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Ukraine War: The Limits of Traditional Naval Power and the Rise of Collective and Civilian Seapower

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BASIL GERMOND, MAY 10 2022

The illegal invasion of the sovereign state of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has been met with an unprecedented level of coordinated sanctions imposed on Russian assets and individuals, as well as with arms transfers to Ukraine. This was not unexpected though. As President Biden said, 'we prepared extensively and carefully. We spent months building coalitions of other freedom-loving nations [...] to confront Putin'. Ukraine's resilience and resistance has also been underestimated by Russia. The strongest political and material support to Ukraine has come from Western countries. However, these countries can also be defined in terms of their strong connection to the global maritime order (from the US to the UK, and from Japan to Australia) and their dominance thereof. Whereas this has not translated into an effective use of naval power in support of Ukraine's defence, I argue that seapower and its collective leverage in this war shall be understood more comprehensively, which requires to account for its civilian dimension.

Whereas President Putin's final objectives remain unclear, control of the Northern coast of the Black Sea from the official border of the Russian Federation to the Russian-backed secessionist Republic of Transnistria might be one of his geopolitical objectives. Russia's interest in dominating the Black Sea has constituted a recurring feature of its foreign policy since Peter the Great. Tsarist Russia, and then the Soviet Union, have recurrently attempted to control the Black Sea and, beyond, the Turkish Straits, in a bid to gain perennial access to 'warm waters'. Whereas the Straits are clearly off limits due to Turkey's membership of NATO, controlling the coast of Ukraine has both a symbolic and a geopolitical appeal for Moscow.

In practice, the Russian Navy's role in the war has remained limited and less visible compared to land forces, but in no way has it been inactive: cruise missiles and naval bombardments have been used against land targets, mines have been laid, amphibious forces have operated in the waters off Odessa, and Ukraine's access to global sea lanes of communications has been *de facto* cut off. The sinking of the cruiser Moskva (flagship of the Black Sea Fleet and one of the largest warships sunk since WWII), apparently fatally hit by two Ukrainian land based anti-ship missiles, has first and foremost an important symbolic impact. Naval ships (especially large ones) are synonymous with prestige. Its loss contributes to Ukraine's morale (which is crucial when fighting a war of attrition as the underdog). Secondly, it has certainly cost Russia some operational capabilities (as a command ship and for theatre air defence), which will not easily be replaced, since the Turkish Straits are closed to belligerent warships.

More importantly, this has confirmed that an anti-access/area-denial strategy is a viable means for Ukraine to challenge Russian control of the Black Sea and to prevent any amphibious assault on Odessa. The Russian Navy is not safe in proximity of the coast due to Ukraine having enough mobile land-based anti-ship missiles (that are hard to search & destroy preventively) and drones. This is likely to weaken the role played by its naval forces at a time when the port of Odessa might become a target of Russia's next phase of attacks, especially when keeping in mind that even before the Moskva incident, it was not clear whether an amphibious assault on Odessa was considered by Russia.

Despite a naval balance overwhelmingly in their favour, Western nations have not been in a position to exert their

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naval power in any substantial way. This is due to the specific geopolitics of the Black Sea as well as the imperative to avoid escalation with a nuclear state. The Turkish Straits regime, set up in the 1936 Montreux Convention, grants Turkey the power to close the Strait to belligerent warships (based on its own assessment of the situation), which it has done less than a week after the war started. As the war drags on, this might appear to disadvantage Russia in being unable to receive any naval reinforcements, especially if Ukraine continues to successfully destroy Russia's naval assets.

However, due to the inability of the Ukrainian Navy to oppose Russian warships at sea, the Russian Navy can *de facto* blockade Ukraine. This is becoming an economic problem more than a war-time supply one that impacts all riparian states, including Russia itself, as well as on the global economy (e.g. rise in food prices due to lack of Ukrainian agricultural exports – a 'patch-up remedy consists in shipping grain and vegetable oil via Romania). UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said that "The Russians can't control the Black Sea; It's not theirs anymore". Yet, a freedom of navigation operation (such as escorting civilian ships to Odessa) would entail the risk of a direct confrontation with Russian naval forces. Operating NATO warships in the Black Sea outside the territorial waters of the three NATO members (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) would certainly risk escalation between NATO and Russia, which has been carefully avoided so far (e.g. by refusing to impose a no-fly-zone over Ukraine). This is the main reason why naval power has been under-used so far. At the time of writing, nothing indicates that this will change in the short term.

However, seapower must be understood more broadly than naval power. Seapower is a collective endeavour that brings together like-minded nations and non-state actors that are united by their common values and interests in a stable and free maritime order. Their prosperity and stability depend on the freedom of the sea, and it is in their interest to oppose actors that do not play by the rules. Collective seapower is not just about naval power; it is about the strength of the global, liberal maritime order. It is about sharing the benefits and burden of the efforts to defend the global maritime order.

Seapower can be used to oppose Russia in a collective way that includes the private sector. States' margin of manoeuvre is limited because of the need to avoid escalation, but private maritime actors have leverage via their economic and financial power. For example, almost all major shipping companies (including MSC, Maersk and ONE) have suspended their operations to and from Russian ports, impacting the Russian economy. This demonstrates the holistic nature of seapower that transcends state actors and institutional processes to include the corporate sector that shares the interests and concerns of maritime nations.

States can also indirectly use their broader, non-naval maritime power to exercise effects upon those who violate the rules. For example, Russian flagged, owned, and operated ships have been banned by the US, the UK, European countries, and others from calling at their ports. These measures are all part of the global, comprehensive diplomatic effort that is conducted by public and private stakeholders to put pressure on President Putin's regime. Their maritime element shall not be neglected and its effect on the Russian economy has been recognised by Russian maritime stakeholders.

The maritime dimension of the response to the invasion of Ukraine is a collective effort by states and non-state actors that are united by maritime values linked to freedom and respect for international law of the sea. They form a solidaristic community of liberal nations and actors sharing maritime-related interests and traditions that transcend state-centrism with private sector stakeholders playing their part in the collective effort and assisting where states' leverage is limited by the risk of military escalation.

In the short term, the maritime dimension of the war will be linked to the fate of Odessa; if the port city falls and Russia manages to control the whole length of the Ukrainian coast, this will negatively impact on Ukraine's ability to resist and put further pressure on global food security by prolonging Ukraine's inability to freely access global sea lanes of communication. The operational realities point towards Russia's use of land rather than naval forces to achieve this objective. In the longer-term, the effects of seapower, in its collective and civilian form, can contribute to Russia's eventual failure, even without using naval power. The effects can already be felt and will only grow as months pass by and maritime nations and stakeholders continue to make the most of their seapower to put as much

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pressure as possible on Russia.

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