


Russia-Ukraine War: Kiev's navy says 'We will be Ready' and prepared to use 'weapons' if Moscow attacks again

One month after Russia attacked three Ukrainian navy ships in the Kerch Strait, Ukraine's navy chief said his country was prepared to defend its sovereignty from its bigger neighbor and exert its freedom to navigate in the body of water.

"There's a war going on, initiated by Russia...and this war is raging at the sea too, since 2014. Whether we want and don't want to lay low at bases and offices; we have to fulfill our duties regarding the protection of our sovereign interests. And the sovereign interests of Ukraine apply to the Kerch Strait as well," Vice Admiral Andriy Tarasov, chief of Ukraine's naval staff, told the *Kyiv Post*.

"If we face an act of aggression, we will be ready to have different rules, particularly regarding the use of weapons, if we are forced to do so, and if we are fully entitled by international and Ukrainian law," Tarasov continued.

Russia and Ukraine have been in conflict ever since a pro-Western social movement ousted the country's former pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014. Since then, Moscow has propped up pro-Russian separatists in the part of eastern Ukraine known as Donbass, and annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine, a move that was not recognized by the rest of the international community.

 A Russian Federal Security Service patrol boat on duty in the Kerch Strait on December 5. SERGEI MALGAVKO/TASS/GETTY IMAGES

The conflict came to a head on November 25, when Russia attacked the three Ukrainian navy vessels. The incident took place as the Ukrainian ships were attempting to enter the Sea of Azov from the Black Sea via the Kerch Strait. The strait connects mainland Russia from the Russian-occupied Crimean peninsula.

According to article 123 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, both Ukraine and Russia are required to share use of the Strait as well as the other waters surrounding their two countries.

Russia has been working to make it increasingly difficult for Ukraine to use the ports surrounding the Crimean peninsula, and the recent attack is considered part of that strategy. About 24 Ukrainian sailors were detained in the skirmish, and they have yet to be released.

Nevertheless, Tarasov expressed his conviction that Ukraine's navy must continue to operate in the area.

Other officials in Ukraine argued that the country needs the international community to continue to pressure Russia to allow freedom of navigation in the waters.

"Our ships were navigating sea routes where freedom of navigation is guaranteed by international maritime law. This is not an opinion but an indisputable fact. The only 'crime' to have taken place was that perpetrated by Russian forces, which fired on and then seized Ukrainian ships and their crews in open waters," Ukraine's minister of foreign affairs Pavlo Klimkin wrote in an op-ed for *Politico Europe*.

"It is our firm belief that the highly volatile and dangerous situation in the Sea of Azov and Kerch Strait can only be deescalated through solidarity among countries with a shared respect for international law," Klimkin continued.

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