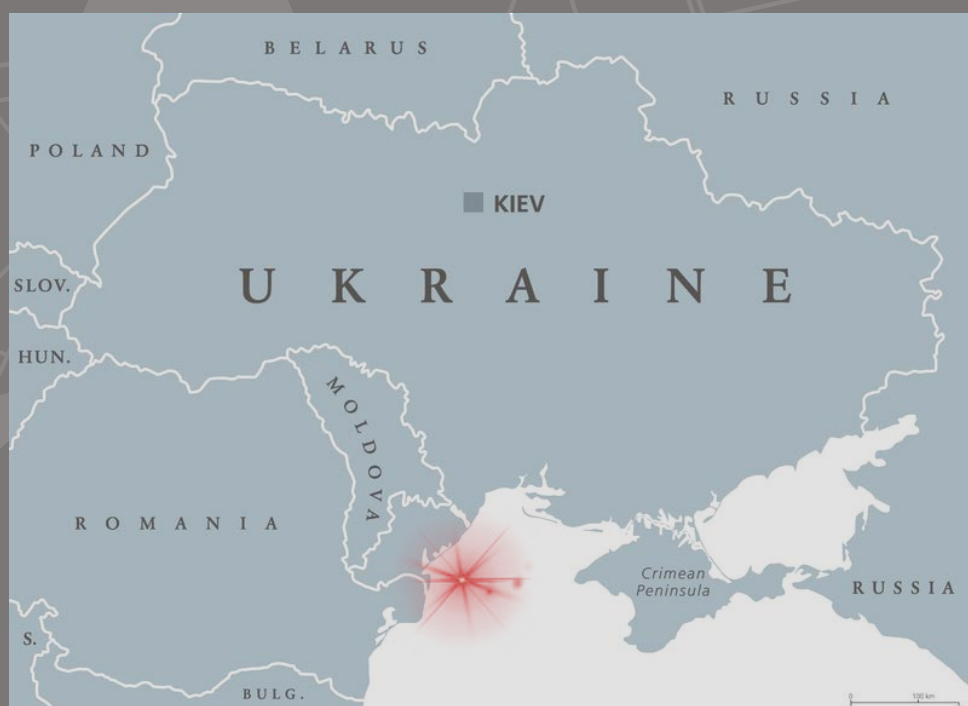


REPORT

How the Snake Island matters in the context of the 2022 war in Ukraine?

An assessment of the strategic importance of the most disputed island of the Russian-Ukrainian War

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Introduction: Russia's strategic objectives and war in Ukraine

When trying to interpret reasons why the Russian political leadership – read Vladimir Putin – decided to launch a war on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 it is important to understand what long-, mid- and short-term objectives Russia has sought to achieve by launching what was by the Russian policymakers labelled a special military operation and what instruments of national power were deployed to achieve these objectives.

Because Vladimir Putin himself has on many occasions discussed the history of relations between Russia and Ukraine as an important contentious issue, in his examination of the pattern of Russian long-term objectives Cyril Black¹ listed the stabilization of frontiers, assurance of favorable conditions for economic growth, unification of Russian territories, and participation in alliance systems and international institutions as the main leitmotifs in Russian foreign and security policy. Interesting and still partly relevant ideas on the evolution of strategic objectives in the last years of the Soviet Union was provided by Michael MccGwire². He argued that the overarching objective that guided Soviet policy in that period was to promote the long-term well-being of the Soviet state. In addition there were also three first order objectives supporting this policy — to ensure retention of power by the Communist regime; to retain independence of action on the international stage; and finally to avoid world war.³ Analyzing the pattern of Russian objectives in the post-Soviet period, Margot Light⁴ found the Russian policymaking community to be preoccupied with the following: establishing the CIS as a buffer zone; opposition to NATO's eastward expansion; defense of Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity; countering Western plans to deploy a ballistic-missile defense system; efforts to create a multipolar international system; and

¹ Cyril C Black (1962), "The Pattern of Russian Objectives," in *Russian Foreign Policy. Essays in Historical Perspective*, ed. Ivo Lederer, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

² Michael MccGwire (1987) *Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.

³ Michael MccGwire. *Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy*, 37–38.

⁴ Margot Ligh (2015) "Russian Foreign Policy Themes in Official Documents and Speeches: Tracing Continuity and Change," in *Russia's Foreign Policy Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*, ed. David Cadier and Margot Light, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

achieving recognition of Russia's great-power status. A RAND study published in 2017⁵ concluded that the Putin regime was most interested in defense of the nation and the regime; in boosting Russian influence in the near abroad; in creating conditions that would limit the ability of other states to interfere in Russia's domestic affairs; in strengthening perceptions of Russia as a great power; and, finally, in political and economic cooperation on a par with other great powers. The recent US reading of Russian strategic intentions⁶ concluded that Moscow's core objectives are to reclaim and secure Russian influence over the former Soviet republics; to regain global recognition as a "great power" and to portray Russia as a reliable actor, a key regional powerbroker, and a successful mediator, in order to gain economic, military, and political influence over nations worldwide, countering the liberalist rules and norms that currently govern the world order.

Based on this brief examination one can present a short hierarchical list of strategic objectives the current Russian seeks to achieve:

- The survival, well-being and security of the current regime;
- Protection of the territory and security of the Russian state against any malign external influence by creation of a buffer zone along the country's perimeter in which Russia is to have special interests and influence;
- Regaining by Russia of the status of a great power other great powers should reckon with and recognize;
- Securing of positive framework conditions for economic development, including through cooperation with other actors;
- Securing Russia's participation and influence in international organizations and institutions.

This set of objectives played also apparently an important part when the decision on war was announced by Vladimir Putin on 24 February 2022. He presented a short list of objectives Russia sought to achieve but these specific objectives could also be treated as driven by Russia's long-term interest in achieving strategic goals outlined above.⁷ These specific objectives listed by Putin were denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine and protection of inhabitants of the newly recognized Donetsk (DPR) and Lugansk (LPR) people republics.

⁵ Andrew Radin and Clinton Bruce Reach (2017) *Russian Views of the International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation).
https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1800/RR1826/RAND_RR1826.pdf

⁶ NSI, John Arquilla, Anna Borshchevskaya, Belinda Bragg, Pavel Devyatkin, Adam Dyet, R. Evan Ellis *et al*, (2019) *Russian Strategic Intentions* at <https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SMA-TRADOC-Russian-Strategic-Intentions-White-Paper-PDF-1.pdf>.

⁷ Vladimir Putin. (2022) 24 February 2022 Speech on launching of special military operation in Ukraine at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

Denazification meant in this context an attempt to remove the incumbent pro-Western power elite in Kyiv, first and foremost president Volodymyr Zelenskiy and his team. Demilitarization should be understood in this context as an attempt to destroy Ukraine's military capabilities and the country's ability to oppose Russia militarily. Demilitarization of Ukraine was also in the view of the Russian policymakers a precondition for a successful denazification of the country that could be achieved only by using harsh military measures labelled officially as a special military operation. Also the effective protection of Russians living in the LPR and DPR that had been recognized by Russia on 21 February 2022 within the borders they claimed in their own declarations of independence required destruction of Ukraine's military capabilities.

If achieved, these three objectives were to make people in Russia rally around the regime, securing its stability and survival, in the same way as in the aftermath of occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014. In addition, a success of this special military operation – the removal of the pro-Western elite and destruction of Ukraine's military capabilities – was in the minds of the Russian decisionmakers to help Russia establish a Russia-controlled buffer zone along its Western borders and minimize in that manner the risk of Western influence in the region. A quick military victory in Ukraine was also to help Russia strengthen its position as a fully sovereign great power other great powers should reckon with, which is another long-term strategic objective of the current regime. Russia was also aware of the fact that its permanent seat in the UN Security Council would help it to stave off all efforts by the international community to punish it for its actions in Ukraine and the Russian elite was apparently willing to accept both direct and indirect economic costs of its operation and the worsening of relations with its most important economic partners in the West.

One of the first military objectives sought to be achieved by Russia was the occupation of a tiny rocky island located in the western part of the Black Sea, close to Ukrainian border with Romania, the Snake Island. In this brief study we will look at what specific objectives Russia sought to achieve when occupying the Snake Island and how the achievement of these objectives was made impossible by a stiff resistance offered by the Ukrainian military who forced Russia to withdraw, inflicting it what was widely perceived as a humiliating defeat.

Snake Island in the 2022 war – a quick glance

The table below presents how the war developments related to situation around the Snake Island have been covered in the daily reports on war in Ukraine published by the US based Institute for the Study of War.⁸ This overview provides a good understanding of the efforts made by the Russian forces and the counter-moves implemented by the Ukrainian army that have forced Russia to abandon the island after several months of occupation.

Date	Snake Island – ISW references
2022 02 24	On the first day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Navy attacked Snake Island and captured it along with its entire garrison, beginning a military occupation of the island. The attack was widely publicized when an audio clip of Russian cruiser <i>Moskva</i> demanding their surrender was told in return <i>Russian warship, go fuck yourself</i> or <i>Russkiy voyenny korabl, idi na khuy</i> , which became the highly symbolic motto of the whole Ukrainian opposition to the Russian invasion.
2022 02 26	TV talk shows claimed that Russian forces rescued 82 Ukrainian servicemen with no casualties from Zmiinyi (Snake Island), despite Ukrainian Defense Ministry’s confirmation that a Russian warship killed all 13 servicemen stationed on the island on February 24.
2022 04 15	The loss of the <i>Moskva</i> —regardless if from a Ukrainian strike or an accident—is a major propaganda victory for Ukraine. The sinking of the <i>Moskva</i> , which was involved in the infamous “Snake Island” incident in the early days of the Russian invasion, is a boon to Ukrainian morale as a symbol of Ukrainian capabilities to strike back at the Russian navy.
2022 05 09	The official also noted that the US has no confirmation that Ukrainian forces recaptured Snake Island, off the coast of Odesa Oblast.
2022 05 11	The UK Ministry of Defense stated that Russian troops are likely trying to reinforce their garrison on Snake Island off the coast of Odesa for increased access to the northwestern Black Sea.
2022 05 12	Russian forces are strengthening their position on Snake Island in an effort to block Ukrainian maritime communications and capabilities in the northwestern Black Sea on the approaches to Odesa. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense stated that the Russian grouping on Snake Island is trying to improve its position on the island in an effort to block Ukrainian maritime communications and capabilities in the northwestern Black Sea, particularly toward Odesa.

⁸ Institute for the Study of War. “Ukraine project”. <https://understandingwar.org/project/ukraine-project>

2022 05 13	Ukrainian forces are reportedly attempting to regain control of Snake Island off the Romanian coast or at least disrupt Russia’s ability to use it. Ukrainian forces are attempting to regain control of Snake Island, southwest of Odesa and near the Romanian coast. An unnamed US defense official said that Ukrainian forces successfully destroyed Russian surface-to-air missiles and landing ships with drones in recent days in an effort to dislodge Russian troops. Chief of the Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Kyrylo Budanov said Ukraine is prioritizing regaining the island to prevent Russian naval landings. He flagged especially the possibility that Russia might try to transfer troops by sea to Transnistria as provocations intensify at the border. Russian forces are unlikely to use Snake Island to attempt amphibious landings near Odesa in the face of continued effective Ukrainian attacks on Russian ships. Russia’s continued presence on Snake Island, however, could greatly complicate efforts under discussion in the West to open a humanitarian sea line of communication to Odesa.
2022 05 14	Russian forces began to strengthen air defense systems at Snake Island located off the Romanian coast in response to Ukrainian strikes on the island. The GUR reported that recent Ukrainian attacks wounded or killed 32 servicemen on Snake Island. Russian vessels may have been unable to evacuate Russian servicemen in a timely fashion due to the Ukrainian missile and drone threat, contributing to the high casualties. Two Russian vessels reportedly left Snake Island on May 14.
2022 05 16	Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces are continuing rescue operations on Snake Island following Ukrainian strikes against the Russian grouping on the island.
2022 05 19	Russian forces are bolstering their naval presence around Snake Island to fortify their grouping on the island. Russian forces are continuing to fortify their grouping on Snake Island with two warship detachments and cruise missiles.
2022 05 20	Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces are continuing rescue operations on Snake Island following Ukrainian strikes against the Russian grouping on the island.
2022 06 01	The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command said that Russian forces are transferring anti-aircraft missile systems, electronic warfare equipment, and multiple rocket launchers to Snake Island off Romanian coast.
2022 06 06	The UK Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces have been strengthening their air defense assets on Snake Island. these reports suggest that Ukrainian naval pressure and anti-ship missiles—likely including those provided by the UK and other states—have forced the

	Russian grouping in the northwestern Black Sea to rely more on coastal and air defense as they are pushed away from the Ukrainian shoreline
2022 06 15	Russian forces are likely attempting to strengthen their presence in the northwestern Black Sea. Satellite imagery from June 14 shows an increase in fortifications and military equipment on Snake Island. The Russian-appointed Kherson occupation administration stated that the Kherson Commercial Sea Port has resumed operations and will begin cargo transport. While Ukrainian forces still control the critical coastline location of Ochakiv, Mykolaiv Oblast, and can possibly interdict Russian shipping, Russian forces likely intend to strengthen control over port access in the Black Sea under the protection of a fortified naval presence on Snake Island.
2022 06 17	Ukrainian forces destroyed Russia’s Black Sea Fleet “Vasily Bekh” tugboat as it delivered ammunition, weapons, and personnel to Snake Island off the Romanian coast despite the presence of Russian air-defense systems on the island.
2022 06 21	Ukrainian forces reportedly struck Russian positions on Snake Island in the Black Sea, likely to destroy Russian fortifications and equipment on the island, but ISW cannot confirm competing Ukrainian and Russian claims of the results of the attack. Ukrainian forces reportedly struck Russian positions on Snake Island in the Black Sea, likely to destroy Russian fortifications and equipment on the island. Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian forces are conducting an ongoing concentrated attack on Snake Island and inflicted unspecified damage on the Russian garrison as of June 21. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that Russian air-defense systems repelled an attack against the island by more than 15 Ukrainian drones on June 20. Russian officials also claimed that Ukrainian drones struck gas production platforms near Crimea after Russian forces defeated the Ukrainian attempt to capture Snake Island. ISW is unable to independently confirm either claim and will continue to monitor the situation as it unfolds. The UK Defense Ministry also stated that Ukrainian attacks on Russian ships off Odesa shores have “neutralized” Russia’s ability to control the sea and derailed Russian plans to block Odesa Oblast from the Black Sea.
2022 06 23	Head of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate Kirill Budanov stated that Russian forces are deploying a detachment consisting of air defense and rocket group units, a boat group, and special forces to Snake Island in response to recent Ukrainian strikes directly against Snake Island.

2022 06 26	Russian forces are additionally continuing to fortify their military presence on Snake Island off the coast of Odesa Oblast to extend their control of the southwestern Black Sea.
2022 06 27	Ukrainian forces continued strikes on the Russian grouping in Snake Island, likely in order to complicate Russian attempts to consolidate their presence in and control of the northwestern Black Sea.
2022 06 28	Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Nataliya Gumenyuk noted that Ukrainian forces also struck three Russian Pantsir systems in a continuing effort to destroy Russian defenses on the Snake Island off the Romanian coast.
2022 06 30	Russian forces retreated from the Snake Island on June 30 following a Ukrainian missile and artillery campaign. The Russian Defense Ministry spun the retreat as “a step of goodwill.” The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that the Kremlin does not interfere with United Nations (UN) efforts to organize a humanitarian corridor for agricultural export from Ukraine but did not acknowledge the Ukrainian artillery and missile campaign that had actually caused the retreat. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command had announced elements of that campaign on June 21. The Russian Defense Ministry has claimed that Russian forces defeated all Ukrainian drone and missile attacks leading up to their retreat despite considerable evidence to the contrary.[3] The Russian defeat on the Snake Island will alleviate some pressure off the Ukrainian coast by removing Russian air defense and anti-shipping missile systems from the island. The retreat itself will not end the sea blockade, however, as Russian forces have access to land-based anti-ship systems in Crimea and western Kherson Oblast that can still target Ukrainian cargo as well as the use of the remaining ships of the Black Sea Fleet.
2022 07 20	Ukrainian troops rescued a cat during clearing operations on Snake Island and evacuated it back to the Ukrainian mainland on July 20. The cat reportedly survived the duration of the Russian occupation of the island.
2022 09 13	The Kremlin acknowledged its defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, the first time Moscow has openly recognized a defeat since the start of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Kremlin officials and state media propagandists are extensively discussing the reasons for the Russian defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, a marked change from their previous pattern of reporting on exaggerated or fabricated Russian successes with limited detail. The Kremlin never admitted that Russia was defeated around Kyiv or, later, at Snake Island, framing the retreat from Kyiv as a decision to prioritize the “liberation” of Donbas and the withdrawal from Snake Island as a “gesture of goodwill.” The Russian Ministry of

Defense (MoD) originally offered a similar explanation for the Russian failure in Kharkiv, claiming that Russian forces were withdrawing troops from Kharkiv Oblast to regroup, but this false narrative faced quick and loud criticism online. The Kremlin's acknowledgment of the defeat is part of an effort to mitigate and deflect criticism for such a devastating failure away from Russian President Vladimir Putin and onto the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the uniformed military command.

Snake Island – location, history, and strategic importance

Snake Island ($45^{\circ} 15'18''$ N; $30^{\circ} 12'15''$ E) is located 20 nautical miles (37 km) from the Romanian port of Sulina and the mouth of the Danube, 77 nautical miles (143 km) from Odessa, and 90 nautical miles (167 km) from Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Force Base, where most of U.S. troops deployed in Romania are stationed, close to the western coast of the Black Sea.

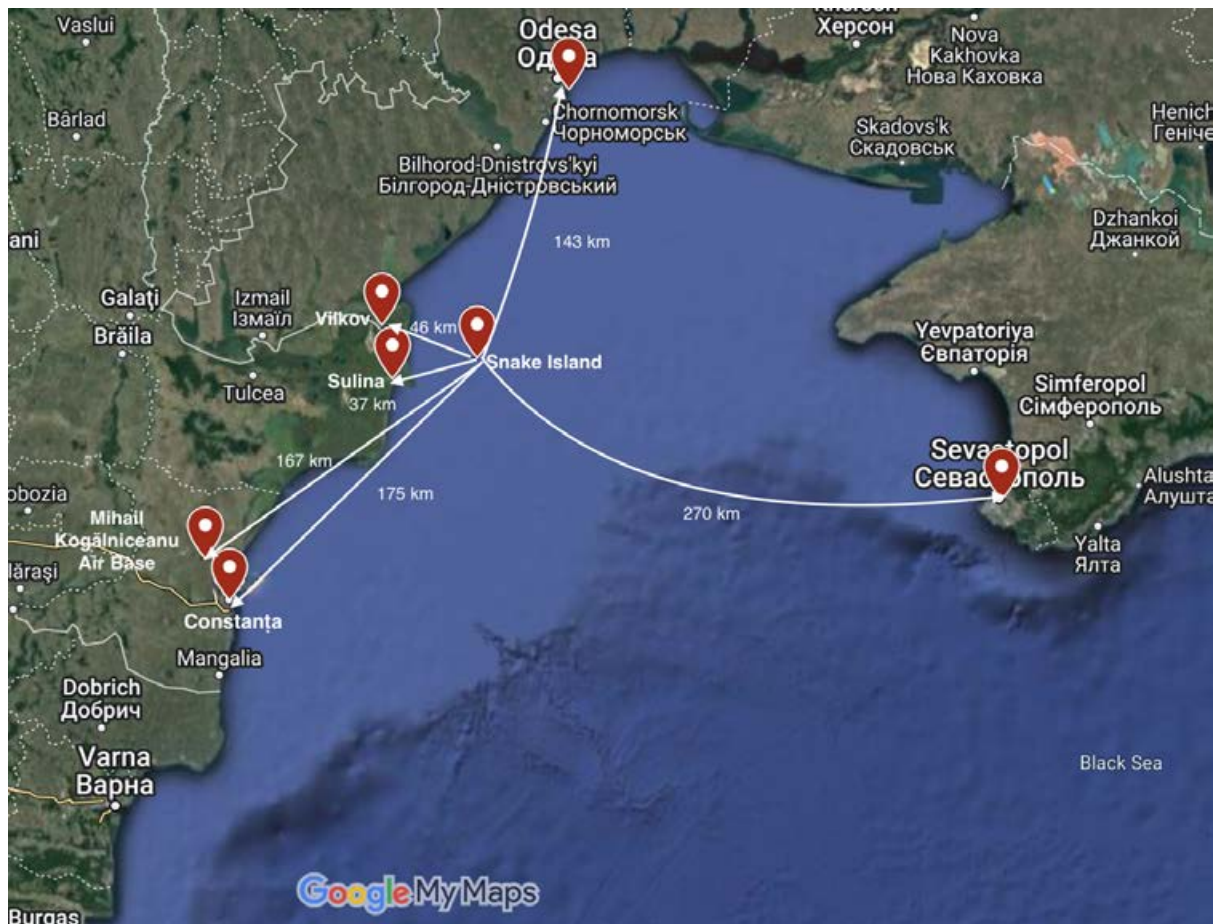


Fig. 1. Location of the Snake Island in the Black Sea.

Source: Google Maps, New Strategy Center.

The Greeks called the island "Leuke" in ancient times, while for the Romans it was known as "White Island", on which a temple was built to glorify Achilles. The island was occupied by the Turks in the 14th century, and then by the Tsarist Empire between

1812 and 1856. Following Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, the Turks returned it until 1878, when the island came into Romania's possession. Even though Romania ceded territories to the Soviet Union in June 1940 as part of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Snake Island remained in Romanian possession. Following WWII, the Soviet Union applied pressure on Romania to take over the island. On February 4, 1948, Romania and the Soviet Union signed a protocol that left under Soviet administration Snake Island and several islets on the Danube south of the 1917 Romanian-Russian border. Four months later, on May 28th, the island was handed over to Soviet Union on a simple handover / receipt document⁹.



Fig. 2. Maritime EEZ delimitation Romania vs. Ukraine.

Source: Hague Justice Portal. <https://www.haguejusticeportal.net/>

delegations from Romania and Ukraine presented their arguments to international judges, all centered on the state of Snake Island. Ukraine wanted to show that Snake Island is an inhabited island with its own resources, whereas Romania claimed it is just a rock. The International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled in 2009 in favor of Romania, which received 9700 km² of the disputed area, and Ukraine received 2300 km². At the international level, the International Court of Justice's decision has become a point of reference for the peaceful resolution of international maritime delimitation disputes.¹⁰

⁹ Cristina Paiusan Nuica. „Insula Șerpilor - un conflict încheiat? (Snake Island – a finished conflict?)”, *Historia*, <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/insula-serpilor-un-conflict-incheiat-585315.html>

¹⁰ Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “11 YEARS SINCE ROMANIA'S TRIAL TO THE HAGUE, which brought Romania 9,700 km² of continental shelf and exclusive economic zone”, February 3, 2020, https://www.mae.ro/sites/default/files/file/anul_2020/pdf_2020/2020.02.03_brosura_web_proces_haga.pdf

Russia's reoccupation of Snake Island could pave the way for Moscow to refuse to recognize Hague decisions and to claim on an area of Romania's EEZ

New exclusive economic zone delimitation in the Black Sea after the occupation of Crimea, the Russian vision



Fig. 3. The new delimitation of the EEZ in the Black Sea after the occupation of Crimea, in the Russian vision.
Source: Russian World Forums. <http://www.russianworldforums.com/>

won in 2009. Even if the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and eventual reoccupation of the Snake Island will not be recognized internationally, Romania *de facto* borders Russia on the Black Sea by abusively expanding the Russian Federation's EEZ.¹¹

Because the island doesn't have its own fresh water sources, it lacks tall vegetation, making life support and natural concealment of military installations and equipment impossible. The small size of the island also limits the maneuverability of deployed troops, and the hard ground prevents the construction of underground shelters¹². Ukrainians supply the island from the village of Vilkov, which is 46 kilometers away. Instead, Russian troops were supplied from Crimea Peninsula, 270 kilometers away from the Sevastopol naval base. The lack of drinking water makes the garrison's long-term survival impossible, as a siege necessitates reserves of fuel, food, and water. The garrison is vulnerable to air, naval, or shore bombardment in the absence of underground fortifications. This was evident in May and June 2022, when Russian troops on the island were repeatedly attacked with missiles, artillery, and drones. After suffering heavy losses because of these successive attacks, the Russians were forced to abandon the island and withdraw their troops stationed here on June 30th, 2022. In addition, the Russian Black Sea Fleet's flagship, the cruiser "Moskva," as well as the tug "Vasili Bekh," were sunk not far from the Snake Island. "It is easy to conquer the island; it is more difficult to keep it, especially when the enemy forces are numerous," admit

¹² Major General (ret.) Leonardo Dinu, member of the Scientific Council of the New Strategy Center, opinion expressed during the internal analysis of the New Strategy Center on the consequences of the occupation of Snake Island by the Russian Federation, March 2022.

Russian military analysts¹³. The island will now be the target of Russian rocket fire, as it was a few days ago when the Ukrainians raised the island's flag once more¹⁴.



Fig. 4. Snake Island after being retaken by the Ukrainian forces. Source: BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61992491>



Fig. 5. Anchoring the Ukrainian flag on Snake Island after the island was retaken. Source: Yahoo. <https://images.app.goo.gl/kdYsYUxx3WQtGV1W8>

The Russians can retake the island in two ways: if they occupy the entire western Black Sea coast up to the mouth of the Danube, eliminating the threat of enemy fire against the island from the shore, or if they regain control of the island shortly before the conflict freezes and diplomatic negotiations begin.

Snake Island is a vital land platform, located on the navigation corridor that connects all Ukrainian ports from the Black Sea to the Turkish Strait of Bosphorus and Dardanelles, Romanian ports, and the Danube's mouth. Furthermore, the island is located north of the Sulina Channel, which is the only one that receives larger tonnage ships on the Danube to the Romanian port of Galați. At the moment, most of Ukraine's grain exports are being diverted through the Danube port of Galați and by railway to the port of Constanța, with over 1 million tons of grain exported so far on this route with the assistance of Romania. Russia will be able to continue harassing Ukraine's naval traffic even after the conflict ends, further undermining the country's exports and economy. In 2021, the Odessa region's seaports handled 7,626 ships and 107.18 million tons of cargo, including 81.99 million tons of export cargo¹⁵. Ukraine's economy suffers a daily loss of \$170 million due to the Russian invasion's blockade of Black Sea and Azov ports. Ukraine exports more than 70% of its \$47 billion in goods to seaports¹⁶. The

¹³ *Остров преткновения. Почему российские военные покинули плацдарм Змеиный* (Stumbling Island. Why did the Russian military leave the Snake bridgehead), Dmitrii Litovkin, 07 iulie, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2022-07-07/1_1196_island.html

¹⁴ REUTERS, „Russia says missile strike hit and killed Ukrainian troops on Snake Island”, July 7, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-defence-ministry-says-warplane-hit-ukrainian-troops-snake-island-2022-07-07/>

¹⁵ ТРАНСПОРТНА ГАЛУЗЬ ОДЕСЬКОЇ ОБЛАСТІ. ПІДСУМКИ 2021 РОКУ ТА ПЛАНИ 2022 РОКУ, (TRANSPORT INDUSTRY OF THE ODESSA REGION. SUMMARY OF 2021 AND PLANS FOR 2022), 28.01.2022, [HTTPS://MORHOZ.OD.GOV.UA/TRANSPORTNA-GALUZ-ODESKOYI-OBLASTI-PIDSUMKY-2021-ROKU/](https://morhoz.od.gov.ua/transportna-galuz-odeskoj-oblasti-pidsumky-2021-roku/)

¹⁶ Українська економіка втрачає щодня \$170 млн через блокаду морських портів (Ukrainian economy loses \$170 million every day due to the blockade of sea ports), April 25, 2022,

Russian naval blockade, which begins off Snake Island and extends all the way to Crimea, has halted maritime traffic since February 24th.

Russia has the ability to transform the island into an advanced opto-electronic observation post for commercial traffic and naval/river military activities to and from the Danube, as well as from Odessa to Constanța or Istanbul. The installation of an airborne radar, a naval radar, electronic warfare equipment, radar and radio jamming, and GNSS¹⁷ data alteration will enable Russia to benefit from a larger reserve of data on enemy targets, on a larger space approximately 300-350 km from the current Russian A2/AD system in the Black Sea. With control of Snake Island and a constant naval presence between the island and Crimea, Russia will be able to act much more aggressively, including in Romania and Bulgaria's EEZ.¹⁸



Fig. 6. Disturbance of free navigation in the Black Sea. Source: Black Sea News. <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/153503>

Since 2017, Russia has disrupted navigation in the Black Sea, abusing a legal practice to notify the organization and execution of military naval exercises, the areas in question being declared dangerous for navigation. In the summer of 2019, about a third of the Black Sea area was blocked by Russia and declared dangerous for navigation.

So, if the Russian Federation were to occupy the island again, it is possible that after the end of the war, Moscow would exacerbate its military posture, its aggressive and provocative attitude not only towards Ukraine and Romania, but also towards the military and naval presence of NATO and the USA in the Black Sea.

<https://ports.ua/ukra%20nska-ekonomika-vtracha%20shhodnya-170-mln-cherez-blokadu-morskih-portiv-zmi/>

¹⁷ Global Navigation Satellite System

¹⁸ Major General (ret.) Leonardo Dinu, member of the Scientific Council of the New Strategy Center, RADM (ret) Sorin Learschi, senior associate expert of the New Strategy Center, opinions expressed during the internal analysis carried out at the New Strategy Center on the consequences of employment Snake Island by the Russian Federation, March 2022.

Military Analysis of the physical geographical characteristics of Snake Island

Snake Island is a rock with an area of 17 hectares, roughly shaped like the letter X¹⁹, having the sides with the following dimensions: to the North - about 645 m, to the West - about 490 m, to the South - about 390 m, and to the East of about 720 m, and its diagonals are approximately equal to 665 m.²⁰

Taking into account the rocky shore and terrain, it follows that Snake Island has a useful surface of about 14 hectares that can be used for the installation of military systems and related auxiliary constructions.²¹ The areas occupied by the already existing infrastructure must be subtracted from this area.

Due to its size, Snake Island is unsuitable for the maneuver and mobility of forces and combat assets deployed on it.



Fig. 7. Snake Island. Source: Google Maps; New Strategy Center.

The rock that forms Snake Island consists of hard siliceous sandstones, conglomerates, and quartz²², which are not adequate to buried engineering facilities and locations or require very large volumes of work, as complementary rainwater drainage systems are also necessary. Thus, the creation of facilities, bunkers and/or underground silos for radar and missile systems is almost impossible.

The soil, although it has a high content of silicon and quartz, does not significantly influence the installation of radar research systems, and the lack of obstacles and the openness offered by the sea favors the propagation of waves over long distances.

During the Soviet period, a radio technical detachment (most probably up to two companies) was deployed on the island, most likely with radars of the P-14 (Oborona-14) type in the metric wave range, P-18 (Tepek) circular observation also in the metric wave range.²³ It is very possible that together with the radar systems mentioned above,

¹⁹ Cristina Paiusan Nuica. „Insula Șerpilor - un conflict încheiat?”. *Historia*.

<https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/insula-serpilor-un-conflict-incheiat-585315.html>

²⁰ Measurements are approximate and were made with the Google Maps app.

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/%20Zmiinyi+Island/>

²¹ Ibidem 4

²² Daniel Guță, “Insula Șerpilor, locul interzis din Marea Neagră. Secretele tărâmului legendar al anticilor, pierdut de români în Al Doilea Război Mondial”, July 16, 2018, Adevarul

https://adevarul.ro/locale/hunedoara/insula-Serpilor-locul-interzis-marea-neagra-secretele-taramului-legendar-anticilor-pierdut-romani-doilea-razboi-mondial-1_5b4b469ddf52022f754030a3/index.html

²³ P-14 (Radar), Wikipedia, [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/P-14_\(radar\)](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/P-14_(radar))

radar systems in the decimetric wave range were also deployed to cover a wider electromagnetic spectrum, including for maritime surveillance.

The radio technical means deployed on the island could have been worked independently or integrated within the automated command and control airdefense system of the Soviet Union. The radar was intended for airspace control, identification, determination of coordinates (azimuth, distance), speed and flight path of air targets at long distances and heights, with a high possibility of separation, in the conditions of intense radio electronic warfare actions. The P-18 radar²⁴ is intended for the permanent observation of the airspace, the tracking of air targets, including those with stealth technology, within the limits of the surveillance area, the Friend or Foe determination and the transmission of coordinates (distance, azimuth) to the beneficiaries of information about the air situation.²⁵



Fig. 8. Radar systems deployed on the island. Source: Google Maps; Wikipedia (footnote 15, 16, 18); New Strategy Center.

Complementary to the P-14 and P-18 radar systems, PRV-13 type radio altimeters were deployed as a means of height measurement in the composition of the radiolocation complex²⁶ and radio rangefinders of the P-15 type for airspace surveillance, discovery and tracking of air assets evolving up to 6,000 m, within the limits of the surveillance area. Also, R-400 and tropospheric radio communication systems from the R-408 (Balkan) range were deployed in support of the radio technical subunit.

Snake Island has no freshwater resources of its own, being thus devoid of tall vegetation, i.e. ensuring a natural camouflage of installations for military systems and equipment, it being necessary to use camouflage nets, covers, domes, containers, above-

²⁴ P-18 (Radar), Wikipedia, [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/P-18_\(radar\)](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/P-18_(radar))

²⁵ Ibidem 8

²⁶ PRV-13, Wikipedia, <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/PRV-13>

ground shelters. In order not to influence the radio-electronic surveillance and direction-finding systems that might be deployed on the island, the materials used for masking must not be metallic or to contain less ferrous materials. Also, the lack of potable water requires its regular supply and storage in reservoirs. Consequently, the resistance capacity of the military forces deployed on Snake Island in the event of encirclement/isolation depends on the stockpiles and fuel reserves available for power generation.



Fig. 9. Shore of Snake Island. Source: Google Maps.

The shore of the island is rugged, with steep slopes, with access from the sea possible through the north of the island where a quay without loading/unloading facilities has been built, which allows vessels with a draft of up to 8 m to dock. Loading/unloading of materials and equipment on ships can be done with the help of a car crane.

Access to the island can also be achieved by air with helicopters, as in 2002 a helipad was built without being identified beaconing elements.



Fig. 10. Snake Island. Source: Google Maps.

Accordingly, it can be appreciated that these two access points on Snake Island, which can be rebuilt after the intense bombardment of the island, can only be operated during the day and only in favorable weather conditions.

The construction of the lighthouse on Snake Island for the safety of sea navigation began in 1837 and lasted five years ²⁷; the lighthouse was reconstituted in 1920 by the European Commission of the Danube and was renovated in the Soviet period. In August 2004, the lighthouse was equipped with a Yantar-2M-200 type radio beacon, which provided differential signal correction for global GPS navigation systems and the Russian GLONAS.²⁸

²⁷ Ana-Maria Morcovescu, "Care e povestea Farului din Insula Șerpilor și a gardienilor săi?", *Shtiu.ro*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.shtiu.ro/care-e-povestea-farului-din-insula-serpilor-si-a-gardienilor-sai-27232.html>

²⁸ Ibidem 2

The Military Importance of Snake Island

From the military point of view, Snake Island is a land platform located on the route of maritime trade routes mainly from/to the port of Odessa, as well as Kherson and Nikolaev and the Romanian, Bulgarian ports and the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which are vital for the export/import of agricultural products, natural resources, and consumer goods of Ukraine. Also, the location of Snake Island in the proximity of the Danube Delta and its mouths, near the Chilia and Sulina arms belonging to Romania and the Ukrainian Bâstroe channel^{29,30} may be considered as a possible advanced optoelectronic observation post for commercial maritime traffic and naval/river military activities to/from the Danube River.

Generally, to protect targets/areas of strategic importance, the Russian Federation has deployed and will deploy surface-to-air missile systems of the S-400 type on its territory or abroad in theaters of operations. These SAM systems are intended to achieve a strategic anti-air and anti-missile defense area with the aim of protecting fixed targets such as government institutions, industrial platforms, headquarters and command posts, military and strategic air bases and nuclear sites.³¹ A minimal variant of an S-400 surface-to-air missile battery deployment should include at least the following elements: a command post, a radar control module, two air target acquisition radars, up to 8 vertical launchers, each with 4 missiles, loader/crane, missile carriers, 200kw electric generator, power distribution system, logistic support system, missile and fuel depots, maintenance and testing. To improve detection and strike capabilities, two more target acquisition radars, 3 radar emission direction finding systems, containers/vehicles for military accommodation can optionally be installed. It should be noted that an S-400 battalion can have up to 6 additional batteries and radars.³²

From the analysis of the available images³³ regarding the deployment of an S-400 battery at Djankoj (Crimea Peninsula), it follows that the minimum area required for installation of the basic elements of an S-400 surface-to-air missile battery is about 6 hectares, without considering the other components necessary under the conditions of deployment in an isolated area such as Snake Island.

If Moscow plans to provide a strengthened defense to the Snake Island, according to the operational practice of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, in addition

²⁹ Sebastian Jucan. "Unde este Insula Șerpilor și de ce ar putea avea ea un rol crucial în invazia Rusiei în Ucraina?", *HotNews*, February 24 2022, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-25388298-unde-este-insula-serpilor-putea-avea-rol-crucial-invazia-rusiei-din-ucraina.htm>

³⁰ "Snake Island (Black Sea)", [https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Snake_Island_\(Black_Sea\)#Geography](https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Snake_Island_(Black_Sea)#Geography)

³¹ Air Power Australia, "Almaz S-300P/PT/PS/PMU/PMU1/PMU2 Almaz-Antey S-400 Triumf SA-10/20/21 Grumble/Gargoyle", October 20, 2021, <http://www.ausairpower.net/APA-Grumble-Gargoyle.html>

³² Ibidem 16

³³ Google Maps – Djankoj
<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Djankoj/@45.6925846,34.3937599,5482m/>

to a battery of S-400 surface-to-air missiles, at least one battery of coastal defense missiles should be deployed like K-300P (Bastion-P) for the purpose of engaging combat ships and maritime landing crafts.

Moreover, the two systems are interoperable and provide a joint air-naval operational image. A mobile coastal missile battery K300-P consists of 1-2 command/control vehicles, 4 vehicles with missile launchers, 4 transport vehicles and other support vehicles. In such an air defense configuration of the Snake Island, the two missile batteries should in turn have the protection and support of a tactical anti-aircraft defense system against targets and munitions flying at low and very low altitudes, respectively an anti-aircraft battery of the Pantsir-S1M/SM type.³⁴



Fig. 11. Layout of a SAM S-400 Battery of DJANKOJ AB – Crimean Peninsula. Source: Google Maps; New Strategy Center

However, taking into account the characteristics of the soil, which does not allow for underground engineering facilities, the useful surface available, the lack of mobility, the lack of vegetation to ensure camouflage, as well as the difficulty of quickly ensuring

³⁴ Air Power Australia, “Surface to Air Missile Systems and Integrated Air Defence Systems”, <http://www.ausairpower.net/sams-iads.html>

stocks, reserves and maintenance, it is unlikely that, in the case of reoccupation of the island, the Russian Federation to install strategic surface-to-air, surface-to-surface and coastal defense missile systems on Snake Island.

The difficulties encountered did not prevent the Russians from bringing other systems, especially anti-aircraft, during their occupation of the island, especially after the sinking of the cruiser Moskva, to increase the degree of protection of the island and the surrounding area against air attacks.

At the time of Russian occupation, Ukrainian military sources stated that "about three dozen pieces of equipment were delivered to the island: a Tor-M2 and a TSM SAM (surface-to-air missile) system, four Pantsir-S1 (self-propelled anti-aircraft missile and artillery systems), two Grad and Tornado-G (multiple rocket launcher vehicles), one BBM (armored fighting vehicle), three military vehicles, two diesel generators and about one and a half dozen objects carefully masked with a camouflage net. After the sinking of the Moskva guided missile cruiser, which provided cover for the naval group at sea with its anti-aircraft defense, the Russians decided to create a stationary cruiser on the island".³⁵

Even though Snake Island is under the umbrella of anti-access/aerial denial (A2/AD) and at the upper limit of the maritime interdiction area established by the Russian Federation with the systems deployed in the Crimean Peninsula, the isolated location of the island near the Romanian and Ukrainian shores (37 km from Sulina and 35 km from Kubanskyi Island near Bâstroe Channel)³⁶ and at distances of more than 150 km from the Crimean Peninsula, occupied by the Russian Federation, also constitutes a major disadvantage for its defense in case of attacks with long-range artillery, unmanned systems, air-to-ground, surface-to-surface missiles and other means of combat. The failure of the Russians to hold the island is precisely due to the intense shelling from the Ukrainian coast and the persistent attacks with unmanned systems.

The military importance of the geographic location of Snake Island could increase under the condition that the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war would also mean the occupation of the port city of Odessa, respectively of the entire Odessa region, with the Russians reaching the mouths of the Danube and achieving the junction with the so-called Russian "peacekeeping" forces and the separatist ones from Transnistria, the secessionist area of the Republic of Moldova.

Thus, Snake Island would become a possible forward observation/surveillance/early warning base creating an alignment located immediately north of Romania's EEZ and up to the Crimean Peninsula. Under these conditions, the Russian Federation could install surveillance and radio-electronic systems, air, and maritime surveillance, which

³⁵ Joseph Golder, "Ukraine Claims Russia Lost Nearly \$1B in Equipment During Snake Island Battle". July 12, 2022, *Newsweek*, <https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-claims-russia-lost-nearly-1b-equipment-during-snake-island-battle-1724006>

³⁶ Ibidem 2

would ensure a better acquisition of data on enemy targets, on a more extended area of about 300-350 km compared to the existing A2/ Integrated AD of the Russian Federation in the Black Sea.

In addition to the technical systems, for the protection of its own forces and equipment, the Russian Federation could deploy on Snake Island a marine infantry subunit equipped with tactical anti-aircraft and coastal defense means. But for an immediate reaction and support, the Russian Black Sea Fleet will have to ensure the permanent presence of 1-2 warships to patrol the areas located at most halfway between Snake Island and the Crimean Peninsula.

The geoeconomic dimension

Russia's strategic objective is to gain back control over Kiev and keep Ukraine under its influence. At the same time, Russia needs to maintain control over key shipping routes through the Black Sea, securing its regional power status. Therefore, Moscow could not allow Ukraine to become a maritime power in the Black Sea. By taking Crimea in 2014, Moscow made sure that it could not only control its shipments and operations through the Black Sea but that it could also build and maintain control over the Ukrainian shores. So, taking control over the Snake Island (or, better said, the potential for Russia to take control over the Snakes Island) confirms its ability to maintain the Black Sea Basin under its influence - and use it, should it need to increase economic pressure over the West.

There are two major roles for the Snakes Island in the Russian strategy for the Black Sea Basin. The first refers to the potential for Russia to exercise full control of the Northern Shores of the Black Sea. The second refers to the ability for Russia to use such potential as a tactical tool in the current global economic warfare.

To understand the way Russia uses the island to grow its control over the Black Sea Northern Shores, we need to take a closer look at the economic repercussions that the recent (albeit brief) Russian take of the island has caused. Both the build-up for the war as well as the *de facto* military occupation of the island has affected the global food supply chains and triggered spillover effects for the neighboring countries' ability to control their own operations in the area.

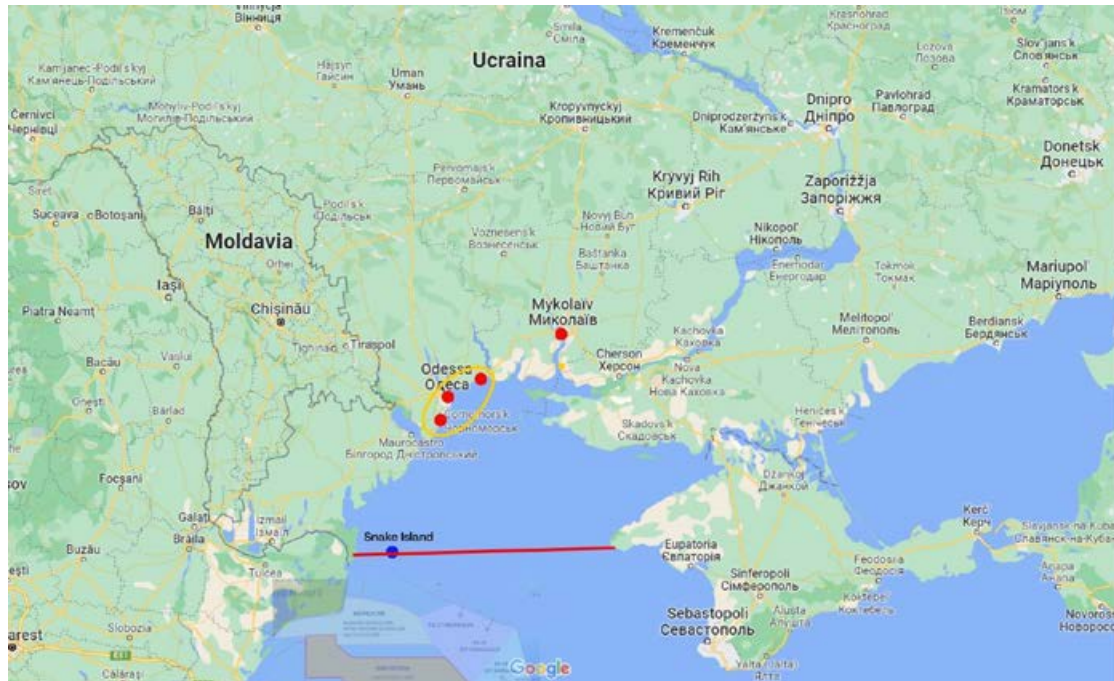


Fig. 12. Russia's use of Snake Island. Source: Google Maps; New Strategy Center.

In February 2022 Russia has not only started a military war in Ukraine, but also launched a global economic warfare. Russia deprived Ukraine of the ability to ship goods on the Black Sea. By doing this, Russia increased the pressure on the West, who was forced to react to the simultaneous global crises in the energy and the food sector, both having a direct effect on the inflation levels. Ukraine is not only hosting one of the most important energy routes from Russia to Europe (Ukraine not only hosts 5 main pipelines that deliver both oil and gas to the West, but it also has the largest storage capacity for gas in Europe of a capacity of about 33,57bn cubic meters of gas³⁷), but it is also a major agricultural producer. According to the latest available UN – FAO data, Ukraine provides between 13 to 15 percent of the global share of maize exports³⁸, about 9 percent of the global wheat exports, and almost half of the world's sunflower oil.

Before the war, Ukraine's Black Sea ports of Odessa, Pivdennyi, Mykolayiv, and Chornomorsk served as terminals for around 5 million metric tons of grain per month, representing about 80% of its total grain exports³⁹. The North African and Middle Eastern countries have been taking most of its consumption needs from Ukraine. Both regions have a high import demand for these products, making any drop in Ukraine's export ability key for their stability. Considering these regions' geopolitical relevance to

³⁷ Ben Aris, "Ukraine's gas pipelines and storage tanks are safe for now, but not for long", <https://intellinews.com/ukraine-s-gas-pipelines-and-storage-tanks-are-safe-for-now-but-not-for-long-237354/>

³⁸ UN food Ukraine country profile, <https://www.fao.org/countryprofiles/index/en/?iso3=UKR> and FAO data stats for Ukraine <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#country/230>

³⁹ Polina Devitt, Gleb Stolyarov, Natalia Zinets, "Ukraine shuts ports as conflict threatens grain supplies", <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-halts-vessel-movement-azov-sea-black-sea-open-2022-02-24/>

the West, the diminution of Ukraine's ability to export their food has, in fact, a major ripple effect around the world.

The Russian invasion into Ukraine has cut off access to the Black Sea concurrently with the operation to seize the coast, as well as the port cities at the Sea of Azov. The war started at the height of the maize export season, and it effectively blocked Ukrainian exports. At the same time, prices have spiked for other grains that Ukraine produces, considering it was (correctly) expected that Russia would not end blocking the Ukrainian ports in a quick manner – on the contrary. As Russia took control of the Snake Island in the very first days of the war, commercial shipping was effectively stopped in the area and ships were subject of war risks. This has not only blocked traffic and essentially created bottlenecks and new supply chain problems, but it has also driven up the cost of insurance for all shipments in the Black Sea⁴⁰. With the War, the Black Sea became unfriendly to trade.

Until February 2022, Russia could only monitor the movements of ships in the Black Sea through Crimea. From the military standpoint, blocking Odessa – the largest Ukrainian port on the Black Sea Russia gained a strategic advantage. From the economic standpoint, the Russian control of the Snake Island allowed the surveillance of the ship's movement in the western and northern areas of the Black Sea.

The occupation also offered a unique perspective into what else it could control around the island, should it gain a similar position to Crimea. While there was no traffic on the Ukrainian side, Romanian maritime shipping continued and intensified in the area as Romania had to accommodate the transit of the Ukrainian shipments to the world. Since Russia controlled the Snake Island, the shipping operations on the Romanian side increased both in complexity and cost.

At the same time, considering that after taking Crimea in 2014, Russia captured the platforms exploring and exploiting gas and oil reserves around it, the risk of it doing the same in the Snake Island region became realistic for all projects in its area. With Russia able to control the Northern shore of the Black Sea, new risks are added to all investment projects that are planned for the area and its vicinity. This cuts directly into Romania (and European) interest of developing new energy projects that would diminish the European dependency on Russian gas since one of the major energy projects to be developed by Romania lies in the vicinity of the Snake Island. Romanian offshore area covers 22,000 square kilometers, reaching depths beyond 1000 meters, divided in blocks of different sizes, and covering the area South of the Snake Island. Considering the current energy crisis, Romania's strategic goal is synced up with the energy security concerns of the West in that it works to speed up the development of its energy sector, where the exploration and exploitation of offshore projects are key

⁴⁰ Jonathan Saul, "Insurance costs of shipping through Black Sea soar", <https://www.reuters.com/business/insurance-costs-shipping-through-black-sea-soar-2022-02-25/>

elements for securing alternative energy to Russian supply to Europe and therefore works have started on the platform even with the risk of war in its vicinity⁴¹.

However, the potential for Russia to control the Snake Island influences the cost of such projects from the very beginning. Each offshore project in the Black Sea has its own features, depending on the specific geology and other circumstantial factors, including those referring to neighboring environment. Compared to onshore work, the offshore projects are considerably more expensive and involve long-term deployments. These two characteristics alone make for the reasons why offshore projects are considered to be at high-risk, especially in the first part of exploration. The potential for offshore operations to be harassed by unfriendly country's military adds further uncertainty and growing political risk which translates into lower expected rate of return of such projects. Considering much of the oil and gas from the Romanian Black Sea shore is aimed for the European market, the potential of a Russian threat from the Snake Island area increases the cost of exploration in the area, ultimately increasing the Black Sea energy price for the final consumer.

At the same time, the Russian occupation as well as the Russian withdrawal from the Snake Island has an important political value. Moscow declared that the withdrawal from the island is an act of goodwill by Russia. Russia said it doesn't want to block Ukraine's grain exports and starve the world – all which ties into its strategy for the global economic war, making the potential for Russia to control the Snake Island a useful tactical tool of negotiation. However, the Black Sea is still crowded and, in early October, only few ships could leave the ports of Ukraine⁴² - usually less than 10 per day, which means Ukraine is currently exporting under its potential. With the latest attacks of the Russian military on Ukraine, the waters of the Black Sea remain dangerous for all commercial purposes.

Days after Russia announced is no longer controlling the Snake Island it was reported that Nika-Tera, one of the biggest grain terminals in Mykolaiv, was destroyed, indicating the opposite of the Russian goodwill. But even without holding the Snake Island, Russia has managed to have an economic impact for pretty much all operations in the area. Not to mention that the current economic warfare has its own propaganda attached, which should not be dismissed, given that information is what ultimately drives prices and markets. Just as the potential of a threat equals a threat in the accounting books of any business project.

⁴¹ Maritime Executive, "Romanian Offshore Gas Field Starts Up Despite War Risk", <https://maritime-executive.com/article/romanian-offshore-gas-field-starts-up-despite-war-risk>

⁴² Interfax, "Ukraine exports 7 mln tonnes of food products as part of grain initiative", <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/83753/>

Conclusions, or what has made Snake Island important in the ongoing war?

Snake Island proved to be, in the war between Ukraine and Russia, easy to conquer but difficult to hold. Its position, in front of the mouths of the Danube and next to the shipping corridor between Ukraine's Black Sea ports and the Bosphorus Strait, makes this island strategic. The reality shows that the Russian naval blockade can suffocate Ukraine's economy even without conquering the country's Black Sea coast.⁴³ But the possession of the island, in the perspective of freezing the conflict, will give Russia the opportunity to use Snake Island as a platform for monitoring all NATO air and naval traffic, for electronic warfare, and also for air interdiction (A2/AD) in case of the installation of anti-aircraft systems. This would add to current economic problems for Europe and would potentially delay the Romanian Black Sea offshore energy projects in the vicinity meant to diminish European dependence on Russia. At the same time, perhaps more important, all of Russian operations would develop in the proximity of the largest base on the Black Sea, the Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Force Base in Romania, which hosts thousands of US and other NATO states troops, including an additional 1.000 troops from the US relocated from Germany since February 2022,⁴⁵ and which is located only 167 km away from the island.

This is why, considering the future peace negotiations, the US and NATO must support Ukraine now in trying to avoid a new conquest of the island by the Russians. Taking into account the strategic importance of the island, there is a high potential that Russia will try to recapture the island right before the ceasefire, to be sure that it will be able to use it against the economic interests of Ukraine and Romania, but also against the presence of NATO in the Western part of the Black Sea. Support from the US and NATO would consist in the continued delivery of anti-ship missiles to deter a Russian naval attack on the island, and anti-aircraft systems to affect the air support of a naval invasion. At the same time, stopping Russia's military actions before advancing on Odessa will block Moscow's attempts to seize Ukraine's Black Sea coastline, reach the Mouths of the Danube, and create a land corridor between Crimea and Transnistria. Once Russia reaches the Danube, Snake Island will no longer be able to be defended by Ukraine from the shore, so recapture by the Russians in such a situation will be predictable and very easy to do.

⁴³ Antonia Colibășanu, G. Alexander Crowther, Joel Hickman, George Scutaru. „The Strategic Importance of Snake Island”, *New Strategy Center & Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)*, September 2022, <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-Strategic-Importance-of-Snake-Island-NSC-CEPA-STUDY.pdf>

⁴⁴ Yaroslav Lukov and Paul Kirby, “Snake Island: Why Russia Couldn't Hold on to Strategic Black Sea Outcrop,” *BBC News*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61992491>.

⁴⁵ Ibidem 29; Stephen McGrath, “In Romania, NATO Chief Visits Air Base Hosting US Troops,” *ABC News*, February 11, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/romania-nato-chief-visitsair-base-hosting-us-82822476>.

To build a credible deterrent in the future in the Western Black Sea area, where Snake Island is located, the US and NATO will need to develop a broad program of support for Ukraine so that the country can have a stronger naval presence. At the same time, the US must continue and enhance the assistance programs for strengthening the ISR capabilities of the Romanian Navy and to deploy for the next 3 years anti-ship missile systems to protect the coast and the EEZ of Romania. In 2021 the government of Romania signed an agreement to purchase 4 Naval Strike Missile Coastal Defense System, or NSM CDS. The agreement makes Romania the first country to purchase the system via the U.S. government's foreign military sales program. Even though these systems will bolster Romania's defensive advantage against high-end maritime targets, they will only reach Romania in more than 2-3 years, creating a gap in defense capabilities that must be filled by the deployment of anti-ship systems from the US. Romania must be helped in this way to protect its existing natural gas exploitation infrastructure in the offshore area, especially the one that will be developed in the next 3 years and that will give Romania the opportunity to stop Russia's influence in the energy field in the region. The gas that Romania will extract from the Black Sea will not only make this country completely independent of imports, but will also help other countries, such as the Republic of Moldova, Bulgaria, Hungary or Austria, to become less reliant on Russian gas and be politically blackmailed by Moscow. We are talking about an estimated amount of 200 billion cubic meters, enough to stop Russia's malign influence in energy field for at least a decade.

Ukraine's *de facto* and *de jure* control of the Snake Island needs to be ensured as it is the only guarantee that freedom of navigation in the Black Sea will be possible after the end of the war, and that trade on the Danube and the Black Sea will be able to be carried out freely, as it was until February 24, 2022, when the Russian invasion began. As long as Snake Island belongs to Russia, it will give Moscow the ability to harass naval traffic on the Black Sea and the Mouths of the Danube. The Black Sea has two entrances, the Bosphorus and the Danube. By recapturing Snake Island, Russia will have the keys to the entrance from the Danube. At the end of July 2022, in front of the Romanian port of Sulina and a few kilometers from the Snake Island, there were more than 150 ships waiting to enter the Sulina canal of the Danube to reach the Romanian ports on the Danube, Galați and Brăila, to load the grain brought from Ukraine. This was an effect of Snake Island being abandoned by the Russians. At the same time, on July 23, 2022, one day after the conclusion of the agreement between Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the UN for the transport of Ukrainian grain through a maritime corridor between Odessa and the Bosphorus, the signatory from the Ukrainian side, the Minister of Infrastructure Alexandr Kubrakov, declared that "the agreement was the result of the actions of the Ukrainian army that liberated Snake Island, and this fact was possible as a result of the help of our allies who provided us with the modern weaponry necessary to defend the

coastline”⁴⁶. The importance of keeping the island under Ukrainian control, and how critical it is for ensuring world grain supplies, cannot be overstated. In addition, Russia will have an unsinkable platform from where it will monitor all NATO movements in the western Black Sea basin and in Romania. Moreover, from this island Russia can project hostile actions in the EEZ of Romania, the closest ally of the USA in Southeast Europe.

Both Ukraine and Romania, but also the USA and NATO now understand better the strategic importance of the Snake Island. After the war, the island will lead to a greater cooperation between Ukraine and Romania at the level of their naval forces and will be a sentinel that will guarantee trade and free navigation on the Black Sea and the Danube. Or it will be the place from which Russia will project its next invasion. It depends only on us, those who represent the free and democratic world, on NATO and the EU, whether the island is an instrument of good or evil. As a result, having a clear strategy in place and targeted support focused on the island's defense would provide protection from such threats, which might impact not only Ukraine and the riparian states, but the Alliance and the EU as a whole.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *Украина намерена продолжить подготовку к экспорту зерна, несмотря на атаку на одесский порт, Ukraine intends to continue preparations for the export of grain, despite the attack on the port of Odessa*, Ksenia Akserova, July 23 2022, *Kommersant*, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5479649?from=top_main_1

⁴⁷ *Ibidem* 29

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