



Mediterranean Battlespace

Lady Mariia, Lefkada and the Law of Commerce Warfare

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EXECUTIVE ABSTRACT

The essay applies the law of naval targeting to the 6 September 2026 drone attack on the Russian-flagged Ro-Ro Lady Mariia in the central Mediterranean, read together with the December 2025 strike on the Omani-flagged tanker Qendil and the May 2026 recovery of an armed Ukrainian USV at Lefkada. It separates four legal tests — object, persons, method and geography — and refuses to treat a sanctions' listing as a targeting folder. Attribution, launch site and cargo remain publicly unestablished. What can already be shown is a gap between Europe's explicit choice of economic coercion against Russia and the unauthorised emergence of a Mediterranean operational space.

KEY FINDINGS

- Attribution, launch site and cargo remain publicly unproven as of 7 September 2026. A logistics history and a sanctions listing may inform targeting; they do not decide it.
- Legality is the intersection of four tests: object, persons aboard, means and precautions, and geography of deployment, staging, transit, launch and impact.
- Qendil is a harder case than Lady Mariia: a neutral tanker struck empty is not the same object as a Russian-flagged Ro-Ro with a recorded military-transport function.
- Lefkada is the sovereignty problem. Greece classified the armed Ukrainian USV in its territorial waters as illegal and rejected self-defence as a licence to transfer operations into the Mediterranean.
- A sanctions list is not a targeting folder. If Europe does not fix the boundary between economic and kinetic commerce warfare, operational practice will fix it instead.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC CITATION

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META DESCRIPTION

Legal analysis of the Lady Mariia attack, the Lefkada incident and commerce warfare in the Mediterranean: sanctions, targeting, neutrality and European maritime sovereignty.

LANGUAGE

English

Epistemic principle: an operational pattern can acquire the attributes of a battlespace without a declaration and without the consent of the coastal states whose geography it consumes. Observed fact, legal test and strategic implication must remain distinct. The lawfulness of the Lady Mariia strike is still open.

On 6 September 2026, the Russian-flagged Ro-Ro cargo vessel *Lady Mariia*, IMO 9220641, was attacked by aerial drones while sailing eastwards through the central Mediterranean after departing Oran, Algeria. The available imagery appears to show several small unmanned aircraft approaching the ship and releasing munitions against its upper decks, producing fires and damage without, apparently, causing the loss of the vessel. Within hours the incident had already acquired the characteristics that have become familiar in the maritime extension of the Russian-Ukrainian war: Ukrainian responsibility was assumed by many commentators before it was demonstrated, the vessel's presence on sanctions lists was presented almost as a synonym for military status, claims emerged that it was carrying Iranian weapons and armoured vehicles, and a further allegation placed the origin of the attacking drones somewhere in Libya. Some or all of those claims may eventually prove correct, but as of 7 September they do not possess the same evidentiary status. What can be established is that *Lady Mariia* was attacked; what cannot yet be established publicly with comparable confidence is who attacked it, from where the operation was launched, what cargo was actually aboard on this particular voyage, and what intelligence concerning that cargo was available to whoever authorised the strike.

That distinction is not a pedantic reservation inserted after the strategic conclusions have already been reached. It is the point from which the legal analysis must begin, because almost every relevant legal answer changes depending upon those missing facts. Ukraine's Main Directorate of Intelligence identifies *Lady Mariia* as a vessel connected with Russian military logistics and specifically records its previous use for the transportation of armaments from Syria to the Russian Federation. The ship is Russian-flagged, linked to MG-Flot, formerly Transmorflot, and belongs to a maritime network already subjected to sanctions by Western governments. Those facts make it entirely reasonable for an intelligence service to scrutinise its movements, cargoes and destinations, and they may provide part of the evidentiary basis required for a targeting assessment; they do not, however, automatically determine the result of that assessment. A history of military transportation does not prove military transportation on every voyage, a sanctions designation does not transform commercial property into a military objective, and Russian ownership does not abolish civilian protection.

Cause and Conduct

This is precisely where the discussion surrounding *Lady Mariia* touches a principle that is increasingly difficult to maintain politically because it is extremely simple legally: the legitimacy of a belligerent's cause does not determine the legality of each object it attacks. Russia's invasion of Ukraine remains the fundamental cause of the conflict, and Ukraine's resort to force in self-defence rests on a legal foundation radically different from Russia's original resort to aggression, but the law governing the conduct of hostilities was designed deliberately to operate independently of that difference. *Jus ad bellum* asks whether a state may lawfully resort to force; *jus in bello* asks what persons and objects may be attacked, how attacks must be conducted, what precautions must be taken and what protections continue to exist once war is under way. The two bodies of law are separated because any other arrangement would destroy the regulatory purpose of humanitarian law. If the victim of aggression acquired an enlarged catalogue of permissible targets simply because its war was defensive, while the aggressor's civilians and civilian property lost protection because the state to which they belonged had acted unlawfully, the principle of distinction would cease to be a legal rule and become an extension of political judgement.

The uncomfortable symmetry is therefore essential:

$$L_{target}^{Ukraine} = L_{target}^{Russia}$$

not because Ukraine and Russia possess equivalent responsibility for beginning the war, which they plainly do not, but because the legal definition of a military objective cannot change according to the moral

identity of the actor applying it. The same facts must encounter the same test. Different facts may produce different conclusions; different flags may not produce different laws.

Military Objective, Not Economic Association

For *Lady Mariia*, the first question is accordingly whether the vessel constituted a military objective at the time it was attacked. The modern general formulation appears in Article 52(2) of Additional Protocol I and is reflected in customary international humanitarian law: an object may be attacked when, by its nature, location, purpose or use, it makes an effective contribution to military action and when its total or partial destruction, capture or neutralisation, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage. Both components matter, and the restrictive language matters. The rule does not say that an object becomes targetable because it benefits the enemy, contributes taxes to the enemy state, increases national income, violates sanctions or participates in an economic activity without which the adversary would eventually become weaker. It demands an effective contribution to military action and a definite military advantage arising from neutralising the object under the circumstances then prevailing.

Naval warfare adds its own specific history and qualifications. The San Remo Manual on International Law Applicable to Armed Conflicts at Sea, adopted in 1994 by a group of international lawyers and naval experts after several years of deliberation and supported during its preparation by the International Committee of the Red Cross, is not a treaty and should not be presented as one, but it remains the most influential contemporary restatement of the law governing armed conflict at sea. Its treatment of merchant vessels is especially useful because it refuses both of the simplistic propositions that dominate contemporary argument: that a merchant vessel is immune because it is civilian, and that an enemy merchant vessel is attackable because it belongs to the enemy.

Paragraph 59 states that enemy merchant vessels may be attacked only when they meet the definition of a military objective. Paragraph 60 then identifies forms of conduct capable of producing that result: engaging in belligerent acts on behalf of the enemy, acting as an auxiliary to enemy armed forces, participating in intelligence, reconnaissance or command-and-control systems, sailing under military convoy, resisting lawful interception, possessing armament capable of threatening a warship, or otherwise making an effective contribution to military action, for example by carrying military material. That last category is obviously the one most relevant to *Lady Mariia*. A Ro-Ro merchant vessel transporting tanks, artillery, missiles, ammunition, armoured vehicles or other matériel to Russian armed forces is not protected from attack merely because the hull is commercially registered or because its crew members are merchant seamen. Civilian objects can become military objectives through their use or purpose, otherwise every belligerent could immunise military logistics simply by outsourcing them to commercial carriers.

If the claim that *Lady Mariia* was carrying military equipment on 6 September were established, and if the cargo or operational function made an effective contribution to Russian military action whose interruption offered a definite military advantage, the vessel could therefore lawfully lose protection from attack. The analytical difficulty is that, as of the present, the public evidence does not establish that critical premise. Claims that Iranian weapons and armoured vehicles were aboard are not independently corroborated; the reported draught of the vessel cannot responsibly be converted into a manifest of its cargo; and a history of AIS irregularities may raise intelligence interest but does not prove what was carried on this voyage. A serious assessment must resist the temptation to assemble a sufficient number of suspicious facts and then treat their accumulation as a substitute for the fact that actually matters.

The distinction becomes more important precisely because the contemporary sanctions environment encourages semantic migration. A vessel is initially described as Russian; it then becomes sanctioned; subsequently it is incorporated into the category of the “shadow fleet”; because the shadow fleet facilitates Russian commerce it becomes “war-sustaining”; and from “war-sustaining” it is only a short rhetorical movement to “legitimate target”. Yet these categories belong to different legal and political systems. A government may sanction a vessel because of ownership, revenue generation, sanctions evasion, corporate

association, oil transportation or participation in a commercial network designed to circumvent economic restrictions. None of those reasons automatically answers the question posed by the law of targeting.

A sanctions list is not a targeting folder.

The temptation to treat it as one is understandable because the economic chain connecting Russian commerce with Russian military capacity is real. Oil exports generate foreign currency and fiscal revenue; fiscal revenue increases the resources available to the Russian state; the state allocates enormous resources to defence and military production; consequently, maritime commerce helps sustain Russian capacity to continue fighting. In economic terms,

*Maritime exports → Revenue → Fiscal capacity → Military expenditure
→ War capacity*

is a perfectly coherent causal chain. The problem is not the existence of the chain but the legal consequence attached to it. If indirect contribution to the state's economic capacity becomes sufficient to satisfy the definition of military objective, almost every productive civilian asset can be incorporated into the same chain. Refineries produce export revenue, banks process transactions, insurers keep ships moving, telecommunications companies maintain connectivity, ports facilitate trade, railways transport goods, factories create taxable output and workers pay income taxes. At a sufficient level of abstraction the entire economy sustains the war, which is precisely why humanitarian law must distinguish contribution to the war economy from effective contribution to military action.

There is, admittedly, a genuine doctrinal disagreement on this point. The United States has traditionally taken a broader view of objects contributing to an adversary's "war-fighting or war-sustaining capability" than the narrower interpretation generally associated with the ICRC, while the latter has resisted the proposition that broad economic contribution alone can convert civilian economic infrastructure into military objectives. The disagreement matters enormously when applied to Russian oil shipping because the more expansive concept offers a plausible route from tanker to state revenue to war capacity, whereas the narrower approach requires a substantially more direct connection between the vessel and military action. What should not be done is to conceal the existence of the disagreement and pretend that "shadow fleet" constitutes a legal category already recognised by the law of naval targeting. It does not.

Qendil and Neutral Merchant Shipping

The earlier attack on *Qendil* exposes the problem more sharply than *Lady Mariia*. On 19 December 2025 Ukraine carried out what Reuters described as the first known Ukrainian drone attack against a Russian shadow-fleet tanker in the Mediterranean, more than two thousand kilometres from Ukrainian territory. *Qendil* was reportedly empty when it was struck and, significantly, flew the flag of Oman rather than Russia. Ukrainian sources justified the operation by reference to the ship's participation in Russian oil exports and the revenue those exports provided to Moscow. Strategically the logic was clear; legally the case was substantially more difficult, because a neutral merchant vessel is not simply an enemy merchant vessel wearing another flag.

Paragraph 67 of the San Remo Manual establishes a more restrictive regime for neutral merchant shipping. Such a vessel may become attackable in defined circumstances, including participation in belligerent acts, service as an auxiliary to enemy armed forces, incorporation into an enemy intelligence system, sailing under military convoy, certain forms of contraband carriage accompanied by refusal to submit to interception, or another effective contribution to enemy military action such as carrying military materials, subject to additional precautions and, where circumstances permit, warning and an opportunity to reroute or unload. The mere fact that a neutral merchant vessel participates in trade benefiting one belligerent does not create an unrestricted right to attack it.

This produces an essential distinction:

Sanctioned vessel $\Rightarrow$ *Military objective*

whereas

$$\text{Military logistics} + \text{Effective contribution} + \text{Definite military advantage} \\ \Rightarrow \text{Potential military objective}$$

and even in the second equation the word “potential” remains indispensable because determining that an object is targetable resolves only one part of the operation’s legality.

Four Tests, Not One Label

This is where *Lady Mariia* requires a more sophisticated framework than the binary question “civilian ship or military target?”. At least four separate legal tests are involved:

$$L_{\text{operation}} = L_{\text{target}} \cap L_{\text{persons}} \cap L_{\text{method}} \cap L_{\text{geography}}$$

The first concerns the status of the vessel. The second concerns the people aboard it. The third concerns the way in which force was employed. The fourth concerns the maritime or territorial space from which, through which and within which the operation was conducted. An operation may satisfy one test and fail another.

The distinction between vessel and crew is especially important. If a merchant vessel becomes a military objective because it is transporting military matériel, the civilian crew do not automatically become combatants. A civilian cook, engineer, deck officer or ordinary merchant seaman does not lose protection simply because the object on which he works has acquired military significance. Unless an individual crew member is directly participating in hostilities or possesses some other status that changes the analysis, the foreseeable harm to that person remains civilian harm and must be considered when assessing proportionality and precautions.

Article 57 of Additional Protocol I, together with the corresponding customary rules and the basic rules restated in the San Remo Manual, requires those planning or deciding upon an attack to do everything feasible to verify that targets are military objectives, choose means and methods capable of reducing incidental civilian harm, reassess an operation when circumstances change and cancel or suspend an attack when it becomes apparent that the target is not military or that expected civilian harm would be excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage. At sea, historical rules concerning warning, rescue and the safety of crews add a further layer whose application depends upon the circumstances and the type of vessel involved.

Consequently, proof that *Lady Mariia* carried military matériel would not end the investigation into legality; it would begin a different one. One would need to know what the attacking force understood about the number and status of persons aboard, what weapons were used, what explosive effects were anticipated, whether repeated attacks were required to achieve the military objective, whether disabling rather than destroying the vessel was feasible, whether warning could reasonably have been provided without sacrificing the operation, what risk the strike created for nearby civilian shipping and what precautions were actually taken. The status of the hull and the status of the human beings aboard are related operationally but distinct legally.

This distinction also clarifies the use of the expression “war crime”, which has become so politically promiscuous that it often obscures more than it explains. An act can violate international humanitarian law without automatically constituting an individual war crime. International criminal law requires the elements of a specific offence, including the relevant mental element. Article 8 of the Rome Statute criminalises, among other conduct, intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects that are not military objectives, and separately addresses intentionally launching attacks with knowledge that incidental

civilian harm will be clearly excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage. A targeting assessment later shown to have been factually wrong does not necessarily prove the war crime of intentionally attacking a civilian object; the information available to the decision-maker, the verification undertaken and the genuine belief concerning military status matter greatly.

Accordingly, if *Lady Mariia* were demonstrated to have been engaged solely in civilian commerce and the attacker knowingly selected it merely because it was Russian, sanctioned or economically useful to Moscow, the possibility of an unlawful deliberate attack against a civilian object, and potentially a war crime, would have to be confronted directly. If, by contrast, credible intelligence indicated that the vessel was carrying military equipment and the attacking force genuinely and reasonably identified it as a military objective, later discovery that the intelligence was wrong would not by itself establish the same crime, although the adequacy of verification and precautions could still require examination. If the ship were a lawful military objective but the method selected created clearly excessive civilian harm, the attack could be unlawful for an entirely different reason. This is why legal classification cannot be reduced to the political desirability of damaging Russian logistics.

Dönitz, Without the Morality Play

The historical precedent that best demonstrates this distinction is also one of the most uncomfortable, because it requires applying legal analysis to conduct undertaken by Nazi Germany without allowing the criminal nature of the regime or its aggressive war to decide every individual question in advance. The German campaign against Allied merchant shipping was not an accidental by-product of naval warfare but a central strategic effort to attack the economic circulation that allowed Britain to continue fighting. Germany understood that Britain's military capacity depended not merely upon existing stocks of weapons but upon continuing flows of food, fuel, industrial raw materials, replacement equipment, American production and imperial resources. The merchant fleet was therefore understood as a mechanism for reproducing military power.

The logic was essentially:

Merchant shipping → Economic circulation → Military endurance

and in strategic terms that logic is recognisable in contemporary Ukrainian attempts to raise the cost of Russian maritime logistics. The comparison is not moral and should never be presented as such. Ukraine is not Nazi Germany, contemporary Russia is not wartime Britain, and inexpensive autonomous drones are not U-boats. What is comparable is the strategic problem created when civilian maritime circulation becomes sufficiently important to an adversary's military endurance that a belligerent begins to treat commerce itself as a means of applying military pressure.

The pre-war law already understood how dangerous this transition could become. Article 22 of the 1930 London Naval Treaty, reaffirmed in the 1936 Procès-verbal on submarine warfare to which Germany acceded, subjected submarines to the rules of international law applicable to surface vessels and prohibited them, except in circumstances such as persistent refusal to stop or active resistance to visit and search, from sinking or disabling merchant vessels without first placing passengers and crew in safety. The rule was significant precisely because submarine warfare created powerful operational incentives to ignore it. Surfacing, warning and rescuing crews exposed submarines to counterattack and deprived them of surprise, but the legal response was not simply to erase civilian protection because compliance was tactically inconvenient.

The Dönitz judgment at Nuremberg is particularly instructive because the International Military Tribunal did not take the intellectually effortless position that attacks carried out by Nazi Germany against Allied merchant vessels were unlawful merely because Germany had initiated an aggressive war. It examined what those merchant vessels were actually doing. The Tribunal recorded that British merchant ships had been armed, frequently placed under convoy, ordered to report submarine positions and instructed, where

possible, to ram U-boats, thereby integrating them into the British warning network and resistance system. In those circumstances, the Tribunal stated that it was not prepared to hold Dönitz guilty for his conduct of submarine warfare against armed British merchant ships.

The same judgment then turned to neutral shipping and reached a very different conclusion. Dönitz had authorised neutral vessels to be sunk without warning merely because they entered operational zones declared by Germany. The Tribunal noted that the London rules and the 1936 Protocol had been adopted with full knowledge of the use of such zones during the First World War and had nevertheless created no exception allowing a belligerent to suspend the protection of neutral merchant shipping simply by drawing a boundary on a map. The German order was consequently held to violate the Protocol. The Tribunal also found violations arising from failure to comply with rescue requirements, observing in unusually direct terms that if a submarine commander could not rescue those aboard a merchant ship as required by the Protocol, he could not simply sink the ship and invoke military necessity to excuse the omission.

Nor should the famous Nimitz evidence be misunderstood. Admiral Chester Nimitz informed the Tribunal that the United States had conducted unrestricted submarine warfare against Japan from the first day of American participation in the Pacific war, while the Tribunal also considered a British Admiralty order concerning the Skagerrak. As a consequence, it stated that Dönitz's sentence would not be assessed on the basis of those breaches of the international law of submarine warfare. That did not transform the German conduct into lawful conduct; the Tribunal had just stated that violations existed. What it did demonstrate, however, was the deep difficulty of criminally punishing an enemy officer for methods that the victorious powers had themselves employed. The legal and historical importance of the episode lies precisely in this refusal to allow law to function only against the defeated.

The contemporary implication is straightforward and intentionally uncomfortable. If an armed British merchant ship integrated into military operations could lose protection when attacked by Nazi Germany, a Russian merchant vessel genuinely integrated into Russian military logistics cannot become immune merely because Ukraine is defending itself against aggression. Conversely, if a neutral merchant vessel could not lawfully be destroyed by Germany merely because it entered a German-declared operational zone or economically assisted Britain, a neutral tanker does not become freely attackable in 2026 simply because it carries Russian petroleum, appears on a sanctions list or contributes revenues to a government whose conduct Europe condemns.

The same test must be capable of producing the same answer when presented with the same facts. That is not moral equivalence; it is the minimum condition for law.

Lefkada and Neutral Waters

The problem becomes still more consequential when *Lady Mariia* and *Qendil* are read alongside the Lefkada incident, because commerce warfare in the Mediterranean now intersects with a separate issue that has received insufficient attention: the use of the territory and waters of states that are not parties to the Russia-Ukraine war as elements of a belligerent operational architecture.

The armed unmanned surface vessel discovered at Lefkada on 7 May 2026 initially appeared to present an attribution and engineering puzzle. Greek investigators dismantled and reverse-engineered the craft and examined its electronic systems and metadata, while early Reuters reporting recorded several possible explanations: the vessel might have been transported as part of a shipment, launched from a mother ship, or lost orientation following a communications or technical malfunction. Subsequent Greek investigation concluded that a malfunction had indeed caused the vessel to lose its intended course, but the significance of that conclusion has often been misunderstood. A malfunction can explain why a weapon failed to reach its target; it cannot by itself explain why the weapon had been deployed into the relevant operational environment in the first place.

The Greek government eventually moved considerably beyond speculation. On 12 May Defence Minister Nikos Dendias informed his European counterparts that Greece had become certain that the USV was Ukrainian and described the incident as an extremely serious danger to freedom and safety of navigation. After receiving the official findings of the investigation, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs made formal written and oral *démarches* in Athens and Kyiv on 28 and 29 May. In its public briefing of 3 June, the Ministry stated that the armed unmanned surface vessel had been detected in Greek territorial waters, that its presence had seriously endangered maritime traffic and civilian lives, that transferring military operations into the Mediterranean threatened Greek national security and economic interests, that Ukraine's right of self-defence could not justify such actions, and that Greece strongly opposed what it expressly called the illegal presence of the armed USV in Greek territorial waters.

That official Greek position changes the legal importance of Lefkada.

The case can no longer be described only as evidence that Ukrainian unmanned systems may have been operating in the Mediterranean. According to the coastal state itself, an armed system belonging to a belligerent was present illegally inside Greek territorial waters, and Athens formally protested to Kyiv that its right of self-defence did not justify transferring military operations into the Mediterranean. Greece's position does not establish that the craft had deliberately entered those waters, nor does it prove that it had been concealed there intentionally while waiting for a Russian target. The malfunction remains relevant to state responsibility and to the factual reconstruction of how the craft arrived where it did. But the incident establishes something independently important: an armed instrument of the Russia-Ukraine war entered the sovereign maritime space of a European state that was not itself a belligerent, and the state concerned considered that presence sufficiently serious to raise the matter at EU and NATO level and issue a formal diplomatic protest.

This requires another distinction that should be kept as carefully as the distinction between sanctioned ship and military objective:

Accidental intrusion ≠ Deliberate staging

If an armed USV genuinely malfunctioned outside Greek territorial waters and, no longer under effective control, drifted into them, the legal analysis is not identical to a deliberate plan to use a Greek bay, island, cave or coastal area as a concealed waiting position. The first raises questions of responsibility, due diligence and potentially circumstances such as distress or force majeure; the second would involve the purposeful incorporation of neutral sovereign space into a belligerent operation.

The traditional law of maritime neutrality is exceptionally clear about the latter. The San Remo Manual defines the internal waters, territorial sea and, where applicable, archipelagic waters of a neutral state as neutral waters and states that hostile actions by belligerent forces are forbidden within and over them. It specifically includes the use of neutral waters as a base of operations and prohibits belligerents from using them as a sanctuary. These principles are older than the contemporary Ukrainian conflict and older than the United Nations itself. Hague Convention XIII of 1907 on the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval War provides that belligerents must respect the sovereign rights of neutral powers and may not use neutral ports and waters as a base of naval operations against their adversaries.

Consequently, if an armed Ukrainian USV were deliberately pre-positioned, hidden, maintained or allowed to loiter inside Greek territorial waters in anticipation of a Russian target, the illegality would not depend upon whether the Russian vessel ultimately attacked was itself a lawful military objective. A lawful target does not legalise the unlawful use of neutral sovereign space.

This can be expressed as:

$$L_{target} = 1$$

while simultaneously

$$L_{\text{geography}} = 0$$

and therefore

$$L_{\text{operation}} = 0$$

The geography test applies not merely to the coordinates at which a munition explodes but to the operational architecture that makes the attack possible. A more complete formulation is therefore:

$$L_{\text{geography}} = L_{\text{deployment}} \cap L_{\text{staging}} \cap L_{\text{transit}} \cap L_{\text{launch}} \cap L_{\text{attack}}$$

because an operation conducted against a lawful military target on the high seas may still involve a separate violation if its weapon was clandestinely stored, prepared or launched from the territory or territorial waters of a neutral state without consent.

UNCLOS reinforces the importance of the twelve-nautical-mile distinction. Articles 2 and 3 establish that the sovereignty of a coastal state extends to its territorial sea, which may reach twelve nautical miles from the baselines. Beyond that lies a fundamentally different legal regime. An exclusive economic zone may extend up to two hundred nautical miles, but the coastal state possesses specified sovereign rights concerning resources, installations, scientific research and environmental protection rather than full territorial sovereignty, while other states retain freedoms including navigation and overflight subject to the relevant rules of international law. The distinction is essential because an attack taking place somewhere within a Greek EEZ cannot automatically be described as an attack inside Greek sovereign territorial waters.

This is not a technicality designed to minimise the strategic significance of hostile activity close to Greece. It permits us to formulate the problem accurately. An attack inside Greek territorial waters engages sovereignty and neutral-water rules directly; an attack farther offshore within an EEZ engages a different set of coastal-state rights, international navigation freedoms and rules governing hostilities at sea. Politically, both may produce profound concern for Athens, particularly if repeated operations affect shipping lanes, tourism, marine safety, environmental risk or commercial insurance, but legal precision is especially important when the entire argument of *Mediterranean Battlespace* rests upon refusing to substitute political categories for legal ones.

Range of the Weapon, Reach of the System

The allegation that the drones which attacked *Lady Mariia* were launched from Libya raises the same problem on an even larger scale, although at present it remains precisely that: an allegation. If independent evidence eventually demonstrated that Ukrainian or other belligerent forces deliberately used Libyan territory or Libyan territorial waters as a staging or launch area for an attack against Russian shipping, the incident would acquire a legal significance considerably greater than the destruction or damage inflicted on one Ro-Ro vessel. The issue would concern not only whether *Lady Mariia* was a lawful target, but whether the territory of a third state had been incorporated into the operational system of the war.

The fragmented condition of Libya makes the question particularly complicated. An operation clandestinely conducted from territory weakly controlled by a local authority is not legally identical to an operation knowingly authorised by the internationally recognised Libyan government, and questions of attribution, effective territorial control, consent and state responsibility would have to be examined separately. Nevertheless, the strategic consequence would be unmistakable. Once a belligerent develops the capacity to deploy weapons from third-state territory, mother ships, covert logistical cells or pre-

positioned launch points, the useful operational range of the system ceases to correspond to the endurance of the weapon itself.

This distinction was already implicit in Lefkada:

$$R_{\text{weapon}} \neq R_{\text{system}}$$

A maritime drone need not navigate autonomously from Odesa to Sicily or Crete for a Ukrainian operational architecture to threaten a Russian vessel there. If systems can be transported covertly, launched from commercial or auxiliary vessels, pre-positioned ashore, controlled through satellite communications or provided with target information through distributed intelligence networks, a weapon with a tactical radius measured in hundreds of kilometres can become part of a military system whose strategic reach is measured in thousands.

This changes the meaning of distance in maritime warfare. The correct question is no longer simply how far a drone can travel but how cheaply a belligerent can place it near the trajectory of a target. Once that distinction is understood, the movement from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean ceases to require a technological miracle and becomes an intelligence and logistics problem. Modern distributed warfare is exceptionally well suited to solving precisely that kind of problem.

The sequence *Qendil*–Lefkada–*Lady Mariia* must nevertheless be handled with methodological discipline. *Qendil* is a confirmed Ukrainian attack against Russia-associated shipping in the Mediterranean. Lefkada is an armed Ukrainian USV whose presence in Greek territorial waters Greece formally classified as illegal, while the precise original launch point and intended target remain incompletely disclosed. *Lady Mariia* is a Russian military-linked merchant vessel attacked by drones in the central Mediterranean, but Ukrainian attribution remains unproven at the time of writing. These facts do not permit us to write:

$$Q + L + M = A_U$$

where A_U would mean demonstrated Ukrainian authorship of all three events.

They do, however, justify a broader probabilistic update:

$$P(H_M | Q, L, M) > P(H_M | Q, L)$$

where H_M is the hypothesis that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has acquired a persistent Mediterranean operational dimension.

The crucial word is operational. To describe the Mediterranean as an emerging battlespace is not to recognise it as a lawful or politically legitimate one. “Battlespace” describes the behaviour of military actors, not the consent of coastal governments. A sea acquires an operational function when belligerents use it for deployment, targeting, intelligence, staging, attack or protection of military systems; it does not require a declaration by the states surrounding it. Indeed, one of the more dangerous characteristics of grey-zone warfare is precisely that geography can become militarised before political institutions acknowledge that militarisation has occurred.

Sanctions Consensus, Kinetic Vacuum

The Greek reaction to Lefkada demonstrates that at least one Mediterranean state understands this distinction clearly. Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis stated before the investigation had even concluded that Greece would take the necessary measures to ensure that the Mediterranean did not become a theatre of military operations, and after the final findings Athens formally objected to the transfer of military activity into the Mediterranean and to the illegal presence of the armed USV in Greek territorial waters. This was not a Russian argument or an abstract complaint about escalation; it was the

position of an EU and NATO member that strongly supports Ukraine but nevertheless refused to accept the proposition that support for Ukrainian self-defence automatically includes consent to Ukrainian military operations inside Greek sovereign maritime space.

That distinction leads directly to the larger European problem. Europe has deliberately chosen extensive economic coercion against Russia. Through successive sanctions packages it has frozen assets, restricted finance, prohibited or limited trade, designated individuals and entities, imposed measures against shipping and targeted the networks used by Moscow to sustain energy exports and circumvent sanctions. Whatever one thinks of the efficacy or wisdom of particular measures, these are explicit political decisions adopted through identifiable European and national procedures.

Europe has not adopted an equivalent decision authorising a kinetic campaign against Russian or Russia-associated merchant shipping in the Mediterranean.

The difference is not semantic. Economic coercion and military coercion create different risks, different legal consequences and different forms of reciprocity. An EU decision to prohibit services to a vessel does not authorise a foreign intelligence service to destroy that vessel. A European designation of a ship as part of the shadow fleet does not establish military-objective status. Support for Ukrainian self-defence does not automatically authorise Ukrainian forces to use European territorial waters as hiding places, staging areas or launch corridors.

The divergence can be represented as:

$$C_{sanctions} > C_{kinetic}$$

where C represents the degree of political consensus among European states. Even agreement on sanctions is incomplete and continually renegotiated, as demonstrated by disputes over renewal periods, energy exemptions and maritime interests; there is no evidence of anything approaching an equivalent collective European decision that merchant vessels classified politically as supporting Russia may be attacked kinetically along Mediterranean routes.

Allowing military practice to fill that political vacuum creates a serious sovereignty problem. The transition from sanctions to targeting can then occur without any formal European choice: a vessel is designated, subsequently described as part of a shadow fleet, then rhetorically incorporated into the Russian war economy, after which an attack becomes easier to present as the physical enforcement of a status already assigned politically. The legal threshold has been crossed not by law but by vocabulary.

The problem is made more dangerous by reciprocity. If Ukraine considers Russian or Russia-associated maritime traffic in the Mediterranean part of the operational battlefield, Russia will inevitably analyse the infrastructure enabling Ukrainian attacks in equivalent functional terms. It will ask where drones are stored, from which ships they are launched, what ports sustain them, which communications systems control them, which intelligence networks supply targeting information and whether nominally civilian assets have acquired military functions. None of those questions automatically transforms European infrastructure into lawful Russian targets; each object remains subject to the same military-objective test and geographical limitations. But military actors do not stop tracing causal chains merely because doing so creates political discomfort for non-belligerents.

A mother ship carrying attack drones can become militarily relevant. A commercial platform persistently used to launch weapons can acquire a different status from an ordinary merchant vessel. A communications node directly integrated into targeting may become legally different from a generic telecommunications system. A port deliberately used to prepare belligerent operations may raise neutrality questions radically different from a port merely handling ordinary commercial shipping. The very logic Europe might accept when applied to Russian commercial logistics can therefore return in reverse when Russia assesses the architecture supporting Ukrainian operations.

This is how commerce warfare expands. Ships under threat require protection; protection produces surveillance, escorts and defensive systems; escorts bring military forces into closer contact; contact creates rules of engagement; rules of engagement create opportunities for miscalculation; and non-belligerent coastal states eventually find themselves deciding whether unidentified drones, launch vessels, military escorts or armed platforms may operate in the seas surrounding them. What begins as an attack on one commercially registered vessel gradually alters the behaviour of an entire maritime system.

The historical experience of the United States in 1941 remains instructive in this respect. America did not move in a single clean step from neutrality to maritime war. Before Germany declared war in December, American naval forces were already escorting vessels, sharing information, operating in areas in which German U-boats were active and increasingly engaging in incidents such as those involving USS *Greer*, USS *Kearny* and USS *Reuben James*. Practical participation developed through a sequence of interactions before formal belligerency clarified the legal relationship. The historical circumstances are obviously different, but the structural lesson remains valuable: maritime conflicts can expand through protection, intelligence, logistics and reciprocal encounters before governments formally acknowledge that their strategic position has changed.

Europe should therefore be especially cautious about confusing political solidarity with geographical consent. A state may support Ukraine, supply weapons, train personnel, provide intelligence and maintain sanctions against Russia while simultaneously refusing to allow its territorial waters to become part of Ukrainian military planning. Greece has already demonstrated that these positions are not contradictory. Ukraine's right of self-defence exists, but, as the Greek Foreign Ministry stated explicitly after Lefkada, that right does not justify every action or permit the automatic transfer of military operations into the Mediterranean.

The Boundary

The same principle should govern *Lady Mariia*. If the vessel was genuinely carrying military material and the attacking force had sufficiently verified intelligence establishing its effective contribution to Russian military action, it may have been a lawful military objective. If the vessel was engaged in ordinary commercial activity and was selected merely because it was Russian, sanctioned or historically associated with military logistics, the targeting analysis could lead in the opposite direction. Even if the vessel was a military objective, the protection of civilian crew, proportionality and precautions remained relevant. Even if the method of attack complied with those requirements, the use of neutral territory or territorial waters as a staging or launch platform could constitute a separate violation. And even if an operation violated the law of neutrality or state sovereignty, that would not automatically mean that every person involved had committed a war crime, because state responsibility and individual criminal responsibility belong to different legal regimes.

This is why the legality of an operation at sea cannot be captured by one label. Four questions must remain separate:

1. *Was the object lawfully targetable?*
2. *What protection remained due to persons aboard?*
3. *Were the means, methods, precautions and proportionality lawful?*
4. *Were deployment, staging, launch and attack conducted in geographical space that could lawfully be used?*

The Lefkada case is particularly important because it demonstrates that the fourth question can arise before a weapon ever reaches its intended target. If an armed USV is deliberately concealed or positioned in neutral territorial waters, the legal problem exists even if no explosion takes place. If the same craft enters those waters because an unforeseeable malfunction has made effective control impossible, the analysis is different, but the security consequence for the coastal state remains real. Greece's official protest reflected precisely this concern: the dangerous fact was not merely that the drone had failed but that an armed

instrument belonging to a distant war had physically entered Greek territorial waters and threatened civilian navigation.

This gives Lefkada a place in the emerging Mediterranean picture that is perhaps even more important than *Lady Mariia*. The latter presents an unresolved target-status problem; Lefkada presents an established sovereignty problem from the perspective of the Greek government. Athens knows what it found, knows where it found it, considers the armed USV Ukrainian, formally classified its presence in Greek territorial waters as illegal and explicitly rejected the argument that Ukrainian self-defence could justify such actions. What remains uncertain is the degree of intent behind the penetration: whether Greek waters were deliberately used as part of the mission or whether the weapon entered them after the mission had already failed.

That uncertainty must remain because it is analytically honest. There is no need to exaggerate Lefkada by claiming that Ukraine deliberately hid an attack drone inside a Greek cave unless evidence eventually establishes that fact. The actual official record is already serious enough. A foreign belligerent's armed system entered European territorial waters, creating the possibility of civilian casualties and environmental damage, and the coastal state considered the event an unjustified transfer of military operations into the Mediterranean.

In strategic terms this is precisely the transition from grey sea to battlespace. A grey sea is one in which attribution, legal status, economic function and military purpose overlap imperfectly; a battlespace begins to emerge when those ambiguities are no longer merely observed but systematically used by military actors. Commercial ships become intelligence objects, sanctioned ships become potential targets, civilian platforms can become launch systems, neutral coastlines may become covert staging areas, drones can be pre-positioned far from the declared theatre and maritime routes that remain formally civilian begin to be incorporated into operational planning.

None of this requires Europe to declare itself at war. That is the problem.

The Mediterranean can acquire many of the practical characteristics of a theatre of military operations while the states surrounding it continue to describe themselves, correctly in formal terms, as non-belligerents. Insurance markets react before parliaments do. Shipowners alter procedures before foreign ministries change doctrine. Naval staffs expand surveillance before governments acknowledge that surveillance has become necessary. Coastal security forces begin searching for unmanned systems, crews erect improvised anti-drone protection, port authorities review suspicious ships and intelligence services monitor maritime corridors more intensely. The strategic status of the sea changes incrementally through behaviour.

At that point the question for Europe can no longer be reduced to whether Ukraine should be allowed to defend itself or whether Russian commercial flows sustain Russia's military effort. Both propositions can be true while leaving the central sovereignty problem entirely unresolved. The real question is who possesses the authority to determine where that defence may be exercised and which parts of the European maritime environment may be incorporated into the conflict.

Russia does not possess that authority. Ukraine does not possess that authority.

The fact that one is an aggressor and the other a victim does not transfer sovereign control over Greek, Italian, Maltese, Cypriot or other European maritime space to either of them.

If Europe wishes to tolerate certain forms of belligerent activity beyond territorial waters, that is a political position that should be articulated, legally examined and collectively understood. If it wishes to prohibit the use of European territorial seas, ports, anchorages or commercial vessels as covert platforms for military operations, that boundary should likewise be explicit and enforced regardless of the identity of the belligerent. If Europe believes that attacks against certain Russian military-logistics vessels on the high

seas are lawful but attacks against neutral shadow-fleet tankers are not, it should distinguish those categories rather than allowing sanctions terminology to perform the legal work indirectly.

What Europe cannot indefinitely do is maintain a widening gap between the military reality developing around it and the political vocabulary with which it describes that reality.

The lesson of Dönitz is not that commerce warfare is inherently criminal, nor that it is inherently legitimate. The lesson is that merchant status does not answer the targeting question, neutral status matters, methods matter, rescue and civilian protection matter, and legal standards lose authority when applied selectively. The lesson of *Qendil* is that the economic war against Russia can become a kinetic war against commerce if revenue generation is allowed to substitute for military contribution. The lesson of Lefkada is that the geography of a war can expand through weapons and logistics before governments consent to that expansion. The unresolved lesson of *Lady Mariia* is that we still do not know whether we are observing a lawful attack on military logistics, an unlawful attack on civilian commerce, or something between those poles complicated further by the possible use of third-state territory.

The common thread is not Russia and it is not Ukraine.

It is the boundary.

The boundary between sanction and target, between commerce and military logistics, between civilian crew and military objective, between self-defence and geographic licence, between territorial sea and EEZ, between support for a belligerent and use of one's territory by that belligerent, between an isolated covert operation and an emerging theatre of war.

Those boundaries exist precisely because war has a tendency to erase them whenever doing so produces military advantage.

Europe has already made an explicit political choice to participate in economic coercion against Russia and an equally explicit choice to support Ukraine materially. It has not made an explicit collective choice to allow foreign belligerents to conduct an expanding drone and maritime campaign across Mediterranean routes, to pre-position armed systems in European territorial waters, to use third-state coastlines as launch areas, or to convert sanctioned merchant shipping into a category of presumptively attackable objects.

If it intends to reject that development, it will eventually have to do more than protest each incident separately. If it intends to tolerate it, it should recognise that tolerance has reciprocal consequences and that the same functional logic used to identify Russian logistics will inevitably be used by Moscow to identify the infrastructure supporting attacks against those logistics.

A battlespace is not created by terminology. It is created by repeated operational use.

Nor does a battlespace require consent from the states whose geography it consumes.

That is precisely why the title should disturb rather than reassure.

The Mediterranean is not yet a declared theatre of the Russia-Ukraine war, but the distinction between declared theatre and operational space is becoming progressively less meaningful. *Qendil* demonstrated that commerce warfare could reach it; Lefkada demonstrated that an armed Ukrainian system could penetrate the territorial waters of a European state and provoke a formal protest over the transfer of military operations into the Mediterranean; *Lady Mariia* now demonstrates that Russian military-linked commercial shipping can again be subjected to drone attack deep inside the same maritime environment.

We still do not know enough to determine whether the attack on *Lady Mariia* itself was lawful.

We already know enough to ask a much larger question.

Europe has sanctioned Russian ships, financed Ukrainian resistance and accepted the economic consequences of confronting Moscow, but it has never clearly authorised foreign powers to decide by military action which ships may be struck, where weapons may be positioned, which neutral waters may be penetrated and how far the battlefield may move toward European shores.

If those limits are not established politically and enforced symmetrically, they will be established operationally instead, one incident at a time, until what Europe still calls spillover has become normal practice and what it still calls the Mediterranean has acquired all the attributes of a war zone except the declaration.

The question is no longer simply whether the war has reached the Mediterranean. It has.

The question is whether Europe intends to decide what happens next, or merely record the precedents created by others.

How long will Europe allow foreign powers to wage their wars inside European seas?

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