

Type:	Threat	Version:	1.0	Classification:	Restricted
Created:	20250520			Status:	Live
Title	AMBREY THREAT CIRCULAR – 20/05/2025				



AMBREY THREAT CIRCULAR: RUSSIAN REPRISAL VESSEL ARREST OF GREEK-OWNED LIBERIA-FLAGGED VESSEL

SOURCE:

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A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A Liberia-flagged tanker was detained by Russian authorities in the vicinity of Hogland Island, Russia.
- At the time of writing the vessels remains in Russian waters.
- The vessel was almost certainly targeted due to the vessel's cargo origin (Estonian shale oil) and port of departure (an Estonian terminal).
- A Gabon-flagged tanker was approached by the Estonian Navy; in response, Russia deployed a fighter jet into NATO airspace
- There is a realistic possibility of further retaliatory detentions.

B. INCIDENTS

On 18 May, a Liberia-flagged tanker was detained by Russian authorities in the vicinity of Hogland Island, Russia. The detention occurred following a port call at Sillamäe, Estonia, while the vessel was transiting a transnationally agreed transit corridor intended to avoid navigational hazards, enroute to Rotterdam, Netherlands. Following the detention, the Estonian Transport Administration announced that vessels calling at Sillamäe would henceforth be escorted through Estonian territorial waters. At the time of writing, Russian authorities had not issued any comment. AIS data indicated that the vessel's destination was subsequently changed from Rotterdam to "Primorsk, Russia."

This was preceded by an incident off Estonia. On 13 May, a Gabon-flagged tanker was approached by the Estonian Navy, 18NM northwest of Tallin, Estonia, while en route from Al Adabiyah, Egypt, to Primorsk, Russia. The tanker refused to comply with the Estonian law enforcement instructions to divert to a nearby port for an inspection. Russian forces deployed a fighter jet into NATO airspace as a show of force and a means of support to the tanker. The tanker evaded the detention and sailed into Russian waters. The Gabon-flagged tanker was sanctioned by the United Kingdom on 9 May for its involvement in the transportation of Russian oil. Ambrey is aware that this is the second incident in which the Estonian Navy attempted to detain a tanker since 11 April. The first detainment was conducted to inspect the technical condition, insurance status, and documentation of the crew and vessel.

C. THREAT UPDATE

The recent detention of a tanker in Russian waters is assessed to be a retaliatory measure in response to increased enforcement by NATO-member Baltic Sea nations targeting the vessels enabling Russian sanctions evasion, also known as the "shadow fleet." In recent months, European Union (EU) member states bordering the Baltic Sea have adopted a firmer posture, detaining or denying entry to vessels suspected of breaching EU sanctions. These actions are part of a broader effort to reduce the operational space for Russian oil exports through non-compliant maritime assets. The cumulative effect of these efforts has been the tightening of maritime controls and the creation of operational choke points for Russian crude flows.

Until the incident on 13 May, Russia's response had remained relatively restrained. However, mounting EU pressure, declining global oil prices, and the rising number of vessel detentions appear to have prompted a shift in Moscow's posture. In a notable escalation, a Russian military jet was deployed to discourage the Estonian Navy from detaining a Gabon-flagged vessel suspected of sanctions evasion. This was quickly followed by Russia's detention of a Greek-owned tanker carrying Estonian shale oil, an act that is evidently a retaliatory measure.

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Ambrey assesses that the detention was not likely based on flag state, ownership, or historical trading patterns, but rather on the vessel's cargo origin (Estonian shale oil) and port of departure (an Estonian terminal). This selective targeting highlights Russia's use of coercive maritime tactics to pressure NATO-member nations and safeguard its hydrocarbon export routes with the use of force.

In response, Estonia has announced that all commercial traffic to and from the port of Sillamäe will now be routed exclusively through Estonian territorial waters, likely in an effort to limit exposure to Russian jurisdiction and military pressure.

It is a realistic possibility that if Baltic Sea nations continue to strengthen their adversarial posture toward the sanctioned vessels in their waters, Russia will likely conduct reciprocal actions in the maritime domain, including detentions, seizures and plausible deniability attacks. The vessels operating in Estonian and Finnish waters are assessed as most likely targets for detentions. Most but not all vessels avoid the waters of the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, which sits between Gdansk, Poland and Klaipeda, Lithuania.

D. OUTLOOK AND RISK IMPLICATIONS:

Short-Term: Expect heightened maritime security risks, particularly around vessels transporting oil from or to Baltic ports, including the increased likelihood of arbitrary detentions, military posturing, and freedom of navigation impediments.

Medium-Term: Should a future Russia–Ukraine peace agreement fail to address EU-UK sanctions on Russian hydrocarbon exports, Russia is likely to reallocate its security apparatus, previously focused on the Black Sea, to the Baltic region. This could increase the likelihood of non-linear warfare between NATO and Russian forces, with merchant shipping likely to be used as a vector for coercive leverage and political signalling.

E. MITIGATION

- It is advised to conduct comprehensive and dynamic voyage risk assessments.
- It is recommended that vessel operators require their security providers to deliver relevant, near real-time, and actionable intelligence alerts.
- Develop multiple contingency plans for various scenarios, including likely port closures and detentions and seizures.
- Establish clear thresholds and indicators that, if breached, would necessitate the immediate departure of vessels from the area.
- Operators are advised to provide masters with Bridge Cards containing pre-prepared responses to being hailed by the Russian Navy. If boarded, it is advised to comply with instructions.
- Stay informed on the current sanctions landscape, including ongoing restrictions related to Russian LNG and crude oil.

F. CONTACT INFORMATION

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