



RiskIntelligence

Russia - Ukraine:

Potential scenarios and implications for maritime security

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Threat briefing: Russia - Ukraine

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Introduction

The recent massing of Russian military forces on the border of Ukraine can be seen as overt aggression by Russia. But it also highlights the unresolved political issues in this region stemming from Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine in 2014, and Russia's direct involvement in the two separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, also since 2014.

The possibility of further conflict has now increased. This report considers the background to the current situation, how the conflict could play out, and the implications for maritime security in the Black Sea and potentially elsewhere.

Frontpage image: A Russian SU-35 approaches a US P-8, Mediterranean, May 2020, US Navy, CC.

What does Russia want?

Russia's primary objective is the subject of some debate and is likely to include some combination of the following to greater or lesser degrees:

- ▶ **Desiring greater attention and presence** on the world stage (possibly to shift attention from national issues). (possibly by leading a country-wide insurgency/hybrid-warfare) and demand a pro-Russian government take its place.
 - ▶ **Expanding control and territory** in the northern area of the Black Sea.
 - ▶ **Achieving actual and recognised control** of the Ukrainian Donbas regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and the Crimean peninsular (thereby legitimising the 2014 insurgency and the illegal annexation of Crimea).
 - ▶ **Making future Ukrainian NATO**, and perhaps even EU, membership impossible.
 - ▶ **Forcing the current pro-Western government** in Kyiv to stand down
- ▶ **Trying to force the West** and most notably NATO members to recognise Russia's position on its "near abroad".

Given the current situation at the time of this assessment, all objectives are as likely as unlikely. However, each objective would be a different scenario and each placing a different demand on both the Russian approach and the Ukrainian – and the Western partners and allies – response, which in turn would result in very different outcomes.

What could Russia do?

There are broadly five different operational scenarios that Russia might consider:

1. **A hybrid operation**, including subversion, information warfare and cyber attacks on military and government installations and sectors to limit the normal functioning of the country.
2. **A Russian naval blockade** in the Black Sea to limit direct trade with Ukrainian Black Sea ports, thereby targeting the Ukrainian economy as a means of exerting pressure and cutting of supplies delivered by sea.
3. **A limited military operation** limited to the Donbas region, as an incursion to fully exert control of the region and officially claim it as part of Russia proper.
4. **A partial invasion** of eastern Ukraine perhaps to and including the Dnieper River as well as southern Ukraine and coastal areas.
5. **A full-scale complete invasion** and occupation of Ukraine.

A limited military operation could go further and focus on invading additional eastern regions of Ukraine. These could be the regions of Kharkiv, Sumy, Chernihiv, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. This would create additional buffer zones between the Ukrainian and Russian borders.

A variation of such a medium-scale invasion would be to focus on the southern Black Sea regions of Ukraine - Zaporizhzhia Kherson, Mykolaiv and Odessa. This would establish Russian control of the Ukrainian access to the Black Sea and its ports and provide further dominance over the Crimean peninsular and the Sea of Azov.

There are two variations of a major military operation. A full-scale complete conquer and control invasion would focus on the whole of the Ukrainian territory – effectively a total take-over of the country.

A variation of this, which could also be considered a larger scale medium invasion, would be to invade and occupy all regions east of the Dnieper River. This would annex around a third of the current territory of Ukraine and provide the same control of the regions included in the limited military operations as a variation of scenario 3.

Although the likelihood of each scenario differs, it is our assessment that a true full-scale invasion of Ukraine is possible, but unlikely, as there are significant deterrents to such an invasion. Variations of scenarios 1-4 are therefore more likely.

Of the other scenarios, on a cost effective scale, occupying the southern Black Sea coast regions of Ukraine while also fully invading the Donbas region would seem to provide the

most complete fulfilment of a medium scale operation, though a combined maritime and land-based military operation would seem necessary, to achieve the objective of exerting control of the Ukrainian Black Sea ports and their industries to damage the Ukrainian economy and public spirit, which could lead to a regime change in Russia's favour.

Overall, no scenario comes without a severe cost to Russia – economically and politically as well as potentially militarily depending on the effectiveness of the Ukrainian response.

It is the assessment that NATO, or any other Western countries, are unlikely to provide direct military support to Ukraine in any of the above scenarios. NATO members are likely to provide military equipment, ammunition, field hospitals as well as intelligence to Ukraine in combination with financial support, but the deployment of military forces is assessed as unlikely, while perhaps support in the cyber domain is more likely.

What would this mean for maritime security?

Merchant vessel operations and personnel safety might be directly affected:

- ▶ In case of direct confrontation, Russia is likely to use its naval superiority to control maritime traffic in the Azov and Black Sea near Crimea and the Ukrainian coast, including blockades of the Kerch Strait and major Ukrainian ports. This will impact the way merchant maritime traffic is conducted in the area.
- ▶ Another possible outcome is that Russia will engage Ukrainian naval assets in port and on patrol in the Black Sea, using land-based anti-ship missiles, air attacks and warships to cripple Ukrainian units.
- ▶ Similarly, Ukrainian units might attempt to engage Russian vessels. While this activity would likely be focused mainly on military targets, collateral damage in port areas or firing on civilian vessels due to mistaken targets cannot be ruled out.
- ▶ Russian naval or special forces units may be tasked with taking and holding major Ukrainian ports to cut off the country from the Black Sea, potentially leading to combat operations near and in port areas.
- ▶ It is also possible that Ukrainian special forces or other assets will attempt to sabotage Russian port infrastructure or other maritime targets, including the Kerch Strait Bridge to disrupt Russian planning and operations.
- ▶ Finally, it is possible that sea mines will be deployed by either party, meaning that civilian shipping will be at risk of collateral damage.

As well, GPS/AIS interference and cyberattacks could be used in various scenarios. A key electronic warfare capability is jamming and spoofing of electronic and radio-based signals, including satellite-based positioning and communication systems. This is done to blur the enemy's understanding of the battlefield. The maritime industry has been hit multiple times by this in the form of jamming of AIS/GPS, as well as spoofing of these signals – this includes multiple incidents in the Black Sea, and new incidents are likely to occur as Russian forces will use these capabilities.

Cyber weapons have increasingly become a part of military arsenals and is very likely to be used by Russia as part of hybrid and conventional attacks in Ukraine, as well as by the Ukraine against Russia in case of a

Russian overt military attack. It should also be noted that non-state actors such as activists may perform cyberattacks against media, government, and infrastructure targets on both sides of the conflict. Cyber weapons can also have the built-in capability of spreading rapidly, infecting, and damaging various systems not directly linked to the conflict.

Attacks like these may impact basic supply installations like heat, water, and electricity affecting employees and offices in country. Other attacks may directly impact transport infrastructure, like impeding port operations or causing disruptions on railways or roads. In addition, attacks against media outlets may happen to hinder the free flow of crisis communication from the authorities to destabilise local communities.

Conclusion and other developments

Political developments for this crisis have been moving quickly, with significant negotiations taking place between Russia and NATO countries. At the same time, the situation on the ground is also changing. Russia's specific intentions are not clear, which leaves open variations of the scenarios noted above. It is also not clear, should a Russian military operation take place, how the Ukraine and NATO would respond, which means that there are several possibilities for how the escalation of the conflict could play out.

As noted above, there are some immediate implications for maritime operations in the

region. As well, local personnel in the Ukraine could be affected. Trading in general with Russia could be affected by sanctions and financial restrictions. There are also possibilities for wider effects in northern Europe, so that the implications would not just be limited to the Black Sea area.

Ultimately, there is a very real possibility of disruption to maritime and related operations and a worsening of the overall security situation in the region. At the time of writing, the situation remains uncertain but could change rapidly if some form of Russia military operation is initiated.

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