

Russia Steals the Thunder in ‘Wheat War’

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In a master stroke of military diplomacy, Russian Foreign Ministry announced today that it is “withdrawing” the garrison in Snake Island, the hotly contested Black Sea property from where Ukrainian forces were evicted in March in the early days of Moscow’s special military operation.

This decision comes a day after Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres discussed food security amid the situation in Ukraine, in a phone call Wednesday. The [Russian readout](#) said Lavrov “underscored that the export of Ukrainian grain is being prevented by Kiev’s mining of the Black Sea.”

Furthermore, Lavrov “reaffirmed readiness to continue fulfilling its obligations on export of food and fertilisers, despite their fulfilment being significantly complicated by the illegal unilateral sanctions of Western states and disruption of global production and retail chains due to the COVID pandemic.”

Importantly, Lavrov conveyed to Guterres Moscow’s “intent for further work on reduction of threats of the food crisis, including in cooperation with the UN.”

The Russian Defence Ministry while announcing the withdrawal from Snake Island, called it a “goodwill gesture” and linked it to the crisis of food security. It added, “The Russian Federation has demonstrated to the international society the absence of any obstacles for the efforts of UN to establish a humanitarian corridor for transporting agricultural products from Ukraine.

“This solution will prevent Kiev from speculating on an impending grocery crisis citing the inability to export grain due to total control of the northwestern part of the Black Sea by Russia.

Now it is up to the Ukrainian side that is still not clearing the Black Sea coastline, including the harbour waters.”

In effect, Russia has challenged Kiev to do its part by removing the mines in the approaches to its ports. But this act of diplomacy is not without serious military implications. Kiev will surely celebrate this as a “military victory”.

However, on the face of it, Moscow is taking a gambit — a clever action that takes the wind out of the sails of Western propaganda blaming Russia for the food shortage as if this situation is the result of its 4-month old operation in February rather than a crisis that had been snowballing through the past four or five years for which the US and the Western countries are to be blamed.

But, as with any gambit, this ploy involves taking a risk insofar as the Russian retreat from Snake Island could be seized by Kiev to retake that strategic piece of real estate in the Black Sea, something that its American and British military advisors have been pressing for. Moscow has taken precautions by stating that it won't accept wheat cargo ships being accompanied by western warships or drones and that it reserves the right to inspect the ships and ensure they are not carrying military stuff.

So far, two major operations by Kiev with the indirect participation of the Americans and British advisors to seize Snake Island by force were beaten back by the Russian forces. The Western military analysts estimate that the Russian presence on Snake Island would pose threat to NATO's assets in next-door Romania. (See my blog [Southern Ukraine is the priority in NATO's planing](#), Indian Punchline, June 22, 2022.)

However, this Russian move also has a certain political resonance insofar as it can be construed as going beyond issues concerning Ukraine's wheat export. Of course, the facilitation of “humanitarian corridors” in the Black Sea obviates the need for any Western intervention, as implied in the G7 [Statement on Global Food Security](#) issued in Elmau, Germany on 28th June backing “UN efforts to unlock a safe maritime corridor through the Black Sea.” This is the first thing.

Indeed, Russia, which accounts for 16% of global wheat exports, and Ukraine, which accounted for 10%, are not the only key global exporters of wheat — for instance, the US and Canada, which export 26 and 25 million tons of wheat, respectively (or around 25% of global exports) and other major western producers France (19 million tons) and Germany (9.2 million tons) accounting for another 12% of global exports are unwilling to share their grain with those in need, prioritising their own food security in the recent years.

Of course, these rich western countries have their own difficulties related to energy prices, production costs and inflation. They would want to keep their raw materials to shield their economies from further inflation spikes. Simply put, in the event of currency instability, or indeed any form of economic or political instability, it is always more prudent to have raw materials than cash: it does not depreciate as quickly as currency.

The problem with the supply of such a widely produced commodity as wheat will most likely be solved only if the US and EU allow Russia, the [largest exporter of wheat](#) in the world, to share supplies in exchange for the removal of sanctions. The western sanctions have forced international companies to sever long-standing business ties and leave Russia, which caused supply disruptions. In one example, the EU last month banned cooperation with the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, through which more than half of the exported grain from Russia is shipped.

What worries the West most is that Africa's heavy dependence on Russian wheat supplies have a strategic dimension that boosts Moscow's influence in that continent. The rapidly growing Russian presence in Africa challenges the western neo-colonial projects of European countries. This is already evident in the Sahel region.

At any rate, Russia still retains its dominance over the Black Sea and can not tolerate any threat to Crimea. The goodwill gesture on Snake Island apart, there is no let-up in the Russian special military operation in southern Ukraine, either.

In this context, President [Putin's remarks at Ashgabat](#) yesterday are to the point when he was asked by the media about the "current goal" of the Russian operations. Putin said:

"Nothing has changed, of course. I talked about it in the early morning on February 24. I talked about it directly and publicly for the entire country and the world to hear. I have nothing to add. Nothing has changed... I trust professionals. They are doing what they consider necessary to attain the overall goal. I have formulated the overall goal, which is to liberate Donbass, protect its people and **create conditions that will guarantee the security of Russia itself**. That is all. We are working calmly and steadily. As you can see, our forces are moving forward and attaining the objectives that have been set for the particular period of the engagement. We are proceeding according to plan. [Emphasis added.]

"We are not speaking about any deadlines. I never speak about them, because this is life, this is reality. It would be wrong to make things fit any framework, because, as I have already said, the issue concerns combat intensity, which is directly connected with possible losses. And we must think above all about saving our guys' lives."

Here, the operative words are: "*create conditions that will guarantee the security of Russia itself*." After all, Snake Island is only some 175 miles from Sevastopol, the Russian naval base in Crimea.

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