How Kerch Strait Incident is a Deliberate Provocation

When Crimea became a part of Russia through referendum, Ukraine practically lost the right to free passage through the Kerch strait. The recent Kerch incident that took place when Ukraine took things for granted, violated the norms of international law and then met a strong Russian response tells a story not of Ukraine trying to assert its rights that don’t exist in the first place, but a story of how Ukraine is in the middle of a thought-out plan to engage Russia in a conflict. Interestingly enough, this wasn’t the first time that Ukrainian ships/vessels wanted to pass the strait. They had done so on another occasion as well, but at that time they had followed the procedures, met Russian demands and rules and gave notice about their passage in advance, and had requested permission through proper channels. Therefore, the question is: if Ukraine had behaved properly in the past, why did it violate the set rules now and why has the West taken this matter as “Russian aggression”? Surely, the intent is to turn Kerch strait into a conflict zone.

The mantra of “Russian aggression” is a false projection. For one thing, Ukrainian vessels weren’t some fishing boats; those were naval vessels, which were clearly violating both international law and the norms that Ukrainian vessels had followed in their previous passage. It was, as such, the Ukrainians who were the true aggressors, yet the Western pundits have chosen to call Russia the aggressor, adding to the ever prevalent and never ending
Russophobia, and the threat of some Russian all-out attack.

This is how hawks of the American Foreign Policy Council have painted the situation, and are wanting a further escalation of the situation by urging the West to jump in militarily. After painting a dangerous ‘Russian aggression’ in the strait, the author of this article states that:

Ukraine does not have the means to counter these threats. What it needs is foreign help in the form of weapons from the United States so that it can build a joint land, sea, and (if necessary) air force to deter Russian military actions in order to relieve economic pressure. US Ambassador Kurt Volker has stated Washington’s willingness to offer Ukraine more weapons. This statement now needs to be backed up by action.

However, the issue of the Sea of Azov does not end here: there is more at stake than just Ukraine. The international community cannot recognize the right of Russia to seize territory by force, annex it, and then pretend that it has always been and will continue to be Russian. That opens the door to further adventures across the former Soviet and even Tsarist empire, jeopardizing every state from Finland to Bulgaria.

Another article published by the Atlantic Council, which is no more than a mouth piece of the American military industrial complex, makes the same kind of provocative reasoning:

Thus far, Russia’s escalating pressure has been met only with rhetorical condemnation by the United States and the EU. If the latest attacks and illegal seizure of Ukrainian ships bring little more than a slap on the wrist, Putin will see this as a green light for further escalation, to include a full blockade or even the illegal annexation of the Azov Sea.

Further outlining the strategy and objectives of the ‘war’ that the hawkish institution and their sponsors want to impose, the article reasons that:

The United States and the EU need to impose “real costs” on Russia if it doesn’t reverse course, including tighter economic sanctions beginning with the suspension or cancellation of the Nordstream 2 pipeline, said Vershbow, referring to the natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany. The United States and its allies should also expand NATO’s naval presence in the Black Sea and consider increased support to the Ukrainian navy.

There is, as such, not only quite an obvious intent of escalation of the conflict, but also an intent of internationalising the issue, which for the Russian doesn’t exist at all, of Kerch strait. Ukraine, which lost the Azov crisis, needs international mediation in order to squeeze out concessions from Russia. Gunfire, sunk ships, and dead sailors are indeed what’s necessary for the purpose of motivating such mediation, and the true aggressor here seems planning on further escalation so a crisis that can be manufactured out of thin air.

For the Ukrainians, this holds dual significance. Not only would this help internationalise the issue, but also help its president use the situation to his advantage that he can use in the next presidential elections, due to be held in March 2019, and thus can hope to increase his approval rate, which is currently as low as just 8 per cent.

Already the projection of this crisis as “Russian aggression” has led to cancellation of an important Putin-Trump meeting that was to take place on the outskirts of G-20 meeting in Argentina, and was supposed to be primarily focused on the issue of INF treaty. Clearly the cancellation of this meeting has given the American hawks a victory.

There is, as such, a certain method in the madness that the Ukrainians displayed at Kerch, whereby both the American hawks and the Ukrainian leadership stands dangerously to benefit by using this crisis as just “another example of Russian aggression.” But the reality is that hawks in the US and their cronies elsewhere in the world continue to rely on imagined “Russian aggression”, making a practical use of system survival theory, whereby the very survival of the unfit needs an “aggressor” and “enemy.” The Kerch crisis fits nicely into this framework of invented aggression.

Salman Rafi Sheikh, research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.
