

The Strategic Implications of Ukraine's Strikes in the Black Sea

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Ukraine's recent long-range strikes against the Russian Black Sea Fleet headquarters in Sevastopol and its ships triggered discussions about the related operational impact. Much less attention has been paid to the important strategic implications of Ukraine's successful military activities in the Black Sea.

An alternative to viewing war as a breakdown of diplomacy is to **perceive** it as another stage of bargaining, during which the warring parties continue negotiations and end the fighting when they agree on a deal. In addition to accurately reflecting the Clausewitzian rationale of war as another form of politics, this idea offers a very useful analytical prism through which to examine the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Viewed through this lens, the belligerents' actions on the battlefield affect their bargaining leverage in the expected post-war negotiations. This means that Ukraine's continuous military successes on the battlefield are an important factor contributing to its negotiating power. Recent successful attacks by Ukraine against Russian installations and ships in Crimea and around the peninsula not only erode Russia's strategic assets in the Black Sea area, but also generate effects for the forthcoming negotiations over the war's outcome.

Following Ukraine's **successful long-range strikes** against the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea Fleet (BSF) in Sevastopol on 22 September, Russia reacted by relocating the largest part of its ships from the naval base in Sevastopol. Russia's concerns about the security of its Sevastopol fleet were not unwarranted, as two more Russian vessels – a patrol boat and a missile carrier – **were damaged** by Ukrainian naval drones in the port of Sevastopol on 11 and 13 October, respectively. Earlier, on 13 September, the Ukrainian military also used long-range missiles to successfully attack the Sevmorzavod shipyard within the Sevastopol naval base. This reportedly **resulted** in severe damage to a Ropucha-class landing ship and a Kilo-class submarine that were stationed in dry docks for maintenance.

The Russian Navy's **partial withdrawal** from Sevastopol, with some ships relocating to Novorossiysk and others to Feodosia, has triggered discussions on the operational significance of these moves. Feodosia and Novorossiysk are located on the eastern side of the Crimean Peninsula and the eastern coast of the Black Sea, respectively, placing the ships at a longer distance from Ukrainian long-range strike capabilities. Although these two ports **are not completely out of reach** of Ukrainian attacks, the longer distance and different topography increase the probability of their interception by Russia as well as the difficulty of targeting Russian equipment and installations.

The withdrawal of the BSF's ships to safer ports is viewed by some experts as reflecting a reality where Russia has '**clearly lost its control**' over the Black Sea. In a similar fashion, UK Minister for Armed Forces James Heappey **has hailed** the 'functional defeat' of the BSF as a result of repeated Ukrainian attacks. More cautious voices have examined the previous operational behaviour of the Russian fleet following Ukrainian attacks, and **assessed** this withdrawal as a provisional step. They have warned that the Ukrainian strikes against the BSF '**have not defeated it as a naval force**', even though they have degraded its role as a combined armed headquarters.

The reality, unsurprisingly, is not that simple. The Ukrainian military will be able to continuously restrain the BSF's operations only if it maintains a

similar tempo and unpredictability of attacks against Russia's installations and naval equipment in the Black Sea. And this capacity is directly dependent on the continuous provision of long-range missiles by Kyiv's Western partners. For instance, Ukraine attacked the BSF's headquarters and many of the ships in the Sevastopol naval base area by using **UK-provided** Storm Shadow cruise missiles. France has also **provided** Ukraine with SCALP cruise missiles – the French name for the same weapons system, a joint Franco-British production – which have been used by Ukraine since at least August this year. Given that these cruise missiles are air-launched, they offer great operational flexibility for use in the Black Sea area.

Despite the important operational repercussions of these strikes, much less attention has been paid to their strategic implications. And arguably, one of the most critical contributions of the UK and France's delivery of these long-range missiles lies in their strategic impact, reflected in their strong potential to affect future peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. To that end, it is helpful to explore Russia's strategic preferences in the Black Sea.

Assessing Foreign Policy Preferences

One of the most difficult tasks in foreign policy analysis is **discerning** the genuine policy preferences of countries, and consequently, their real interests. This is because states have the incentive to **misrepresent** these preferences. On many occasions, revealing them is politically disadvantageous – for instance, aggressive states often camouflage their expansionist goals by invoking legitimate claims of self-defence.

“ **Quick access to both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean relies on Russia's ability to maintain and protect a sizeable navy in the Black Sea** ”

Consider how Russian leaders have been claiming that the strengthening of ties between Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries – the former Soviet republics, not including the three Baltic states (and Georgia, since 2009) – and the West is a security threat to Russia, due to NATO moving closer to its borders. In fact, Russia's efforts to keep the former Soviet republics outside of formal EU and NATO structures have also resulted in these states being more exposed and vulnerable to Russian pressure and influence; this has also made it easier for Russia to build and exert political control over them. Coupled with Russia's continuous assertions that its 'near abroad' **represents** one of its vital national security interests, and the credible revelation that it **does not actually view** NATO as a military threat, this exposes Russia's effective intention to recover its political control over the former Soviet republics. In fact, Russia has used euphemistic framing in some of its fundamental foreign policy documents to **acknowledge** this. It has indicated its intent to integrate these countries by diminishing the role of borders within the CIS and achieving a 'unified system of border protection' on the perimeter of the CIS.

The example above provides some insights into how foreign policy observers can address this analytical challenge. The solution is to examine the ways in which stated intents and objectives are backed by costly actions. For instance, the objective of protecting the rights of Russian speakers, as stated in Russia's national security strategy documents over the years, is not credible. If Russia genuinely cared about the rights of Russian speakers abroad, it would first respect the rights of its own citizens, which it does not. On the other hand, the objective of strengthening its military capabilities to enforce its interests outside its borders is credible, given the constant and considerable **increase** in defence spending that Russia has sustained since the early 2000s, at the expense of various social programmes and economic development.

Armed with this approach, it becomes easier for external observers to gain insights into Russia's practical strategic intent in the Black Sea region. The

widespread perception of Russia's interests is rather vague, invoking historical and cultural reasoning. In his Crimea annexation speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin **appealed** to past military glory linked to Crimea, to common historical and cultural heritage and to Russia's 'historical right' to own the peninsula. His reference to the security dimension of controlling Crimea was more superficial. However, the distinction is particularly important. It is more challenging to address historical and cultural claims in negotiations since they are typically indivisible, while it is easier to negotiate over security issues, as these are more susceptible to a degree of give-and-take.

If Crimea was a territory of major historical and cultural importance for Russia, ceding it to Ukraine in the early 1990s would have resulted in public protests. And, even if we assumed that at the time the population was most concerned with economic survival and paid less attention to the results of the USSR's disintegration, as soon as the economic welfare of the Russian population improved, we ought to have seen a major popular push for the return of Crimea. Instead, such calls were the fixation only of Russian radicals and nationalists, who make up a minority of the public.

Russia's Strategic Intent in the Black Sea

Instead, Russia's foreign policy towards Crimea in particular and the Black Sea region in general has been predominantly an elitist, Kremlin-led project. Russia's view of the region has been gradually radicalised along with the consolidation in power of representatives of the security and defence agencies. Specifically, as these ruling elites in Russia have grown more secure internally and accumulated sufficient resources, they have increasingly directed their attention beyond Russia's borders.

The consistency of ideas and statements about the role of the Black Sea region in Russia's national security debates among policymakers and policy experts is another sign of Russia's genuine foreign policy preferences. Military experts have traditionally been blunter and more radical in their

assessments of the West and Russia's interests, stating that Russia **wants to recover** its great power status, while the West has been opposing this. Russia's leadership views this great power status as the ability of its military forces to either protect favourable status quos, create new ones, or obstruct and increase the costs of Western efforts to change established facts on the ground that benefit Russia. One of the tools that Russia relies on in this regard and which it aims to consolidate further is its easy and quick access to the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

Russia's 2022 Maritime Doctrine **provides** more insights into this logic, emphasising the related instrumental role of its naval forces as well as the strategic objective of maintaining a permanent military naval presence in the Mediterranean. However, quick access to both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean relies on Russia's ability to maintain and protect a sizeable navy in the Black Sea. The significant role that Russia's leadership assigns to its ability to exert control over the Black Sea as a precondition to its ability to access the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean is better **reflected** in Russia's 2015 Maritime Doctrine. Confirming this idea, former Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy Admiral Vladimir Masorin **claimed** that limiting Russia's access to the world ocean from the Black Sea represents a threat to Russia's military security.

“ Only by losing Crimea's full military functionality will Russian planners be disabused of their idea that the peninsula is critical for Russia's wider Black Sea strategy

Of course, this is the narrow angle that Russia's military and security professionals pay particular attention to. It reflects an important aspect of

the role that the Black Sea region plays in Russian foreign policy, but not the only one. Some Russian analysts **provide** a broader view of Russia's strategic goals in the Black Sea region, including: 1) instrumentalising the increasing dependency of the EU on energy resources provided by Russia; 2) neutralising the European component of NATO and keeping the post-Soviet area in Russia's 'orbit of influence'; 3) blocking the development of energy projects that are not controlled by Russia; and 4) and maximising Russia's control over the transit of crude oil and gas from the Caspian and Central Asian region.

In addition to these objectives, Russian experts **identify** a few others which require Russia to build its predominant control over the Black Sea. This is intended to allow Russia to severely undermine Ukraine's economic potential while increasing its own, by exerting control over the major Black Sea ports and commercial routes. It will also increase Russia's ability to pressure Romania and Bulgaria, as well as giving it more bargaining leverage over Turkey using both direct and indirect military threats. Russian actions in the Black Sea, such as targeting Ukraine's ability to export its products and the Russian Air Force's aggressive behaviour in the region's international airspace, are consistent with these stated objectives. For instance, in May 2023, a Russian Su-35 fighter jet **conducted** repeated dangerous manoeuvres against a Polish L-410 Turbolet operating as part of the EU's Frontex border agency mission, which was patrolling international airspace over the Black Sea some 60 km east of the Romanian border.

To summarise, Russia has several mutually reinforcing strategic objectives that are dependent on maintaining its predominant control of the Black Sea. It aims to preserve this dominance in order to allow safe and uninterrupted access for Russian military vessels into the Mediterranean and Atlantic Ocean, so that they can militarily influence facts on the ground.

Implications for Russia's Negotiating Stance on Crimea

What do the assessed factors mean for Russia's stance on Crimea? They reveal that Russian control over Crimea and the Sevastopol naval port is not critical for implementing Russia's strategic designs in the Black Sea. This is because modern war is not an end in itself, but a cost-generating policy tool – an alternative to diplomacy (or trade) – aimed at advancing a strategic objective. As the related costs increase, either specific military objectives or the whole war itself become prohibitive. What Ukrainian strikes against Russia's military installations and ships in Crimea and at the Sevastopol naval base have done is to increase the costs of their use by Russia.

In fact, Ukraine has done more than that. It has managed to diminish the role of the Sevastopol naval base in the framework of Russia's wider strategic designs in the Black Sea, to the extent that it has become a replaceable asset. Only by losing Crimea's full military functionality and becoming used to this state of affairs will Russian planners be disabused of their entrenched idea that the peninsula is critical for Russia's wider Black Sea strategy. In fact, Russia **has recently revealed** its intention to build a new naval base in the Ochamchira district of the Georgian breakaway region of Abkhazia. In parallel, it **has been working** on building a naval base in Novorossiysk. This project **has been on the cards** since at least 2009, when the Russian authorities had considered it as a potential replacement for Sevastopol in case Ukraine refused to extend the lease after 2017. By making it difficult for the Russian military to use its Sevastopol naval base and other military installations in Crimea, Ukraine is diminishing their importance for Moscow, affecting the Russian perception of them being under effective Russian ownership or irreplaceable assets.

Therefore, Ukraine's long-range strikes against Russian military installations and equipment in Crimea have strategic implications for negotiations over the war's outcome. Due to its limitations in terms of quantity, Western

assistance should primarily focus on supporting and enabling exactly this type of activity. However, there are specific requirements in order to trigger these strategic effects. Most importantly, the continuous supply of long-range missiles by the UK, France and other partners is critical. Ukraine needs to ensure that Crimea remains a risky zone for Russia's strategic military assets such as ships, major air defence systems and **air-patrolling capabilities**, so that the peninsula loses considerable value in the perception of Russian policymakers. This will increase the probability that it becomes a negotiable asset, undermining its image and role as a critical territory for Russia. Under these conditions, the **endowment effect** impacting Russia's perception of Crimea will be weakened. Thus, the consequent military recovery of Crimea by Ukraine is less likely to be perceived by Russia as a loss of its own territory. Among other effects, this will decrease the risk of Russia escalating into the nuclear domain.

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