



The Ukraine War: naval thoughts

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Images of burning tanks and shattered streets and the relentless pounding of Ukraine's energy infrastructure explains why its war with Russia is essentially seen as a land-air conflict rather than a maritime one. But this would be a mistake. The maritime side of this conflict is crucial to its outcome and has lessons for all navies everywhere. Looking at the conflict from four levels of war (Grand Strategic, Military Strategic, Operational and Tactical-technical) should make this clear. There is a key maritime element in all of them.

(G. Baks, Photocom)

The Grand Strategic Level

We do not know what precisely drives Russia's grand strategy, but the notion of *Derzhavnost* which in English translates as something like 'great power-ness' is certainly part of it. From Peter the Great's time, Moscow's assumptions have often been that as a great power, Russia must have a great navy with access to the world ocean, and that this needs to include the warmer waters of the Black Sea. Maintaining this though has always been a struggle. The current conflict is redolent with the iconic names of some of the most heroic battles of the Great Patriotic War as, until now, simply the most recent of these massive engagements. Russia's strategic culture adds even more to the mix. To them, Ukraine is not an independent nation; it is merely just one of 'all the Russias' over which the Tsars used to rule, and which is Russian simply because Russians live there. For years, what we used to call Kiev rivalled Moscow as a centre of Russian-ness. Accordingly, for the Russians, the

notion that Ukraine should be independent and, still less, allied to the West, is culturally offensive and strategically dangerous.

For the Ukrainians the matter is as deeply embedded, if much simpler. It is just a question of national survival against a hostile Russia. Always a restive part of the Russian empire, Ukraine has often been the victim of unyielding control from Moscow. Because of the bitter memories of the *Holodomor*, the mass starvation of the Ukrainians under Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture into the 1930s, many Ukrainians welcomed the Germans in 1941 as liberators. Hence Moscow's labelling their current leaders as Nazis. For the Ukrainians, then as now, of getting help from the West to sustain survival and counter oppression from an over-bearing East. For this, the Ukrainians need access to the West, and the rest of the world, by land and sea. What's happening now is not history repeating itself; instead, it's the same history.

The Military Strategic Level

Descending to the military strategic level, Putin's 'special military operation' was reportedly planned not by the Main Operations Directorate of the Ministry of Defence, but by the 5th Directorate of the FSB, where the strategic-cultural assumptions just described are particularly strong. This would explain why the war started so badly, with so many axes of advance and in some cases with the paramilitary crowd-control forces of the *Rosgvardia* as the leading echelon, not the army. What was envisaged was a quick decapitation of the Zelensky regime and a popular uprising, not a war. But the military forces gathered beforehand around the Ukrainian border to shape opinion offered a fall-back option.

This was to advance to the Dnieper and consolidate the most Russian parts of the country while striking out from the northeast Crimea to take Kherson, and then advance westwards taking over the ports and shipyards of Mykolayev and Odesa, linking up the breakaway sub-state of Transnistria in Moldova. Having lost its industrial area in the east, and its entire coastline, the rump state of Ukraine would be land-locked, largely isolated, leaderless and if it survived at all, no threat to Russia's security or identity. For this the army and the navy operating in joint conjunction along the coast, just as they had in the Great Patriotic War, was crucial. For the Ukrainians, the matter was simpler. It was just to stop the Russians in their tracks, first to prevent their reaching the Dnieper, second to block any coastal advance, third to re-possess lost territory. This would naturally include the Crimea. Ten years before in 2014, and almost exactly to the day of the 70th anniversary of Mr. Khrushchev's giving the Crimea to the Ukraine in 1954, the Russians took it back. This solidified Russia's use of the Sebastopol naval base, transformed the extent of 'Russian' jurisdiction over the waters of the Black Sea, including its oil and gas rigs, and gave Moscow the option, soon taken, of impeding Ukrainian access in and out of the Azov Sea through the Kerch strait. This would undermine the port cities of Berdyansk, and Mariupol and the local economies of the Ukrainian controlled sectors of Zaporizhzhya and Donetsk.

To reverse all this, they needed Western help. For the United States and its allies this was tricky. How to help Ukraine, but without 'poking the Bear' and providing Putin with the popular support he needed, thus precipitating the outcome it was designed to deter. As far as naval support was concerned, the Americans and the British led the way with the construction of naval facilities in Berdyansk, Mykolayiv and Odesa, doctrinal advice and training, ship-building contracts and the like. There were vague promises of joining the EU one day, maybe NATO in the distant future, a red line for Russia if ever there was one. Then there was the unexpectedly stern response to the passage of HMS *Defender* and HMNLS *Evertsen* through

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and near sensitive waters off the Crimea. The writing was on the wall, but the Ukrainians could not be blamed for thinking that their Western friends were not reading it. For evidence they could point to the West's failure to respond to the closure of the Azov Sea and to the fact that since 2014, NATO ship-days in the Black Sea were actually declining until just before the war started. The question of whether Russia would have attacked Odesa and Mykolayiv if NATO warships happened to be visiting at the time will doubtless be a subject for discussion after the war. Meanwhile, to achieve the necessary 'correlation of forces' the Russian military presence along the border were being gathered and the Black Sea fleet reinforced, not least with amphibious vessels. An unfortunate mix of strategic inattention and indecision meant opportunities for effective Western deterrence, if there were any, were lost. Some might say, though that if they hadn't been, the war would just have come sooner.

The same dilemma in balancing effective deterrence with strategic safety still confronted the West once the war started. One expression of this was in the conduct of large-scale naval exercises in the Baltic, the Mediterranean and Europe's Northern waters to demonstrate alliance resolve and deter horizontal or vertical escalation. To an extent Russian forces responded in kind. Alongside this came extensive support in military equipment and supplies, and a maritime and risk-conscious Western alliance also resorted to a carefully calibrated sanctions campaign. Taken together, all these responses would hopefully redress the correlation of forces more in Ukraine's favour and bring Putin to his senses. Because global trade is sea-based, the sanctions campaign has a very significant maritime component. This allows the West to make maximum use of its maritime strength. Firstly, sanctions campaigns, however carefully targeted, remain the ultimate in blunt instruments. They have unintended consequences, inflicting collateral damage on by-standers especially in the Global South. In a shrinking world, the West has had to cajole and persuade neutral opinion, and wide-ranging naval engagement in waters far from the Black Sea is an important part of the necessary economic and diplomatic effort to service the sanctions campaign in this way. Secondly, maritime pressure, short of blockades, can be directly exerted in support of the campaign. Hence the proposal to exploit Western predominance in maritime services like marine insurance to deter shipping companies from facilitating the sale of Russian oil above its 'cap price.' Again, the Russian response, to buy up and commission a fleet of ghost tankers is maritime.

Nonetheless, few believe that the sanctions campaign will have sufficient strategic effect on its own. The Russians have been agile in seeking ways around the sanctions by leveraging the vulnerabilities of by-standers. They have also imposed countersanctions, especially against

Europe's energy dependence on Russian sources. Maintaining alliance unity, when some members are more vulnerable to this than others, has been difficult - hence the setting of a cap price too high to do real harm to the Russian war effort. Such considerations explain why the historical track record of sanctions campaigns is unencouraging, and why resolution of the problem by force remains a necessary option. But here too, the Ukrainians have complained that the West's desire to contain the prospect of escalation has meant their getting less and/or later military support than they need and have asked for. This refocuses attention on battlefield consequences and on how maritime power has helped in this regard.

The Operational Level

The all-important battle for sea control that allows everything else hardly looked like a battle at all, such was the initial dominance of the Russian Black Sea fleet operating out of Sebastopol and Novorossiysk. This gave them the capacity initially to determine the rules of the game. The unexpectedly successful defiance of the Ukrainians has, however, cumulatively chipped away at the extent to which Russia can determine outcomes from the sea. Starting with the now famous response of the defenders of Snake Island, a string of asymmetrical successes, including the sinking of the Slava class cruiser *Moskva*, the Black Sea Fleet flagship, and the *Saratov* LST at Berdyansk in missile and drone attacks had this effect. Long-range Ukrainian attacks on the Crimean naval air base at Saky and Sebastopol itself, have forced the Russians to behave with much more circumspection and to pull their forces back to Novorossiysk. This has reduced but not eliminated the value of the Russian naval contribution to success in the land battle, though what the Russians call 'operations against the shore'. The sea is still a sanctuary of sorts, if not to the extent of bases in Russia itself, from which missile attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure can be launched. Coming as they do from multiple axes; they complicate the Ukrainians' defensive task and of course supplement Russia's diminishing stock of land-based materials. The *Kalibr* missile fired from corvettes and light frigates has once again proved its worth, particularly in the early days when it destroyed much of Ukraine's air defence system, giving the Russian Air Force a larger and more successful role than was generally recognised at the time. The 1000 nautical mile range of these missiles means that the Ukrainians will need more sophisticated means of anti-missile defence and will perhaps be looking for innovative means of taking active defence in the shape of anti-ship (and anti-submarine?) defences further out to sea.

Amphibious operations are the more familiar form of operations against the shore. From the Russian point of view this has been a major disappointment. The potential scale of the effort was never going to be more than the 'desant' operations characteristic of the Great Patriotic War, not least in this very area. Relatively small scale, operating in direct support of the advancing land-forces and poised very close to shore, there were some reasonably successful desant operations in the Azov



campaign to secure Berdyansk and the land-bridge to the Crimea. But the Russian army's inability to advance along the Black Sea coast and the prohibitive dangers of inshore operations has, at the moment, rendered this capability strategically irrelevant. Instead, Russian marines have been thrown into a land battle for which, to judge by their performance so far, they have not been specifically trained or equipped. The Russian media made much of the initial seizure of Berdyansk, partly for reasons of cultural sentiment and partly because it offered a means of funnelling logistical support to their land-forces that seemed much faster and safer than doing so by land. Conversely, they have been able to deny Ukraine access to Western supplies by sea. Russia's limited capacity to exploit the sea as a means of logistical supply and, now more importantly, economic support against a disadvantaged adversary further underlines the critical importance of the West's sanctions campaign, on the one hand and its supply of military and humanitarian assistance by land, and air on the other.



Russia's amphibious capabilities on show during a joint exercise with India in 2017 (Mil.ru). From the Russian point of view, amphibious operations in the war with Ukraine have been a major disappointment.

The Tactical-Technical Level

Amongst the multitude of points to emerge from the naval side of this conflict, for navies generally, the absolute importance of high degrees of training, preparedness and motivation stand out. The *Moskva* should have been able to survive that attack. The key role of drones in conjunction with missiles in coastal operation also seems obvious and likely to reinforce the arguments of those who maintain that the increasing effectiveness of such instruments of sea denial means that the fleets of the future will need to comprise diffused concentrations of power and distributed operations by smaller faster forces networked together. The much-vaunted Russian expertise in cyber-warfare seems to have been noticeable chiefly by its effective absence. It has signally failed to unravel Ukraine's defences. It would be dangerous, though, to assume this is the final conclusion.

More generally, the need for the close integration of naval, land and air forces in multi-domain operations is yet again totally clear. Equally the Ukrainians have demonstrated the manifest strategic advantage to be gained from the military effort being closely coordinated with diplomatic, economic, and political lines of national effort, underlining the importance of the concept of 'Integrated deterrence' now being pursued on both sides of the Atlantic. Even the Russians have been in part constrained by the law (not least the Montreux convention) thereby emphasising the growing importance of the legal domain of conflict which has also to be included in the wider effort. Finally, all the world's navies will have noted that they are not, after all, sailing into a glorious sunrise agenda of multinational cooperation against maritime crime, climate change and humanitarian disaster. Real sustained operations of war have not, it seems, gone away, and it would be as well to prepare for them properly.