

Black Sea and The Three Musketeers. Conflict Slouches Toward Odessa...

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As the conflict in Ukraine slouches toward Odessa, the war gets elevated to the sphere of a romantic adventure. If Alexander Dumas was alive, the idea might have struck him to write a sequel to his Three Musketeers, the historical novel written in 1844, which has heroic, chivalrous swordsmen who fight for justice, highlighting the absurdities of the Ancient Régime in a setting when the debate in France between republicans and monarchists was still fierce.

The absurdity of raking up a non-existent controversy over the Russian missile strike on Odessa on Friday casts Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky for the second time in a lead role with three swashbuckling musketeers — US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, UN Secretary-General António Guterres and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell.

The first time was when Zelensky acted in a Russian musical film based on Dumas’ novel, with three beautiful Soviet actresses — Anna Ardova, Ruslana Pysanka and Alyona Sviridova — as musketeers, which was released in Moscow on New Year’s Eve in 2004.

Coming back to time present, on Friday, it was a controversy waiting to happen when Russia fired four high precision Kalibr missiles and destroyed Ukrainian military infrastructure in Odessa Port just a day after the Russia-Ukraine grain deal was signed in Istanbul, which provides for the resumption of grain exports from the region.

Zelensky promptly shouted that the missile strike was a “barbaric” act. And Blinken came on the line to [level charges](#) against Russia; Guterres jumped into the fray “unequivocally” condemning the Russian strike; and, Borrell lazily wrote on Tweeter that the missile strike was “particularly reprehensible & again demonstrates Russia’s total disregard for

international law & commitments.”

As for the Russians, well, they slept over it — that is, until Sunday, when late in the afternoon, the Defence Ministry in Moscow inserted two tersely-worded sentences into its customary daily bulletin on the day’s operations in Ukraine:

“Attack launched by high-precision long-range sea-based missiles has resulted in the elimination of Ukrainian military ship and a depot of Harpoon anti-ship missiles delivered by USA to the Kiev regime in the seaport of Odessa. The list of neutralised targets also includes the production facilities of an entity specialised in repairing and modernising the fleet of Ukrainian Navy.”

Zelensky soon issued a clarification that the implementation of the grain deal from Odessa Port was not in doubt. Apparently, he hadn’t coordinated with the three musketeers sitting elsewhere who reacted prematurely. Blinken probably did the logical thing by distracting attention from the [corruption concerns being revived](#) in the Beltway regarding America’s gravy train to Ukraine.

Fundamentally, the grain deal is an eyesore for the Biden administration, which in the first instance never expected an agreement could be negotiated that requires great flexibility on the Russian military’s side. Even more galling is that the deal is turning out to be a political victory for Russia.

Moscow is getting good publicity over its pragmatism to lift its naval blockade for addressing the global food crisis. But what is not obvious to most people is that the grain deal is also a back-to-back deal which commits the UN to get the restrictions being put by the EU and the US on Russia’s grain and fertiliser exports lifted.

Besides, apart from the big income out of grain and fertiliser exports, there is that unquantifiable goodwill that Moscow earns from so many countries which critically depend on Russian wheat, especially in West Asia and Africa. Evidently, the itch to spoil the party in Moscow was found irresistible by Blinken & Co.

Enter Sergey Lavrov. From Oyo, Republic of the Congo, deep in the heart of Africa, where he was travelling to follow up on the grain deal — Russia is the number 1 grain supplier to Africa — Foreign Minister Lavrov sensed immense potentials in the emergent situation. [Lavrov made three points](#) while flying out of Oyo in the direction of Kampala:

- The grain deal contains nothing “to bar us from continuing the special military operation and hit military infrastructure and other military targets. And the United Nations secretariat representatives... confirmed this interpretation of the documents yesterday.” (Guterres was [apparently unaware](#).)
- The missile strike was aimed at “a separate part of the Odessa port, the so-called military part” and, therefore, “there are no obstacles for shipping grain to contractors under the Istanbul agreements and we have created none.” (Indeed, Zelensky himself is acknowledging it.)
- The missile strike was aimed at the depot where the Pentagon’s Harpoon anti-ship missiles were stored. “These missiles were delivered to pose threats to the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Now, they pose no threats.”

What Lavrov didn't say but would have implied is that Odessa war theatre has now become "kinetic" and Friday's attack sets a precedent. The missile strike underscores that Moscow likely anticipated Pentagon's antics to use the grain deal to shield its deployment of advanced Harpoon missiles in Odessa Port.

Curiously, off Bulgaria, next door to Odessa, on July 14-25, the US took part in a multinational maritime exercise, [Breeze 2022](#), involving 24 warships, cutters, auxiliary vessels, five planes, and four helicopters manned by 1,390 naval personnel from eleven NATO member countries!

The controversy over the missile strike highlights that Russia's special military operations in Ukraine will remain incomplete and inconclusive until Moscow altogether cuts off the US' and NATO's access to Odessa Port and cripples the alliance's capability in the Black Sea. Obviously, that's still some way off.

Meanwhile, the great game is accelerating in the Black Sea with Blinken doubling down to woo Azerbaijan. He [spoke with President Aliyev](#) on Monday to press Washington's pending offer "in helping facilitate the opening of regional transportation and communication linkages." Azerbaijan is the chosen bridgehead for the NATO in southern Caucasus. (See my blog [Ukraine's Great Game surfaces in Transcaucasia](#).)

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Featured image: A 1894 image of Alexander Dumas' Three Musketeers by Maurice Leloir, the French illustrator, watercolourist and writer (Source: IP)

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