Drone shot down near Ankara

NATO-Ukraine war on Russia spreads to commercial vessels in the Black Sea

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Conflicts between NATO-backed Ukraine and Russia have taken on a new dimension in recent weeks with attacks on civilian commercial vessels in the Black Sea. That the attacks occurred not only in international waters but also off the coast of NATO member Türkiye raises the danger of the war widening and provoking a new military escalation.

Monday's statement from the Turkish Ministry of National Defense indicates the situation could rapidly get out of control. The Ministry announced that Turkish F-16s shot down an "out-of-control" unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that had entered Türkiye's airspace from the Black Sea. The origin country of the UAV was not identified; reports say it penetrated 175 kilometres inland from the border and was struck about 100 kilometres from the capital Ankara. This is an unprecedented incident.

On 28 November, two tankers named *Kairos* and *Virat*, en route to Russia, were attacked in waters under Türkiye's jurisdiction off the coasts of the Kocaeli and Kastamonu provinces. The Kyiv regime claimed responsibility for these attacks. Ukrainian officials said the tankers were targeted with "Sea Baby" unmanned underwater vehicles carried out by the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU).

Both tankers had been listed among vessels sanctioned after the war began in 2022. Following its invasion, Russia has used a "shadow fleet" of hundreds of tankers—many sailing under different flags—to evade Western sanctions, especially those targeting its oil exports.

Cahit ?stikbal, head of the Maritime Safety Association, said: "For the first time commercial ships are being targeted… Yes, beyond [Türkiye's] territorial waters is not the full sovereign domain of the state, but even if it occurred within an EEZ [exclusive economic zone], such an attack means [the war] has expanded to this degree for the first time. It is a grave development."

The attacks were followed on December 2 by an assault in international waters 80 miles off Türkiye's coast on the *Midvolga 2* tanker, which had been carrying sunflower oil from Russia to Georgia. On December 10, the Comoros-flagged tanker *Dashan* was struck in the Black Sea—again reportedly by a Ukrainian-made Sea Baby unmanned maritime vehicle.

Since the start of the war, Ukraine has carried out attacks on pipelines, valves and filling facilities aimed at undermining Russia's oil and gas revenues. In September 2022 the Nord Stream gas pipeline in the Baltic Sea was bombed; it later emerged that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky personally approved that attack. But it would be wrong to say the most recent strikes are solely an attempt to cripple the oil revenues that sustain Russia's war effort.

The attacks came after the Trump administration presented Kyiv with a 28-point plan for negotiating an end to the war with Russia. Articles in the proposal—such as Ukraine's pledge not to join NATO; recognition of the annexation of Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk by Russia; and holding elections within 100 days that would almost certainly precipitate the fall of the Zelensky regime—have put Kyiv in a very difficult position.

Ukraine's government is already rocked by a corruption scandal involving Zelensky's inner circle. Opposition in the population is growing in the face of conscription and mounting deaths, and the military crisis is deepening.

European imperialist powers, fearful of being excluded by the US from the spoils in Ukraine and Russia, are backing the continuation of the war—both to revise Trump's plan and develop their military independence.

French head of the army general staff, General Fabien

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Mandon, demanded that French people be prepared "to sacrifice their children" in a war against Russia. In Germany, measures are being prepared to reintroduce conscription. The mass protests in Germany on December 5 against this measure expressed widespread popular opposition to the militarization drive.

Regarding the Black Sea attacks, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on 2 December: "The attacks on tankers did not take place even in neutral waters; they occurred in another state's—third state's—exclusive economic zone. This is piracy."

Putin added, "The most radical option is to cut Ukraine off from the sea. Then, in principle, piracy would be impossible," adding that Russia would consider retaliatory measures against Ukrainian vessels and those of countries aiding Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, in a post on the Russian Embassy in Ankara's social media account, said: "This [Ukraine's attack] is an attack on commercial ships and tankers in Turkish territorial waters. This is a very serious matter and an attack on the sovereignty of the Republic of Türkiye."

On December 12 Russia launched strikes on ports in the Odessa region. Various commercial ships were targeted during the attacks on Odessa and Chornomorsk ports. Ukrainian officials reported damage to the tanker Cenk-T and three Turkish-owned ships.

The Ukrainian Navy alleged on December 13 that Russia had intentionally targeted a civilian Turkish merchant vessel in the Black Sea with a UAV; according to the statement, the *Viva* was carrying sunflower oil to Egypt.

Attacks on civilian merchant shipping in the Black Sea expand the scope of the war and threaten to drag NATO members like Türkiye deeper into the maelstrom. Ankara—fearing that a further escalation would harm bourgeois interests and in support of Trump's peace plan—has called for calm.

President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an said on December 1: "The war between Russia and Ukraine has clearly begun to threaten navigational safety in the Black Sea. The targeting of vessels in our Exclusive Economic Zone on [28 November] Friday signals a worrying escalation."

He added, "We cannot in any way condone attacks that particularly threaten navigation, life and environmental safety in our exclusive zones. We are conveying the necessary warnings to all relevant sides regarding such incidents."

Asked on December 13 what Türkiye's stance would be if the war spread across the region, Erdo?an responded: "As you know, US President Donald Trump is involved in this issue. In addition to Trump's involvement, we are also encouraging America."

While calling for a "negotiated solution" after the war's outbreak, Türkiye helped arm Ukraine with Bayraktar UAVs. At the same time, Ankara has pursued a policy of manoeuvring between NATO and Russia because of Türkiye's strong economic ties to Moscow.

Following Russia's February 2022 invasion, Ankara closed the straits to warships of NATO and Russia under the Montreux Convention. The 1936 Montreux Convention gives Türkiye control over the Istanbul and Çanakkale straits and strictly limits access of warships from non–Black Sea states.

As in the twentieth century, the Black Sea today has broad international significance. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, "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 seminar Alton Buland, 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."

The danger of escalation in the Black Sea—after a war that has already killed, wounded and displaced millions of Ukrainians and Russians—should be a warning to the working class. The only way to stop imperialist war is through the mass mobilization of the European and international working class to seize power and put an end to its source, the capitalist system.

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