The Russian Navy: Has the Phoenix Risen?*

Peter Haydon

Winston Churchill once said of Soviet foreign policy that it was “a puzzle inside a riddle wrapped in an enigma, and the key is Russian nationalism.” Modern Russian foreign policy is quickly becoming just as perplexing especially in the wake of the August 2008 intervention in Georgia and as a result of a series of other recent military and naval deployments.

The existence, or sometimes the absence, of naval capabilities often provides clues to the nature of the state itself and its policies. States with extensive maritime interests, usually functions of territory, trade, natural resources, local industries and population distribution, usually maintain navies to facilitate and protect those interests. The size and capability of a navy is a product of a calculus of economics, geography and threats to national security, sometimes with a measure of imperialism disguised as ‘overseas interests,’ all within a framework of domestic politics. The Russian Navy of the pre-Soviet era that grew into the Soviet Navy of the Cold War only to collapse dramatically in the last decade of the 20th century matches that model rather well. Now, as Russia re-invents itself as a world power, the re-birth of its navy is intriguing and provides some clues to the long-term policies of the Russian leadership.

Although much of the impetus for this analysis came from the Georgian crisis, an excellent book on the Russian Pacific Fleet by Alexey D. Muraviev, published by the Royal Australian Navy’s Sea Power Centre,¹ provided some necessary background by de-mystifying the Cold War era at sea in the Pacific. The Economist’s August 2008 thought-provoking look at a “Resurgent Russia” provided some of the necessary political context for a new look at the Russian Navy.² As always, the bulk of the naval technical details come from the indispensable Jane’s Fighting Ships.

Because modern navies are political instruments, rather than autonomous organizations as some believe naively, one cannot analyse any navy without taking its political context into account. What this means, amongst other things, is that numbers alone do not explain a navy’s purpose or capability; one has to dig a little deeper to get answers to key questions like “Why does it exist?” and “How will its political masters use it?” Nevertheless, one invariably has to begin by looking at the number of ships in the inventory and where they are based.

Today, the Russian military as a whole is essentially a ‘work in progress’ as it tries to re-invent itself after the decade of almost complete neglect following the collapse of the Soviet system. However, it now has a new champion and, for once, funds to modernize. But as the 2007-2008

¹The nuclear-powered battle cruiser Pyotr Velikiy, still an intimidating presence at sea.
²The aircraft carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov, which is the centrepiece of the Northern Fleet Task Force is capable of operating several types of fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft.
The basic purpose of the Russian military remains as a guarantor of national security – a role to which counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency have been added – it is also required to be a symbol of a resurgent Russia on the world stage. And it is still a prominent marketing device for a wide range of future arms sales. As the Jane’s analysis explains, there is a problem in the basic role because the military is still structured for Cold War power projection with capabilities to fight a war that will now never be fought. This strategic contradiction is being corrected through new equipment, but slowly. Even though the nuclear arsenal, strategic and tactical, has been reduced, it is still large enough to give the Russian government the means of intimidation.

The Russian Navy Today
The Russian Navy now maintains a mix of capabilities, many held over from the Cold War, that give the government some strategic flexibility as it re-asserts itself as a regional power and, in time, as a major power capable of independent intervention operations. Based on what the Russians have been saying, the recent operations against the Georgian vessels in the port of Poti and off the coast of Abkhazia are almost certainly the low end of the spectrum of power projection seen necessary by the Russian leadership.

The number of ships and their geographic distribution is still largely along traditional lines from the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras. The numbers are misleadingly large because there is uncertainty over exactly which ships and
Table 1. The Russian Navy Today

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SHIP TYPE</th>
<th>FLEET</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>Baltic</td>
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<td>SSBN</td>
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<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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</table>

Submarines

Of the 15 ballistic missile-firing submarines (SSBN), six are scheduled for disposal by 2010. The average age of the remaining nine – three Typhoon-class (Akula) and six modernized Delta IV-class (Delfin) – is 20 years and they will need replacing soon if the deterrent capability is to be retained at present levels. So far, only three new SSBNs, the Borey-class, are being built and progress is slow. The new missile, the Bulava, which has now been test-fired successfully, will be fitted to all the SSBNs except the Typhoons which will likely be replaced by the Boreys in due course. Hence, Russia is able to deploy a considerable sea-based nuclear deterrent force for the foreseeable future. The question is, ‘How much deterrence is enough?’ And, here the Russian leadership has not yet provided an answer.

The other 53 submarines are a mix of nuclear-powered and diesel-electric vessels with an average hull age of 17 years. However, some are much younger in terms of usage because building was interrupted when the Soviet system first collapsed. The core of the nuclear submarine fleet consists of the seven cruise missile-firing Oscar-class (Antyey) and the 11 Akula-class (Bars) also able to fire land-attack cruise missiles and with a large torpedo capability. Although these submarines were designed for the Cold War and their exact role may not be clear, they remain effective instruments of intimidation. Of the 19 Kilo-class diesel-electric submarines, whose present defensive (sea control) role is easier to understand, about half were completed in the last 12 years. Because of their export potential, work was not stopped on these submarines during the decade of turmoil beginning in 1991.

The importance of submarines in Russian defence and economic policy can be seen from the decision to build a new class of general-purpose nuclear-powered submarine, the Yasen, which is just starting to enter service, and a new diesel-electric submarine, the Lada, the first of class, Saint Petersburg, is already in service. The export version of the Lada, the Amur-class, is drawing interest and it seems that Venezuela may be the first customer with an order for three of the class for delivery in 2012-13 while orders from China and India are anticipated. Even taking the age of the submarine fleet into account and making allowances for maintenance cycles, it still represents a significant capability for deterrence, intimidation, sea control, surveillance and to support joint operations with land-attack cruise missiles and torpedoes. As the British found out in the south Atlantic in 1982, the nuisance value of a hostile or potentially unfriendly submarine in the vicinity of a coalition or unilateral intervention operation can change the plan quite quickly. It would be a grave mistake to think that the Russians have not grasped the lessons of that brief war.

Major Surface Warships

Russia’s present ‘blue-water’ capability is similarly impressive on paper but is not sufficiently large to give the government the ability to mount and sustain a lengthy operation far from home. The inclusion of the carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov, and the nuclear-powered battle-cruiser, Pyotr Velikiy, in the Northern Fleet task force provides a powerful surge capability but that is all. Even though there is some scepticism over the operational effectiveness of the carrier, which is 25 years old and built during the period when the Soviet fleet was experiencing major quality control problems, the ship was able to take part in a major fleet deployment into the north Atlantic and Mediterranean from December 2007 to February 2008. The purpose of that exercise was largely symbolic and intended to show that Russia was still a credible actor on the world stage. The use of an aircraft carrier to show the potential for power projection is a new aspect of Russian naval policy, and Kuznetsov in company with two cruise missile-firing cruisers and two heavily-armed destroyers was a significant show of force, albeit only for a limited time.
Russian cruisers are essentially floating arsenals left over from the Cold War with a mix of land-attack cruise missiles, anti-ship and air-defence missiles; nevertheless, they are impressive. The *Pyotr Velikiy*, the last of the four *Kirov*-class battle-cruisers built in the latter years of the Cold War to counter the US carrier battle groups, seems to have more symbolic than operational value at the moment. A sister ship, *Admiral Nakhimov*, may be taken from reserve and overhauled at considerable expense but the strategic and/or operational rationale for doing this is unclear unless the Russians are trying to improve operational sustainability. The three remaining *Slava*-class (*Atlant*) cruisers, now over 25 years old, seem to be used as command and control ships with a good mix of area protection and land-attack weapons. The last of the *Kara*-class (*Berkot-B*) is based in the Black Sea; at over 35 years old, its future value is probably limited. There do not seem to be any plans to build new cruisers.

### Minor War Vessels

Another clue to the future of the Russian Navy comes from the inventory of smaller warships which are based in every region. Although mainly remnants of the Cold War they remain effective in coastal waters. Interestingly, there are new construction programs for a ‘stealth’ patrol vessel, the *Steregushchy*-class, and for a general-purpose coastal patrol vessel, the *Astrakhan*-class, both being built in St. Petersburg. It is quite possible that the Russian leadership is using shipbuilding as a way of creating work and thus of stimulating the economy in much the same way that US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt did in the 1930s. More importantly, the Russian leadership sees their country still at risk from regional insurgency, as evidenced by the intervention in Georgia, and is taking appropriate action to maintain the necessary forces now and into the future. Not surprisingly, the coastal forces being maintained in all regions are adequate to prevail in almost any situation: the Russians still take the security of their country very seriously.

### Fleet Support

Amphibious vessels and fleet oilers are also evenly distributed among the fleets. The amphibious capability seems to support the overall policy of intervening in regional disputes where security is seen to be at risk.

By Western standards, the number of fleet auxiliaries is low, but as the recent Northern Fleet deployment showed, those vessels are able to provide basic underway logistic support. As the commander of the navy, Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, explained “What is important is that we have appeared [in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean] at a scheduled time and not just that we appeared there. We’ll do all we can to build up our presence where Russia has strategic interests.” He added that Russia intended to carry out similar missions once every six months.

### Strategic Interests and Naval Roles

Russian naval policy probably doesn’t exist in a Western-style form. As in the communist era, as in the Western democracies, the navy is an instrument of state policy and

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*A Cold War era artist’s impression of a Delta-IV firing an SS-N–23 ballistic missile from Arctic waters.*

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completely responsive to the government. The purpose of the naval policy would be to establish the capabilities to be maintained, and this is apparently being developed but with difficulty.

The Defence Minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, is attempting to eliminate the corruption and bureaucratic ineptitude that has been the hallmark of Russian defence spending which is a necessary first step in re-building the new military. While he does this, the military is attempting to create a defence policy that serves its interests. As a recent Jane’s analysis explains, the army, for instance, is championing local power-projection missions, such as the one in Georgia, or international humanitarian or peacekeeping interventions. The navy is “presenting itself as the only credible expression of Russia’s new global ambitions and the air force as an incubator for new-generation technologies able to revitalise Russian industry.” Yet, at an operational level, Cold War thinking persists in maintaining the traditional view that the US Navy is the threat and that the real role of the Russian Navy is to deter the Americans from operating freely at sea.

Admiral Vysotsky explained his view of future naval requirements in saying that the long-term aim was to acquire 5-6 aircraft carriers over the next 50 years. This vision of a new Russian naval superpower, which is probably unrealistic, rests on the conviction that joint operations must be the driving force behind equipment acquisition. For now, the navy is being used as an instrument of Russian foreign policy on a much lower scale:

- to uphold Arctic seabed resource claims;
- as a show of force in waters around the Svalbard Islands in a dispute with Norway over the exclusive economic zone (EEZ);
- to make goodwill visits in the Pacific and Indian Oceans where task groups have conducted exercises with regional navies, including the US Navy; and
- as a display of power projection potential in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, as seen through the recent Northern Fleet deployment to those areas. There have also been reports of the Russian Navy re-establishing a base in Syria to support regional counter-terrorism operations, but Black Sea requirements have probably taken priority.
As Professor Muraviev explains in his analysis of the Russian and Soviet Pacific Fleets, the origins of those fleets lie in the need to consolidate the country’s economic expansion in the 18th century and the related need to secure trade routes. But the Pacific Fleet never received the priority those national interests demanded because the Czarist focus was European. The Russo-Japanese War (1905) proved the folly of the Eurocentric policy, and it was only after the Second World War that the Pacific Fleet became a true strategic entity with a mission of countering the US Navy. From the Russian Navy’s perspective, the present strategic focus is little different: the priority seems to lie with the Northern Fleet and the Cold War anti-American strategic rationale has not completely vanished. Until Russian foreign policy, especially in the Pacific, becomes clear, it seems as if naval policy will remain in limbo and at the beck and call of the Russian political leadership.

Is it fair to claim that Mr. Putin’s foreign policy is a puzzle inside a riddle wrapped in an enigma, and the key is Russian nationalism? Yes, it is, and it is also fair to expect that the new Russian Navy will play an important role in implementing policy as it is made more transparent. That said, lack of clear foreign policy statements will likely infuriate Western governments because the Russian leaders are likely to be more reactive than prescriptive for the next few years. Like the Russian Navy, Russian foreign policy is very much a ‘work in progress’ but with clear nationalistic roots.

That said, the Russian Navy today has some capabilities that should cause us to take it seriously. The deterrent and intimidation capability is modern and large; large enough to give Western politicians reason for careful second thought before attempting risky international ventures that might impinge on Russian ‘interests.’ Clearly, the security of the homeland remains a high priority and that, perhaps in the traditional Russian/Soviet way, will include a concept of ensuring the stability of neighbouring states. The navy has a traditional role in this policy. Finally, the Russian Navy has the capability to deploy significant force at quite long range as seen by the recent Northern Fleet exercises in the Atlantic and Mediterranean; however, it may well be that the show of force is somewhat hollow because the navy lacks the means of long-term sustainment and the operational effectiveness of the ships is questionable in some areas. The Russians certainly know this and are working on it.

The limiting factors, it would seem, are twofold: the availability of adequate funds; and the ability of the admirals to convince not only their political masters but also their army and air force colleagues of the need for a multi-purpose, combat-capable navy. In this they are not alone, that problem faces the admirals of most Western navies today.

**Conclusion**

**Notes**

- It is interesting to compare this article with my April 1992 article, “The Legacy of the Soviet Navy: Will a Phoenix Rise?” in Canadian Defence Quarterly, pp. 25-32.

4. For convenience and ease of reference I have stayed with the old NATO classification names such as Typhoon but have included the Russian class name, i.e., Akula, where known.
8. I have arbitrarily separated the larger frigates, over 3,000 tonnes, from the smaller vessels designated as frigates because it seems that the smaller vessels are mainly used for coastal work whereas the larger vessels work with the ‘blue-water’ task forces.
9. One frigate is based in the Caspian Sea.

**Author’s Note:** Since this article was written, a Russian naval task force sailed for a ‘good will’ visit to Venezuela. American response has been muted but the event is being watched with concern and interest.

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