



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Russian escalation in the Black Sea - Turkey is crucial for a decisive response



The warning shots fired by Russian soldiers at the Turkish trade vessel "Sukru Okan" in the Black Sea might be part of Moscow's plans to escalate the Ukrainian crisis and directly involve NATO.

But perhaps this desire to expand the Ukrainian front and relax Russia's primary objectives in the east of Ukraine turns out to be its biggest nightmare. The swing of the pendulum largely depends on Turkey.

Moscow has already sharply escalated its aggression against Ukraine with its recent refusal to extend the Black Sea grain deal, followed immediately by a threat to use force against incoming trade vessels if it considers them a security threat.

The crew of the Turkish freighter, sailing towards the Ukrainian port of Izmail under the flag of the Pacific state of Palau, experienced this Russian threat. After a shot from an automatic weapon, it stopped, accepted the Russian inspection and continued sailing.

Is Russia bluffing?

Turkey responded mildly to this incident, mostly with silence. A spokesman for the Ministry of Defence said that they were "aware of an incident" and that officials were conducting an investigation.

But things are much more severe and explosive than Ankara's reaction shows. In the case of the Turkish vessel, Moscow wanted to show that it was not bluffing when it threatened to open fire on vessels sailing towards Ukrainian ports on July 20.

Even though the warning shots were almost

symbolic, there is no symbolism in the choice to expose a Turkish trade vessel to this threat.

The Black Sea has been designated an area of strategic interest in Russian and NATO documents. At this point, both are showing in practice what they are actually prepared to do to implement their strategies.

Russia is taking a significant risk as it resorts to escalation in the Black Sea and provoking NATO to react. Its current moves - pulling out of the Black Sea grain deal and carrying out the threat to shoot at foreign trade vessels - seem even like desperate steps. But that's why they are extremely dangerous.

Challenging Ankara

By annexing Crimea in 2014 and turning the peninsula into a bastion, Russia caused a drastic increase in NATO's presence in the region, primarily in Romania and Bulgaria, and reconnaissance aviation patrolling over the international waters of the Black Sea.

The aggression against Ukraine only accelerated and increased NATO's presence in its Black Sea member states and air operations over the Black Sea.

Ukraine's actions against targets in Crimea, its bombing of the bridge connecting the peninsula to the mainland, frequent attacks on Russian ships, and an increased NATO presence in the region are becoming intolerable for Moscow.

Choosing a Turkish vessel as a target to demonstrate Moscow's determination to block Ukrainian ports is similar to throwing down the gauntlet at Ankara.

Moscow expects Ankara not to react, and even more so to dissuade its NATO partners from plans to retaliate using force.

Outdated estimates

Russia is counting on several Turkish "weaknesses" (as it sees them), that is, the specifics in Ankara's policy regarding the Black Sea.

Turkey is expected to abide by the Montreux Convention of 1936, which gives it the right not to allow the passage of military vessels through the Bosphorus Strait.

Moscow calculated that, in this instance, this would refer to NATO vessels, which would eventually arrive to defend trade convoys from the Russian naval threat.

Russia is relying on Turkey to show its NATO allies that it wants to take the lead in ensuring the security of the Black Sea region and that further partner forces are not required.

They are probably relying on Turkey's decisions during the Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 not to allow 2 American hospital ships to pass through the Bosphorus on their way to assist Georgia.

However, just like many earlier assumptions regarding its invasion of Ukraine, such Russian expectations could soon prove outdated.

Is Ankara's patience running out?

By withdrawing from the grain deal, Moscow

has shown enormous disrespect for Turkish interests and overstepped boundaries when testing Turkey's balanced attitude towards Russia.

The Black Sea Grain Deal was one of the most significant diplomatic assets in the international arena for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as its primary architect, because it opened up many options regarding Western allies, the Middle East and the Global South.

If Moscow recognised Erdogan's shift towards Western allies after he was re-elected president, it opted to respond in the worst possible way - by exacting revenge and abandoning the grain deal, and then attacking a Turkish trade ship.

This comes from a crucial miscalculation that Turkey will once again put the interests of its NATO partners on the back burner and prioritise its own regional interests.

However, Turkey's most significant interest in the Black Sea region and its hinterland, particularly the Caucasus, is to avoid security escalations, let alone larger-scale conflicts that Russia desires and provokes.

Ankara has no interest in taking action that would support Russia's aggressive ambitions towards the Black Sea. The opposite is the case.

As the dominant military power in the Black Sea region, where it seeks unquestionable leadership and in the NATO framework, Turkey is positioning itself as a leader in a decisive response to Russian attempts to cause conflict in the Black Sea theatre.

Numerous options for Turkey's

response

There are numerous ways to respond, from providing military escorts to trade convoys on the Black Sea alone or with the Black Sea NATO partners – Romania and Bulgaria.

Perhaps even allow several NATO vessels to pass through the Bosphorus for a certain period (21 days) without violating the limits on the size and weight of vessels prescribed by the Montreux Convention, which Turkey wants to preserve as a lever of its influence in the region.

Or consider the possibility that one of the larger navies from non-NATO states, also vitally interested in grain import from Ukraine, protects trade convoys: Ankara would appear as the principal arbitrator for such a role.

And finally, even though it respects its provisions as committed to the rules-based order and is committed to the alliance with Turkey within NATO, the US is not a signatory to the Montreux convention, so this does not apply to the US Navy.

Under regular circumstances, the last option would be only an option in theory. But a theory might rapidly become a reality after Russia's long-term militarisation of the Black Sea region and its intention to turn it into a zone of escalation and conflict. If the US and Turkey so choose as allies in NATO.