



Status Report: The Ukrainian Navy

Eugene Kogan

Undoubtedly, the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014 caused serious damage to the Ukrainian Naval Forces. About 70 per cent of the fleet has been lost and what remained is in poor shape and in need of repairs.

The resulting conflict in the Eastern part of Ukraine drew attention, energy and resources away from the difficult state of the Ukrainian Navy towards the urgent needs of the army and air force. The perilous state of the economy has further decreased financial support for the Navy's needs. In addition, a debate on the conceptual vision of the Navy divided the expert community and top naval personnel for about 15 months. In February 2017, it was agreed that the concept of the Mosquito fleet would be pursued until 2020 and then be replaced by a concept of blue and littoral waters. It remains to be seen whether the concept agreed upon will remain valid. Still, both concepts require funds for repairs, construction and purchase of foreign vessels. In addition, Ukrainian shipbuilding facilities urgently need to be modernised, which requires additional funding. In other words, the road to the renewal of the naval forces, including the modernisation of the country's shipbuilding facilities, is a complicated but not impossible one.

The State of the Fleet

In November 2015, the Ukrainian Navy consisted of 11 warships and 39 auxiliary vessels, most of which were in need of repair. At that time when Russia annexed the Crimea in March 2014, Ukraine was deprived of many bases, including the largest base in Sevastopol, and lost about two-thirds of its fleet, including two minesweepers and a coastal mine hunter. There is no point in the Ukrainian Navy accepting an offer by Russian President Vladimir Putin in January 2018 to take back the ships that have been lost in Crimea. Repair and maintenance of what was lost back in March 2014 would be more costly than construc-



Coat of arms of the Ukrainian Navy

tion of a new fleet. This is by all means a clear case of economic considerations outweighing Russia's political niceties. It appears that in the meantime Odessa has become the provisional harbour of

Navy is estimated at only a quarter of its former strength and capabilities, with slightly more than 7,000 sailors and officers in total. And while other segments of the Ukrainian Armed Forces are doing considerably better in March 2018 than they were in 2014, the Ukrainian Navy is still struggling to regain its footing, strength and capabilities.

What is more, the Navy's budget in 2016 amounted to just 2% of the MoD's total budget (US\$2.2Bn) or US\$44M, while only 0.5% of the total budget or about US\$11M is spent on procuring weapons and military equipment for the fleet. Even though, according to various estimates, the MoD budget in 2017 rose to between US\$2.4Bn and US\$2.6Bn, data for the naval budget in 2017 were not disclosed. Stepan Poltorak, Ukraine's Minister of Defence said in October 2017 that the budget of the



On the Day of the Ukrainian Navy, Stepan Poltorak, Minister of Defence of Ukraine, honouring Ukrainian Navy servicemen who had taken part in combat operations in the east of Ukraine

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the Ukrainian Navy. However, Odessa was and still is a commercial rather than a military port as it lacks a maritime infrastructure to support and maintain the fleet effectively. Four years after the annexation of the Crimea, the Ukrainian

ministry in 2018 would become a "development budget" without further elaborating on the issue. The MoD felt that it would be good for them to receive US\$5.4Bn in 2018, but only US\$3.2Bn or 2.56% of GDP were allocated in the draft State Budget.

Photo: Ukrainian Navy



The frigate HETMAN SAHAIDACHNIY is the current flagship of the Ukrainian Navy.

In April 2017 the Navy had only three combat ships, several artillery gunboats and one minesweeper to protect the country's 1,350 kilometres of coastline. Most but not all of these naval platforms were designed and built in the late 1970ies and early 1980ies; they are outdated and cannot adequately face the challenges of modern naval warfare. Only one ship, the frigate HETMAN SAHAIDACHNIY, has anti-submarine and missile- and air-defence capabilities, and two new GURZA-M missile-capable patrol boats can be considered modern. With just several

(FMS) programme, in 2015 US manufacturer Willard Marine delivered five 7/11-metre Rigid Hull Inflatable Boats (RIB)-like crafts to the Ukrainian Navy, and in March 2015, Willard Marine shipped spare RIB parts and materials to Ukraine. In November 2016, it was reported that Ukraine was refitting its naval fleet, including repairing its flagship, the frigate HETMAN SAHAIDACHNIY. Repair work is still ongoing, helped by US\$30M worth of US support, which is part of a US\$500M package provided by Washington for the Ukrainian military.

Photo: Ukrainian Navy



A Ukrainian Navy GURZA-M Class boat.

Ka-27 helicopters operational, Ukraine's obsolete naval aviation also has limited capabilities. Finally, the development of the Navy was further hampered by continuing uncertainty about the country's optimal naval concept and a lack of balance between tasks, skills and resources. Both topics are discussed in detail below. Despite the gloomy news, the Navy's sea component was recently expanded. Under the US Navy Foreign Military Sales

Following lengthy acceptance trials designed to resolve some technical challenges, on 6 December 2016, the Navy commissioned two GURZA-M missile-capable riverine patrol boats. The commissioning is part of a wider programme to rebuild Ukraine's naval force structure. In December 2017, four further GURZA-M-boats were built and put into operation, and three more have been commissioned. In addition, back in May 2016,

the Ukrainian MoD signed a contract to build two CENTAUR class coastal assault landing craft that are fitted with guns, grenade and rocket launchers, and are capable of transporting up to 32 troops. They are scheduled to enter service by 2019. In November 2017, the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers finally approved construction of four corvettes to be delivered to the Naval Forces between 2022 and 2028. In the same month, Vice-Admiral Ihor Voronchenko, the Naval Forces' commander, said: "The Ukrainian Navy will develop a mine-defence capability (MCM) to regenerate the Navy by 2020."

In addition to upgrading its fleet, Ukraine is increasing the level of training of naval personnel and creating new units of coastal defence forces. The training to combat the separatists in Donbas has increased the professionalism of the personnel of the Navy, and in particular the naval soldiers. Vice-Admiral James Foggo III, then commander of the US Sixth Fleet, in a visit to Odessa in September 2015, commented positively on what he saw of the professionalism of the officer corps of the navy. Part of the training is also being carried out in NATO member countries such as France, Italy and the UK. In addition, as Oleksandr Turchynov, Secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defence Council (NSDC), said in November 2016: "We are ready to cooperate with NATO countries in joint patrols in the Black Sea." And last but not least, Ukraine's active participation in the maritime Sea Breeze exercise in the Black Sea enhances Ukraine's and NATO's interoperability and improves skills of seamen and officers. Thus, it can be said that things are slowly but surely moving in the right direction.

In addition to fleet repair and the commissioning of new vessels, the expert community and naval personnel agreed on a fleet concept. Although, as highlighted below, both sides have reached a kind of compromise, the scope and nature of the concept can be revised after 2020.

The Fleet Concept

In 2015, a heated debate on the naval capabilities that the country really needs divided the Ukrainian expert community. One group of experts led by Vice-Admiral Serhiy Haiduk, then Naval Forces commander, proposed a blue and littoral waters concept, arguing that Ukraine was in need of a classic naval force. Apparently, this group forgot that the implementation of their concept would be very expensive and that the country has no means for such extravagance for the next decade.

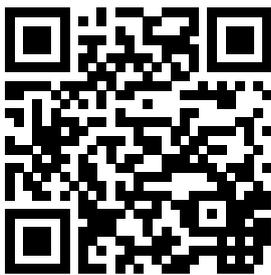
The Soviet mentality, however, is still strongly ingrained in the minds of Ukrainian top naval brass. They should accept the new reality and finally understand that the construction of the post-Soviet Ukrainian Navy requires a different way of thinking and a different approach, a concept of blue and coastal waters is not only a thing of the past, but should be completely discarded. Another group of experts proposed the so-called Mosquito fleet concept. With the aim of solving the pressing security problems in Ukraine's coastal waters, this structure of troops would adopt an asymmetric approach and prioritise the fleet's tasks on the basis of available resources. The Mosquito fleet concept envisages purchasing about 30 small- and medium-sized combatants as the centre of a new naval force structure it aims to have in place by 2020. According to Captain (N) Andriy Ryzhenko, the Navy's Deputy Chief of Staff, and one of the authors of the mosquito fleet concept, the concept is viewed as a more cost- and time-effective option for maintaining presence at sea when compared to a more traditional naval force structure. These small vessels would act asymmetrically to exploit the adversary's vulnerabilities and prevent the adversary

to approach the country's coastline. In other words, defending harbours and ports, securing critical infrastructure and countering landing operations of an adversary are the main tasks of the Mosquito concept. The aforementioned GURZA-M and CENTAUR combat boats appear to constitute a sizeable proportion of the fleet that is currently under construction. The latter naval concept ultimately secured support from the high command. In late February 2017, Vice-Admiral Voronchenko, who replaced Haiduk in July 2016, referred to the Mosquito fleet concept as "the best option for the Navy up to 2020." However, in November 2017 Voronchenko added that: "the Mosquito fleet concept is intended as an interim solution for the short term, until building a classic fleet becomes sustainable." This structure will "allow us to perform the core tasks of our navy, namely coastal defence, general, and offensive operations." It appears that Navy officials failed to reconcile with the Mosquito fleet concept which they considered as an interim solution only. Still, it would be premature to say that the interim solution will be off the navy agenda by 2020. The final concept of the fleet will be work in progress.

An Interim Solution

To conclude, the current state of the Ukrainian Navy seriously hampers its ability to deter and defend the country against the types of sea threats that Russia is currently practicing. What is more, a lack of modern equipment precludes Ukraine from conducting effective anti-surface, anti-submarine and air-defence warfare as well as mine-countermeasure missions or Ukrainian harbour protection operations. In addition, Ukraine requires modernising its shipbuilding sector that was left struggling over the last decade and longer. A successful implementation of the Mosquito fleet concept should go hand-in-hand with developing and enhancing the Ukrainian Naval Forces' interoperability with NATO. All this requires funds that are currently in short supply but that is no reason not to seek to build new boats, to strengthen cooperation between the Navy and NATO countries and to steadily improve the state of the shipbuilding industry. US military assistance is important since naval systems delivered under FMS programmes save funds for procuring non-US funded equipment. As for the construction of naval aviation this one remains a long-term objective that requires a steady allocation of financial resources. ■

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