

Tanker-War: Everything Is Ideological

By [Padraig McGrath](#)

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Ukraine's most senior military prosecutor, Anatoly Matios, announced yesterday that the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) had seized the Russian tanker Nika Spirit at the port of Izmail and detained the crew, including at least 7 Russian nationals. Matios alleged that the tanker was involved in the Kerch Strait incident in November, during which Ukrainian naval vessels were seized by the Russian Coastguard for attempting to illegally enter Russian territorial waters, and 24 Ukrainian sailors arrested. Anatoly Matios has claimed that the Russian tanker was seized yesterday as material evidence in the ongoing Ukrainian investigation into the Kerch Strait incident.

In response to this news, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that

“If this amounts to taking Russians hostage, it will qualify as a blatant violation of international law and the consequences will not be long in coming.”

The Ukrainian government, and numerous western governments, had also claimed that the seizure of the Ukrainian naval vessels in November constituted a violation of international law.

These events quickly follow the seizure of the Panamanian-registered, Iranian-owned Grace 1 supertanker off Gibraltar by the Royal Marines on July 4th, and the seizure of the Swedish-owned, British-registered tanker Stena Impero by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard on July 19th. Yesterday Iranian president Hassan Rouhani suggested a swap. The British legal argument for the seizure of the Iranian tanker on July 4th was that it was involved in smuggling oil to Syria in breach of European Union sanctions.

We understand perfectly well, of course, that the appeals to “international law” by the various sides are strictly pro forma. While the relevance and meaningfulness of the concept of “international law” has steadily eroded since 2001, we might still argue that this new tanker-war makes that process of the decay of international law more explicit than it has been at any point since 2001. The US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the deliberate destruction of Libya, have all created humanitarian catastrophes and created a historical precedent of reckless military unilateralism, the normalization of wars of aggression. However, in even those appalling events, the demise of international law was only implicit. Once widespread piracy re-appears, we can say that the concept of “international law” is well and truly dead.

As Europe's first de facto failed state, as the European equivalent of Somalia, it is entirely to be expected that Ukraine is one of the first countries to graduate to the new maritime culture of neo-piracy.

However, this very point concerning the demise of international law in itself makes the various sides' appeals to the concept of "international law" all the more necessary. Once it is admitted that "international law" is now an irrelevant, meaningless concept, it opens up an even more appalling vista. De facto, we are in the preliminary stages of a third world war. Everybody knows this. This is precisely why all sides are still engaging in pro forma appeals to "international law" – the logic of this deliberate obtuseness is that, if we admit that international law is dead, then it accelerates the escalation of the impending global conflict. Everybody is in denial, but that denial is a matter of pragmatic necessity. Once the denial-phase ends, the third world war begins in earnest. Everybody is trying to delay that for as long as possible. Denial is an existential imperative in this case.

This existential imperative to deny the obvious closely mirrors the economic forces primarily driving the process of gradual escalation. The overly financialized western liberal economic model is unsustainable. It has always required subsidization by the natural resources of other nations, and always will.

We may accuse western governments of hypocrisy regarding their self-serving and selective appeals to "international law" (which was only ever a euphemism for quasi-legalized western hegemony), but the point should not be overlooked that this hypocrisy is also seen by the Occident's political elites as an existential imperative, not only because it is partially devised to maximally delay the outbreak of a third world war, but also because the western world's entire social and economic structure cannot possibly survive without this hypocrisy.

When your entire social order is premised on denying the obvious, civilizational self-negation sooner rather than later is inevitable, but you still don't have a choice. Therefore, critiques of western hypocrisy do not go deep enough – the point is overlooked that, from the Occidental point of view, this hypocrisy is actually an existential imperative. Western liberal hypocrisy is an absolutely logical manifestation of neo-imperial capitalism's ideological superstructure, made inevitable by the realities of its economic base.

There is no point in trying to postulate an "objective" ethical position. All ethical truths are temporary, because their purpose is ultimately to sustain a particular social order, and all social orders ultimately self-negate. That is to say, all truths are temporary because all truths are ultimately expedient. Lenin's observation that reality itself is inherently ideological (somewhat adapted from Hegel) is highly applicable here.

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