In the wake of the crisis in Ukraine and the general deterioration of relations between Russia and NATO, Western strategists and policy-makers must consider how to deal with what appears to be a revanchist and opportunistic Russia. The seizure of Crimea, a poorly-concealed intervention in eastern Ukraine, and statements that Moscow would intervene on behalf of Russian-speaking populations outside Russia proper, are challenging the notion held in much of the West that great power confrontation in the Euro-Atlantic space is a thing of the past.

While it may be premature to characterize naval capability development in Russia as a build-up, efforts to arrest and reverse the post-Cold War atrophy of the Russian Federation Navy (RFN) are underway. In what might be more accurately termed a slow rebirth, the RFN has been the recipient of greater attention from the Kremlin in terms of policy direction and investment since the early 2000s. The navy’s short-term force development priorities are discernible, as is its overall strategic purpose. The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and allied counterparts should take these matters into account as they contemplate their own future.

**Policy Context**

A combined reading of the Russian National Security Strategy (2009), Military Doctrine (2014) and Foreign Policy Concept (2013) reveals that Russia sees four external threats: NATO expansion; the deployment of ballistic missile defence capability in Europe; regional and local wars on Russia’s borders; and terrorism/radicalism. Collectively, the policy documents illustrate a perception of insecurity and vulnerability in the face of Western technological superiority, soft power and military operations in areas of interest to Russia. The policy tone is decidedly more anti-Western/American and considerably more nationalist than in the previous decade.

The purpose of the RFN and its place within the country’s security hierarchy is defined at the highest level by the National Security Strategy. This document outlines that security is derived from various elements of national
power including, *inter alia*, defence against foreign and domestic threats, socio-economic growth for citizens, and advances in science and technology. Military (and naval) spending is regarded as one means of achieving these ends.

Although Russia has not articulated a naval doctrine since 2001, the 2010 Russian National Maritime Policy made an oblique yet important reference to naval strategy. It observed that unfettered access to the world’s oceans was essential to Russia’s economic well-being and that beyond the critical tasks of defence and deterrence, the RFN could undertake maritime peace support and humanitarian operations, maintain freedom of the seas, and engage in naval diplomacy. In contrast to the defensive/nationalist undertones in Russian defence and security policy, this reflects an outward-looking, potentially cooperative approach to maritime security not unlike those of Western states. Indeed, the RFN has been an active contributor to anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2007. However, Russia’s disinclination to attach its ships to either NATO or European Union naval task forces suggests that while there is a common interest in assuring good order at sea, Russia prefers to act independently to achieve this, thereby avoiding any appearance of subordination to the West.

The Arctic and Pacific Oceans are considered to be the most important maritime thoroughfares for Russia. Access to and development of the Northern Sea Route, the Arctic continental shelf and port infrastructure in the Russian Far East are considered critical to facilitate intercontinental trade through Russian waters, the exploitation of untapped natural resources, and to give Russia options for dealing with the shift of the global economic and strategic centre-of-gravity to Asia. Like the desire to match US nuclear capabilities, these politico-economic considerations will influence the contours of RFN capability development.

The small Baltic and Caspian Sea Fleets are destined for capability renewal due to oil and gas infrastructure located there, although re-capitalization will favour smaller vessels rather than ones capable of expeditionary operations. A Black Sea-based Mediterranean *Eskadra* of five to 10 surface vessels as well as submarines may also be expected to take shape. This notional formation may be useful for showing the flag, maintaining economic ties with littoral states and pursuing training opportunities. It would also allow Moscow to probe international naval reaction/readiness at a time when virtually all Western navies are struggling with budgetary austerity.

Russian naval manoeuvres reflect both an attempt at outreach to partner states, as well as the conduct of what could be called assertive naval diplomacy. Russo-Chinese manoeuvres in the East China Sea took place in May 2014, while exercises in the Black Sea a month later may have been staged in part to warn Western states about intervening militarily in the Ukraine crisis. Some recent deployments have caused consternation among Western states, including that of an *Akula*-class attack submarine to the Gulf of Mexico in 2012, and the transit of a task force, including the missile cruiser *Pyotr Veliki*, the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* and several escorts, through the English Channel in May 2014. The deployment of a naval task force off the coast of Australia during the G20 summit likewise did not go unnoticed. These and other drills seem to bear out the statement of a former US Chief of Naval Operations, who told a congressional sub-committee in 2011 that “the Russian navy is moving again.”

**Capability Investment and Development**

Until the recent sharp drop in the price of oil and the value of the rouble, it seemed clear that the RFN would not lack budgetary support in the short to medium term. Indeed, President Vladimir Putin had re-confirmed the Kremlin’s commitment with a (US)$130 billion allocation up to 2020. But aside from the price of fossil fuels – upon which Russia’s economy and re-armament plans heavily depend – the greatest challenge to the renewal of the RFN is the ability of the defence-industrial base to deliver new, technically-advanced naval vessels while maintaining existing ones. Cuts to research and development after the end of the Cold War meant the RFN lost ground to other navies in both qualitative and quantitative terms.
After 2000, over-capacity in the shipbuilding sector was met with a vigorous consolidation drive. But since this process was state-led and in response to primarily domestic demand, there has been little incentive for surviving firms to achieve production efficiencies on par with their Western counterparts.

An ageing labour force, a lack of up-to-date skills and old production machinery and infrastructure could also impede development or renewal of certain key systems such as aircraft-capable ships and other large surface combatants. A large portion of the current Russian fleet will almost certainly face decommissioning by the middle of the next decade. As some of these units are considered to be the RFN’s most capable, the loss will be qualitative and well as quantitative. The short-term implications of this may include reduced (or tiered) readiness across the fleet, and the repeated appearance of ‘showcase ships’ on international manoeuvres.

Another major challenge is recruiting and retaining adequate personnel to operate and maintain the future fleet. The professionalization of the Russian Armed Forces allowed for the enforced retirement of a large portion of the legacy officer corps, with a simultaneous retirement of older hulls. However, efforts to achieve desired personnel levels (one million positions across the various services) will be impeded by unfavourable demographics combined with the need to foster technical proficiency to operate advanced systems. There will be pressure on authorities to find adequate numbers of personnel with the requisite skills for specialized naval trades, and to persuade them to choose the navy over the private sector. It should be noted, however, that over the past few years there has been “a dramatic increase in Russian naval-school enrolment.”

The jewel in the RFN’s crown continues to be its submarine fleet. In keeping with the primacy of nuclear weapons in the country’s defence, a new generation of nuclear-powered ballistic missile-firing (SSBN) boats and advanced attack submarines (SSN) are in development. Eight Borei-class SSBNs (each with 16 Bulava inter-continental ballistic missiles, which are still in development) are planned, as are eight Yasen-class SS(G)Ns. The latter are equipped with highly advanced quieting technologies and will be armed with long-range cruise missiles and the super-cavitating VA-111 Shkval torpedo. These units will serve alongside ageing yet still-capable Delta IV SSBNs and Akula-class SSNs, providing a respectable degree of strategic deterrence, long-range sea control/denial and land-attack capability to the Northern and Pacific Fleets.

For operations in Russia’s near abroad, the RFN diesel-electric submarine (SSK) fleet is composed of 17 Kilo-class boats, with another six ‘improved’ kilos entering service. Armament includes torpedoes, anti-ship missiles and, interestingly, surface-to-air missiles to defend against anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft. All RFN fleets (except the land-locked Caspian) will receive these latter units, with the first to be based in the Black Sea to buttress task group operations there and in the Mediterranean. A trio of more advanced Lada-class units – with air-independent propulsion – are due to enter service by 2019.

The renewal of the surface fleet will include the commissioning of different classes of multi-mission escort-type vessels. For medium-range operations, up to 20 of the 4,000-ton Admiral Gorshkov-class general-purpose frigate will be built. Concurrently, up to 20 of the 2,200-ton Steregushchiy-class guided-missile corvettes are to enter service for operations closer to shore. Both are intended to match the stealthy designs and advanced combat systems of contemporary Western ships.

Although the Kremlin had high hopes to build and service larger units, Russia’s industrial incapacity has compelled it to source some from foreign builders. A novel joint construction project was to have seen a pair of Vladivostok-class helicopter landing platforms acquired with assistance from French shipbuilder DCNS. It was anticipated that an additional two units would be built in Russia. This looks unlikely given international concern over the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and the pressure being exerted on the French government to delay or cancel the original order. For the moment, domestic industry will furnish smaller amphibious ships suitable for short-range operations. These will give the RFN the ability to influence matters along Russia’s borders, including along the northern Black Sea coast.
The same industrial challenges have forced the RFN to walk back on plans to build and/or maintain more complex combatants for blue-water operations. The fixed-wing aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov is being re-fitted for further service, but any plan to build new, larger carriers does not yet have political support. And while the formidable Pyotr Veliki will likely be joined by her modernized sister, Admiral Nakhimov, in 2018, senior officials seem to have discounted the possibility that any more missile cruisers will be built. Instead, the RFN may take a page from the US Navy playbook and design an advanced, multi-purpose destroyer that could deliver air defence and surface attack capability in a smaller and less maintenance/manpower-intensive package. This would seem logical given the pending obsolescence of the current Udaloy- and Sovremenny-class destroyer fleets which, along with the ageing cruisers, have given the RFN its strategic reach.

One of the most significant (non-)developments is the apparent lack of attention paid to underway replenishment. The ageing stable of RFN auxiliaries does not seem to be the subject of a re-capitalization plan. Possible explanations include the lack of capacity of the shipbuilding industry to do concurrent work, the priority the government attaches to operations closer to home, and the hope that Russia will be able to secure logistical support from friendly states. Still, failure to address this deficiency could impede the deployment of surface task groups drawn from the Northern and Pacific Fleets.

**Possible Implications for the RCN and Allied Navies**

What Russia’s naval renaissance means in strategic terms for the West is difficult to discern. It does not point definitively toward competition, confrontation, or limited cooperation at sea, any of which could occur in the years ahead. A period of modernization after years of stagnation may be natural and not cause for undue concern. Indeed, building smaller surface combatants instead of replacing the ageing stable of larger ones indicates that an offensive naval posture is not the desired end – at least in the short term. It may also reflect Russia’s perception of itself as a Eurasian (i.e., land) power where trade and prosperity are less dependent on use of the high seas. (Notwithstanding the importance attached to the Northern Sea Route, Russia’s main export continues to be delivered by overland pipelines.) If this is so, one should not expect that the RFN will have first call on defence procurement funds in the medium or long term. One exception could be additional investment in the sea-based arm of Russia’s nuclear deterrent, which Putin regards as a sign of national virility.

Still, the determination of the Kremlin to minimize Western influence its near abroad and to take swift military action when it perceives its great power prerogatives are being challenged (i.e., Ukraine 2014, Georgia 2008) may portend a renewed drive to assert primacy in waters shared with Western states, such as the Black and Baltic Seas. Western naval planners will need to ponder how the assertive nationalism expressed at the highest levels of the Russian government might influence the country’s naval strategy, to say nothing of the actual conduct of RFN operations. Close encounters at sea and in the air, or brief incursions into Western territorial waters (occasionally
backed up by information and cyber operations against allied and partner governments) could become the new norm.  

To help minimize the effects of recent political tensions, all parties should re-commit to the principles of safe navigation and good order at sea. Confidence and security-building measures – such as advanced notice of naval exercises – have been useful in the past and should continue to be practised.

Canada shares ocean spaces with Russia, and the Canadian government has expressed concern about Russian motives there. But Moscow’s recently announced plans for the Russian Arctic – the establishment of two army brigades and the upgrade of ports and airfields along its northern coastline – are intended for territorial security, commercial development and search and rescue rather than the projection of naval power into Canada’s Far North, which is mostly impassable to naval surface vessels. A prudent response could include efforts to enhance maritime domain awareness, backed up by an appropriate level of capability to deter incursions into ice-free waters. Meanwhile, the need to reassure allies dealing with RFN ‘probing’ actions in shared seas or near allied coastlines requires Canada to project a modest but credible naval presence on an as-needed basis.

Curiously, the RFN’s short-term outlook resembles that faced by the RCN: a temporary dip in the number of operational units while industry re-capitalizes and delivers new or upgraded capabilities plus the ongoing challenge of recruiting and retaining skilled personnel. Also, lower energy prices affect the national revenues of both countries and could therefore slow the pace of naval re-capitalization. But while the quantity of new vessels under construction in Russia is meant to cover its dispersed maritime spaces simultaneously (a challenge also faced by Canada), it may also reflect the age-old Russian belief that combat resilience is, in part, a function of mass. RCN planners who believe that quality can adequately compensate for quantity should take careful note. Smaller numbers of ‘exquisite’ ships may be a strategic handicap – even in operations short of combat.

As a hedge against uncertainty over the medium to long term, the RCN and its counterparts should seek to remain collectively proficient in all naval warfare domains. Collective proficiency recognizes that few navies are full-spectrum forces, and that it is critical to foster interoperability through regular and realistic training so that navies with ‘niche’ capabilities can bring value to naval coalitions. This would help with budgetary pressures that threaten the breadth and depth of capability in each navy. Since Western inventories of ships and maritime aircraft are slowly contracting, collective investments in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance are needed so that navies allocate their remaining combat platforms more effectively.

Even if the RFN and Western navies do nothing more than eye each other warily, close attention should be paid to the proliferation of Russian naval technology to both state and non-state parties, as post-Cold War conflicts have routinely pitted Western forces against Russian-pattern equipment. The export of ever-quieter submarines could complicate littoral operations in areas of concern to the West, while counter-ASW technologies could spread to new and existing submarine operators. Russia has also made great strides in cruise missile technology and has either adopted or exported systems that can out-perform many of their Western counterparts. Since advanced anti-ship/land-attack cruise missiles provide considerable striking power to even less-advanced navies (and
shore batteries), improved surface ship defences must be sought to detect the launcher and defeat multiple, incoming rounds in a compressed time-frame. Alert and robust defences will be required when operating in the littoral regions, as non-state actors may also obtain access to missile technology from external sponsors or as a result of state failure. In the interim, NATO allies should explore how innovative doctrine based on cooperative engagement could make better use of existing defence systems.

It is unclear whether Russia’s defence-industrial base and recruiting system will be able to fulfil Moscow’s naval ambitions. Budgetary austerity resulting from Western sanctions and a decline in energy prices could also delay re-capitalization plans but will not halt them entirely given the importance that Putin attaches to military and defence-industrial renewal. Therefore, without despairing that a new Cold War is at hand, Canada and its allies should maintain a close watching brief on the RFN’s evolution.

Notes


7. There are strong suspicions that one or more Russian subs have penetrated Swedish waters in October 2014. See Bruce Jones, “Swedish ‘Mystery Submarine’ Hunt Called Off,” Jane’s Navy International, 24 October 2014.


9. The damage inflicted on the Israeli corvette Hanit on 14 July 2006 is widely accepted to have been caused by a Chinese C-802 anti-ship missile transferred by Iran to Hezbollah forces in Lebanon.

Conclusion

Under President Putin Russia has entered a period of intense nationalism, anti-Westernism and assertiveness in its pursuit of security in its near abroad. The RFN’s slow but steady rebirth illustrates the Kremlin’s desire to undertake the full range of naval missions ranging from nuclear deterrence to sea control in adjacent waters to limited presence/power projection in distant seas. However, the number and type of new builds, and the lack of investment in at-sea replenishment, suggest that the RFN is not positioning itself to confront the combined Western navies globally. Putin’s nationalism and the RFN’s force posture may, therefore, be defensive in nature (at least as perceived by Moscow). Historically, Russia has been a land power and this places natural limitations on the growth of the RFN. Therefore, while striving to maintain current force levels, Western navies should seek qualitative improvements in key capability areas. Still, the possibility of confrontational behaviour in shared waters and the proliferation (or leakage) of leading-edge technologies to unstable third parties should give pause for thought.

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