



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The Russian threat to transporters of Ukrainian grain - a bluff that requires a strong response



By withdrawing from the Black Sea grain deal, Russia has moved from blackmail to an open threat of armed intervention against merchant ships that dare to continue transporting Ukrainian grain after July 17.

The collapse of the agreement on the transport of grain from Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea, less than a year since it was implemented, has taken on a new security dimension due to Russian threats of attacks on ships that would transport grain in the future.

"All vessels sailing in the waters of the Black Sea to Ukrainian ports will be regarded as potential carriers of military cargo. Accordingly, the countries of such vessels will be considered to be involved in the Ukrainian conflict on the side of the [Kyiv] regime", the Russian Ministry of Defence announced last Wednesday.

This threat was synchronised with a heavy Russian missile attack on port facilities in Odessa, Ukraine's main export hub, a day earlier.

The attack on Odessa and the destruction of large quantities of grain, warehouses and loading infrastructure was Moscow's revenge for the Ukrainian bombing of the Crimean Bridge, a vital communication link between the annexed peninsula and the Russian hinterland.

Escalation with the aim of spreading the conflict further

The destruction of the port facilities in Odessa is an action that follows Moscow's decision not to extend the validity of the Black Sea grain deal.

This attack should mean that Russia has not

been bluffing when it announced that armed retaliation would follow against merchant ships that continued transporting Ukrainian grain.

This has been a serious escalation, which, in Moscow's plans, might include the idea of spilling over its aggression on Ukraine to a wider international level.

Such a scenario, even though inadmissible, would be observed by the Kremlin as a salutary shift of the focus of Western involvement in helping Ukraine to some other zone - in this case the Black Sea.

It is less significant that by taking this step, Moscow has confirmed that it wanted to weaponise the issue of exporting Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea ports from the start.

Its definitive withdrawal from the agreement, brokered by the UN and Turkey, is no longer significant, but has opened up a new potential security crisis.

Alternative corridors already exist

From an economic point of view, Ukraine has been preparing alternative solutions with its partners for a long time in case Russia blocked the grain export corridor across the Black Sea.

Alternative corridors where Russia has no influence are already in use, as evidenced by the significant decline in traffic through the Black Sea ports since the beginning of the year.

Last June, for example, only about 40% of the

total export of grain was exported through the three Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea, while last January, 70% of the total export was transported through them. At the same time, the total volume of grain exports did not decrease, and amounts to slightly more than 4 million tons per month.

The main alternative corridors are Ukrainian ports on the Danube, combined with rail and truck transport. It is a more expensive and slower option, but unlike shipping across the Black Sea, it is completely safe.

Additionally, the Black Sea export arrangement has not been functioning according to the initial agreement for months due to obstruction and even sabotage by Russian inspectors at the Joint Coordination Centre, who have been delaying the procedure for cargo shipments.

Since the second half of June, the grain export regime has almost stopped because Russian inspectors refuse to inspect ships that load cargo in Ukrainian ports. Probably as part of the pressure to comply with Russian demands to renew the arrangement.

In addition to this practically non-functioning of the Black Sea grain deal even before its formal end, it has become expensive over time due to high tariffs for inspection, insurance in wartime conditions and cargo premiums, which makes alternative corridors more financially justified.

Two plans for the continuation of grain exports

The plans of Ukraine and its partners to ensure the safe export of grain have been moving in two directions simultaneously.

One is to increase the capacity for export via alternative corridors, primarily via the Danube to the Romanian port of Constanta on the Black Sea, through which, since the start of the Russian aggression, Ukraine has transported a third of its total exports.

Samantha Power, USAID head, announced symbolically in Odessa, just one day after the city was attacked by Russian forces, that the US will contribute approximately \$250 million to the financing of alternative export routes.

The second part of the plan, which Kyiv has been developing, is the continuation of exports through ports on the Black Sea, regardless of Russia's withdrawal from the agreement, and despite Moscow's threats that it would react militarily if this regime continues.

Ukraine calls it "Plan B", and the parliament in Kyiv has already provided \$535 million for its implementation as a fund that would guarantee insurance to foreign carriers in the event their vessels and cargo were damaged.

According to this plan, Ukraine would continue to export grain through its three Black Sea ports as before, but it would need security guarantees from the UN and particularly Turkey, for the safety of carriers due to Russian threats.

Inevitable participation of Turkey

The participation of Turkey in such an arrangement is crucial, because only Turkey could provide a sufficiently authoritative security guarantee to carriers.

The Turkish authorities have not yet made any announcement following Russian threats of

military retaliation against merchant ships, but there is reason to believe that Ankara is disappointed by Russia's withdrawal from an arrangement where Turkey, as a mediator, has achieved a significant success on the international stage.

The recent visit of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, to the Turkish leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, took place as a sign of Turkey's significant shift in the direction of open support for Ukraine, abandoning its previous tolerant attitude towards Moscow.

Turkish participation in such an option would be crucial, regardless of whether it would provide security support to civilian cargo ships alone or as the backbone of an allied naval coalition.

The Russian threat of attacks on civilian ships has also evoked associations with the allies' anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden ten years ago when military ships escorted civilian convoys as they travelled through the danger zone.

A similar protection could be provided to ships that would continue transporting Ukrainian grain across the Black Sea, despite Russian military threats.

Regardless of whether it has been a bluff or not, Russia's announcement that it would treat merchant ships as war targets calls for an adequate security response from Ukraine and its allies.