

INSIGHT BRIEF: BLACK SEA, USV THREAT INSIGHT

15/03/2024

Incident

The port of Novorossiysk, Russia, has imposed a ban on the navigation of all small vessels and watercraft until the 18th of March, 2024, at 15:00 UTC. This restriction, mandated by the commander of the Novorossiysk naval base, applies to vessels not subject to state registration, including pleasure, sports, and sailing vessels, inflatable watercraft, watercraft for water sports, jet skis, and windsurfers. Additionally, all types of underwater work and diving operations are prohibited. While the reasons for the ban were not officially specified, Ambrey assessed that Russian forces likely suspect an imminent Ukrainian unmanned surface vehicle and/or subsea sabotage attack on the port of Novorossiysk, which has replaced Sevastopol as a primary Russian naval port in the Black Sea. Vessels sailing in the Black Sea are advised to conduct a comprehensive voyage risk assessment. Additionally, to post lookouts at the bow of the vessels and to minimise sailing during low visibility.

Context

In recent weeks Ukraine has accelerated its targeting of Russian naval vessels in the Black Sea utilizing its unmanned systems. Ambrey assessed that there is an elevated risk of collateral damage en route to Russian Black Sea ports.

On the 4th of March 2024 at 12:05 UTC, a Russian-flagged general cargo vessel ELLA reported sighting four unmanned surface vehicles (USVs) 80M northwest of Sinop, Turkey. The master reported that one USVs altered its course towards the merchant ship. ELLA performed an evasive manoeuvre to avoid a collision with the USV, after which the USV accelerated and continued northeast. Footage of the incident captured from the merchant vessel showed a fast-moving object on the water's surface moving parallel with the general cargo vessel. Ambrey assessed that these USVs were likely the group of Ukrainian MAGURA-5 USVs that attacked the Russian naval vessel SERGEY KOTOV on the night of the 4th of March near the Kerch Bridge. At the time of the sighting, over 20 merchant vessels were within 5M of ELLA.

Ambrey assessed that the ELLA was likely surveilled and assessed by Ukrainian forces, determining it not to be one of the vessels utilized by Russian forces for military purposes. Consequently, the Ukrainian command opted not to engage the merchant vessel.

Analysis

Ukrainian forces deployed their unmanned systems program to compel the Russian Navy to withdraw from the Western Black Sea. Utilising unmanned surface and aerial vehicles like the MAGURA-5 and BOBER, Ukraine destroyed several Russian naval vessels, including the Russia-flagged tanker SIG, which was affiliated with Russian forces. Thus far Ukraine has intentionally targeted only vessels that were subject to international sanctions. Additionally, Ukrainian special forces conducted multiple attacks on offshore platforms of western Crimea utilized by Russia for reconnaissance purposes. Furthermore, Ukraine systematically targeted airports, radar systems, and anti-aircraft batteries in Crimea. These actions forced Russia to restrict the movement of its naval ships to the eastern Black Sea and to depend heavily on reconnaissance primarily conducted by air assets. This allowed Ukraine to open and maintain its unilateral export corridor.

Implications

The USVs have altered the balance of power in the Black Sea and are frequently used. Similar to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, where it is best practice, to maintain distance from at-risk, the same applies to the Black Sea. For example, on the 26th of February, Ambrey informed its clients that Russian-flagged, Russian forces-affiliated and US-sanctioned, vessels YAZ and the SPARTA IV were waiting for their northbound passage via the Bosphorus, Turkey. These vessels have been identified by Ukraine's officials as a part of the fleet utilised by Russian forces and therefore "legitimate targets." These vessels regularly sail between Syria and Russia. Once in the Black Sea they withhold their AIS and are known to be escorted by the Russian Navy. Unlike on previous occasions, both vessels turned around and sailed out of Turkish waters. Ambrey assessed it likely that the Russian intelligence services warned the vessels of possible attack and re-routed them.

The presence of Ukrainian USVs in highly frequented shipping lanes also poses a threat to merchant shipping. Ambrey documented several instances of Ukraine losing control of these crafts, likely due to Russian electronic warfare, resulting in them washing up on the shores of the Black Sea. A collision with a MAGURA-5, which carries up to a 300kg payload, could cause major damage to a merchant vessel.

Mitigations:

Vessels sailing in the Black Sea are advised to contact their security provider and to conduct a comprehensive voyage risk assessment. The voyage risk should be live monitored to allow the vessel to maintain distance from at-risk vessels. It is also advised to request from the vessel's security provider an ordnance identification sheet and use it to brief the crew. Vessels are advised to minimise sailing during low visibility and to post lookouts at the bow of the vessel. All muster points are advised to be above the waterline.
