

Odesa could be vulnerable to Russian sea assault

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Military experts have said that an attempt to capture the historical, Russian-speaking and previously Russia-sympathetic port of Odesa, could be vulnerable to a seaborne assault, particularly if the city/port of Mykolaiv, up to coast towards Crimea, was taken by Russian troops.

More than half of Ukraine's imports and exports move through Odesa. It is the last major city between Russian forces advancing past Kherson to the east and the border with NATO member Romania to the west.

In other words, the capture of Odesa would give Russia control of the entire southern coastline, weakening Ukraine's economic viability

Anne Debie, analyst with maritime security company Dryad Global, said that "due to its importance to the Ukrainian economy, a Russian capture of the port would represent a material and symbolic loss for Ukraine in the conflict". Serhiy Bratchuk, spokesman for the Odesa Regional State Administration, told *Reuters* that seven Russian vessels, including amphibious assault ships, had appeared on Thursday some 15 miles (24 km) off the coast of Odessa, visible through binoculars.

Mayor Gennadiy Trukhanov told Reuters in an interview late on Thursday March 17th that he was still hopeful the city would not be attacked. He noted that there had been shelling by warships off the coast and air strikes in the area, killing dozens of people and targeting infrastructure, but the historic city centre was so far largely unscathed.

"Still I believe... and it's a kind of inner conviction, that it (an attack) will not happen, because Odesa is a symbol, a symbol of freedom," Trukhanov said.

"They (the Russians) will simultaneously try to distract us from the Transdnistria direction, to create a problem there, and of course move from the sea. To hold such a large defensive front is rather difficult," he said.

Transdnistria is a narrow strip of land held by pro-Russian separatists that runs along the east of Moldova and comes to within about 25 miles of Odesa. Russian troops are stationed there, despite repeated calls by Moldovan President Maia Sandu for them to leave.

Ukraine fears that Transdnistria could be used as a new front, putting further pressure on Odesa. Local media reported that a bridge from the region had been blown up by Ukrainian forces. Destroying bridges has been an effective defensive weapon for Ukraine throughout the country.

Gerry Northwood, a former British Royal Navy captain who commanded warships and a consultant with maritime security company MAST, told *Reuters* that any land route to the east of Odesa would be full of challenges for Russia.

“The geography of southern Ukraine doesn’t favour a land force trying to penetrate Odesa from the east,” he said, noting that there were “too many estuaries, bays and rivers which largely run north-south, and lots of killing zones for the Ukrainians to exploit at crossing points.” He felt that for Russia it would be far safer to attack from the sea.

Ukraine’s navy is small, although Odesa might be able to mine surrounding waters, as well as the beaches likely to be used for an amphibious landing.

The Ukrainian military has estimated that Russia was capable of using 12 ships for such a landing, delivering at least five battalion groups of up to 400 troops, each plus support units. It said three Ukrainian brigades reinforced by the National Guard and territorial defence troops would be waiting, noting that artillery and medium-range missiles could also be fired at approaching vessels, as well as the shoulder-held weapons supplied by Western nations, weapons that have been markedly effective against Russian tanks and other vehicles.

Dryad Global’s Debie warned that Russia could unleash an intense bombardment of Odesa and that Ukrainian forces were poorly equipped to repel its Black Sea fleet.

A slower option for Russia could be to impose a blockade of Ukraine’s coast, which Northwood said would be relatively easy to do.