A geopolitical turmoil in the Sea of Azov. Risk of a maritime spill-over for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict?

Beginning in spring 2018, growing tensions emerged between Russia and Ukraine in the North-Eastern part of the Black Sea, along the Kerch Strait which gives access to the Sea of Azov. Beyond the strategic value of this area linked to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict over Donbass and Crimea, the Sea of Azov has a special significance for its economic significance, both for Moscow and for Kiev. For Russia, in this inland sea there is the mouth of the river Don, a fundamental maritime transport route connected with the major industrialized areas of the country. For Ukraine, the ports of the Azov Sea - which have always been important for their proximity to the coal and industrial areas of the Donbass basin and as a grain export channel - have lost trade traffic due to the conflict in the hinterland, in particular the port of Mariupol, but they have further increased their strategic value after the loss of control of Crimea and therefore of the port of Sevastopol.

The area, despite the tensions that occurred at the beginning of the conflict around the port city of Mariupol, has remained substantially unaffected from the center of gravity of the military tensions after 2014, but nevertheless in these years the coastal strip of Ukraine remained under strategic pressure for the enlargement of the Russian Black Sea coastal control, in the Crimea and in the Donetsk region. The situation has further deteriorated since the spring of this year with the decision by Russia to build a bridge over the Kerch Strait that connects the Crimean peninsula with Russia. The ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk, in fact, depend totally on the transit through the Kerch Strait.

Conflict areas between Ukraine and Russia in Azov Sea according to a Ukrainian source [www.liveuamap.com](http://www.liveuamap.com)
For Moscow, the control of the straits has a strategic value, not only as an instrument of economic pressure on Ukraine, but because the Sea of Azov represents an important maritime transport route that connects Moscow and the most industrialized areas of Russia with the Black Sea and, therefore, the Mediterranean. The Azov Sea is the main gateway to the well-developed Russian internal river transport system linking Central Russia, the Urals and Central Asia with the Eastern Mediterranean and Central Europe. In fact, the Black Sea leads to the Mediterranean but also to Central Europe following the Danube communication system. The Sea of Azov is the gate of the river Don which in turn is the final part of a major connection system through the Volga / Don canal (built in the fifties) that unites the Don with the Volga river, the largest river in Europe and a very important Russian transport corridor.

An expansion of Russian-Ukrainian tensions from the land to the sea appeared at the beginning of 2018, in particular in conjunction with the start of the Russian construction of the bridge over the Kerch Strait that links Crimea with Russia.

**A strategic bridge. The risk of a maritime conflict**

In May, Russian companies completed the construction of the road section of the bridge that was opened to traffic and named it "Crimean Bridge". The European Union condemned the construction of the work by including the 6 Russian companies that had completed the project in their list of sanctions. The construction, condemned by Kiev and by the EU, has produced an increase in the tension due to the Ukrainian fear that it could be used to block the transit of its ships from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. Obviously the construction of the bridge should not be seen only from the maritime point of view, i.e. as a further restriction of the choke point of the Kerch Strait, but also as a key infrastructure for the logistic / military support to the Crimea and as a vital support channel for water and gas to the population and the industry of the peninsula, given that the supplies from Kiev to Crimea were interrupted after the Russian annexation.

Focusing only on the strategic value of the work from the point of view of maritime traffic to the ports of Ukraine, it is important to consider that the construction of the Kerch bridge has created a further restriction of the type of ships able to cross the strait, not particularly in width as in the height of the bridge span.

The size of the bridge, in fact, create a further constraint of transit compared to the strait and would not allow the passage of the larger average vessel, such as the Panamax standard which, although not representing the majority of traffic to the Ukrainian ports, could have an important impact on the value of goods handled in these ports. According to the Ukrainian port authorities, this type of ships would generate over 40% of the sales of the ports of the Sea of Azov. For example, the Ukrainian port authorities argue that only strait closure measures (up to 72 hours), adopted during the construction of the bridge, have already led to an estimated economic loss of 20 million dollars, while more difficult to estimate is the long-term economic damage caused by the size of the infrastructure. However, it is likely that the larger ships that served the Ukrainian ports of the Sea of Azov will have to be replaced by smaller ships with transshipments that increase the costs of logistics, both incoming and outgoing.
Focusing only on the maritime traffic to the ports of Ukraine, the strategic effect of the bridge from on the ports of Ukraine is that it has created a further restriction of the type of ships able to cross the strait, not particularly in width but in the height of the bridge.

However, it appears that the most relevant vulnerability for the Ukrainian economic system of the Sea of Azov, even after the construction of the bridge, is not so much the physical one related to the new infrastructure - which has an impact - but the "political" one, linked to the different forms of contingency, slowdown and blocking of traffic that Russian authorities can put in place to the detriment of transit from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. This is also due to the fact that the bridge structure represents a known physical limitation, that may be overcome which appropriate, although costly, countermeasures. For an economic and commercial point of view, the highest cost is represented by the unpredictability of obstacles that can produce a hiccup for many reasons: from capillary inspections for safety or environmental reasons, to queues and expectations for piloting ships through the strait. Before the Russian annexation of Crimea, these problems were absent from the Ukrainian side, because the situation was reversed and the passage of the Kerch Strait took place in the Ukrainian part of the territorial waters boundary line and was therefore Kiev to manage the crossing and the piloting ships across the strait (and collecting the rights). All this has radically changed after the annexation and control of Crimea by Moscow: now the management of incoming and outgoing transit is regulated by the Moscow authorities (the Russian land and sea border police has returned to be, since 2003, a branch of the FSB, the Russian security services). Obviously, the attitude of the Russian authorities on the transit of Ukrainian ships through the straits follows the changing political relations and tensions between Kiev and Moscow, resulting in direct and indirect costs for the transport economy of the Sea of Azov. The rising costs of insurance due to an increase in political risk are also added to the direct costs of delays and obstacles.

The issue goes beyond the scope of the Kerch strait, and extends more generally to the extremely complex problem of the ongoing and potential maritime disputes in the Black Sea and the Azov Sea, between Russia and Ukraine, to the point that we could almost talk about an economic
frozen conflict between the two countries, where the particularity of the maritime environment, the orography of the coasts, the mechanisms of conducting maritime trade and the functioning of the laws of the sea create a potentially explosive mix capable of damaging, in particular, the economic and maritime interests of Ukraine. There are virtually endless opportunities to block or significantly delay commercial traffic to the ports of the Sea of Azov to the point of making it uncertain and unreliable: from repeated and prolonged inspections, to environmental standards, to transit procedures along the choke points, to military exercises, to the proclamation of an Exclusive Economic Zone. The question had already emerged after the conflict in 2014, to the point that in 2016 Kiev had opened a legal dispute with Moscow, referring to an arbitration Court the decision on their rights on natural resources of the exclusive economic zone off the Crimea, in the Black Sea and in the Sea of Azov, including the illegality of the Russian initiative to unilaterally build a bridge in the Kerch Strait.

Until the beginning of 2018, the Russians maintained an approach not oriented towards an escalation with Ukraine in the maritime dimension, allowing the ships of Kiev the transit to the Sea of Azov without particular restrictions.

As mentioned, however, since spring of 2018, tensions have risen sharply between the two countries with the attempt of Moscow to exercise a growing control of the maritime space in the Sea of Azov, also through the construction of the bridge over the Kerch Strait. Favoring this by the non-existence of the Ukrainian military fleet, already modest, and that saw the defection of 4/5 of its ships to Russia during the crisis of 2014; and by the mechanisms of the balance of maritime power guaranteed by the convention of Monteaux which makes the Black Sea a strategic Turkish-Russian co-domain. In parallel, Kiev has begun to shift its focus towards a widening of the military confrontation in the maritime space of the Sea of Azov, probably aiming at strengthening its naval military capabilities in this inland sea, and starting the construction of a new naval base in the Sea of Azov, near the port of Berdiansk. The first two naval units, two Gyrza-M classy trucks (Kremenchuk and Lubny) were built on the Kuzna on Ribalsky shipyards in Kiev (located on the Dnieper River and until 2017 called Leniskaya Kuznya) and transported to the Sea of Azov by land in September. At the end of September, two other military ships were added, the U-500 Donbass, an old support unit transformed into a Command ship, and the Korets military tugboat. These two military ships crossed the Kerch Strait on 23th September under the control and escort by Russian authorities, respecting the transit procedures introduced by Moscow. They are the first Ukrainian military ships transiting from the Black Sea into the Sea of Azov after the conflict in 2014 and after the construction of the bridge over the strait.

Two months later, instead, the situation went differently. On November 25, when a second convoy consisting of a military tug and two other Ukrainian Gyrza-M classy trucks (Nikopol and Berdyansk) tried to cross the Azov Strait without requiring authorization to transit to the Russian authorities, there was the intervention of the Coast Guard of the FSB which, after a brief firefight, captured the tug and the two escorting military ships. Following the incident, 24 Ukrainian soldiers were arrested, some of them wounded. According to the Moscow authorities, Ukrainian ships entered the Russian territorial waters illegally without respecting the orders of the Russian coast guard authorities.

**Consequences of the incident**

The maritime accident at the end of November in the Kerch Strait produced a strong reaction from the Ukrainian government that put the armed forces on high alert and introduced the martial law for 30 days in areas of the country that could be affected by a possible conflict with Moscow (10 of the 24 regions of the country). A visa ban was also issued for Russian male citizens aged between 16 and 60.
Putin has accused Ukraine of a deliberate military provocation and the ships and crews of the Ukrainian navy are still under arrest in Russia. German Chancellor Angela Merkel activated a diplomatic mediation activity between Kiev and Moscow, as Russian President Putin refused to speak on telephone with Ukrainian President Poroshenko.

US President Trump found himself forced to cancel the planned meeting with the Russian president on the sidelines of the G20, without particularly challenging either side, but demanding the release of the Ukrainian crew. Following the incident, the Russian authorities blocked the strait with an oil tanker placed along the entire bridge opening, interrupting commercial traffic between the Black Sea and the Azov Sea for a few days, demonstrating their ability to produce significant damage economic to Ukrainian without the need to resort to the military instrument. Ukraine, in fact, takes an important part of the state budget from the maritime economy of the regions of the Sea of Azov, which Moscow has under economic control by holding the keys to entry and exit from this inland sea. In the event of a renewed crisis, Moscow will again be able to use its economic blocking capabilities in the region with the dual objective of damaging Kiev's military capabilities and demonstrating to the population of the coastal regions on the Sea of Azov their economic dependence on the will of Moscow.

Finally, as a result of this small crisis, it should be emphasized that international reactions have been rather measured and most of the third countries have supported measures of escalation of the tension asking Russia to re-establish free access to the waters of the Sea of Azov to Ukrainian ships, which the Russians did. The American position has been more articulated. More neutral from President Trump, more assertive that of the US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley. Haley, at the Security Council has described the incident in a pro Ukrainian vision, blaming the incident to Russia and stating that the US will keep the sanctions currently in force against Moscow and that episodes such as the November 25 incident will cause a further deterioration in the relations with the USA.
Even in these terms, however, the American reaction can be considered to be broadly moderate. In comparison, for example, the declaration of the British representative to the United Nations was far more critical, and - among other things - has defined Moscow's actions as an economic aggression against Ukraine.

**Analysis, assessments and forecasts**

Overall, it appears that the incident should not be classified as a military confrontation but rather as a legal / economic conflict caused by Kiev attempt to break the status quo and to cross the Kerch strait without requesting permission to the Russian authorities that control it, attempting to restore its complete freedom of movement through the straits and disavowing the de facto authority of Moscow in controlling the transit; this triggered the violent reaction of Moscow that had to pay, for its reaction, a little price in its international image. At the same time, however, Kiev has shown its economic and military vulnerability, that Moscow can exploit in the event that Ukraine tries to call into question the Russian control of the Crimean peninsula.

The exercise of the strict control of access to the Sea of Azov does not represent for Moscow only the affirmation of its acquired control on the Crimean peninsula and its "territorial waters", but also responds to a precise meaning of economic and commercial pressure on neighboring Ukraine. Moscow has no interest in implementing a strategy of economic "strangulation" of the ports of Ukraine, but rather that of maintaining tactical control of access, allowing or blocking it depending on how Kiev government moves, acts and reacts to Russia initiatives in the Sea of Azov but, potentially, also on the wider theater of the conflict in the Donbass. In this sense, the maritime clash at the end of November between Moscow and Kiev should probably be interpreted as a reaction / Russian signal to Ukraine regarding attempts to expand the potential theater of conflict to the maritime domain by building a new naval base in the Azov Sea and concentrating there, light military assets.