Case Study: Black Sea Ramming, 1988

As NATO Allies consider or undertake freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in areas of heightened political and military sensitivity for Russia, there is awareness that this may lead to an assertive response by Russia.\(^1\) A previous instance of FONOPs leading to a potentially dangerous confrontation is worth considering in detail for the lessons it provides on the multiple and complex factors that can lead to miscalculation in these circumstances.

**Incident Outline**

In 1986, the United States claimed territorial waters extending to three miles from the coast. The Soviet Union claimed 12 miles of territorial waters, a claim that the U.S. accepted as long as free navigation was permitted through the additional nine miles. The USSR, however, only allowed foreign warships to travel unannounced within the 12-mile limit in restricted lanes, with any deviation from those lanes requiring advance Soviet approval. The United States did not recognise these restrictions, and conducted freedom of navigation operations to contest them.

In early March 1986 the Aegis cruiser USS Yorktown and the Spruance-class destroyer USS Caron entered the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits. Their entrance was observed by a Soviet Krivak-class frigate, the Ladny, which shadowed them as they crossed the Black Sea toward the Soviet coast. On 13\(^{th}\) March Yorktown and Caron entered Soviet territorial waters and remained there for just over two hours, sailing west along the southern coast of Crimea and coming within six miles of land. The Ladny continued to shadow them but took no action to intervene, and the Soviet response was limited to diplomatic protests after the fact.

In February 1988, the Yorktown and Caron repeated the operation: but this time they were confronted by two Soviet warships, the frigates Bezzavetnyy and SKR-6, which after issuing warnings both rammed the U.S. ships.

There were key developments on the Soviet side which meant the reaction to the 1988 cruise was greatly more robust than in 1986; but these changes may not have been visible to the US side, leading to a potentially hazardous misalignment of assumption and expectation. Factors contributing to this unexpectedly assertive response by the USSR fall under three broad categories: the operational context, political developments, and a mismatched understanding of what constituted legal freedom of navigation. Each of these will be examined in turn.

\(^1\) An alarmist commentary that nonetheless is based on sound summary of the situation can be found at David Auerswald, "Now Is Not The Time For A FONOP In The Arctic", War on the Rocks, 11 October 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/now-is-not-the-time-for-a-fonop-in-the-arctic/
Operational

Russia’s rules of engagement had changed between March 1986 and February 1988, and this change may or may not have been discernible to the United States.

A key development in the intervening period was the German private pilot Matthias Rust landing his Cessna light aircraft in Red Square in 1987. The evident confusion of Soviet air defence on how to respond to Rust’s incursion provided a political pretext for the mass sackings of senior Soviet military officers; but it also led to a determination on the part of the Soviet Armed Forces to prevent similar embarrassment in the future. By February 1988, according to Vice Admiral Nikolay Mikheyev (at that time Chief of Staff of the Black Sea Fleets’s 70th Brigade of anti-submarine warfare vessels), the Black Sea Fleet’s mission was to prevent a U.S. incursion “by any available means”; so after the Yorktown and Caron had first approached "dangerously close to the closed area off the coast of Crimea", and then “crossed the line into the forbidden area in spite of warnings”, a confrontation was inevitable.²

The Soviet Navy had given careful thought to scenarios and methods for preventing a repeat incursion. However, the actions of the Bezzavetny in February 1988 were not one of these methods. The Bezzavetny had just returned from a Mediterranean cruise, and had started unloading its missiles and released part of the crew for shore leave. However, it was allocated at short notice to meet the US warships because the destroyer Krasnyy Kavkaz was unable to put to sea because of “technical problems”.³

Rear Admiral Vladimir Bogdashin, commander of the Bezzavetny in 1988, considered that his only option after issuing warnings to the U.S. ships was shouldering. Interviewed in 2008, Bogdashin commented that this was despite understanding “that colliding with an object three times your size was in best case a fire, in worse breaking up and foundering… My ship had a displacement of 3,100 tonnes and they were 9,700. What could we do?”⁴ This also suggests a potential factor for miscalculation that lies in asymmetry of attitude to risk. According to Bogdashin, speaking in a separate interview, “the Americans are good sailors. But they are weaker psychologically. Dying for their Motherland doesn’t feature in their plans.”⁵

After the first glancing collision, the Bezzavetny was ordered to withdraw; but, according to Bogdashin, was forced to change heading back toward the Yorktown once more and ram it by the bows in order that the sterns of both vessels - with loaded torpedo tubes on the Bezzavetny and Harpoon missile launchers on the

---

² Interviewed by Russian “Pervyy kanal” TV. “Soldaty Rossii: Zhizn’ na linii ognya” (Soldiers of Russia: Life on the Firing Line), Pervyy kanal, 2100 GMT, 20 February 2008.
³ Aleksey Ovchinnikov, "Империя наносит последний удар" (The Empire Strikes for the Last Time), Komsomolskaya Pravda, 15 February 2012, https://www.kp.ru/daily/25836.3/2809165/
⁴ Interviewed by Russian “Pervyy kanal” TV. “Soldaty Rossii: Zhizn’ na linii ognya” (Soldiers of Russia: Life on the Firing Line), Pervyy kanal, 2100 GMT, 20 February 2008.
⁵ Aleksey Ovchinnikov, "Империя наносит последний удар" (The Empire Strikes for the Last Time), Komsomolskaya Pravda, 15 February 2012, https://www.kp.ru/daily/25836.3/2809165/
Yorktown - did not clash with the likelihood of fire or explosion.\(^6\)

**Political**

The political climate of the time was predisposed toward reducing tensions and consequently avoiding escalation. According to US reporting at the time, "Government officials said little would be made of the incident for fear of jeopardizing warming superpower relations."\(^7\)

However, if there had been a further escalation of confrontation over the incident, it is likely the USSR's response would have been hard to predict and influenced by internal policy incoherence. The senior leadership in Moscow was rapidly adjusting to the context of slowly thawing tensions with the United States under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. A new Minister of Defence, Gen. Dmitry Yazov, had recently been appointed in Moscow, with a potentially different approach to rules of engagement. According to Admiral Vladimir Chernavin, C-in-C of the Soviet Navy 1985-1993, his report to Yazov on the bumping incident met with incomprehension:

> "When I came to Yazov, he asked me what was going on down there in the Black Sea Fleet. I said nothing, all is as planned. He said what do you mean planned, the General Secretary [Gorbachev] has just called me and said ships have collided and we are practically at war with the Americans! I said no, this is all as planned."\(^8\)

As a further indication of confusion in Moscow over the appropriate handling of the incident, Mikhayev and Bogdashin were congratulated and given commemorative watches - after first being threatened with disciplinary action and told they would have to pay for the Bezzavetny’s anchor lost in the collision.\(^9\)

**Legal**

A further source of confusion, and a primary cause of the confrontation, was differing legal interpretations of what constituted permissible sailing in foreign territorial waters.

The US claim of innocent passage was open to legal question, since electronic intelligence gathering was a secondary aim of the close approach to the Soviet coast. But in addition, as noted above, at the time the Soviet Union recognised the right of innocent passage for warships in its territorial waters solely in designated sea lanes, but the United States held that there was no legal basis for a coastal nation to limit navigation in this way.

These interpretations were based on the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention; but after the 1988 incident, a U.S. Department of State investigation found crucial differences

\(^6\) Aleksey Ovchinnikov, "Империя наносит последний удар" (The Empire Strikes for the Last Time), Komsomolskaya Pravda, 15 February 2012, https://www.kp.ru/daily/25836.3/2809165/
\(^8\) Interviewed by Russian "Pervyy kanal" TV. "Soldaty Rossii: Zhizn' na linii ognya" (Soldiers of Russia: Life on the Firing Line), Pervyy kanal, 2100 GMT, 20 February 2008.
\(^9\) Interviewed by Russian "Pervyy kanal" TV. "Soldaty Rossii: Zhizn' na linii ognya" (Soldiers of Russia: Life on the Firing Line), Pervyy kanal, 2100 GMT, 20 February 2008.
between the English and Russian language texts of the Convention. The Russian text allowed a coastal state to regulate the right of innocent passage whenever necessary, while the English text did not. (Other differences were detected in the official text of the Convention rendered in several other languages as well.)

In other words, in challenging the U.S. warships' passage, the USSR was acting in good faith and in accordance with its rights under the official Russian-language version of the Convention.  

**Aftermath, Conclusions and Lessons Observed**

During rapid political change in Moscow, it was to be expected that the USSR's further actions after the incident were the subject of conflicting views between Soviet Navy command, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the KGB. In this instance, Moscow joined with the United States in not escalating further, either locally or elsewhere. But one final mismatch of perception was in the USSR's view of the results of the incident constituting a successful outcome for Moscow. According to Bogdashin, ramming was a successful tactic because “after that NATO vessels came no closer than 120 miles from our shores”. This is patently untrue; but it is hardly uncommon for Russian narratives, whether for external or domestic consumption, to be entirely unconstrained by factual accuracy.

In summary, the responses of Russia and indeed other nations to movements by Western forces can be rendered unpredictable not only by deliberately provocative Russian behaviour at a tactical level, but also by a range of objective factors, all of which may or may not be detectable outside Russia:

- Political change at a senior level, and accompanying policy incoherence;
- Shifting perceptions and motivations among military commanders;
- Differing interpretations of legal rights and obligations between the two sides;
- Mismatched attitudes to and acceptance of risk;
- Varying concepts of what constitutes a successful outcome to confrontation.

**END**

---

