Russia Reopens Kerch Strait to Shipping After Naval Clash With Ukraine

By [Reuters](#)

November 26, 2018

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Russia reopened the Kerch Strait near Crimea to shipping in the early hours of Monday morning after firing on and seizing three Ukrainian naval ships a day earlier, a move that triggered a dangerous new crisis between the two countries.

Russia's FSB security service said early on Monday its border patrol boats had seized two small Ukrainian armored artillery vessels and a tug boat after opening fire on them and wounding several sailors, the most serious clash between Moscow and Kiev in years.

It had previously blocked the Kerch Strait near Russia-annexed Crimea to stop the ships from passing from the Black Sea into the Sea of Azov, saying the small flotilla had not notified it of its plans in advance and ignored warnings to stop while maneuvering dangerously.

With relations still raw after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and its backing for a pro-

Moscow insurgency in eastern Ukraine, the incident risks pushing the two countries towards a wider conflict and is likely to renew Western calls for more sanctions on Moscow.

The Russian ruble opened 0.4 percent weaker against the dollar in Moscow, its lowest since mid-November.

Kiev, which denied its ships had done anything wrong, accused Russia of military aggression and asked for the international community to mobilize to punish Russia.

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The UN Security Council will meet on the latest developments at the request of Russia and Ukraine later on Monday, diplomats said.

The European Union said in a statement it expected Russia to restore freedom of passage via the Kerch Strait and urged both sides to act with the utmost restraint to de-escalate the situation. A NATO spokeswoman issued a similar appeal to both sides.

Martial law in Ukraine?

A Reuters witness said the three Ukrainian naval vessels seized by Russia were being held at the Crimean port of Kerch. People in naval-style uniforms could be seen around the vessels, which bore no sign of damage, the witness said.

The FSB has said Russia has opened a criminal case in connection with what it said was the ships' illegal entry into Russia's territorial waters.

The FSB said three Ukrainian sailors were wounded in the incident and were getting medical care. Their lives were not in danger, it said.

The Ukrainian parliament is due to consider a proposal to impose martial law for 60 days later on Monday after Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko met his top military and security chiefs on Sunday night.

The move may be unpopular in some quarters in Ukraine since it would restrict civil liberties and give state institutions greater power ahead of a presidential election next year which polls indicate Poroshenko would lose.

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