

# Ukrainian drone strikes target Moscow as fighting intensifies in Black Sea region

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Early Monday morning local time, Ukrainian forces carried out drone strikes on Moscow, including on a building affiliated with the Ministry of Defense. No casualties were reported. Ukrainian officials boasted of their responsibility for the drone strikes.

The Russian Ministry of Defense on Monday also accused Ukraine of launching 17 drones on the Crimean Peninsula in the Black Sea, which Russia annexed in 2014. The Kerch Bridge, which connects Crimea with the Russian mainland, was attacked by Ukraine last Monday.

Shortly after the attack on the Kerch Bridge, Russia announced its withdrawal from a deal that had been brokered by the United Nations and Turkey between Moscow and Kiev to ensure grain shipments from Ukraine through the Black Sea to international markets. Russia and Ukraine both count among the world's largest agricultural producers, supplying above all countries in Africa and Asia.

The agreement provided for monitored Ukrainian grain supplies via a planned route through the Black Sea, large portions of which are controlled by the Russian navy and mined by both Russia and Ukraine.

The Kremlin said it withdrew because the obligations toward Russia as part of the deal had not been met. At the same time, Moscow indicated that Russia would consider rejoining the deal if these obligations were fulfilled and if financial sanctions on the Russian Agricultural Bank were lifted. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday that the grain deal had “lost its meaning” and assured African countries that Russia could make up for Ukrainian grain supplies.

Following the collapse of the deal, the Russian Ministry of Defense declared it would impose a “blockade” on Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea and that, from July 20 onward, it would consider any foreign ship seeking to enter Ukrainian Black Sea ports a legitimate target.

The Zelensky government has insisted that it would

continue grain shipments regardless.

In response, Russia has launched a series of strikes on Ukrainian port cities. Over the past week, Russia launched several missile strikes on Odessa, a strategic port city on the shores of the Black Sea. Missile strikes have also hit the ports in Nikolaev and Chernomorsk. Further strikes since have hit Reni and Izmail, two port cities on the Danube River, which flows into the Black Sea. Russian media reports suggest that a number of both grain and ammunition depots were destroyed in those strikes. The Ukrainian military has confirmed that the grain depot of the Odessa port was destroyed.

Romania, a NATO member on the Black Sea, has declared that it would make its Constanta port on the Danube River available to Ukraine for additional shipments until mid-August.

In addition to its role in the global food supply, the Black Sea is of fundamental geostrategic significance to both the imperialist powers and to Russia, as well as countries like Turkey. The Black Sea forms a bridge between Eastern and Southeastern Europe, Russia and the resource-rich Caucasus and Middle East. In a 2021 webinar by the hawkish Washington D.C.-based think tank Atlantic Council, Alton Buland, the director for European policy at the US Department of Defense, described the Black Sea as “Russia’s geostrategic center of gravity” and its “gateway south, the gateway to the Middle East [and] ... the gateway to Asia.”

Because of the immense significance of the Black Sea for Russia, the country’s encirclement by the imperialist powers since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has centrally involved the incorporation of most countries bordering the Black Sea into NATO. Apart from Russia, the only non-NATO member states on the Black Sea are Georgia and Ukraine, which is heavily supplied by NATO weapons and integrated into NATO’s war machine.

The escalating fighting in the Black Sea region also has

significant implications for Turkey, which so far has tried to maintain a precarious balancing act between Russia and NATO in the conflict. Over the years, the Erdogan government has developed extensive military ties with Ukraine, and Turkey has never recognized Crimea and the waters off the peninsula as part of Russia. Ankara also recently dropped its previous opposition to Swedish membership in NATO and declared that Ukraine “deserves” NATO membership.

However, Turkey has not aggressively sided with NATO in the conflict and continues to maintain close economic ties with Russia. Erdogan has announced that he would be speaking with Putin in an effort to rescue the grain deal.

In the wake of the collapse of the grain deal, retired Admiral Cem Gürdeniz declared that conflicts over the grain deal could end Turkey’s policy of “active neutrality” in the Black Sea, i.e., potentially trigger Turkey’s direct military involvement in the conflict. He warned that Turkey would commit “geopolitical suicide” if Ankara were to allow for Ukrainian grain shipments through its straits in the Black Sea, in opposition to Russia.

A meeting between the newly created NATO-Ukraine Council is scheduled for Wednesday to discuss the situation in the Black Sea.

The escalation of the conflict between Russia and NATO in the Black Sea region began just days after the NATO summit in Vilnius concluded in mid-July. Held amidst the debacle of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, which is taking a tremendous human toll and has cost tens of billions of dollars without resulting in any serious military gains, the summit was focused on discussing plans for global conflict in a new imperialist redivision of the world, including an expansion of the war against Russia.

In addition to the infighting in the Black Sea region, the summit has also been followed by growing tensions between Russia and Poland. In the lead-up to the Vilnius summit, former NATO General Secretary Anders Rasmussen had raised the prospect that countries like Poland and the Baltic states might “engage even stronger ... maybe including the possibility of troops on the ground.”

On Friday, in a meeting with his national security council, Russian President Vladimir Putin raised the prospect of a direct military conflict with Poland. Commenting on reports that Poland is planning to deploy a newly founded Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Corps

(LITPOLUKRCORPS) to West Ukraine, Putin said that such a deployment would mark the beginning of a Polish “occupation of West Ukraine” and that Russia would respond militarily.

In a meeting with Putin on Sunday and Monday, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko reportedly showed Putin a map of Polish troop deployments to just 40 kilometers off the Belarusian border city of Brest. In a press conference, Lukashenko hinted that troops of the mercenary leader Evgeny Prigozhin, who launched an insurrection a month ago, are now stationed in Belarus and could be deployed in such a conflict. The Wagner troops were, in Lukashenko’s words, “in a bad mood” and eager “to go on an excursion” to Poland. Lukashenko then said that he was still holding them back and urged Putin to do the same.

In the weeks following the coup attempt, which Prigozhin launched with an open appeal to pro-NATO forces within the Russian oligarchy and state, Prigozhin and Wagner have effectively been given carte blanche. Neither Prigozhin nor his mercenaries have faced criminal charges, and Putin met with 35 Wagner commanders, including Prigozhin, just five days after the coup attempt.

In an indication of ongoing conflicts within the Russian military and state apparatus, the Kremlin on Friday arrested Igor Strelkov (Girkin), a well-known ultranationalist and longtime separatist leader in East Ukraine, charging him with “extremism” based on allegations of a former Wagner employee. Strelkov denounced Prigozhin’s coup attempt as treason but has also long criticized Putin’s conduct of the war, demanding that the president enact a mass mobilization. Most recently, Strelkov attacked Putin as a “nonentity,” stating, “the country will not survive another six years under the rule of that cowardly mediocrity.”



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