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## **INSIGHT BRIEF: BALTIC SEA, RUSSIAN WARSHIP INCIDENT WITH DANISH PASSENGER SHIP**

**25/04/2024**

### **Incident**

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, a Danish-flagged Ro-Ro passenger ship was compelled to perform evasive manoeuvres to avoid a collision with a Russian warship 7NM northwest off the coast of Zealand Odde, Denmark. Ambrey understands the ship can carry up to 1,000 passengers and more than 400 vehicles. The vessel executed a 360-degree turn and cut its 35kt-speed in half. The operator stated that the Russian vessel "did not follow maritime regulations." The Russian vessel was expected to alter course and did not acknowledge hails.

### **Context**

This event followed broader concerns about the safety of Russia-linked operators in the Baltic Sea. To avoid or mitigate sanctions, Russia-linked vessels have adopted practices that could erode safety. These include flags of convenience, opaque ownership, an absence of International Group (IG) P&I coverage, and non-compliance with regulatory checks. In March, the Danish Maritime Authority detained a Russia-linked tanker following a collision with a Bulgaria-flagged general cargo vessel 8NM south of Copenhagen. The tanker, in ballast condition, was ordered to sail to port for inspection and repairs. She was Panama-flagged, Seychelles-owned, with unclear beneficial owners, and regularly transported Russian-origin crude oil to India. Though she was not registered with an IG P&I Club, authorities reported that she did have "required" insurance. Danish Defence reports also indicate that Russia-linked tankers are more likely to decline pilotage through the Danish Straits. Such refusal increases the risk of collisions and the potential for environmental disaster.

### **Analysis**

This event manifested in similar concerns but represented a different and emergent dynamic in the Baltic Sea. The presence of the Russian Navy transiting through Danish waters is regular and lawful. However, her purpose on this occasion was unusual. She was accompanying the Russia-flagged general cargo ship SPARTA IV. It is assessed highly likely that the SPART IV was engaged in transporting Russian military equipment. From May 2022 until February 2024, the SPARTA IV and some other merchant vessels regularly sailed to Russian Black Sea ports. In late February 2024, SPARTA IV and the products tanker YAZ approached the Bosphorus but turned around and sailed to the Baltics. The cause was not publicly disclosed. The Turkish have denied passage through the Bosphorus to patently military vessels under the Montreux Convention but had permitted prior transits by these merchant vessels. The Ukrainian armed forces had some success in targeting such Russian convoys through the Black Sea. The presence of the SPARTA IV, accompanied by a Russian warship, in the Baltic Sea indicates the Russians have adjusted their supply routes, making the Baltic Sea increasingly strategic to the Russian war effort.

It is assessed realistic that Ukraine could attempt to disrupt these shipments. The Ukrainian unmanned program has matured. Earlier in 2024, this enabled long-range attacks on Saint Petersburg and Ust-Luga. Ukrainian forces have also conducted sabotage operations in the Baltic Sea, including offshore Kaliningrad, a Russian semi-exclave on the Baltic Sea. Any Ukrainian attack on a Russian vessel in the Baltic Sea outside of Russian territorial waters would mark a significant escalation and likely prompt strong objections from NATO partners if it occurred in their waters. Yet, Ukrainian leadership has demonstrated a notable degree of autonomy in target selection.

### **Implications**

Merchant shipping is advised that Russian warships may not take the expected measures to avoid a collision, including engaging with crews over the radio. This can reduce the time needed to implement collision avoidance measures. Vessels navigating near certain Russia-affiliated merchant vessels also face an increased risk of collateral damage and are urged to steer clear of these potential military targets.