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U.S. NAVAL DIPLOMACY IN THE BLACK SEA

Sending Mixed Messages

Deborah Sanders

Naval diplomacy—the use of naval power in peacetime to secure influence—by contemporary navies is seen by many as playing a vital and unique role in promoting the international aims of governments.¹ The U.S. Navy’s Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Michael Mullen, clearly recognizes the diplomatic utility of naval power: “Navies are not only critical, decisive, and enabling in times of war, but they may be even more important in maintaining the peace.”² Naval diplomacy includes what Sir James Cable calls “gunboat diplomacy,” which is “the use of threat of limited naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to secure advantage or to avert loss, either in the furtherance of an international dispute or else against foreign nationals within the territory or the jurisdiction of their own state.”³

Naval diplomacy allows states to signal national interests in a particular region, and through naval presence, navies can also act as subtle reminders of their states’ military might and commitment.⁴ Naval diplomacy can support allies, influence neutrals, deter potential enemies, protect interests, and uphold international law.⁵ American naval diplomacy and foreign policy goals were clearly linked in the 1994 strategic concept paper *Forward . . . from the Sea*: “Naval forces are an indispensable and exceptional instrument of American foreign policy. From conducting routine ship visits to nations and regions that are of special interest, to sustaining larger demonstrations of support to long standing regional security interests. . . . US naval forces underscore US

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diplomatic initiatives overseas.”⁶ Naval diplomacy, then, is a way in which the United States can use its naval power to achieve desired effects and advance foreign policy goals.

Or so, at least, it is widely assumed. Using American naval diplomacy in the Black Sea during the summer of 2006 as a case study, this article questions the generally accepted view of the diplomatic utility of naval power. It argues that naval diplomacy can be counterproductive: that it can not only fail to produce desired political effects but cause unintended and unforeseen damage. In the Black Sea, the fallout of naval presence may ultimately damage American interests. This article, focusing on the preparations for a joint U.S.-Ukrainian multinational exercise, will illustrate how diplomatic goals of American naval diplomacy were thwarted by Ukrainian domestic politics and how naval presence itself exacerbated already poor relations between Russia and Ukraine.

EXERCISE SEA BREEZE

American foreign policy objectives in the Black Sea are to secure the region from terrorists and other security threats, promote democracy and stability, and ensure the free flow of goods and energy in this closed sea.⁷ The establishment of U.S. military bases in Bulgaria and Romania signals the American geostrategic stake.⁸ In theory, naval presence operates along a spectrum of influence, by means of, variously, coercion (deterrence or compellence), “picture building” (that is, a mental picture, conveyed to potential objects of coercion), and coalition building.⁹ Lacking declared adversaries in the Black Sea, U.S. naval presence here has no intended coercive role—though, as will be seen, that is perceived differently in Russia.

The United States does, however, face a number of security challenges in this region: illegal migration, human trafficking, and drugs and weapon smuggling, as well as “a potential front in the global war against terrorism.”¹⁰ In addition, the Black Sea has become a vital route for energy and goods.¹¹

It is in this broad context that U.S. naval presence in the Black Sea pursues the third fundamental task, coalition building—“a range of activity expressly intended to secure foreign policy objectives not by threatening potential adversaries but by influencing the behavior of allies and potentially friendly by-standers”—through sending messages, reducing risk of conflict, offering reassurance, improving interoperability, and allowing states to act jointly against common threats.¹² An important vehicle for coalition building in the Black Sea has been, since 1997, SEA BREEZE, a joint and combined maritime and land exercise with the principal goal of enhancing the interoperability and maritime capabilities of Black Sea states.

In the summer of 2006, SEA BREEZE was to be hosted by Ukraine and the United States and conducted off the Crimea with seventeen participating states.¹³ The American embassy in Ukraine stated in a press release that the exercise was “designed to improve cooperation and coordination between countries in the Black Sea Region.”¹⁴ An additional aim was to support the Ukrainian government, engaged in the complex task of building democracy after the Orange Revolution of 2004. The United States was among the first states to reject the fraudulent presidential elections in Ukraine in November 2004, and since then it has actively encouraged state building at all levels, including military.¹⁵ For its part, Ukraine sees multinational exercises like SEA BREEZE as aiding its own foreign policy objective of NATO membership, demonstrating progress in military modernization, and increasing interoperability with NATO forces.

The United States began preparations for SEA BREEZE 2006 by hosting an Initial Planning Conference at the Ukrainian Naval Institute in Sevastopol in October 2005.¹⁶ The objectives were to establish each participating nation’s training needs, a plan of action and milestones, manpower and equipment requirements, cost estimates and funding availability, host-nation capabilities and logistical needs, and a command and control structure, as well as to draft exercise scenarios.¹⁷ Such preliminaries are vital, but it appears that neither U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), directly responsible for the exercise, nor the U.S. embassy in Kiev thought through the likely effect of the upcoming Ukrainian parliamentary elections on the exercise or American coalition building.

THE EFFECT OF U.S. NAVAL DIPLOMACY ON UKRAINE

The relationship between naval diplomacy and domestic political factors is complex. It has been argued that success is in the eyes of the “locals,” that the psychological environment of a “target” state affects its decision makers and “internal opinion forming groups.”¹⁸ Naval diplomacy, then, must take account of a state’s political, historical, economic, and military worldview;¹⁹ domestic politics—the policy environment, the decision-making arena, and internal pressures—shape the parameters and likelihood of what can be achieved.²⁰ The routine planning and routine preparation for SEA BREEZE 2006, which were to be caught up in a messy political crisis in Ukraine, became a case in point.

On 26 March 2006 Ukraine held parliamentary elections to decide the composition and priorities of its government. After the Orange Revolution a constitutional package of reform had been agreed upon whereby Ukraine would move toward a parliamentary, as opposed to a presidential, system of government after the March elections. The new prime minister, who would form a cabinet to run the government, would no longer be appointed by the president but instead be drawn from the political party with the most seats in the Ukrainian parliament,



the Rada, and would have significantly increased powers. The recently elected president, Viktor Yushchenko, however, would continue to direct Ukraine's foreign policy and in addition would appoint three members to the new cabinet—for the interior, foreign, and defense ministries.

In the parliamentary election the Party of Regions, associated with Viktor Yanukovich, Yushchenko's discredited rival in the October 2004 presidential elections, won the most seats. With more than 32 percent of the popular vote Yanukovich's party took 186 out of the 450 Rada seats. He was closely followed by the party of Yulia Tymoshenko (Yushchenko's former prime minister, who had been unceremoniously sacked), which won more than 22 percent of the popular vote and 129 seats. In a sign of growing discontent with the pace and shape of the Orange Revolution, President Yushchenko's own party, Our Ukraine, received a mere 14 percent of the vote and eighty-one Rada seats. Finally, the Socialist party, which would later prove crucial, won thirty-three seats.

No party, then, had won a clear majority in the Rada. The new prime minister found himself unable to form a new government, creating a stalemate. Yushchenko held exhaustive talks with his former ally Tymoshenko about joining their respective parties to form the next government. Personal animosity and mistrust as well as differences over priorities ultimately thwarted the attempt, producing a political stalemate that threatened the sustainability of democracy

in Ukraine when it became clear that rather than accept Viktor Yanukovych as the next prime minister, the president was seriously considering dissolving parliament and calling for fresh elections.

It was during this political impasse—when the absence of either a working government or parliament made impossible the constitutionally required parliamentary authorization of foreign troops on Ukrainian soil—that, on 27 May 2006, the U.S.-flag merchant ship *Advantage* arrived at Feodosiya with five hundred tons of construction material and equipment for use in that year's SEA BREEZE exercise. The cargo was for a temporary multinational training base to be built at Starry Krym in the Crimea. U.S. Marine reservists and Navy personnel were also deployed to help the Ukrainian navy assemble hangar-type canteens and utility rooms.²¹

Inevitably, SEA BREEZE 2006 became a hostage to the political crisis in Kiev over the formation of a new coalition government.²² Within two weeks the ship would be forced out of port, its equipment and cargo impounded by Ukrainian customs, and the reservists forced to fly home, their mission unachieved. Absent parliamentary approval of the exercise, the legality and constitutionality of preparations for it were soon questioned. This political ambiguity and postelection infighting created an ideal opportunity for the opposition party to criticize the government. The Party of Regions called the unloading of *Advantage* in Feodosiya an example of “brutal contempt” by the government for the constitution. Amid similar media allegations, the foreign and defense ministers (appointed by the president), as well as the prosecutor general, were forced to declare on their own authority these preparations permissible under Ukrainian law.²³ The foreign minister, Borys Tarasyuk, stated that no Ukrainian law had been breached, as *Advantage* was “a civil ship and consequently . . . subject to international trade law.”²⁴

If the preparations for the exercise (largely involving the landing of foreign military forces) were permissible under the constitution, formal authorization would still be needed from the Rada. The foreign minister agreed that the exercise could only begin after parliament had given its approval. On 4 August 2006 the Rada finally met and authorized the landing of foreign troops on Ukrainian territory for the purpose of multinational exercises. But it was too late—SEA BREEZE had been scheduled to begin two weeks before: the political atmosphere had been poisoned, Yushchenko's bargaining position in the formation of the postelection government had been weakened, and discontent over Ukraine's foreign policy orientation had been brought to the surface.

The declared foreign policy goals of President Yushchenko were (and remain today) full European Union and NATO membership, closer relations with the United States, and, at the same time, a strategic partnership with Russia. His

government had, however, been heavily criticized for failure to inform the public of, and gain its support for, the plans to join NATO.²⁵ Surveys in Ukraine have shown that the majority of the Ukrainian people are opposed to NATO membership, especially in the eastern part of the country and in the Crimea, where the Russian Black Sea Fleet is based. The government's attempt in this context to secure parliamentary approval for the off-loading of *Advantage* became a lightning rod for a widespread campaign against the government's proposed foreign policy in general. Residents of Feodosiya blockaded the city's port, protesting what they saw as an attempt by NATO to establish a presence in the Black Sea. Displaying placards with anti-NATO slogans, pickets prevented the American reservists from preparing for the exercise, ultimately forcing them to abandon the attempt. Within two days of the arrival of *Advantage* the Ukrainian defense minister was forced to deny media reports that its landing party was to build a NATO base near Feodosiya.²⁶ Nonetheless, the public perception of SEA BREEZE as a NATO rather than a multilateral, U.S.-sponsored operation took hold; the day after the arrival of *Advantage* the Feodosiya town council declared the town a "NATO-free area";²⁷ a week later the Crimean parliament declared the peninsula a "NATO-free territory."²⁸

The acrimonious debate about NATO membership soon spread to the feuding political parties in Kiev. Public discontent in the Crimea was exploited fully by opposition parties in the capital to embarrass the government and to force concessions on NATO membership. Yevhen Kushnaryov, Rada member from the Party of Regions, told a public protest at the Feodosiya seaport that Ukraine was "faced with attempts to bring NATO into Ukraine by force."²⁹

Allegations in the press that Yushchenko's government reacted too slowly to the public protests now damaged the president. It took Yushchenko almost a week to sign measures to deal with the crisis and decree preparations for the exercise. Only on 3 June did he confirm the exercise, call upon local councils to abide by Ukrainian law, and direct local governments to take urgent measures to maintain public order.³⁰ The authorities in Kiev were also censured for failure to provide sufficient information or counter misinformation about the planned exercise.³¹ President Yushchenko blamed a lack of military coordination and failure of the defense ministry to settle all the details of the exercise with local authorities and international parties.³²

The Party of Regions called for a referendum on NATO membership; Viktor Yanukovich—finally seated as prime minister on 4 August on the basis of a coalition with the Socialist Party—signaled that membership was unlikely to take place for two or three years.³³ In fact, the accord between the Party of Regions and the Socialists spoke of "advancing" toward, rather than joining, NATO.³⁴ In 2005 President Yushchenko and his team had worked tirelessly to fulfill the

NATO-Ukraine Action Plan and had committed themselves to signing a NATO Membership Action Plan by the end of 2006. Prime Minister Yanukovich and his cabinet have radically altered that policy. During a visit to Brussels in September 2006, Prime Minister Yanukovich stated that Ukraine was not yet ready to implement a formal plan for NATO membership; instead, Ukraine would focus on deepening its partnership with the alliance.³⁵

CASTING A SHADOW: THE EFFECT ON NEIGHBORS

The strategic importance to Moscow of the Black Sea should not be underestimated. Russia has more than twenty-five thousand personnel and almost two hundred ships in the Black Sea. President Vladimir Putin declared that the “Azov–Black Sea basin is in Russia’s zone of strategic interests”; the Black Sea, he explained, “provides Russia with direct access to the most important global transport routes, including economic ones.”³⁶ Russia’s interest in the Black Sea can also be explained by the historical importance of the Crimea, in particular the port of Sevastopol, to its national identity. The Crimea is intrinsically connected to the Russian nation’s foundational myths, some of them propagated by the Soviet Union and then taken up by the Russian Federation.

Uneasy at the American presence in the Black Sea, the Russian Federation refused to take part in the first SEA BREEZE, in 1997. A foreign ministry spokesman stated that it would send only observers: “Russia still does not agree with the idea of holding the exercises and has no plans to participate in them.”³⁷ More recently, poor relations between Russia and the United States in general, as well as NATO and U.S. attempts to secure interests in the Black Sea, have increased Russian sensitivity to American naval presence in the region. Attempts by Russia to build a strategic partnership after the 9/11 attacks failed, and U.S. support of the democratic revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan strained relations. By May 2006 Vice President Richard Cheney was accusing Russia of backpedaling on democracy and using its oil and gas to blackmail neighbors.³⁸

The idea of pursuing an integrated Western strategy toward the Black Sea region has in fact steadily gained ground since the NATO Istanbul Summit of July 2004. The enlargement of the alliance to include Bulgaria and Romania raised the issue of how it was to protect security and stability in the Black Sea. Responding to this prospect, the Russian defense minister, Sergey Ivanov, at a meeting with his Turkish counterpart challenged expansion of NATO naval patrols to the Black Sea; regional security, he declared, “should be ensured by the forces of the Black Sea states.”³⁹ Subsequent American efforts to initiate alliance counterterrorism patrols have been blocked by active Russian participation in the Black Sea Force—established in 2001 by the six littoral states for search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, mine clearance, environmental protection, and

goodwill visits. In July 2006 the Russian navy, represented by a large assault ship, took part in the sixth iteration of a Black Sea Force exercise series, with Bulgaria, Georgia, Turkey, Romania, and Ukraine.⁴⁰

Russia has also been an avid supporter of Black Sea Harmony, a Turkish initiative to set up a naval force to combat terrorism in the region. In September 2006, under that rubric, Russian ships conducted a joint mission with the Turkish navy.⁴¹ This patrol was specifically meant to “demonstrate Russian naval presence in the Black Sea navigation areas.”⁴² It was to be, said Sergey Ivanov, the Russian defense minister, Russia and Turkey, the two Black Sea countries possessing modern navies, that “are responsible for security in the Black Sea area.”⁴³ Black Sea Harmony is accordingly viewed by many as an attempt to prevent NATO from extending its successful multinational ACTIVE ENDEAVOUR series from the Mediterranean into the Black Sea.⁴⁴

If this exercise in naval diplomacy was casting a shadow over Ukraine’s neighbors, it was also exacerbating already difficult relations between Ukraine and those neighbors. Relations between Russia and Ukraine had been particularly strained. Even a deputy in the Russian Duma (parliament), Vladimir Ryzhkov, acknowledged that meddling by President Putin in the Ukrainian 2004 presidential election had alienated millions of Ukrainians.⁴⁵ Also, in early 2006 the Russian Gas Company, Gazprom, announced that it had cut off supplies of gas to Ukraine. Only under pressure from Europe could Russia and Ukraine work out a compromise.⁴⁶ The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the Russian government of economic pressure and blackmail.⁴⁷

Feelings were still raw when the arrival of *Advantage* produced public protests. The Duma, aided by the Russian media, saw an opportunity to criticize Ukraine’s NATO orientation directly. The Ukrainian defense minister, in turn, alleged that the protests showed that certain Russian forces were meddling in Ukraine’s internal affairs.⁴⁸ The Ukrainian Security Council too believed that foreigners, particularly Russians, were participating in the demonstrations in the Crimea. The Russian media were also accused of whipping up public feeling about NATO;⁴⁹ for instance, Ukraine’s law enforcement agencies found themselves forced to deny Russian media reports that Ukrainian special forces had been sent to Feodosiya to deal with the anti-NATO protests.⁵⁰

The chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee for CIS Affairs and Relations, Andrey Kokoshin, cautioned against what he saw as attempts by politicians in Ukraine to drag the country into NATO.⁵¹ The Duma itself went even farther, resolving that Ukraine’s accession to NATO would “lead to very negative consequences for relations between our fraternal peoples.”⁵² The Ukrainian foreign ministry replied that the “edifying tone of the commentaries in the context of cooperation of Ukraine with NATO used by the Russia side [during this

crisis] exceeds the limits of common international communication standards.”⁵³ It asserted that as a sovereign democratic state Ukraine had an inherent right to make its own decisions about security and which security structures it would join.⁵⁴

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

Plainly, navies need to prepare for and conduct presence operations more effectively than was done in this case study if they are to achieve desired diplomatic effects. The first lesson to emerge from this case study has already been recognized by Admiral Michael Mullen, Chief of Naval Operations of the U.S. Navy—the need to improve cultural awareness within the service. Admiral Mullen envisions that American sailors “will be expected to understand and foster cooperation in cultures far different than our own.”⁵⁵ Military personnel engaged in planning for and participating in future coalition-building exercises will clearly need to understand the culture, history, and sensitivities of host states as well as of their neighbors. In Ukraine, plans for future exercises will need to consider the complex and rapidly changing political environment in the former Soviet Union as well as Ukraine’s difficult relations with its larger neighbor—the Russian Federation.

The second lesson is the danger inherent in the “routinization” of naval diplomacy. The mechanics of deploying assets into a theater to prepare for naval diplomacy tend to become standardized, but the political contexts in which exercises take place are inherently dynamic, if not volatile. Consideration needs to be given to the political contexts in which even smaller, more routine recurring exercises are conducted.

Third, some agency must be made responsible for developing and implementing a vigorous information campaign to support an exercise. During the crisis over the arrival of *Advantage*, both U.S. European Command and the American embassy in Kiev produced detailed press briefings in an attempt to contradict media misinformation and address general lack of public understanding of SEA BREEZE. However, this effort was too little and too late to challenge the campaign of opportunists to damage the Ukrainian government and its foreign policy.⁵⁶ To be effective—that is, to ensure that the correct message is being sent and being understood—naval diplomacy must be supported by an extensive and well thought out information campaign within the recipient state, a program that targets the media, security stakeholders, the public, political factions, and interest groups.

Fourth, the United States would do well to encourage states with which it engages in coalition-building exercises to undertake public-awareness campaigns detailing the domestic advantages of participation. In the absence of a Ukrainian public information campaign about SEA BREEZE, the public was easily confused

by suggestions in the local and Russian media that the operation was actually an attempt to build a permanent NATO base in the Crimea.

During 2006 European Command held workshops with Russian leaders aimed at fostering military relations and planning bilateral training events for 2007.⁵⁷ These meetings suggest that there is already recognition within the United States of the last, fifth, lesson—the need to reach out to neighboring states that might be affected by littoral operations. Problems with SEA BREEZE 2006 suggest that such outreach is a vital element of any successful naval presence operation, certainly in the Black Sea—to overcome and mitigate the “shadow” effect. One such meeting was held in May 2006, before SEA BREEZE. Rear Admiral Dick Gallagher, director of European Command’s European Plans and Operations Center, commented that during four years of high-level meetings with the Russian Federation military he had come to recognize the desire on both sides to “not only communicate but to actively understand each other.”⁵⁸

NOTES

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