WHAT HAPPENS ASHORE MATTERS AT SEA - THE BLACK SEA EXAMPLE

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The world is changing. Previously calm seas are waking up from their geopolitical slumber and threats to maritime trade are no longer confined to suspicious gunmen. Armed guards and water cannons will not deter the Iranian Revolutionary Guards or the Russian Navy. Razor wire will not prevent anti-ship missiles from cracking a ship's hull open.

Seafarers are facing an increasingly uncertain and volatile international environment, which renders the current know-how obsolete. To manage this asymmetry, seafarers need to understand the shifting geopolitical context of the shores and the straits that they sail through. Maritime Situational Awareness should therefore not be restricted to the seas. Afloat and ashore are undeniably linked. The question is, are you ready to recognize this and adapt to the changing tide?

Let us consider the Black Sea for a moment. For most of its recent past, the Black Sea was sheltered from geopolitical confrontation and violence by the shadow of the Soviet Union.

When you are venturing in the semi-closed sea today, you might nevertheless encounter Russian warships en route to Syria, American guided missile destroyers on ports calls in Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia, or commercial vessels queuing for hours to access the Azov Sea.

From 1945 to 1990, all Black Sea littoral states, with the exception of Turkey, were either Soviet Union members (Russia, Ukraine, Georgia) or part of the "Iron Curtain" (Romania, Bulgaria). The Black Sea was essentially a "Russian" or "Soviet Lake".

However, as the Soviet empire imploded in 1991, the region turned into a contested zone, with the Russian Federation forcefully re-asserting exclusive influence in its "near abroad."

A pair of Russian fighter jets fly over a Russian tanker blocking access to the Kerch Strait

In their quest for European integration and NATO membership, many of the newly independent countries faced military opposition from Moscow. From 1990 onwards, Russia invaded three countries (Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine) and supported armed separatist movements in four regions (Transdnister Republic, South Ossetia and Abkhazia).

In some instances, Russia directly annexed foreign territory, such as Crimea. As all warfighting domains are interlinked, the sea is inseparable from air and land. It did not take long for armed violence to spill over to the sea.

With the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia secured the strategic warm water port in Sevastopol, the headquarters (HQ) of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. The HQ is augmented by a myriad of air-naval installations on the entire peninsula. Following the annexation, Russia has initiated a wholesale military buildup in Crimea.

"Fortress" Crimea has essentially been transformed into an "unsinkable aircraft carrier," which is used by the Russian Navy to project power in the region and mount operations in the Mediterranean Sea.

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While Crimea was the first and most important step in Russia's strategy of commanding the sea, it was not the last one.

As part of its military campaign against Ukraine, Russia blocked the small Kerch Strait that links the Azov and Black Seas in late 2018.

When Crimea was annexed, both shores of the strait became de facto Russian territory.

With the construction of the dual-purpose rail and road Crimean Bridge, the strait received a land link.

Due to its deliberate design, the bridge also acts as a barrier. Large vessels transiting the strait can only sail through a small pillar-free gap underneath the bridge. Moreover, the bridge's modest elevation prevents vessels larger than 33 meters from passing the strait.

It is estimated that by late 2018, Ukraine's Azov Sea ports have seen a 25 percent reduction in shipping.

During the November 2018 incident in the Kerch strait, the Russian Navy anchored a large oil tanker under the Crimean bridge, physically blocking the shipping lane between the Azov and Black Seas.

For several hours the region became hotter than the Bab el-Mandeb or the Hormuz straits. Russian naval aviation assets such as helicopter and fighter aircraft as well as combat ships were scrambled to police the area. The risk of uncontained escalation and collateral damage was significant.

Through the blockade, Russia essentially dock-trapped the remainders of Ukraine's navy in two separated positions (Odessa and Mariupol) and obstructed commercial shipping to the Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov.

> "While Crimea was the first and most important step in Russia's strategy of commanding the sea, it was not the last one. "

Screengrab of the Kerch Strait Blockade via AIS aggregator Vessel Finder
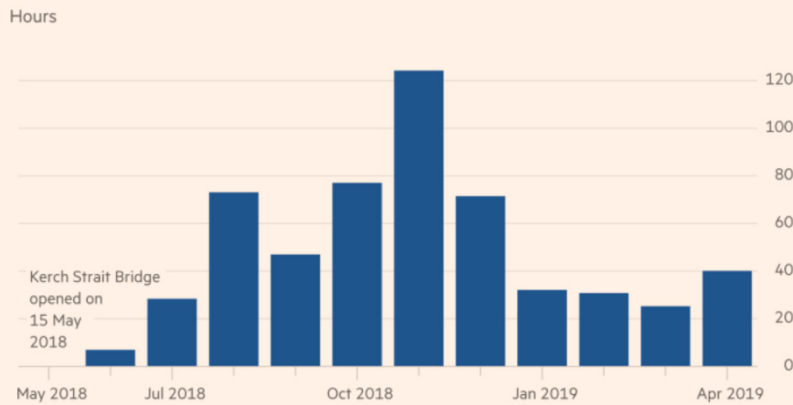
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Average delay of ships en route to Mariupol and Berdyansk at the Sea of Azov entrance

Hours

Kerch Strait Bridge opened on 15 May 2018

May 2018   Jul 2018   Oct 2018   Jan 2019   Apr 2019

Sources: Maidan of Foreign Affairs; Institute of Strategic Black Sea Studies; Black Sea News

As a result of the blockade, the Ukrainian ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk have lost business at a value of over $300 million[1].

Nine days after the incident, Russia returned to its pre-blockade regime of stalling instead of completely obstructing the commercial traffic to Ukrainian ports. For seafarers, this was only a partial relief, as time equals money.

BBC estimates that just one extra day at sea can cost up to 15,000 pounds[2]. The Financial Time's latest assessment shows that ships bound for Mariupol and Berdyansk face average delays of 40 hours. These prolonged journey times render Ukraine's Azov seaports unattractive to commercial operators, sabotaging the country's strategic economic sector.

Over five percent of Ukraine's grain exports are shipped from Mariupol and Berdyanks, alongside 11 percent of construction materials and 25 percent of ferrous metals and products thereof. After the Kerch blockade, the transportation price of Ukrainian wheat has increased by $4-5 per ton[3]. As Ukraine is the seventh largest grain producer, the continued tensions with Russia threaten the global grain supply.

Since 2011, Egypt remains the largest importer of Ukrainian grains ($666 million annual worth), followed closely by Spain ($643 million), the Netherlands ($556), China ($552 million), and Indonesia ($487 million)[4].

Ukraine can only bypass the Kerch Strait by redirecting its agricultural goods from the fertile lands in the East to the western Black Sea port of Odessa, putting additional strain on the limited rail-road infrastructure. Failure to project confidence and stability on Ukraine's part will likely force buyers to look for alternative suppliers such as nemesis, neighbour and grain competitor Russia.

Subscription to an intelligence service or risk consultancy could have mitigated the risk of rising operating costs. Professionals could have provided early warning and contingency plans for seafarers regarding the deteriorating security architecture in the Kerch area.

The situation in the Strait of Kerch was known to be highly volatile months before the blockade. In August 2018, the U.S. Department of State called on Russia to cease the harassment of international shipping in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Straits, after local authorities delayed or stopped hundreds of commercial ships transiting the area, in particular those headed for Ukrainian ports[5].

Given today's evolving geopolitical environment, maritime security cannot be seen as exclusively a seaborne practice. A paradigm shift is required in the way observers and seafarers approach Maritime Situation Awareness in order to extend the concept towards the shores and mainland.

While counter-piracy measures are abundant and palpable, a seafarer's only line of defence against political threats is timely and actionable intelligence. As avoidance and risk prevention are the best strategies in active warzones, information is the only ammunition at your disposal.

1 - https://www.portseurope.com/the-blockade-of-ukrainian-azov-sea-ports-costs-over-e300-million-minister/

2 - https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46439190

3 - https://latifundist.com/en/interview/444-pole-bitvy--pshenitsa-ukraina-rossiya-turtsiya

4 - https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-economy/2638816-ukrainian-grain-exports-hit-record-of-72-bln-last-year.html

5 - https://ru.usembassy.gov/russias-harassment-of-international-shipping-transiting-the-kerch-strait-and-sea-of-azov/