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The Strategic Importance of Snake Island

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Cover photo credit: March 26, 2019: Boundary post on Snake Island (Zmiinyi Island), Black Sea, Odessa, Ukraine, Eastern Europe (Credit Image: © Andrey Nekrasov/ZUMA Press Wire)

The Strategic Importance of Snake Island

*Despite its tiny size, Snake Island is geostrategically important.
Denying Russia control of the island is vital.*

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Executive Summary

- Snake Island is a rocky outcrop less than one square kilometer in size but of huge geostrategic significance to the Black Sea and beyond.
- Military control of the island and surrounding waters affects all shipping routes connecting Ukraine to the rest of the world through the Black Sea, as well as those linking continental Europe to the Black Sea basin through the Danube.
- Russia occupied the island on day one of its invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Control has been fiercely contested ever since, with Russian troops eventually withdrawing on June 30.¹
- Russia may try to seize the island again as a bargaining chip just before a cease-fire. This would have game-changing military and economic consequences for both Ukraine and NATO.
- Keeping the territory under Ukrainian control is essential for maintaining global grain supplies, for the future exploitation of energy reserves in surrounding waters, and for wider regional security.
- NATO allies should continue to support Ukraine to enhance its coastal defenses and protect the island with anti-ship Harpoon missiles, anti-aircraft Stinger weapons, and sophisticated radars and integrated command and control systems.



Introduction

For a small clump of rock in the Black Sea, Snake Island has outsized importance. Much like the Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, it is geostrategically significant at the local, regional, and global levels.



Map: Center for European Policy Analysis

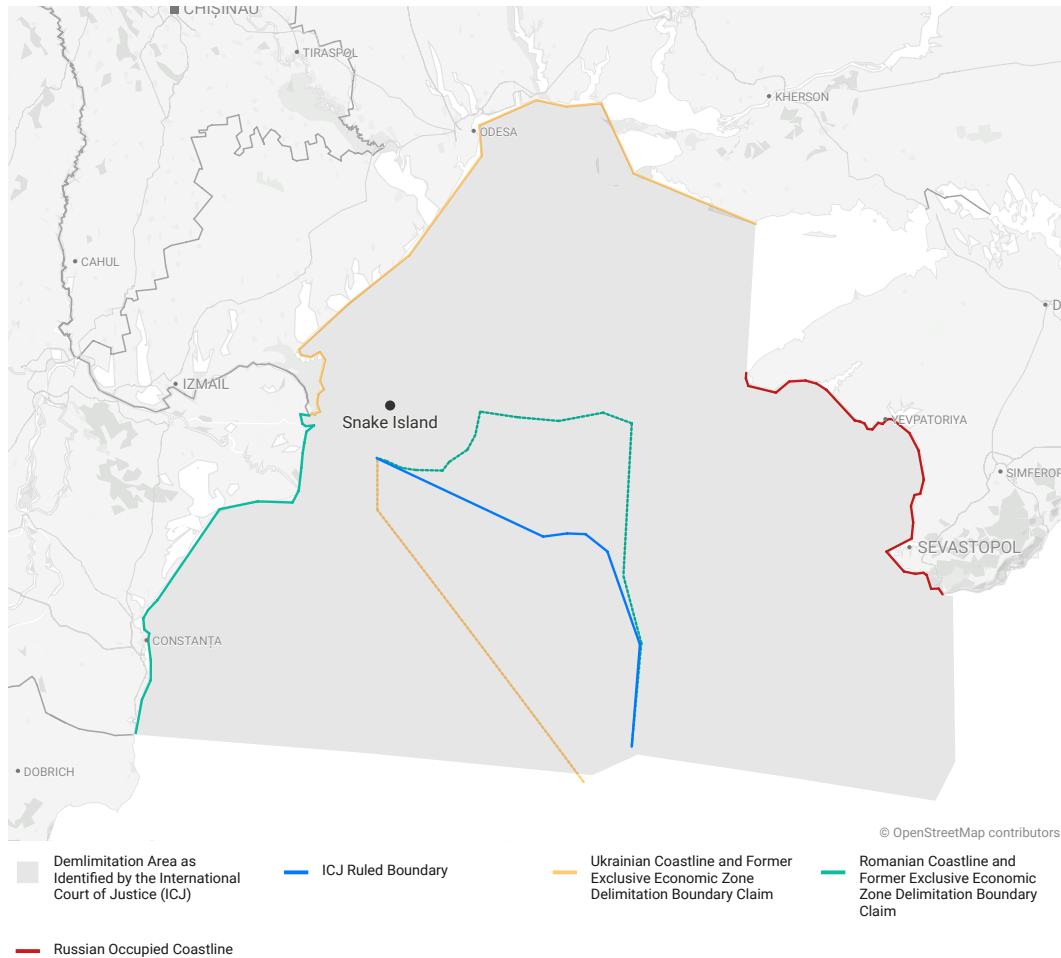
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The island rose to international notoriety on February 24 after a small band of Ukrainian soldiers refused — in uncompromising language — to lay down their arms at the instruction of a Russian warship. The episode later resulted in a popular internet meme.²

The island has an area of 17 hectares, shaped roughly like the letter X. Hard ground and a lack of freshwater resources make permanent troop deployments challenging. Nevertheless, the deployment there of surveillance equipment and aerial denial systems enable operations covering the entire northwestern Black Sea region.

It is located 20 nautical miles (37 kilometers; km) from the Romanian port of Sulina and the mouth of the Danube, 77 nautical miles from Odesa, and 90 nautical miles from Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base in Romania, the headquarters for American forces deployed on the western coast of the Black Sea.

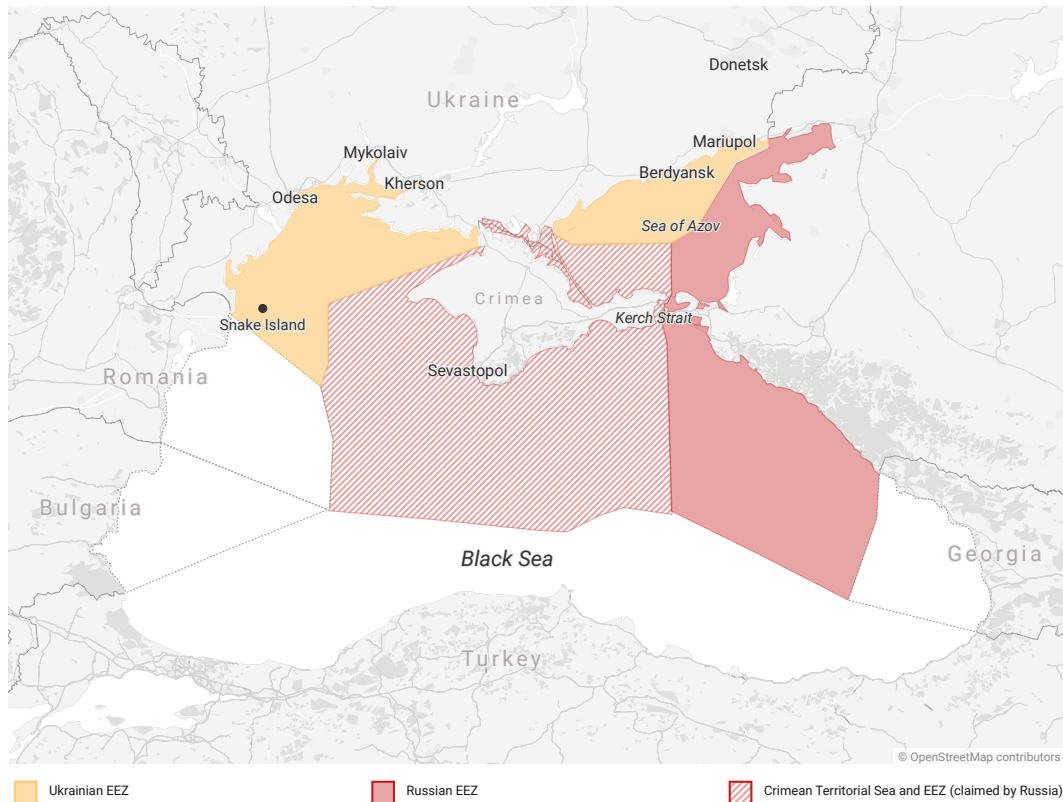
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The island has been significant for at least a thousand years. It derives its name from a species of snake that lived there in antiquity. The Russian empire gained it after centuries of Ottoman rule in 1812 and returned it after the Crimean War in 1856. Romania then gained it in 1878 and ceded it to the Soviet Union in 1948.³ During years of estrangement between the Nicolae Ceaușescu regime and the Kremlin in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Soviet intelligence used it to monitor Romanian industrial sites and ports on the Danube's mouth.

Following the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, control of Snake Island passed to Ukraine. Although Romania and Ukraine signed a treaty that recognized Ukrainian sovereignty over the island in 1997, delimitation of the surrounding Black Sea continental shelf and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) was referred to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Ukraine claimed that the territory

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Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: "Russian Attack on Ukrainian Ships near Kerch Strait – Full Chromoly," Euromaidan Press, November 26, 2018

was an inhabited island; Romania argued that it was merely a rock. The court ruled in 2009 in favor of Romania, which received 9,700 square kilometers (km²) of the disputed maritime area while Ukraine received 2,300 km². The ICJ decision has become a point of reference for the peaceful resolution of international maritime delimitation disputes ever since.⁴

Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 created a de facto Black Sea border with Romania — see Figure 3. A Russian reoccupation of Snake Island could pave the way for the Kremlin to overturn the ICJ decisions and make expanded claims on Romanian and Ukrainian EEZs, just as it did after seizing Crimea in 2014.⁵



Photo: NATO ships exercise in the Black Sea during 2021 Sea Breeze exercise. Credit: NATO

Military Significance

The island provides a permanent platform from which to conduct military operations over a 600-km² area. This includes the Ukrainian shores to the north as well as the Romanian east coast, extending to Varna in Bulgaria and past Bucharest to southern Romania. A military presence on the island affects all shipping routes connecting Ukraine to the rest of the world through the Black Sea. It also dominates the mouth of the Danube, the vital waterway that links continental Europe to the Black Sea. This is of particular importance given that the Romanian port of Sulina served as an alternative shipping route for Ukrainian goods following Russia's blockade of Odesa and other Ukrainian ports.⁶

The island's small size limits the maneuverability of deployed troops, while the hard ground prevents the construction of underground shelters.⁷ However, the island has hosted military units in the past and is capable of hosting surveillance equipment and aerial and maritime denial systems. Russia's four-month occupation, supported from Sevastopol, enabled it to monitor all air and naval traffic in the area, as well as use the island as a platform for electronic warfare and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) missions.⁸

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Indeed, Ukrainians report that between February and June, Russia was deployed to the island with “about three dozen pieces of equipment ...: a Tor-M2 and a TSM SAM [surface-to-air missile] system, four ‘Pantsir-S1’ [self-propelled anti-aircraft missile and artillery systems], two ‘Grad’ and ‘Tornado-G’ [multiple rocket launcher vehicles], one BBM [armored fighting vehicle], three military vehicles, two diesel generators and about one and a half dozen objects carefully disguised with a [camouflage] net.”⁹ This established “a system of air defense and fire damage using rocket salvo systems aimed at ensuring control over the sea and sky in that area of the Black Sea.”¹⁰ Other systems included electro-optical and infrared intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR).¹¹ Another intended function of Russia’s presence on the island was to support an amphibious operation on the mainland,¹² which was thwarted by Ukraine’s successful defense of Odesa.

Permanent installation of these and other systems would make Snake Island a formidable military platform. The installation of an airborne radar, a naval radar, electronic warfare equipment, radar jamming, and Global Navigation Satellite System data alteration capabilities would enable Russia to benefit from a larger reserve of data on enemy targets in addition to the current A2/AD system that it operates in the Black Sea.¹³

In short: Whoever maintains critical weapons systems on the island can also control the entire northwestern region of the Black Sea.

Economic Significance

As already mentioned, this vital land platform is located on the navigation corridor that connects all Ukrainian ports from the Black Sea to the Danube’s mouth, as well as Romanian ports and the Bosphorus Strait, which gives access to the Mediterranean Sea. Control of these sea lanes is critically important to European security and prosperity in the event of a wider conflict with Russia.

Ukraine is the fifth-largest grain exporter in the world. In 2021, Ukrainian seaports in the Odesa region handled 7,626 ships and 107.18 million tons of cargo, including 81.99 million tons of export cargo.¹⁴ Ukraine’s economy suffers an estimated daily loss of \$170 million due to Russia’s blockade of ports on the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Ukraine exports more than 70% of its \$47 billion foreign sales of goods via seaports.¹⁵ Prior to the invasion, Ukraine exported 6 million tons of grain a month but has managed only 1 million tons per month since.¹⁶ A global shortage of 60 million tons of grain over the next year could prove disastrous, particularly for countries such as Egypt, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Turkey, and Tunisia that depend heavily on grain imports to feed their populations.¹⁷ Since the invasion, and with the assistance

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of Romania, a fraction of Ukraine's grain exports has been diverted through the Danube port of Galați and by railway to the port of Constanța.

On July 22, following a United Nations-brokered agreement hosted in Turkey, Russia and Ukraine agreed to release "significant volumes of commercial food exports from three key Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea; Odesa, Chernomorsk and Yuzhny [through] the establishment of a Joint Coordination Centre to monitor implementation hosted in Istanbul."¹⁸ However, just hours after the agreement, Russia carried out missile strikes against the port of Odesa, suggesting that this arrangement may be difficult to sustain over the long term.¹⁹

Despite this initial setback, progress has been significant.²⁰ The United Nations secretary general and the presidents of Ukraine and Turkey met in Kyiv on August 18, noting that Ukraine had succeeded in exporting 625,000 tons of grain since the deal was signed.²¹ Russia's ceding of Snake Island played a crucial role in this²² and helped overturn the blockade of Odesa, which had rendered grain exports all but impossible. The Russian Black Sea Fleet is now "struggling to exercise effective sea control, with patrols generally limited to the waters within sight of the Crimean coast",²³ and is thus unable to interdict Ukrainian shipping on the western Black Sea.

After grain, the other vital issue is oil and gas reserves in Ukrainian, Romanian, and Bulgarian EEZs and territorial waters. Since the 2009 EEZ delimitation, which enables Romania and Ukraine to develop offshore energy resources, large gas deposits have been discovered in the Romanian EEZ in the vicinity of the island.²⁴ This could potentially contribute to improving European energy security by providing imports to countries such as the Republic of Moldova, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Austria to help diminish European dependence on Russian gas.²⁵

Romania plans to exploit some 200 billion cubic meters of offshore gas²⁶ over the next 10-15 years.²⁷ While this is a medium-to-long-term prospect, the impact of Russia limiting its energy supply to Europe is already having a damaging impact on European economies, which are facing the highest levels of inflation in a generation.²⁸ It is likely that Russia will seek to exert maximum pressure over the winter period, as well as exploit opportunities to delay, deter, and prevent European energy diversification over the longer term. Russian reoccupation of Snake Island therefore puts at risk Romania's ability to develop offshore facilities, or indeed any potential commercial activity in its vicinity.²⁹

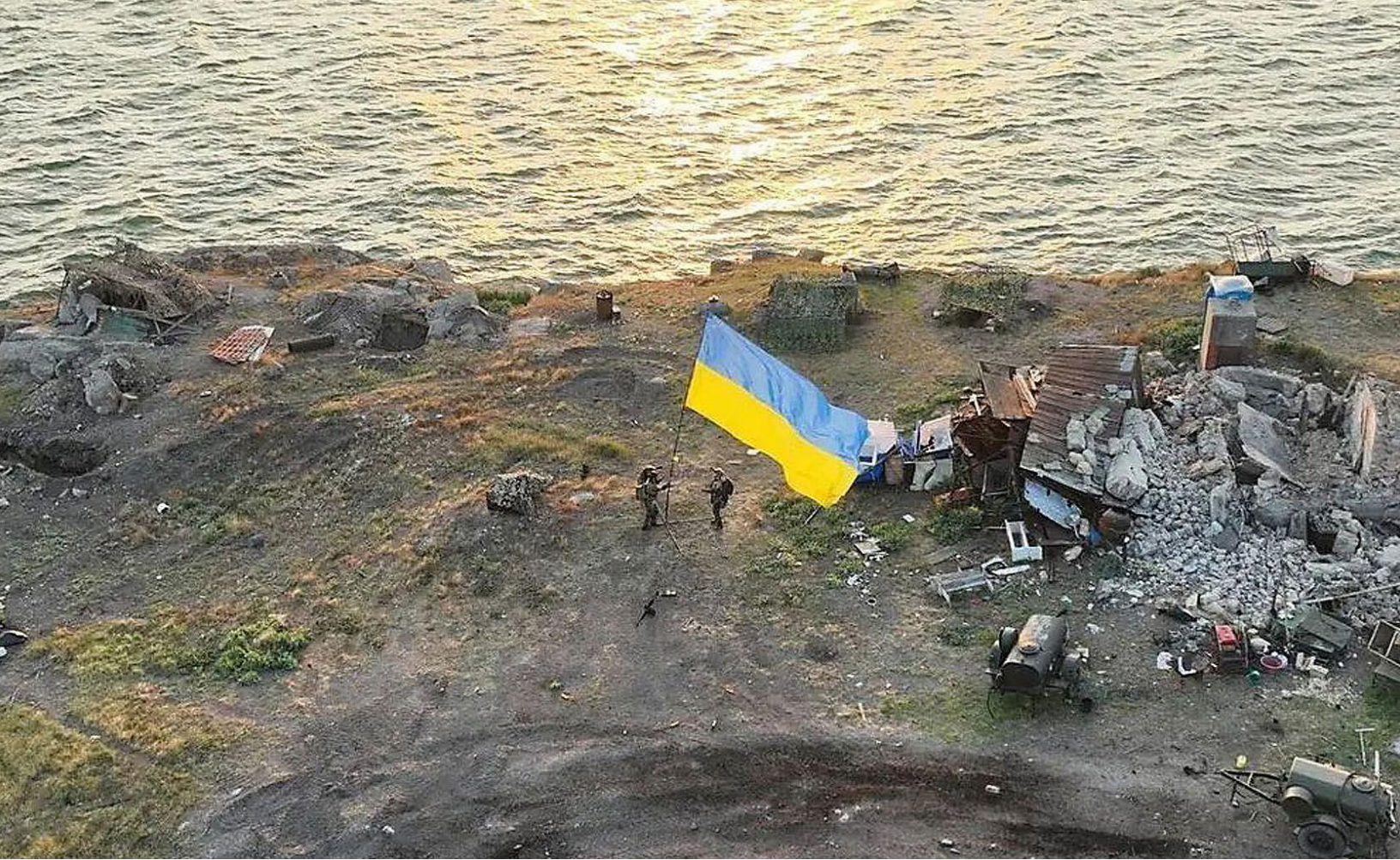


Photo: Snake Island, Ukraine. 7th July, 2022. Ukrainian service people planting a national flag on Snake Island in the Black Sea, as Russia's attacks in the east of the country continue. Credit: Ukrainian Armed Forces/ZUMA Press Wire Service

Risk of Russian Reoccupation

Snake Island is “essentially indefensible without effective area air defense.”³⁰ Russia took advantage of this vulnerability on the first day of its invasion of Ukraine. As noted previously, size constrains maneuverability of deployed troops on the island; hard ground prevents the construction of underground shelters. Its isolated location makes it vulnerable to both air and naval fire.

Ukraine demonstrated this throughout May and June 2022 when its forces repeatedly attacked Russian troops on the island with missiles, long-range artillery, and drones. This followed the sinking of the Moskva in April, a significant event that severely constrained the operations of Russia's Black Sea fleet and prevented it from providing a “protective umbrella” around Snake Island.³¹ Consequently, Russia was forced to abandon the island and withdrew its troops on June 30. Russian military experts later admitted that, “It is easy to capture the point. It is more difficult to hold it – more so if significantly more substantial opposing forces are located in the region.”³²

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On July 7, a group of Ukrainian soldiers returned to the island to raise their flag but did not remain.³³ While Russia controls Crimea and the occupation of Ukraine's southern territories continues, Ukraine will find it difficult to station forces on the island.

A positive point for Ukraine is that the island is farther away from Russian occupied territories than from the Ukrainian-controlled coast southwest of Kherson, some 150 km from the island. The westernmost point of Crimea, by contrast, is 180 km away. However, despite shortcomings in Russian long-range artillery, Russia still has enough long-range assets to make it impossible for Ukraine to defend the island without significant air defense systems.³⁴

The key consideration here is Russia's plans and intentions. Kremlin officials have publicly stated that they want to gain control of the entire Ukrainian Black Sea coast. This resurrected Tsarist-era "Novorossiya" (New Russia) would link occupied territories in southern Ukraine with Transnistria, the unrecognized Kremlin-backed statelet on the eastern bank of Moldova's Dniester River.³⁵ Western officials also believe that Russia will attempt another major offensive early next year, including attempts to "seize the country's southwestern coast and cut off Ukraine from the sea."³⁶

A second danger arises in the case of a potential cease-fire. Russia has a long-standing playbook of launching last minute "land grabs" before entering into formal peace agreements.³⁷ There is a strong likelihood that this time around, Russia would attempt to retake the island immediately before any such truce, in a time frame that would give Ukraine little chance of mounting an effective counter-attack. Control of Snake Island would both be a geopolitical trophy and in practical terms boost Russia's military and economic position in the region, to the detriment of Ukrainian, Romanian, and NATO interests.

Securing the Future of Snake Island

Despite its vulnerabilities, Snake Island's geostrategic importance means that Ukraine, Romania, the United States, and other NATO allies cannot simply ignore it. Ukraine needs to maintain control over the island to secure its Black Sea shores and shipping routes, which are vitally important to feeding large parts of the world. However, Ukraine is limited in its ability to secure the area. NATO allies should therefore develop a strategy to assist Ukraine in safeguarding the island.

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To forestall a Russian reoccupation, support to Ukraine from the United States and other NATO allies should consist of

- long-range artillery systems;
- continued delivery of anti-ship systems such as Harpoon missiles to deter a Russian naval landing on the island;
- anti-aircraft systems such as Stinger or the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System to prevent Russian air support for a naval invasion;
- sophisticated radars; and
- integrated command and control systems.

Allies should also consider deploying similar systems to the Romanian and Bulgarian Black Sea shores to defend shipping routes and protect offshore energy infrastructure.

These weapons would deter or defeat a Russian attack. They would thus block Russian attempts to seize Ukraine's Black Sea coastline to reach the mouth of the Danube and create a Novorossiia land corridor between Crimea and Transnistria.

Russian control of the entire southern Ukrainian coastline (which would take it to the mouth of the Danube) would mean Ukraine would no longer be able to defend Snake Island from the shore. Western allies should therefore develop a broad program of support for Ukraine so that it can project a stronger naval and aerial presence. At the same time, the United States and other NATO allies should continue to enhance assistance programs for strengthening the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities of the Romanian Navy and deploy anti-ship missile systems to protect Romania's coast, territorial waters, and EEZ.

Romania and the United States are already moving forward with this effort. In 2021, Romania signed a Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreement to purchase four Kongsberg Naval Strike Missile Coastal Defense Systems (currently deployed by Norway, Poland, and the US). The agreement makes Romania the first country to purchase the system via the United States' FMS program. While these systems will bolster Romania's defenses against high-end maritime targets, they will not reach Romania for more than two years, continuing a lack in defensive capabilities that may require the deployment of anti-ship systems from the United States or another NATO ally in the worst-case scenario of an attempted Russian reoccupation of Snake Island.



Photo: Special operations forces from the 352d Special Operations Wing and 41st Field Artillery Brigade executed another successful High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), Rapid Aerial Insertion (HIRAIN), coordinated with NATO allies, near Constanta, Romania 10 Apr, 2021. Credit: Capt. Kevyn Kaler, 52nd Fighter Wing Public Affairs

Conclusion

Snake Island has proven easy to take but difficult to hold. Its proximity to the shipping corridor between Ukraine's Black Sea ports and the Bosphorus Strait, as well the mouth of the Danube River and the coasts of Romania and Bulgaria, makes it strategically important, both militarily and economically.

Russia's naval blockade of Ukraine, supported by its position on Snake Island, contributed to suffocating Ukraine's economy without conquering the country's Black Sea coast.³⁸ Snake Island would be a keystone of Russia's wider regional ambitions, hosting long-range air defense systems that would enable it to dominate the northwest Black Sea and frustrate Ukraine's grain supply, as well as development of offshore energy prospects and diversification.

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Perhaps even more importantly, the proximity of Snake Island to the Mihail Kogălniceanu military base in Romania, located only 167 km away from the island, could significantly increase the potential for future miscalculation and flashpoints in the event of Russian reoccupation. This base hosts a significant number of NATO forces and assets, including an additional 1,000 troops from the United States relocated from Germany since February 2022.³⁹

Despite its tiny size, Snake Island is geostrategically important. Denying Russia control of the island is vital

- for the successful defense of Ukraine;
- for the freedom of trade in the Black Sea; and
- for the security of global food and energy supplies.

The United States and other NATO allies should be ready to draw on regionally deployed assets and provide Ukraine with the long-range precision weapons systems needed to prevent a new, and potentially permanent, Russian presence on Snake Island.

A coherent strategy and targeted support in defense of Snake Island would guard against these strategic threats, which affect billions of people around the world.⁴⁰

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