



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Finland's action against the Russian shadow fleet—an important precedent for the security of the undersea infrastructure



The discovery by the Finnish authorities that one of the Russian "shadow fleet" ships was used to **damage** the undersea cable installation in the Baltic Sea signalled the start of a new phase in the conflict between Russia and the West.

This aggressive act by Moscow is certainly not the first of its kind, but its exposure forces the Western partners, and particularly NATO, to strengthen the defence front in their undersea area.

Clearly, it has become a crucial theatre for Russian attempts to disrupt critical Western resources, particularly in the areas of communications and energy.

"Repeated damage to Baltic Sea infrastructure signals a systemic threat, not mere accidents," Estonian President Alar Karis wrote on X following the revelation that a Russian tanker from the "shadow fleet," Eagle S, damaged an energy cable between Estonia and Finland.

A pattern of destruction

Just a year ago, a Chinese container ship **damaged** an underwater gas pipeline, also between Estonia and Finland, by dragging its six-tonne anchor along the bottom. Although the investigation at the time allowed for the possibility that the incident was unintentional, the cases that followed showed the same pattern.

In November of this year, a Chinese ship also severed communication cables on the bottom of the Baltic Sea, one connecting Sweden and Lithuania and another between Germany and Finland.

The ship YI PENG 3, which sailed from the Russian port of Ust-Luga, dragged the anchor along the seabed of the Baltic Sea for several days and, in the process, severed the communication cables. Considering that the sailing conditions were good and the weather conditions favourable, the experts ruled out the possibility that the crew sailed for so long with the anchor down due to negligence or

accident.

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Finland's seizure of the Eagle S tanker is the first decisive action by a government in the region following a series of sabotage attacks on critical underwater infrastructure. Police landed a helicopter on the tanker just hours after the Finnish energy operator signalled a power outage via the Eastlink 2 underwater cable.

According to all criteria, the tanker that the Finnish authorities seized for further investigation belongs to the Russian "shadow fleet," which Moscow uses to evade international sanctions on oil exports.

The Cook Islands, a frequently visited destination where it is simple to change the owner and management without special checks of the integrity of the vessel and documentation, registered the ship, which was transporting oil from Russia to Egypt.

A new theatre for Russian military operations

If the Finnish authorities' suspicions that this tanker caused the underwater cable to break are confirmed, and there is a good chance that they will be, then this will be the first confirmation that Russia is using its large "ghost" tanker fleet for aggressive security operations.

Since the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine almost three years ago, the Baltic region has been of enormous security **interest** to both Russia and NATO. It has especially become so since Sweden and Finland joined NATO. With that accession, the

Baltic became a "NATO lake," where Russia lost its influence almost overnight and remained exposed to an environment it considers hostile.

Operations aimed at destroying critical undersea infrastructure, such as internet connections, energy, and gas pipelines, appear to have become not only a priority for Russia in its actions in the Baltic region but also a means of causing the maximum amount of damage without the use of weapons.

NATO has strengthened its operations in the region due to the possibility of new, similar diversions

Cable infrastructure networks the Baltic Sea playing a vital role for the countries on its coast. The repair of the severed electric cable between Finland and Estonia will take at least seven months, as Estonian PM Kristen Michal said.

NATO has **strengthened** its operations in the region due to the possibility of new, similar diversions. They should include, for the first time, sea drones, which would carry out constant patrols and identify any risk to the underwater infrastructure in time.

According to Admiral Pierre Vandier, NATO's commander for concepts and transformation, the goal of this patrol is that "NATO can see and monitor daily its environment."

Sanctions against the shadow fleet

However, the Russian combination of using the "shadow fleet" as an economic tool for circumventing sanctions and adding a combat role through the destruction of underwater infrastructure calls for an even more comprehensive response.

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They are prohibited from entering the ports and doing any other business, given that they are in a poor technical condition, that they carry oil at a price that circumvents the price cap of 60 dollars per barrel established by the EU and the G7, and that they pose a great risk because they are not adequately insured and carry out environmentally unacceptable practices, such as loading oil in the open sea.

However, the sanctioned Russian tankers represent only a tenth of the total fleet, estimated to be between 700 and even a thousand. There are slightly more than 100 of these ships under UK sanctions, but even that number does not discourage Russia from continuing transport in this way, which now accounts for more than 70% of total oil exports.

In addition to serving as a crucial component of the Russian war budget, it appears that the "shadow fleet" is evolving into a combat fleet that targets the vital infrastructure of the West.

In that respect, the Finnish authorities' action sets a significant precedent for future actions by the allies, not only in the Baltic but also, for instance, in the North Sea or the Mediterranean, where similar security risks exist.