

As Russia stokes tensions with Ukraine, it's trying to gain a military edge over NATO elsewhere in Europe



The Russian large landing ship Azov fires missiles during a rehearsal for the Navy Day parade in the Black Sea port of Sevastopol, Crimea, July 27, 2017. REUTERS/Pavel Rebrov

- **Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have spiked after Russia fire upon and seized Ukrainian ships on Sunday in the Black Sea.**
- **Russia's military presence in the Black Sea region has increased since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and Moscow has made similar moves elsewhere.**
- **Russian capabilities present specific challenges to NATO — something the alliance is well aware of.**

A confrontation between Russian and Ukrainian ships in the Black Sea this weekend ended with Ukraine's ships seized and its sailors jailed.

It was the first direct clash between Moscow and Kiev in years, and it stoked tensions that have been elevated for years, especially after Russia intervened in Ukraine in 2014 and seized the Crimean Peninsula and then backed separatist movements along Ukraine's eastern border.



Two Ukrainian navy ships sailing near Crimea.
Ukrainian Navy Press Service via AP

The November 25 clash took place in the Kerch Strait, which divides Crimea and mainland Russia and connects the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. Photos show Russia appears to have struck one of the Ukrainian ships with a heavy weapon, such as a 30mm gun or missile.

Since claiming Crimea, Russia has taken a more aggressive stance toward the Sea of Azov, declaring invalid a 2003 agreement in which Moscow and Kiev agreed to share the body of water.

In 2015, Russia began construction of a bridge over the Kerch Strait. The sea is already the world's shallowest, no deeper than 50 feet, and the height of the bridge further restricted the size of ships that could pass through.



The road-and-rail bridge constructed to connect the Russian mainland with the Crimean Peninsula, in the Kerch Strait, Crimea, April 25, 2018.

REUTERS/Pavel Rebrov

Russia has also interfered with Ukrainian shipping in the area and at times closed the strait completely — all of which is particularly challenging for Ukraine, which has major ports on the Sea of Azov.

Ukraine and Russia have both pursued a military buildup in the area, but Russia has more forces and their activity has been more substantial.

Moscow's moves in the Black Sea region are of a piece of with what it's been doing throughout Eastern Europe amid heightened tensions with NATO.

'An arc of A2/AD'

Since 2014, Russia has "built up tremendous amounts of capability" in Crimea, said Omar Lamrani, a senior military analyst at geopolitical-analysis firm Stratfor.



Tensions between Ukraine and Russia have been high since 2014, and NATO has taken a more active role in the region. -Google Maps

Russian forces in the area now amount to about 30,000 troops and more than 100 combat aircraft, up from dozens that were in the area prior to the takeover, Lamrani said. (In May, 17 Russian planes swarmed a British warship sailing just 30 miles from Crimea.)

"They have now three battalions of S-400s, plus other air-defense systems, like the S-300 [and the] Buk M2," Lamrani said. Another division of S-400 missiles is on its way to Crimea, where it will be the fourth on duty, according to Russian

state media.

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“They installed a number of coastal missile-defense batteries” firing weapons like Bastion and Bal cruise missiles, which can strike land and sea targets, Lamrani said. Russian state media also said this week that more Bal and other anti-ship missiles were headed to the Crimean city of Kerch, which overlooks the strait of the same name.

“They have some Iskander missiles they rotate through the area, lots of new artillery systems, lots of new armor,” Lamrani added, referring to Russian short-range, nuclear-capable cruise missiles. “They didn’t really have main battle tanks there before 2014. Now they do.”



Russian tank crew members wait for their T-72B tank to move off a train after arriving at a train station in Gvardeiskoye near the Crimean city of Simferopol, March 31, 2014.

REUTERS/Yannis Behrakis

Russia sees Crimea as a stronghold from which to pressure Ukraine and assert control over a broader swath of the Black Sea, Lamrani said.

Weapons like the S-400 and coastal-defense systems can be employed as a part of anti-access/area-denial, or A2/AD, strategy, and their presence in Crimea and elsewhere along Russia’s eastern frontiers has garnered attention from NATO.

Russian “A2/AD capability [runs] from the high north through Kaliningrad, down to Crimea and all the way down into [Russia’s] base at Tartus in Syria,” Ben Hodges, who commanded the US Army in Europe before retiring at the end of 2017, told Business Insider at the beginning of November.

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The S-400, considered Russia’s most advanced air-defense system, is also deployed in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea and near Latakia on the Syrian coast. The S-300, which is older but still highly capable, has been deployed in the region, including in the breakaway Georgian province of Abkhazia, which borders

the Black Sea.

“There are varying degrees of capabilities” at each of those sites, Hodges added, “but the one in Kaliningrad and the one in Crimea are the most substantial, with air- and missile-defense and anti-ship missiles and several thousands of troops” from Russia’s army, navy, and air force. “That’s part of creating an arc of A2/AD, if you will.”



Russia S-400 air-defense systems in Syria. -Russian Defense Ministry

Some of the NATO members bordering the sea, like Romania and Bulgaria, don’t have a major naval presence there, but Turkey would likely prevent Russia from having free reign in the sea.

With the vantage point provided by Crimea, Russian combat aircraft and land-based weapons systems like the S-400 and Bal missiles can extend their reach hundreds of miles into and over the Black Sea.

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“They can effectively support their navy with an umbrella defense of surface-to-air missiles and anti-ship missile systems that can keep NATO away in case of any threat,” Lamrani said.

A2/AD systems could provide similar defense in a place like Kaliningrad, which has Russia’s only year-round, ice-free Baltic Sea port and is close to St. Petersburg, Russia’s second-largest city. In western Syria, where Russian S-400 systems have already been deployed, US-led coalition forces have worked hard to avoid Russian airspace.

‘Alive to these challenges’



Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) flagship HMS Duncan, arrives to the harbor in Constanta, Romania, February 2, 2018.

NATO/CPO FRA C.Valverde

Russian forces are outstripped by NATO as a whole, and an all-out Russian attack

on another country is considered unlikely.

But concern has grown that Russian A2/AD in areas like eastern Syria or the Baltic and Black seas could create layered defensive bubbles and limit NATO's freedom of movement — especially in an engagement below the threshold of war.

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In the decades since the Cold War, NATO members also shifted their attention away from a potential conflict with a peer or near-peer foe, focusing instead on smaller-scale operations like counterterrorism. (The US and others have started to reverse this shift.)

"There's been decline in ... investments rather in this type of warfare, as NATO attention has shifted to other priorities," Lamrani said of A2/AD.

But, he noted, Russia has pursued the mismatch to compensate for a weakness.



A NATO flag flutters next to a US Air Force F-35A Lightning II fighter at Amari air base in Estonia, April 25, 2017.

Thomson Reuters

"Russia is stronger than NATO in air defenses and stronger than NATO in land-based anti-ship missile systems, as well as anti-missile systems in general," Lamrani said. "That came out of Russia trying to mitigate its disadvantages in other areas. For instance, NATO naval forces are much stronger than Russia, and NATO air power as a whole is much stronger than Russia."

Advanced stealth platforms, like the US-made F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, are seen as potential counters to A2/AD systems. And other assets, like the Navy's EA-18G Growler electronic-attack aircraft, could help thwart them.

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But it's not clear those resources are available in the numbers needed to do so, nor is it likely such an engagement could be conducted without heavy losses.

Nevertheless, while Russia may find an advantage within the specific area of A2/AD, Lamrani said, “that doesn’t mean that NATO hasn’t been developing its own capabilities in other areas [and it] doesn’t mean that NATO hasn’t been thinking about this type of stuff.”

“Let’s just say the alliance is alive to these challenges, and it ... will be prepared to use all the different things that would be required,” Hodges said in early November, without elaborating. “This is not something ... the alliance has not looked at very closely.”

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