US and Ukrainian military actions raise Black Sea tension

By Rachel Douglas

9 Nov.—The most confrontation-minded US and NATO military planners, politicians and media lost no time in fanning tensions with Russia, in the wake of the 21-22 October NATO defence ministers' meeting and US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin's tour of the Black Sea region just before it. As we reported last week ("NATO prepares for war with China and Russia", *AAS*, 3 Nov. 2021), NATO has adopted a "Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area", which provides for stepped-up activity in the Black Sea and Baltic Sea, as well as ever more explicit demonstrations of readiness to use nuclear weapons.

Defensenews.com, a website read by senior military and military industry officials, on 26 October summarised Austin's tour as a signal that "the Biden administration sees the Black Sea as a front to challenge Russia". The article drew attention to a hearing held the next day by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, titled "Black Sea Security: Reviving US Policy Toward the Region".

The Ambassadors of Romania and Ukraine, two countries Austin had visited, sent letters to the subcommittee, lobbying for an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea. The Ukrainian envoy complained that Russia was using the Black Sea (on which it, too, has a coastline) as "a springboard for its Syria operations", a reference to Russia's assistance to the Syrian government, which was decisive in defeating the ISIS terrorist insurgency there.

The lead witness at the hearing was Ian Brzezinski of the Atlantic Council, the British-government-funded think tank at the forefront of Washington's anti-Russia hawks. Brzezinski invoked the legacy of his father, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who as national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter introduced hard-core British geopolitical thinking into American foreign policy nearly 50 years ago.[1] He cited his father's insistence on separating Ukraine from Russia, and lamented that China has "established footholds in the region via investments through its Belt and Road Initiative".

Also testifying was Alina Polyakova, president and CEO of the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), where NATO ex-commander Gen. Ben Hodges holds a chair of strategic studies. Defensenews.com quoted Hodges's recent advocacy of a NATO build-up in the Black Sea: "It's clear the Russians will only stop when they are stopped, and so I'm saying: 'What's our strategy? What do we want to accomplish there?'" Hodges is known for predicting that Russian "war against Ukraine" is inevitable, and insisting that the USA and NATO prepare for it.

On 19 October, just as Secretary Austin was to arrive in NATO member Romania, Moscow's official news agency TASS reported that Russian Su-30 jets had scrambled to intercept two American B-1B strategic bombers and accompanying tanker aircraft over the Black Sea "to identify the air

Russia (including Crimea); NATO members Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey; and NATO partners Georgia and Ukraine all front on the Black Sea. The US Navy Sixth Fleet's flagship USS *Mount Whitney* passed the Turkish Straits from the Aegean into the Black Sea on 4 November, where the guided-missile cruiser USS *Porter* is already operating.

targets and prevent a violation of Russia's state border".

The US Navy's Sixth Fleet has announced that the guided-missile destroyer USS *Porter* passed through the Turkish Straits into the Black Sea on 30 October. The *Porter* is an *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer, equipped with the Aegis anti-missile defence system, which Russia has repeatedly protested as a destabilising weapon with offensive potential. On 4 November the USS *Mount Whitney*, an amphibious command ship that is the flagship of the Sixth Fleet, likewise transited the straits into the Black Sea.

The Russian National Defence Control Centre said that Russia's Black Sea Fleet was monitoring the *Mount Whitney's* actions. In Rome for the Group of 20 summit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said 31 October that the appearance of American warships in the Black Sea "does not add to stability" and that creating new NATO naval bases on the Black Sea coasts of Bulgaria or Romania would hinder "good-neighbourly relations" in the region.

A further escalation of American military coordination with Ukraine, though the latter is not a member of NATO, may emerge from a 10 November meeting of the Ukraine-USA Strategic Partnership Commission. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Denis Kuleba are to sign a new Strategic Partnership Charter.

Real and imagined escalations

Amidst the Black Sea deployments, unnamed officials in the USA and Europe told the *Washington Post* 30 October that Russia was again engaged in a build-up of troops along its border with Ukraine. Last April troop movements in that region, on Russia's own territory, led to a rash of media articles claiming Russian invasion of Ukraine was imminent. It wasn't. This time, Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov claimed that Russia had left communications and other military equipment at bases near Ukraine after its *Zapad* 2021 exercises ended several

---

1. The senior Brzezinski's role in breeding radical Islamist terrorism in Afghanistan and worldwide, in the name of harassing the "soft underbelly" of the Soviet Union in Central Asia, is detailed in the *AAS* special report *Xinjiang: China's western frontier in the heart of Eurasia*, available at https://citizensparty.org.au/.

weeks ago. He suggested "80,000 to 90,000" Russian troops were massed near Ukraine.

Washington think tanks were abuzz over videos on social media, purporting to show military equipment being moved around southern and western Russia. The Politico website published satellite photos, supposedly of Russian forces gathered on the border with Ukraine. Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov called these publications "fake news", noting that the photos showed Russia's border with Belarus, not Ukraine. US Department of Defence spokesman John Kirby on 1 November declined to confirm a Russian build-up was under way, while Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley, at a think tank conference the same day, said that "nothing overtly aggressive" by the Russian forces had been observed.

Even Ukraine's own Defence Ministry denied a Russian build-up, stating that "as of November 1, 2021, no additional transfer of Russian units, weapons and military equipment to the state border of Ukraine has been recorded". The contradiction between statements from different Ukrainian agencies may be related to behind-the-scenes political turmoil; Minister of Defence Andriy Taran resigned on 3 November, citing his health.

There is little doubt, however, about rising tension in eastern Ukraine, the Donbass region where civil war has been fought off and on since 2014. More than 13,000 people have been killed. Parts of Ukraine's two eastern regions, Lugansk and Donetsk, remain under independent control; they rebelled against Kiev's authority after the western-backed coup in 2014 brought extreme Ukrainian nationalists to power.

Diplomacy planned out in 2015 by French, German, Russian and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) representatives (the Minsk process), for a settlement between Kiev and the breakaway regions, remains stalled. The leader of the Lugansk People's Republic, one of the regions, said 19 October that he is open to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on resolving the conflict, but that ceasefire violations and shelling along the line of contact (around the separated areas) have increased three- to five-fold since March, as witnessed by OSCE monitors.

At her late-October briefings, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova cited "a rise in tensions in the conflict zone". She charged that Kiev appeared to be deliberately preventing the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group (Russia, Ukraine, OSCE) from meeting, while stepping up clashes, "in order to free its hands to take Donbass back via military means." Boris Gryzlov, Russia's representative to the Contact Group, likewise charged 28 October that "Ukraine is playing an extremely dangerous game. By simultaneously carrying out provocative shelling, publishing absolutely contradictory statements in the media, and violating [agreed-upon] troop dislocations", Kiev is trying to provoke Donbass to resume fighting.

Russia especially bristled when Oleksiy Arestovych, a Ukrainian blogger who is an official advisor to Ukraine's Contact Group delegation, boasted 25 October on TV that Ukrainian missiles will soon be aimed at Moscow. (Ukraine gave up its nuclear warheads in the 1990s, but has some old Soviet missile-launchers, besides its recently acquired American Javelin anti-tank missiles.) Zakharova protested that western partners to the Donbass peace process, like France and Germany, did not rebuke Kiev for this threat.

Ukraine evidently has already used one new weapon system in the Donbass for the first time: a Bayraktar combat drone bought from Turkey. The Defence Ministry claimed 27 October that it had deployed the drone against a howitzer battery of "Russian terrorist forces" (meaning Donbass militias). The report remained unconfirmed and Taran, just before resigning, denied what his own ministry had announced. But Donetsk People's Republic officials did accuse Kiev of a drone attack on an oil terminal in the city of Donetsk. The German Foreign Ministry denounced Kiev's use of combat drones, but Ukraine's Ambassador to Germany Andriy Melnyk rejected the complaint, claiming a "right to self-defence".

Risking war to defend not 'democracy', but fascists

However the Kiev's defence leadership shuffle may sort out, one recent military promotion in Ukraine is chillingly clear. On 3 November it was revealed that Gen. Maj. Valery Zaluzhny, commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces since July, has named Dmytro Yarosh as his advisor. Yarosh was a key organiser of the violent coup of 2013-14 against Ukraine's elected President. A follower of Ukrainian fascist and on-and-off Nazi ally Stepan Bandera, Yarosh worked for years to build up the paramilitary forces that became the "Right Sector" during the coup. He preached ethnic purity and the inevitability of war with Russia. In recent years, Yarosh has worked to fold his fascist paramilitary groups, such as the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, into the regular Ukrainian army. Now he will be tasked with recruiting new volunteers directly into the army.

Zakharova advised, 28 October, that NATO should change its approach to military training assistance in Ukraine, to prevent members of neo-Nazi groups from being trained. She was responding to a George Washington University report that members of a group called Centuria, tied to the Azov Battalion, were receiving instruction from NATO personnel at the Ukrainian military's National Academy of Ground Forces.

Are the USA and NATO risking World War III for the sake of an alliance with Ukrainian neo-Nazis? It is claimed that "democratic" Ukraine needs to be defended against "authoritarian" Russia. The latest politicised ruling by the Supreme Court of Ukraine gives the lie to that myth.

On 27 October the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Ukrainian Ministry of Justice, overturning Appeals Court rulings in a lawsuit brought against the ministry by economist and former MP Natalia Vitrenko, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (PSPU). For nearly three decades, Vitrenko has been a consistent advocate of friendly relations with Russia and of replacing the neoliberal economic policies that have savaged Ukraine's economy and population.

Last year the PSPU, a party that in the past elected members to the national parliament and hundreds of regional representative bodies, won a four-year battle with the Ministry of Justice for reregistration ("'Democracy': A cautionary tale from Ukraine", *AAS*, 25 Nov. 2020). In that case, the PSPU won at every level, up to and including the Supreme Court.

When Vitrenko attempted to run in the 2019 Presidential elections, the Ministry of Justice sat on the papers she filed for 45 days, until after the deadline had passed for filing a candidacy. She sued the ministry, and in July 2019 the Appeals Court ruled that the Ministry of Justice had acted unlawfully. Though the election by then was four months in the past, the Ministry of Justice demonstrated how anxious the government of "democratic" Ukraine is to suppress Vitrenko's voice: it appealed the case to the Supreme Court. On 27 October the high judges obliged, ruling that the Ministry of Justice could review papers for as long as it wanted.

Interviewed after the Supreme Court session, Vitrenko said that the Supreme Court of Ukraine had "trampled on democracy, European values, the Constitution of Ukraine, the European Convention on Human Rights, the rights of political parties, and the entire logic of the people's power."