

Has the Russian Navy Turned a Corner?

Recent Trends in Russian Shipbuilding and Naval Deployments

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In recent years, Russia's foreign policy and behavior have become increasingly self-assertive and the rhetoric of its leaders increasingly hostile. Accordingly, some in the West have viewed with trepidation recent Russian military actions, such as bomber flyovers of U.S. ships at sea and last winter's deployment of the *Admiral Kuznetsov* to the Mediterranean. Many Western analysts are concerned that the Russian military, and especially the Russian Navy (RFN), is about to enter a period of expansion that could even portend a new arms race with the United States.

In this memo, I argue that the capabilities of the RFN are in reality only slightly stronger than they were at the start of Vladimir Putin's presidency and nowhere near the levels of the late Soviet period. The recent attention paid to the Russian military, and particularly to naval deployment, is more the result of a campaign orchestrated by the Russian government to convince both Russians and foreigners that the Russian military has returned, despite very modest actual progress in rebuilding.

Order of Battle and Current Deployments

As Table 1 shows (see end of memo), most of the Russian navy's current combat ships and submarines were built either before the collapse of the USSR or in the two years that followed. Since 1994, only seven new ships have been commissioned, and construction began on all of them in Soviet times. As of 2008, ten new ships are under construction (UC), but at least three of these have been under construction since the early 1990s. As the table reveals, of the 115 ships listed, 39 are not operational. In short, all the combat ships of the RFN are aging Soviet-era ships, and none are scheduled for replacement. In particular, no surface ships larger than a frigate are currently under construction. As a result, the RFN will shrink drastically in coming years.

During the 1990s, the Russian navy rarely sent ships far from their home ports. There were no deployments to the Pacific Ocean after 1994, and none to the Atlantic after 1996. The navy's turnaround after 2000 resulted in a substantial increase in deployments in Putin's first term, though this was followed by a modest decline and then a smaller rise in 2006-2007. Figure 1 shows the pattern from 1999 to 2007.

The increase in naval deployments since 2000 more reflects an increase in the Russian navy's budget than a major shift in intentions or capabilities. Figure 2 shows the patterns of deployment by fleet. Ships from the Black Sea Fleet deployed about twice as often as ships from the other three fleets, primarily because of their participation in numerous multilateral operations and exercises, such as Active Endeavor and BlackSeaFor. The December 2007 deployment of the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, Russia's sole aircraft carrier, to lead a task group to the Mediterranean Sea may have been the first major deployment for Russia's Northern Fleet to the Mediterranean since 1996. However, the Northern Fleet actually deployed task groups to the North Atlantic for exercises in four of the last five years. The main difference between earlier deployments and the most recent one was the publicity accompanying it.

Recent economic progress has allowed the Russian government to give the Russian Navy enough of a budget increase to begin a partial revival. Due to the long lead times required for building new ships, together with the cumulative effect of years of deferred maintenance and limited training for personnel, the Russian Navy is still far less capable than the navies of even most mid-size NATO states, not to mention the Soviet Navy at its height. Across all of the Russian fleets, there are only 17-18 surface combatants that can deploy with any consistency.

The main purpose of deployments is to increase cooperation with other navies. The Putin administration found the RFN to be a useful tool for engagement because it allows Russian military forces to travel outside Russian territory without alarming neighboring states. Through its navy, Russia has been

able to tout its credentials as a world power while participating in bilateral and multilateral exercises designed to reassure neighbors and more distant powers that its military is working cooperatively to solve regional problems, such as smuggling and piracy.

Figure 1: Russian Naval Deployments

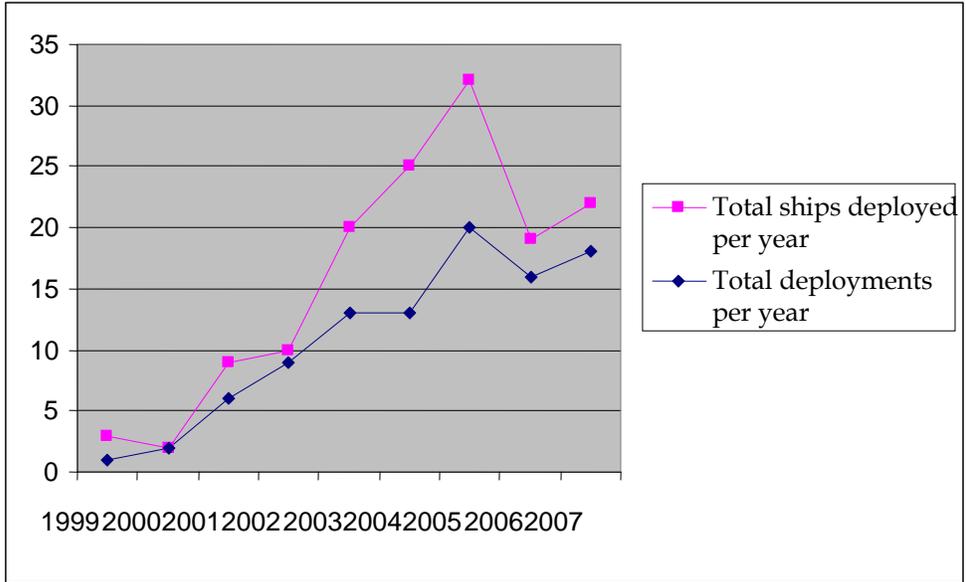
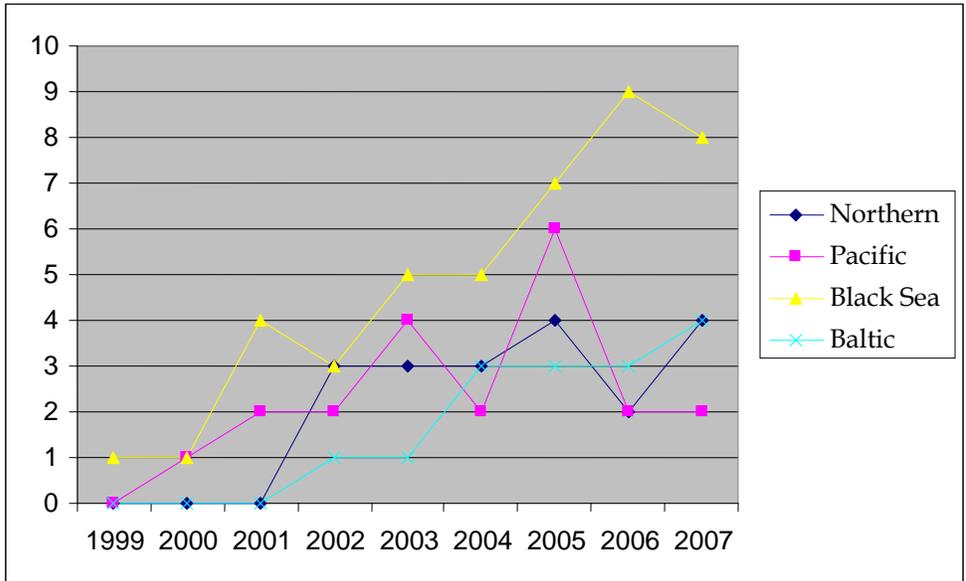


Figure 2: Russian Naval Deployments by Fleet



Shipbuilding Plans

As part of its modest revival, the Russian Navy has launched a shipbuilding program, unveiling several new designs for submarines and smaller surface

ships. This program is small compared to the Soviet shipbuilding of the Cold War, but it shows that the Russian government realizes that significant capital investment in new ships is necessary if the Russian navy is to remain a viable seagoing force.

During Putin's presidency, Russian naval design and shipbuilding focused on the Borei-class ballistic missile submarine (SSBN). Construction of the *Yuri Dolgorukiy*, the first submarine in this class, began in 1996. After years of delay caused by financing and construction problems, it was finally launched in 2007. Two more units are now under construction, and construction will start on another one in late 2008. Plans call for a total of eight new SSBNs to be built by 2015, split evenly between the Northern and Pacific Fleets. However, these new SSBNs will be useless until the navy can work out the problems plaguing the submarine's Bulava missile, which has suffered from repeated test flight failures. Naval commanders insist that an accelerated testing schedule will ensure that the Bulava will be ready this year, but independent Russian observers and even the Head of the General Staff have said it will not enter service until as late as 2012.

The RFN is also building a new nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN), the *Severodvinsk*, designed for both anti-submarine and anti-ship warfare. Plans from 2001 called for a total of seven to be built, though construction has not started on any beyond the initial hull of one. Finally, the RFN is building a new diesel-powered attack submarine (SS) to replace its aging Kilo-class boats. The *St. Petersburg* was the first of this class to be completed (in late 2006), though it is still undergoing final sea trials, and three additional units are currently under construction. There are plans to construct as many as 24 submarines of this class.

Plans for new surface ships have been even less ambitious. Currently, only relatively small frigates or corvettes and minesweepers are under construction, though RFN planners have discussed plans to build much larger ships in the future. These include aircraft carriers, for which no construction facilities are available at present; previous Soviet construction of such large naval ships took place at Nikolayev in Ukraine.

The first of the new surface ships to enter the oceangoing fleet is the *Steregushchy*-class corvette. It is the first RFN ship to be designed entirely in the post-Soviet period. Construction of the first ship of this class began in 2001 and, though it was scheduled to be completed in 2004, entered active service only in February 2008. This class of ships is designed primarily for multi-purpose coastal defense against surface ships, submarines, and aircraft, but it can also provide support for amphibious landing forces. In addition to the *Steregushchy*, now serving in the Northern Fleet, four more ships of this class are currently under construction. Current plans call for around 20 of these ships to be built in order to replace the *Grisha*-class corvettes currently used in all the fleets.

The RFN is also developing a larger frigate, capable of deepwater operations.

Construction on the first of these ships, the *Admiral Gorshkov*, began in 2006 and is scheduled to be completed in 2009 at the earliest. A total of 20 units of this type are planned, to be distributed among all four fleets. It will become the main deepwater surface ship of the Navy, eventually replacing the Udaloy- and Sovremennyi-class destroyers.

Finally, the RFN is developing a new amphibious landing ship, the *Ivan Gren*, which will be able to transport containers and use floating pontoons to transfer armored vehicles to landing areas. The lead ship is planned to be completed in 2008 and a total of five are to be built by 2015. Several smaller ships are also in various stages of planning or construction, including the Tatarstan-class corvettes and Astrakhan-class patrol boats for the Caspian Flotilla, as well as new coastal minesweepers.

Despite these figures, recent developments in the Russian shipbuilding program may be more impressive on paper than in practice. 520 million dollars of budgeted funding is insufficient for current shipbuilding projects. In 2007, 80 percent of the shipbuilding budget was consumed by the Borei-class SSBNs, leaving little for the surface ships. Only 8 million dollars were allocated to the *Admiral Gorshkov* frigate. Given its total price tag of approximately 500 million dollars, it will take many years to complete even one of these frigates at this spending rate. Funding for shipbuilding may also need to be diverted to the relocation of the main Black Sea Fleet base to Novorossiisk, if Ukraine follows through on its intention to ask the Russian navy to leave Sevastopol when the current basing agreement expires in 2017. Unless there is a very large increase in the RFN's budget, we should expect completion targets for all the shipbuilding projects discussed in this section to be delayed significantly.

Future Deployments

Over the next 10 to 15 years, deployment patterns of the RFN appear unlikely to vary much from patterns set in the last five years. The recent deployment of the *Admiral Kuznetsov* in the Mediterranean does not appear to represent a dramatic shift in either frequency or purpose of Russian navy deployments. As funding gradually increases, the RFN appears willing to execute more deployments, perhaps including a semi-permanent presence in the Mediterranean and more frequent forays into the Atlantic. This desire is evident in statements made by Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, the Naval Commander-in-Chief, who said that he would like to see semi-annual deployments of the Northern Fleet to the Mediterranean.

However, funding (e.g., for fuel) and equipment limitations will almost certainly prevent the realization of this goal in the near future. The Northern Fleet has only seven surface combatants capable of deploying outside the Barents Sea. Several of these ships will approach the end of their useful lives in the next five to ten years. Given the long lead times needed to develop and build new

ships, overall numbers of surface combatants will not increase before 2015 and probably not until after 2020. Furthermore, the RFN will be challenged to deploy for an extended period of time because of its practice of bringing all its own fuel with it on deployments. Even with the use of refueling tankers, this practice inevitably limits the number of days a ship group can be at sea before having to return to a Russian port.

A second constraint on increases in Russian naval deployments has to do with the RFN's training cycle. The RFN has a relatively rigid training year, which begins with the arrival of new conscripts in December and concludes with fleet-wide assessments in the fall. Given this cycle, Russian ships generally do not deploy until the RFN is several months into the training year. This may change in the future as the military gradually completes its transition away from conscription, but for the moment such changes are still several years away.

Given these constraints, I expect the RFN to continue its current practice of annually deploying the Northern Fleet to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. It will also deploy ships from other fleets for regular exercises with neighboring navies. These deployments should be treated as routine, not as threatening to the United States or any of its allies. Similar deployments have occurred over the last five years. The *Kuznetsov* deployment, for example, did not represent a real change in the pattern of naval deployments. The main difference is that the Russian government has recently decided to start publicizing such deployments in order to bolster Russia's image on the world stage.

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Table 1: Russian Naval Ships (by type and year put into commission)
 * Denotes ships listed in repair, reserve, or conservation. Each * equals one ship.

	Surface Ships						Submarines			
	CV	CG	DD	DD-ASW	FF	Amphib	SSBN	SSGN	SSN	SS
1966						1				
1968						1*				
1969			1							
1973				1*						
1974				1		1*				
1975						1				
1976						2*				
1977					1		1*			
1978					1	1*	1			
1979							2			
1980					1		1			
1981				1*	1	1				1
1982		1				2**	2			1*
1983						1				1
1984		1*				2*	1			2
1985				1		1	1			
1986		1	1*	1		1		1*		1
1987				1		1	2*		2**	
1988		1*	1*	2		1	1	1*	2*	3
1989		1	1	1*		1*	2**	1*	1*	1*
1990	1		1*			1	1	2	5*	5
1991			2*	1		1*			1*	2*
1992			1			1		2**	3*	1
1993			1		1			1	2*	
1994										1
1995									2	
1996		1						1		
1997										
1998										
1999				1						
2000										
2001									1*	
2002										
2003										
2004										
2005										
2006										
2007										
2008					(1 UC)	(1 UC)	(3 UC)		(1 UC)	(4 UC)
Total	1	6	9	11	5	21	15	9	19	19
	(Kuz)	(3 Kirov 3 Slava)	(8 Sov 1 Kash)	(2 Kara 9 Udal)	(4 Kriv 1 Neutr)	(2 Rog 4 All 15 Rop)	(3 Typh 6 DIV 6 DIII)	(Oscar)	(4 VIII 3 Sier 12 Aku)	(18 Kilo 1 Tango)