The Russian Navy and the War in Ukraine

Ido Gilad

Until the start of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russia’s naval strategy, as articulated by President Putin, attributed considerable importance to Russian maritime strategy as a decisive factor in the nation’s economic and social development. With the Russian navy having the major task of implementing this strategy, its assets were symbols of might in the expanses of the Black Sea, particularly in contrast to the perceived weakness of the Ukrainian navy’s capabilities.

In both the planning stage and the first-stage of implementation (50 days) of the conflict in Ukraine, the Russian navy’s deployment – called “a special operation” in Russia – was meant to be part of the overall campaign. The strengths of the fleet at that time led to its successful integration into the campaign on the “southern” front, which became part of the overall Russian campaign. In fact, the fleet was expected to play a central role in defeating the Ukrainian Navy.

The Russian navy’s strengths were based largely on its superior order of forces compared to those of its Ukrainian counterpart. When the former Soviet navy in the Black Sea was divided (following negotiations lasting until 2007), Ukraine received only about one-fifth of the naval vessels in question. In addition, after seizing the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the Russian navy fortified itself on the southern front by retaking the port of Sevastopol. Thus, the takeover of Crimea considerably expanded Russia’s sway over the eastern reaches of the Ukrainian shore, especially given Russia’s control of shipping at Kerch Strait, the choke point between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The bridge Russia built over the strait, opened in 2018, symbolized Russia’s dominance over Crimea, another step in realizing Russia’s ambition to control all of Ukraine. After the conflict erupted in 2022, the Russian navy was tasked with completing Russia’s seizure of the entire length of the Ukrainian coast, most importantly its western flank, from Odessa Bay to the Danube Delta in the south (on the Moldovan/Romanian border).

Russia’s maritime success was effectively halted after the first 50 days of fighting with the surprise sinking of its Black Sea flagship, the Slava-class warship *Moskva*, on April 13, 2022. Until then, the Russian navy had dominated the Black Sea with its naval blockade, which nearly brought commercial shipping to and from Ukrainian ports to a complete standstill. The blockade naturally affected global supplies of food and raw goods, and together with other global issues, including energy, quickly led to higher market prices and increased transportation and maritime insurance costs, all having an impact on global inflation and the global economy. Also evident were perceptible policy and military restrictions on shipping in the Turkish straits and the involvement of additional players, such as Iran.