Southern Ukraine is the Priority in NATO's Planning. Snake Island in the Black Sea

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On the night of February 24, when Russian forces crossed the western and northern borders of Ukraine, the world's attention was riveted on the fate of Kiev. Hardly anyone paid attention to the far south in the Black Sea, some 140 kms from Odessa, when Russian Navy attacked that night and captured the entire Ukrainian garrison on Snake Island, an obscure small clump of rock with little obvious value, just 46 acres of rock and grass.

But yet another massive attempt by Ukrainian forces on June 20 early morning to land troops on Snake Island signals that the Russian occupation remains under stiff challenge still. The Russians say they spotted a Global Hawk RQ-4 strategic reconnaissance UAV of the US Air Force at high altitudes near Snake Island, apparently feeding coordinates to the Ukrainian combat positions.

The MOD in Moscow issued a lengthy account (in English) on Snake Island during the daily briefing on Tuesday by Lt. Gen. Igor Konashenkov, the chief spokesman. The statement said:

- "On June 20, at about 05.00 AM, the Kiev regime attempted to capture Snake Island."
- "The plan of the operation composed by the Kiev regime was supposed to launch massive air and artillery attacks at Snake Island, to disembark troops and capture it."
- "The air attack involved more than 15 Ukrainian attack and reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) adjusted by two Bayraktar-TB2 UAVs."
- "Russian means detected a Global Hawk RQ-4 strategic reconnaissance UAV of the U.S. Air Force at high altitudes near Snake Island."
- "Ukrainian UAVs were supported in air by S-300 air defense systems from their combat positions near Tuzla and Ochakov (in Odessa Region)."

- "Missile and artillery attacks at Snake Island were launched by Ukrainian Tochka-U ballistic missiles, Uragan multiple rocket launchers and M777 155-mm howitzers from their combat positions to the west from Odessa and in Kubansky island."
- "Russian air defence means (Pantsir air defense missile and cannon system and Tor air defense missile system) have destroyed all the destruction means of the enemy launched at Snake Island."
- "The destroyed targets were: 13 UAVs, 4 Tochka-U missiles and 21 projectiles of Uragan multiple rocket launcher."
- "No Ukrainian destruction means have reached their targets in Snake Island."
- "The unsuccessful fire attack forced the enemy to abandon the landing to Snake Island."

Control over Snake Island is of strategic importance. Located near the southern coast of Odessa, it is a necessary springboard for the expected Russian operation on that port city in a conceivable future. By the same token, the removal of the Russian control of Snake Island becomes important for Kiev.

If the Ukrainian military regains control of the island, it can not only ensure the safety of the air and sea near Odessa, but can also be used for the supply of military equipment by NATO by sea. Although the Snake Island is only a fraction of a square kilometre in size, its importance for control of the sea lanes in western Black Sea is not in doubt.

If Russians set up their long-range air-defence systems they will control the sea, land and air in the north-west part of the Black Sea and in the south of Ukraine. It would also give Russian troops the chance to break into Transnistria, Moldova's breakaway territory under Russian control that lies next-door to Ukraine and not far from Odesa. The US is working feverishly to do "another Ukraine" against Russia in Moldavia which has a president and top officials with dual American citizenship who seek EU and NATO membership.
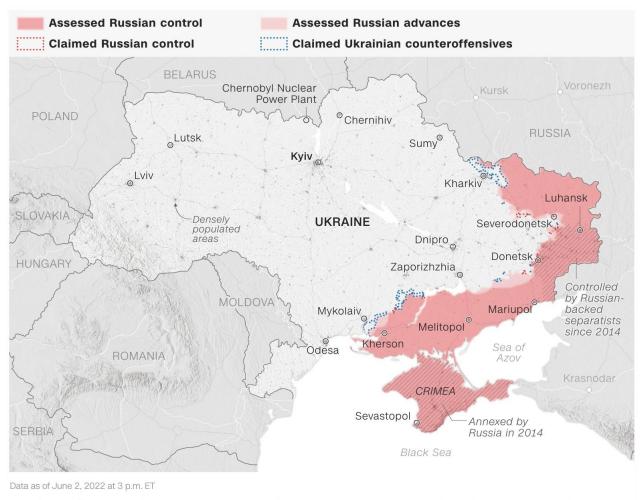
Snake Island is only 45km away from the coast of Romania, which is a member of NATO, where the alliance has deployed an estimated land force of upto 4,000 troops currently drawn from the US, Germany, France, UK, Poland, etc. Snake Island lies close to the mouth of the River Danube, which delineates Romania's border with Ukraine. Military analysts have pointed out that Russian troops on Snake Island could be in a position to control traffic into the Danube delta, the gateway to south-eastern Europe. Romania's Black Sea port of Constanta is not far south.

Clearly, the involvement of the US and UK in the planning and conduct of Ukraine's repeated attempts to regain control of the Snake Island shows that they have given the Snake Island a vital and almost mythical status in the war. Any Russian deployment of S-400 missile system in Snake Island would of course endanger NATO's southern flank.

Suffice to say, the NATO's permanent presence in the Black Sea and future expansion toward the Caucasus and the Caspian and Central Asian regions will remain problematic so long as Russia is in control of Snake island.

Snake Island epitomises the hopelessness of the Ukraine war. Russia cannot end its operation even after a successful completion of the Battle of Donbass. Kiev is unlikely to sue for peace. Kiev is seriously preparing for a counteroffensive once the heavy weapons arriving from the US are deployed.

Kharkiv is only 40 kms from the Russian border and Ukrainian forces are in no mood to give up there. In the south, Kiev vows to retake Zoporozhizhia, Kherson and Mykolaiv regions which the Russians plan to integrate. The Ukrainian forces are well ensconced in Odessa. Clearly, the NATO is preparing for a big fight for Odessa. The

ongoing battle for Snake Island is symptomatic of that.

Data as of June 2, 2022 at 3 p.m. ET

Notes: "Assessed" means the Institute for the Study of War has received reliable and independently verifiable information to demonstrate Russian control or advances in those areas. Russian advances are areas where Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks, but they do not control them. "Claimed" areas are where sources have said control or counteroffensives are occurring, but ISW cannot corroborate nor demonstrate them to be false.

Sources: The Institute for the Study of War with AEI's Critical Threats Project; LandScan HD for Ukraine, Oak Ridge National Laboratory

Graphic: Renée Rigdon, CNN

The two US weapon systems that could be game-changers in an island fight are Harpoon anti-ship missiles and High-Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS). While Harpoons could help the Ukrainians cut off the Snake Island from seaborne resupply, HIMARS could allow them to bombard the island at will.

The Black Sea Fleet remains in control of the Black Sea and Russians apparently managed to ship a Tor air-defence system to Snake Island. But that may change once the US supply of truck-mounted launchers for Harpoon anti-ship missiles reach Ukraine. The Harpoon has a range of 150 kms or more. HIMARS can fire M30 rockets out to a distance of over 70 kms —more than enough to reach Snake Island.

To be sure, a long war lies ahead and it cannot really end without the collapse of the Ukrainian state and abject surrender. Most certainly, Ukrainians will renew their assault on Snake Island. It is evident that unlike eastern region, southern Ukraine is the priority in NATO's planning.

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