

Russia's Navy in Search of a Mission

By Andrei Martyanov

From carrier-centric aspirations to LST-purchase boondoggles, Russian naval thinking needs to emerge from its 'doctrinal fog.'

It has been 23 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and with it, the collapse of the Soviet Navy. That navy had been conceived by its most important commander in the second half of the 20th century, Sergei Gorshkov. Today, long gone are the heady times of unlimited budgets and the unchecked growth of ship and submarine classes. Even with its country's healthy oil revenues and current ambitious military programs, the Russian Federation Navy faces problems much more serious than financial austerity (when compared with the free-for-all defense spending of the Cold War) or obsolescence in some segments of its shipbuilding industry. The Russian navy ultimately faces a doctrinal fog and the inability to define its mission in the 21st century.

That Was Then, This Is Now

Russia's regional and global aspirations remain strong and rest largely with the military. "The Strategy Of National Security of the Russian Federation" explicitly calls for transformation of Russia into a premier world power, capable of providing for "strategic stability in the multi-polar world."¹ One of the pillars of this transformation is the Russian navy or, to be more precise, the remnants of the Soviet navy—and that is precisely the problem. While the Kremlin still tries to think largely within the framework of Gorshkov's fleet-operational capabilities, the realities of the current Russian navy, as well as of Russia itself, do not support such an approach. Those capabilities are long gone, and the sooner the Kremlin begins to face up to reality, the better it would play out for the navy in the near future. The events in Ukraine may provide the navy with a *raison d'être*.

Reforms initiated by former Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov and the inability to define a mission remain major contributing factors in the Russian navy's fight against the slide toward being a hollow force. An article by Otto Kreisher in the February 2010 issue of *Seapower* was sarcastically, and not completely improperly, titled "A Potemkin Navy?" Nowhere has this state of affairs manifested itself more profoundly than in the highly controversial deal to purchase French-built *Mistral*-class amphibious-assault ships—vessels that no one in Moscow is able to justify acquiring without causing resentment and suspicion of government corruption among naval and industry professionals. A public discussion in the Russian media about the fate of the navy still revolves around specific ships and technologies rather than around doctrine, and even top-level government bureaucrats state the case for the future Russian navy in terms of force structure, ignoring altogether the ultimate necessity to first formulate the mission for the navy and then develop the operational requirements from there.

Russia's economic and geopolitical realities, especially against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis, call for immediate formulation of the mission for the Russian Navy as one of sea denial for the foreseeable future (say 20 to 30 years). At the height of its might, and with the industrial capacity much greater than that of today's Russia behind it, Gorshkov's Soviet navy was a dedicated global sea-denial force. While today's Russia does not need nor can it even afford a fleet on that scale, it does need a strong green-water navy with a first-class submarine force.

Constant references to and comparisons with the carrier-centric U.S. Navy in the Russian media only underscore the scale of confusion.

Carrier Ambition, Amphibious Delusion

Many contemporary naval analysts, when writing about the immediate necessity of aircraft carriers for the modern Russian navy, tend to base their case on the U.S. Navy's experience with such ships.² Allusions to national pride and the status of floating a carrier-centric navy abound when making the argument. What many of the carrier-centric proponents are missing is an important nuance of late 20th-century Russian naval history: The Soviet path to carriers was plotted very differently from that of the U.S. Navy, or for that matter the Royal Navy.

The issue of force projection as a national necessity never realistically arose for Russia, whose dependency on sea lines of communication, while significant, was not as severe as that of the United States (or present-day China). Nor could Russia's dependency on foreign resources be cited as a viable argument in favor of force projection. If anything, Russia faces a major task of defending its own immense natural resources, which does bring the task of access and sea denial to the fore of the doctrinal argument. Russia cannot and should not attempt to police the world. This completely precludes any serious discussion of Russian amphibious

capability, which today is reflected in the *Mistral* issue. Russia simply does not need the *Mistral* and has enough resources for completing any immediate amphibious tasks. It is also worth noting that the role of the Soviet-Russian carrier force evolved, in the words of Rear Admiral Valery Aleksin, into the mission “to ensure the combat efficiency of air defense and antisubmarine task forces in the North and Pacific Fleets.”³ Yet the proponents of the carrier-centric navy in Russia also forget the fact that even today the fleet’s main striking force, as it has for the last 40 years, lies in submarines with ballistic and guided missiles.

The situation with surface combatants is complex. Russia’s saga with procurement of a new modern destroyer is entering its second decade, and the only surface combatants the navy can count on in the near future are austere Project 20380 corvettes and Project 11356 frigates bound for the Black Sea Fleet. The lead frigate of the Project 22350 *Admiral Gorshkov* class only recently received her artillery system. These facts preclude any serious talk about a carrier-building program, let alone wasting money on the excessive and operationally useless *Mistral* purchase. The use of increasingly expensive carriers and of large amphibious groups depend on sea control and the ability of the fleet to reliably defend them.⁴ Currently the Russian navy’s surface force would have huge difficulties providing viable defense for prospective carriers, should they ever materialize, since the surface force itself has yet to materialize despite a decade-long stream of promises from the top of the Russian government. The introduction of the *Mistral*-class LSTs will only add confusion in formulating a feasible mission for them, while drawing valuable operational and fiscal resources toward their vague mission and away from more immediate necessities of the fleet.

The Answer Beneath the Waves

The situation with the Russian submarine force provides more of a reason for optimism for the Russian navy and its sea-denial mission proponents. The problems with the Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missile seem to have been finally overcome, and the completion of the first hull (as well as the start of work on additional hulls) of the Project 885 Yasen-class nuclear-powered guided-missile submarine testifies to the fact that a realist approach still prevails. With ten Project 885(M) SSGNs planned for service by 2020 and new types of diesel-powered subs being built, the sea-denial mission for the Russian navy is not a possibility—it is an inevitability.⁵ The new SSGNs are state-of-the-art ships designed for attacking carrier strike groups and carrying out attacks against land targets. Together with their ballistic-missile counterparts, the Project 955 Borey class, this submarine force will require a surface component capable of providing (together with land-based aviation) a reliable cover for deployment to sea. This force, not the aircraft carriers or *Mistrals*, will provide defense of Russia’s national interests and ensure both conventional and nuclear deterrence against any opponent in the immediate future.

For the Russian navy, improvement in antisubmarine warfare and mine-countermeasures capability, restoration of the coastal defense force, large investment in sensors, and training and improvement of the social status of personnel are by far more pressing tasks than wasting resources on amphibious. These are problems that should be addressed immediately if the Russian fleet wants to preserve itself as a viable force through 2020 and to eventually return to the ocean as a first-class blue-water navy. But for this to happen the clear and realistic mission statement for the navy should be made—the doctrinal fog should be dissipated. That statement should account for the present state of the Russian navy (and Russia itself), and it should clearly state the goal of providing for a robust sea-denial force first and foremost. Only then will it be time to consider, based on national interest and economic capability, whether there’s a necessity to turn the Russian navy into a truly global force a goal that, at this stage, is as remote as the idea of the new Russian aircraft carrier.

In 1972 the legendary Arleigh Burke stated one of the most profound naval truisms: “You need numbers.” Whether or not the Russian navy will hear and heed Admiral Burke’s advice, Admiral Gorshkov’s philosophy that “better is the greatest enemy of good enough” remains to be seen. France’s refusal to deliver the *Mistrals* (as it was threatening to do at press time) may finally become a much-needed turning point in Russia’s naval doctrinal debate.

1. “The Strategy Of National Security of the Russian Federation,” www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html.

2. Vladimir Sherbakov, “Behind The Scene Battles Of The Ocean-going Fleet,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 July 2011.

3. RADM Valery Aleksin, RFN, “Russia Needs A Strong Navy,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, vol. 123, no. 12 (December 1997), 45–48.

4. George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years Of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890–1990* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 402.

5. Alexander Mozgovoy, “Is There A Light In The End Of A Tunnel?” *Natsionalnaya Oborona*, June 2011.

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