

SNAKE ISLAND – BLACK SEA STRATEGIC AREA

Lavinia Elena TĂNASE (MĂXINEANU)

Lieutenant commander (N), Master's Degree Student, Command and Staff Faculty –
Navy Department, National Defense University "Carol I"
laviniamaxineanu@gmail.ro

Roxana MANEA (ALEXANDRU)

Lieutenant commander (N), Master's Degree Student, Command and Staff Faculty
Navy Department, National Defense University "Carol I"
roxanaalexandru23@yahoo.com

Abstract: *In this article, we will analyze the strategic importance of the Snake Island for the entire Black Sea area and even the European and NATO countries, which are non-riparian states. Utilizing historical analysis as a research method, we will objectively state the importance of the island throughout history while also pointing out some contemporary elements. In addition, we will focus on the political, military, and economic factors that motivated Russian forces' decision to launch an attack on the first day that hostilities broke out between Ukraine and Russia. For this reason, after Ukraine had already lost both control of the Crimean Peninsula and free access to the Azov Sea, the seizure of Snake Island by Russian forces was most likely planned well in advance, as a tactical operation with strategic implications, for the purpose of cutting off Ukraine's maritime routes and denying access to all of its sea lines of communication. Another factor of great importance is the island's location, which presents the possibility of basing military assets on the island in order to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations and even pose a threat on the eastern frontier of NATO with the probable deployment of mobile multi-layered missile systems.*

Keywords: *Snake Island; strategic; Black Sea; threat; maritime.*

Introduction

In this article we will analyze the motives why Snake Island is a significant strategic zone of the Black Sea, from Russia's point of view, and not only, concerning political, military and economic aspects. Snake Island, even if it is practically a rock, because of several aspects is considered a strategic point by Russia, which took it over, even since the first day of the invasion of Ukraine.

Historically, it was owned by all the major empires which conquered the area, and after the disintegration of USSR, the island continued as part of Ukraine and commenced being used as a military unit, until the legal settlement with Romania, regarding parts of the exclusive economic zone around it, when the demilitarization of the island was part of the agreement. The reasons the island turn out to be a central point for the Russian political and military decision makers are multiple.

From a military and strategic point of view, Snake Island provides the opportunity of conducting an efficient sea denial, forbidding all of the Ukraine's sea routes, after already taking over their Crimean Peninsula and controlling Kerch Strait, the only gate to and out of the Azov Sea. After the war commenced, Ukraine had no way of maritime logistic transports of any kind.

Also, Snake Island provides the most suitable location for conducting ISR operations in the western Black Sea area. Russia can deploy here surveillance, electronic warfare or SIGINT systems, or even missile mobile launching systems against air and ground targets, in order to track Romanian/NATO assets.

From an economical perspective, declaring north-western Black Sea a war zone, enforcing the area and the existence of mine danger in the whole western part of the Black

Sea, disturbs the entire Black Sea navigation, not only the Ukrainian commercial traffic, transport companies tending to redirect their vessels on safer routes.

After considering all the previous reasons, we will understand with no difficulty why Russian Black Sea Fleet took over Snake Island even since the first day of the Ukrainian war, and can start assessing how it could be used for their advantage.

General considerations

Located at the conjunction of Southeast Europe, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the Black Sea is a source of food, an economic zone, a transport route, a base of power and since Russia attacked Ukraine, a theater of war.



Figure no.1. Snake Island location

Source: www.google.ro/maps

This poses a risk, as three NATO countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey), two of which are members of the EU, border Russia here. Moldova and Georgia are considered targets for a possible further expansion of Russia - and are much smaller and less well equipped than Ukraine.

The security of the riparian countries is now even more threatened by the effects of the war. Snake Island is the emerging part of a rock form in the Black Sea, 45 km from the shores of Romania and Ukraine, near Musura Bay. The island, once Romanian, was occupied by the USSR after the end of World War II and annexed during 1948. Theoretically, is now part of the Chilia district in the Odessa region of Ukraine, but practically is under Russian occupation since 25 February 2022. With an area of only 17 hectares, the island of Snakes is not of great importance from a territorial point of view, instead it is important from a strategic-military and economic point of view.

Historical waypoints

Historically, after the periods of Greek and Roman rule, the Snake Island came, successively, under the rule of the Byzantines, the Genoese, and then Romanian territory. Later, the island, together with the mouth of the Danube came under Ottoman rule.

In the successive conflicts that took place over time between the Tsarist Empire and the Ottoman Empire, Russia expanded further west. A protocol between the two great powers of 1817 established the transition of the Sulina channel of the Danube to the domination of tsarism, and since then, Russia has considered that, in fact, Snakes Island belongs to it.

By the Treaty of Berlin of July 13, 1878, Snake Island was returned to the territory of Romania.

After World War II, in 1948, the Protocol specifying the state border between Romania and the USSR provided for the illegal transfer, contrary to the Peace Treaty, of the

Snake Island to the USSR. The Soviet Union imposed on Romania the signing of a simple report of the surrender of the island, which violated the provisions of the peace treaties concluded up to that date, which was signed under pressure from Soviet troops occupying Romania at the time. In fact, this protocol has never been ratified by the parliaments of Romania or the former Soviet Union.

Immediately after the occupation of Snake Island, the Soviets set up an important military base here, that controlled the mouths of the Danube, and radar systems that monitored the entire Balkan area.

After 1980, with the discovery of considerable reserves of crude oil (10 million tons) and natural gas (1 billion m³), interest in the island's surroundings increased greatly.

After the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, in December 1991, and the appearance of the new independent states detached from the Union, the problem of the occupied Romanian territories returns to the present. The Soviet Union, the holder of the titles of sovereignty – also questionable – over these territories, disappears as a subject of international law, in its place appearing new states; among them the Republic of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Snake Island, along with its military base and territorial waters, became "de facto" part of Ukraine as the heir to the former Soviet empire, without any legal or historical rights. However, Ukraine was in a crisis of legitimacy, having territories that belonged to all neighboring states: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Russia.

Romania demanded the application of the provisions of the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, but in 1997 NATO advised the Romanian government to resolve any territorial disputes with Ukraine in order to integrate into the organization. Until 1997, negotiations on the conclusion of the Basic Treaty with the Republic of Ukraine were balanced. In the same year, the President of Romania, at that time, signed the "Treaty on good neighborly relations and cooperation between Romania and Ukraine", which voluntarily enshrined the loss of all territories hijacked to Romania by the Soviets through the Ribbentrop-Molotov Treaty.

In 2004, the request for the initiation of proceedings by the Romanian Party was sent to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, the main legal body of the UN, in order to resolve the issue of delimiting the continental shelf and the exclusive economic zones of Romania and Ukraine, the Black Sea disputed area being approx. 12,200 km².

In 2007, Ukraine founded here a village named Bile (which only consisted of a few houses of the Ukrainian soldiers stationed there), to serve its interest in the dispute with Romania regarding the territorial waters surrounding the island. The dispute ended in 2009, when the court declared that Snake Island cannot be a part of the Ukraine's coastal configuration and consequently ruled that Romania would get 80% of the disputed maritime area.

In August 2021, as Russian forces built up around Ukraine, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy held a press event on the island, during which he said: "This island, like the rest of our territory, is Ukrainian land, and we will defend it with all our might."

Russian attack on Snake Island

The first day of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, 24 February 2022, also represented the day when Russian Navy attacked Snake Island. The operation was conducted by Moskva cruiser, at that time the flag ship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and patrol boat Vasily Bykov (Zubkova 2022). Moskva hailed over the radio the Ukrainian military stationed there (13 border guards) to surrender, in return for their safety, which was firmly declined by the defenders. Recordings of the answer given by the Ukrainian soldier Roman Hrybovof, "Russian warship, go yourself!", became widely circulated on the internet and went viral on social media platforms, and since then, it transformed into a uniting shout by both the Ukrainian military and civilians protesting the invasion.

The cruiser Moskva and patrol ship Vasily Bykov bombarded the island with their deck guns. Officials announced that Russian forces had captured the island following a naval and air bombardment carried out by a Russian Su-24, that destroyed all infrastructure on the island (Veselova 2022). Afterwards, a Russian soldiers detachment landed and took control of it.

All contact with Snake Island was lost. The thirteen Ukrainian border guards defending the island were captured as prisoners of war by the Russian forces. Also, on 26 February, Ukrainian authorities announced that the Sapphire civilian search and rescue ship was captured by the Russian Navy in the vicinity of the island.

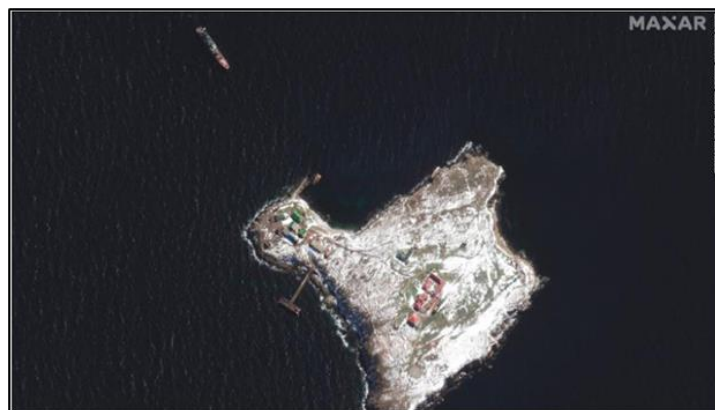


Figure no. 2. Snake Island, 13 march 2022

Source: www.cnn.com

The image in figure no. 2, taken by Maxar Technologies on 13 March 2022, depicts a Russian Ropucha class landing ship anchored in the close vicinity of the Snake Island, and it can be seen that some of the red-roofed buildings in the center of the island have been significantly damaged as a result of the Russian military strikes. Although some parts of the island are covered in snow, impact craters can be seen on it.

On 13 April, Moskva cruiser, that was the lead ship in the attack, was hit by two anti-ship missiles fired from the Ukrainian shore, exploded and burned. On April 14, the Russian navy tried to tow the damaged ship towards Sevastopol, but she sank before she reached port.

Strategic importance

Since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the Putin regime has steadily increased its control over the entire Black Sea region, enforcing Crimea as its base and modernizing its Black Sea fleet with short- and medium-range missiles, especially Kalibr sea cruise missiles. In addition, short-range surface-to-surface missile Iskander missiles and ground cruise missiles are stationed in Crimea. In essence, the hybrid actions (Scipanov and Nistor 2015) carried out in 2014 continued, maintaining the de facto state by capitalizing on the strategic advantage achieved.

The results of the modernization are currently being used against Ukrainian cities, but they can, of course, also be used against the coasts and navies of neighboring countries.

With the deployment of modern missile defense systems in the Black Sea region, Russia has also developed its own protective shields. The goal is to prevent the enemy from gaining access to a selected area, Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) zones, all around the Crimean Peninsula, but also in the extended Black Sea area.

From Russia's point of view, Snake Island is an important place to further extend the Russian protective/ offensive umbrella over the Black Sea region. Not only can the Black Sea region be controlled more comprehensively, but it can also make it more difficult for the allies of the riparian states to support their partners in an emergency. Snake Island is a perfect

deployment location for mobile ISR systems like aerial, surface and even submarine unmanned vehicles, electronic warfare and even SIGINT systems, the proximity to NATO shores being of utmost importance. These systems could provide first hand-real time information about all the movement of the air and surface platforms in the area.

In addition, if Russia stations here any of their mobile ground-to-air (like S-400 Triumpf, which has an operational range of up to 400 km, or the newest S-500 Prometey, with a 600 km range) or ground-to-ground missile systems (K-300P Bastion-P system with a range of up to 450 km, Kalibr system using 3M-14 missiles with a range of up to 2,500 km or even the 4,500 km Kalibr-M variant), they will extend their respective ranges with at least 270 km, the distance with which Snake Island is closer to NATO territories than Crimea.



Figure no. 3. S-400 and S-500 extended ranges – author’s concept



Figure no. 4. K-300P Bastion-P extended ranges – author’s concept

In figure no.3 are depicted the extended ranges of the S-400 and S-500 ranges given the possibility that they could be stationed on Snake Island. This position could provide the ability to launch missiles against air targets above most of the Romanian, Bulgarian, Moldovan, Ukrainian and even Turkish territories, fact that could not have been possible when they are deployed in the Crimean Peninsula. The S-400 Triumpf is a mobile, surface-to-air missile (SAM) system developed as an upgrade to the S-300 missile system. The newer version of the S-400 is the S-500 Prometheus, which entered service in 2021 (Episkopos 2021). S-400 can be fitted with a panoramic radar detection system with a 600 km range, protection against jamming, it can track up to 100 targets, has anti-stealth detection capabilities, making possible the recognition of the air assets which fly over the eastern half of Romania, Bulgaria and all Moldovan territory. It can also be used as an early warning system for the Russian Black Sea Fleet command, based in Crimea.

The same applies to the Bastion missile system (figure no.4), in the case that they would deploy it on the Snake Island. The Bastion missile system could employ strategic targets on all the Moldovan territory and half Romania and Bulgaria, reaching way over Bucharest, thing that couldn’t be accomplished from the Crimean positions. Even if it is mainly a coastal defense system against surface targets, it can also launch missiles on ground targets up to a 450 km range. In 2016, Russia deployed Bastion-P systems to Syria, where it launched Oniks missiles at land targets (Rashed 2016) as part of the Russian military intervention in the area, demonstrating an undisclosed land attack capability, until that time, for the coastal defense system.

When we consider Kalibr missile system locations on ground, 270 km doesn’t seem to make a difference, considering their ranger can go up to 2,500 or even 4,500 km, covering almost entirely the whole Europe and the Mediterranean Se, and also being able to be

launched from surface and submarine platforms, which theoretically, in a worst-case scenario, could be easily deployed in the western Black Sea area.

As for the ground-to-surface missile systems, it is not an advantageous location, because the ones in the Sevastopol area provide a better covering for almost all the Black Sea, including Bosphorus Strait.

Analyzing only the above mentioned and the fact that the Snake Island was among top priorities for the Russian invasion, being attacked in the first day of their “special operation”, we reach the conclusion of the area strategic maximum importance from the military and strategic points of view.

We need to understand that the Putin regime dominates escalation. This means that the danger of a NATO-Russia confrontation in the Black Sea exists - but not only since the open war of aggression that Russia launched on February 24.

The declaration of the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw had already called for "large-scale snap exercises contrary to the spirit of the Vienna Document, and provocative military activities near NATO borders, including in the Baltic and Black Sea regions" and “Russia's [...] use of its military presence in the Black Sea to project power into the Eastern Mediterranean have posed further risks and challenges for the security of Allies and others”.

Economical considerations

Another motive due to which Snake Island is important, represents the economic point of view. After taking control of the Kerch Strait and Azov Sea following the annexation of Crimea, Russian Federation remained just to cut off all of the Ukraine’s commercial navigation in the north-western part of the Black Sea, in order to practically leaving them without any maritime access to the commercial routes.

In any case, the economic interests of all the riparian states are further diminished, as important sea routes and waterways pass through the Black Sea.

Security and freedom of navigation are in jeopardy, even more so than before, when Russia restricted navigation in certain maritime areas at its discretion, maneuvered there, even in the foreign economic zones of Bulgaria and Romania, thus ignoring the sovereignty of neighboring countries freedom of navigation.

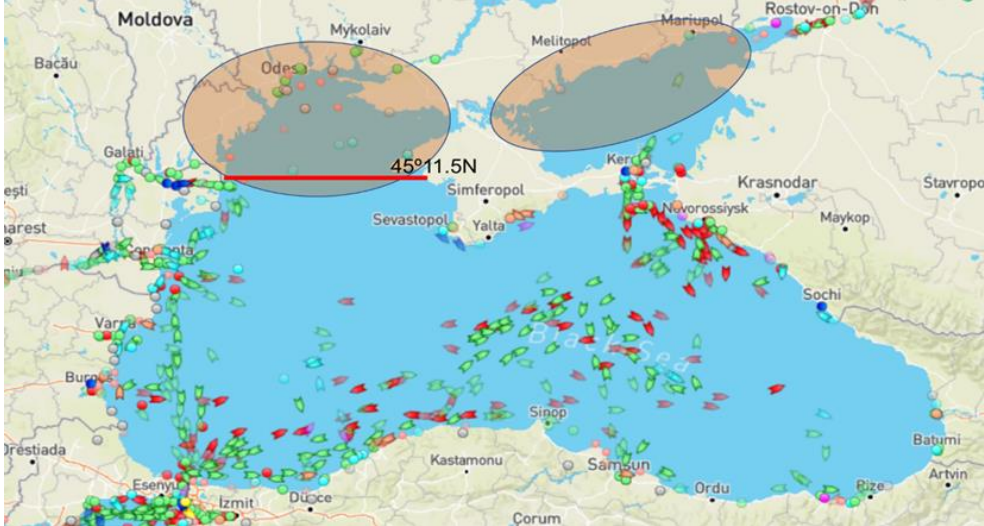


Figure no. 5. Naval traffic in the Black Sea area on Apr 20, 2022

Source: www.marinetraffic.com

As it could be noticed in figure no.5, commercial shipping towards the Ukrainian ports was reduced to zero after Feb 24, being declared officially through a NAVAREA III notice to

mariners (Armada Defensa 2022) a war risk area north of the 45°11.5N parallel (depicted with the red line).

Another factor that affects not only the Ukrainian port, but all the Black Sea commercial traffic and maritime lines of communication is the danger of mines. On March 19, 2022, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) issued a press release that stated the fact that about 420 mines had drifted into the Black Sea after breaking off from cables near Ukrainian ports. The mines supposedly were part of the Ukrainian mine fields, planted for the protection of their shores against Russian ships and landing operations, and because of the stormy weather, the cables connecting the mines to anchors broke and commenced drifting freely in the western part of the Black Sea, because of the wind and water currents. Ukrainian officials considered it as a complete disinformation from the Russian side, in order to justify the closure of maritime areas of the western Black Sea, under the danger of mines (Guy Faulconbridge 2022). In the following days, three mines were discovered by the Turkish and Romanian navies and their diving teams defused them (Stan 2022). Though, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate if these were mines coming from the Ukrainian fields, with their chains broken because of bad weather or some other intended external factors, or could have been planted adrift in the area by Russian forces, in order to disrupt the Black Sea commercial traffic in the western Black Sea and turn it into a no-go zone, as the Black Sea is a major shipping artery for grain, oil and oil products for the entire Europe.

Becoming officially a dangerous area, where ships are advised or even forbidden to sail, means most of the shipping companies would start by-passing it, choosing other routes, especially because insurance companies don't provide compensations for accidents occurred here. Since the first days of war, Russia had taken control of Ukraine's territorial waters and the north-western Black Sea. The Russian navy didn't allow access in and out of the Ukrainian ports of any merchant ship enforcing a blockade. Moreover, the alert level increased after Russian forces fired three Panamanian-flagged merchant ships (a ship was sunk by Russian missiles and two other ships were damaged) (Ziarul Unirea 2022).

The Black Sea is on the way to being transformed into a Russian lake just like the Sea of Azov, but the Black Sea area is also divided between several NATO member states: Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey. Probably, the best thing to be done could be a maritime exclusion zone in the Black Sea, because Russia has targeted international shipping.

Conclusions

In this article we analyzed the reasons why Snake Island is an important strategic area of the Black Sea, from Russia's point of view, and not only, regarding political, military and economic aspects.

Since ancient times it was a disputed area, all the major conqueror empires wanting to take it over, due to its strategic location, in that period mainly being the area where the Danube River naval traffic could be surveilled or even enforced. After the dismemberment of USSR, the island remained part of Ukraine and started being used as a military garrison, until the legal settlement with Romania, regarding parts of the exclusive economic zone around it.

Being at about a 40 km distance from the Romanian and NATO shores, the island became a focal point for the Russian political and military decision makers for a multitude of reasons.

First of all, because of the possibility of conducting an efficient sea denial of the north-western part of the Black Sea, and forbidding all of the Ukraine's sea routes, after already taking over their Crimean territory and controlling Kerch Strait, the only gate to and out of the Azov Sea. After the war started, Ukraine remained with no other way of maritime logistic transports military, humanitarian or any other kind.

Second of all, Snake Island provides the most suitable location for the surveillance of the western Black Sea area with surface and 3D radars (for air targets), and not only. Russian can easily deploy here ISR assets like air, surface or submarine drones unmanned vehicles, electronic warfare or SIGINT systems, and even missile mobile launching systems against air and ground targets. That means all of the Romanian/NATO assets could be tracked and classified straightforwardly.

The third aspect is the economical one. Enforcing north-western Black Sea area, declaring it a war zone and the existence of mine danger in the whole western part of the Black Sea, up to the Bosphorus Strait, affects not only the Ukrainian commercial traffic, but at an extent, the whole Black Sea navigation, because no naval transport company wants to jeopardize its ships, crews and cargo, so most likely they would reroute their vessels in safer areas. Taking all of the above into consideration, we can easily understand why Russian Black Sea Fleet took over Snake Island even since the first day of the Ukrainian conflict, and can give us an idea about how it could be used for their benefit on short, medium and long term.

Bibliography

- Armada Defensa*. Mar 19, 2022. https://armada.defensa.gob.es/ihtm/Aplicaciones/Navareas/Index_Navareas_xml_en.html#divVisorNavarea (accessed Apr 22, 2022).
- Episkopos, Mark. *National Interest*. Dec 15, 2021. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russia%E2%80%99s-next-generation-s-500-missile-defense-system-ready-war-198009> (accessed Apr 22, 2022).
- Guy Faulconbridge, Philippa Fletcher. *Reuters*. Mar 21, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/mines-ukraine-drift-into-black-sea-russia-shipping-sources-say-2022-03-21/?fbclid=IwAR02hJrypzuo5LVmnmvFhNM4AOCcVy8ZVVDtnDkmcu7NKNICgrhW4yupPz6s> (accessed Apr 23, 2022).
- Rashed, Ahmed. *Middle East Observer*. Nov 15, 2016. <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2016/11/15/putin-orders-bombing-aircraft-carrier-syria-hours-after-call-with-trump/> (accessed Apr 20, 2022).
- Scipanov, Lucian Valeriu, și Florin Nistor. „Considerations on the military actions conducted in the North of Black Sea, issue 2, no 2, pp. 99-105.” *Bulletin of the National Defense University "Carol I"*, 2015, ed. 2: 99-105.
- Stan, Filip. *Romania TV*. Apr 15, 2022. https://www.romaniatv.net/mine-plutitoare-folosite-in-conflictul-dintre-rusia-si-ucraina-pericol-pentru-navele-comerciale-din-marea-neagra-ce-impact-ar-putea-avea-asupra-preturilor-la-alimente-si-petrol_6413923.html (accessed Apr 23, 2022).
- Veselova, Victoria. *Krymr*. Feb 25, 2022. <https://ua.krymr.com/a/ostriv-zmiinyi-zakhoplennia-rosiaa-deokkupatsia-krymu/31723199.html> (accessed Apr 21, 2022).
- Ziarul Unirea*. Mar 17, 2022. <https://ziarulunirea.ro/nave-comerciale-din-marea-neagra-atacate-de-catre-rusia-s-a-scufundat-un-vas-cargo-sub-pavilion-panamez-764473/> (accessed Apr 23, 2022).
- Zubkova, Dasha. *Ukranews*. Feb 24, 2022. <https://press.ukranews.com/en/news/836500-zmiinyi-island-in-black-sea-attacked-from-russian-ships-border-service> (accessed Apr 20, 2022).