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Improving Ukraine's Maritime Capability: Next Steps for the U.S.

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On November 25, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) border-patrol boats opened fire on three Ukrainian navy vessels near the Kerch Strait, a narrow body of water connecting the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. This recent incident is a reminder that Ukraine faces many security challenges in the maritime domain. In order to help Ukraine improve its capabilities, the U.S. should gain a better understanding of the maritime situation in the region, increase the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) presence in the Black Sea, and equip Ukraine with much-needed maritime capability, such as radars, ships, and anti-ship missiles.

Tensions Running High

The Sea of Azov is extremely important for Ukraine, both economically and militarily. Along the coastline lies Mariupol, Ukraine's 10th-largest city and one of the country's leading trade ports.¹ Mariupol is also important militarily due to its location in the Donetsk region close to the frontlines of the war in the Donbas.

In May 2018, Russia finished its construction of the Crimean Bridge, which spans the width of the Kerch Strait and links the Russian-occupied Crimean Peninsula to the Russian mainland. The project,

strongly opposed by Ukraine, cost Russia \$3.7 billion.² Under the 2003 Treaty on the Legal Status of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, both the Azov Sea and Kerch Strait are shared territorial waters between Russia and Ukraine. However, since the bridge's completion, Russia has illegally delayed, and in some cases prevented, Ukrainian commercial ships from passing through the Kerch Strait. Considering the importance of the strait for Ukraine's sea-based exports, the economic impact of Russia's actions is expected to be severe.

On November 25, tensions escalated when a Russian tanker³ and FSB border-patrol boats blocked three Ukrainian navy ships' passage under the Crimean Bridge and opened fire on them, injuring six sailors.⁴ Russian forces also boarded the three naval ships, seizing the ships and 24 Ukrainian sailors. As a result, the Ukrainian military was placed on high alert, and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko declared limited martial law for 30 days.

Timing Is No Coincidence

Russia's timing is no accident. On September 27, the United States Coast Guard signed a certificate providing two patrol boats to Ukraine within the next year.⁵ On November 21, Britain announced it would increase its troops in Ukraine used for training.⁶ A day later, the Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, held its first reading of new constitutional amendments providing for Ukraine's future membership in the European Union and NATO.⁷ These events, on top of the simmering tension in the Sea of Azov, likely motivated Russia to act.

In addition, Russian President Vladimir Putin's approval rating is at its lowest point since 2012. It is

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MAP 1

Kerch Strait—Site of Russian Aggression

On November 25, Russian patrol boats fired on Ukrainian vessels near the Kerch Strait. In May, Russia completed the Crimean Bridge across the strait, which gave Russia access to occupied Crimea and allowed it to restrict passage of Ukrainian ships through the strait.



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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likely that, in order to increase his popularity, Putin ordered some sort of aggressive military action, as seen recently in the Kerch Strait. This approach has worked before: In 2013, Putin’s approval rating stood at 54 percent; when Russia invaded and illegally annexed Crimea in 2014, it jumped to 83 percent.⁸

Advancing U.S. Interests

Modern Ukraine represents the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path and to decide with whom it has relations and how, and by whom it is governed. In many ways, the future viability of the transatlantic community will be decided in eastern Ukraine in the trenches of the Donbas or on the waters of the Azov. This is why the most recent incident in the Kerch Strait should be so alarming to the U.S. and its Euro-

pean allies. The U.S. can help Ukraine while advancing its own interests in the region by:

- **Canceling the planned meeting between President Donald Trump and President Putin at the upcoming G20 Summit in Buenos Aires.** Meeting with Putin immediately after Russia’s aggression in the Kerch Strait will send the wrong message to America’s friends and foes alike. The planned meeting in Buenos Aires should be canceled.
- **Using the international spotlight of the G20 Summit to call for the immediate release of 24 Ukrainian prisoners.** The 24 Ukrainian service members are being unlawfully held in Crimea and paraded on television while reading out “confes-

sions” that Ukraine purposely provoked Russia. This conduct by Russia is in violation of Article 13 of the Third Geneva Convention (Humane Treatment of Prisoners) which states that “prisoners of war must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence *or intimidation and against insults and public curiosity.*” (Emphasis added.)

- **Sending the Commander of the U.S. Navy Sixth Fleet to the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol.** Under the current geopolitical circumstances, it is neither realistic nor advisable for the U.S. to send warships into the Sea of Azov. However, a visit by Vice Admiral Lisa Franchetti to Mariupol will allow America’s top naval commander in Europe to get an enhanced understanding of the security situation on the ground, as well as a better sense of Ukraine’s maritime requirements. This will better inform U.S. policy.
- **Sending a warship into the Black Sea as a sign of support and then increasing the U.S. Navy presence in the Black Sea using 2014 as a benchmark.** Soon after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the U.S. stepped up its presence in the Black Sea. However, since then, this presence has been drastically reduced. In 2014, the U.S. Navy spent a total of 204 days in the Black Sea. So far in 2018 the total has been 105.
- **Helping NATO develop a strategy for the Black Sea region.** Security in the Sea of Azov is closely connected to security in the Black Sea. The U.S. should be a leader inside NATO to develop meaningful ways for working with the Black Sea littoral states to develop a strategy for regional security.
- **Working with NATO to establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission modeled on the Baltic Air Policing mission.** NATO’s interest in Black Sea security is increasing, but the overall presence of non-Black Sea NATO warships is decreasing. In order to maintain a robust NATO presence in the Black Sea in line with the 1936 Montreux Convention, NATO should establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission modeled on the successful Baltic Air Policing mission.⁹ This would require non-Black Sea NATO countries to commit in advance to a regular and rotational maritime presence in the Black Sea.
- **Supplying more ships to Ukraine. A strong Ukrainian Navy is in America’s interests. After years of delay, the U.S. will soon transfer two *Island*-class former Coast Guard ships to Ukraine.** This is a good first step in rebuilding Ukrainian maritime capability after it lost many ships to Russia in 2014, but more should be done. The U.S. should move ahead with providing surplus *Oliver Hazard Perry (FFG-7)*-class frigates as part of the Excess Defense Property program.¹⁰
- **Helping Ukraine rapidly improve its anti-ship missile capability.** The right to self-defense does not stop at the shoreline. The U.S. can help fund and speed up research to get Ukraine’s domestically produced *Neptune* anti-ship missile in operation faster. In addition, the U.S. should consider appropriate off-the-shelf options for anti-ship missile platforms for Ukraine.
- **Helping Ukraine improve its maritime domain awareness capability.** Most of the non-lethal support provided by the U.S. to Ukraine since 2014 has focused on the land war in the east of the country. The U.S. should expand this help to improve Ukraine’s maritime security by providing improved radar and appropriate surveillance capabilities, such as unmanned aerial vehicles.
- **Lifting restrictions on U.S. troops in Ukraine.** Currently, the 300 U.S. troops in Ukraine as part of a training mission are restricted to the western half of the country, more than 800 miles from the front lines. On a limited basis, the U.S. should allow U.S. trainers and observers to the front lines to gain a better understanding of the situation on the ground and of training requirements for the Ukrainian military.
- **Evaluating NATO’s trust funds for Ukraine.** NATO should evaluate the effectiveness of the six trust funds established at the 2014 Wales Summit. For example, there is no trust fund focused on improving Ukraine’s maritime capability, yet there is one for counter-improvised explosive device (IED) training. This use of scarce NATO resources makes little sense considering the threats facing Ukraine.

A National Struggle

Ukraine is in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its future geopolitical orientation: the West or Moscow. The outcome of this struggle will have long-term implications for the transatlantic community and the very notion of national sovereignty. While the future success of Ukraine will rest in large part on the shoulders of Ukrainians themselves, U.S. leadership is essential for counteracting Russian aggression and supporting reform. The Trump Administration and the U.S. Congress should not hesitate to provide support for Ukraine. In turn, this will make both America and its allies safer.

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Endnotes

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