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Russia's Place in a Polycentric Naval Setup

Victor Sumsky & Evgeny Kanaev*

With its extremely long coastline, four strong fleets and abundant maritime resources, Russia cannot be viewed as just a continental power. A combination of rich naval traditions, enormous economic potential, technological expertise and independent foreign policy puts Russia in a category of global sea powers. That is exactly how it looked for most of the 20th century. Suffice to say that by the end of the Cold War era, Soviet warships and nuclear submarines posed a serious challenge to the US Navy. In the 1990s came a drastic decline in the naval capabilities of the country, but it did not last long – at any rate, not in historical terms. The early 21st century has been marked by an effort to rebuild the Russian Navy and increase its activities. Whilst trying to modernise its naval potential, Russia does not aim to change the status quo and expand its sphere of influence at the expense of others. Its primary purpose is to discourage other powers from dragging it into conflicts which, in the case of Russia's involvement and given its size and military might, could aggravate the international geopolitical order. This course is generally conducive to a greater polycentrism in global naval affairs, and a more stable world.

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For a variety of reasons – such as the overall maritime potential, rich naval traditions and, most importantly, independent foreign policy – Russia has to be considered a global naval power in the emerging polycentric world. At the same time, Russia's measures in terms of naval modernisation are non-assertive. The country has no intentions to use its naval power in order to change the existing geostrategic situation. Is it a sign of Russia's relative weakness vis-à-vis other great maritime powers or, rather, of the understanding that in the present international circumstances there are better ways to strengthen global security including its maritime aspect?

Starting with a description of Russia's overall maritime potential, we outline the major features of its naval development and present priorities in this area, before turning to the technical and geostrategic issues that shape Russia's current naval policy. A summary of this analysis is presented in the conclusion.

Foundations of Maritime Strength

Russia has a coastline of 37,653 km and a territory washed by 13 seas. Of these, 12 belong to the Arctic, the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans, while the thirteenth sea – that is, the Caspian – is landlocked. Overall, there are about 7 million km² of territorial sea area under Russian sovereignty, with the continental shelf coming up to 5 million km². Of the 67 Russian ports, 22 are situated on the Pacific coast, 18 in the Arctic zone, seven more on the Baltic and three on the Caspian. After Crimea's reunification with Russia, the number of ports under its control in the Azov–Black Sea basin has grown to 17. Russia's continued upgradation of its port infrastructure will strengthen its positions in the global transportation system and improve its overall competitiveness in the world economy.¹

Russia's territorial seas and exclusive economic zones contain vast amounts of biological and mineral resources. There are nearly 900 species of fish (of which 250 species are commercial) as well as enormous deposits of oil and gas. Specifically, the Prinovozemelsky blocks of the Kara Sea contain 6.2 billion tons of recoverable oil plus hydrocarbons amounting up to 20.9 billion tons of oil equivalent. In the Barents Sea, the North Gulyaev deposit of the South Russky block contains 13 million tons of oil and 52 billion cubic meters of gas.² The need to explore and preserve marine resources is among the key priorities outlined in the new Marine Doctrine of the Russian Federation adopted in July 2015.

Russia's maritime transit potential is exemplified, first and foremost, by the Northern Sea Route (NSR) that stretches from Karskie Vorota to Provideniya Bay for about 5600 km and is considered a commercially promising waterway between Europe and Asia-Pacific. The journey from Murmansk to Yokohama via the Suez Canal is 24,000 km, but via NSR it is only 11,000 km. While it is difficult to anticipate that NSR may even partially compete with the Malacca Straits (in 2014, there were 79,334 and 54 passages via the Malacca Straits and NSR respectively³), the much shorter distance leads to lower fuel costs and numbers of transshipments and reduces the turnaround time, therefore increasing the overall profits.

The Russian navy consists of four fleets and one flotilla. In overall terms, Russia has 209 warships and 72 submarines with an aircraft carrier cruiser, heavy nuclear-powered guided missile cruisers, and a number of guided missile cruisers, large anti-submarine warfare (ASW) ships and nuclear-powered guided missile submarines.⁴ Russian seamen participate, although selectively, in international operations aimed at combating non-traditional security threats such as piracy. Since 2008, Russian warships have been protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden.⁵

The territorial and land power potential of Russia complements its naval power and supports the navy with logistics, shipbuilding, naval technologies, human potential and other resources. The sum of land and sea power allows Russia to employ all available assets to secure its national interests. Simultaneously, it increases Russia's overall maritime strength due to the fact that modern technologies make it possible to tackle maritime threats from the shore no less effectively than from the sea. This combination of maritime and land power is a characteristic that Russia shares with its biggest and most important Asian partners – China and India. Russia's status as a global sea power is also underpinned by its rich naval traditions.

A Strong and Non-Assertive Navy

As it started to build its regular fleet, Russia was trying to overcome its political and economic isolation, a major obstacle to the country's modernisation before Peter the Great. While the Azov Flotilla (1696) was the first step towards establishing the Russian Navy, its real test took place in the Baltic, during the victorious Northern War (1703–1721). By the end of the 18th century, Russia had three of the current four fleets (the Northern Fleet was organised in 1933). Since then, the development of the Russian Navy has been going in a consistent and determined way. The Imperial

and later on the Soviet Navy had seen many glorious victories and only rare defeats. The one that comes to mind most often is the battle of Tsushima Strait between the Russians and Japanese in 1905. Even when Russia lost wars – as in the case of the Crimea War (1853–1856) – its seamen, led by Admiral Pavel Nakhimov, defeated the Turkish fleet in the battle of Sinop.

Although in the early 19th century Russia ranked third in the world in terms of the number of warships and continued to modernise its naval potential, it never intended to use it for aggressive purposes or overseas conquests – in contrast with major Western powers which expanded their colonial empires all over the world. During the Cold War, especially in the late 1960s to late 1980s, the tempo of naval buildup in the Soviet Union outpaced that of the US. The USSR created the world's biggest fleet in terms of the number of battleships and displacement tonnage. The latter was 17% bigger than that of the US Navy. But even so, the USSR did not expand its naval presence beyond its territory. Due to the defensive orientation of the Soviet Navy, its relative decline in the immediate post-Soviet period did not result in profound and dangerous changes across the global security landscape. At the same time, this decline didn't last long – at least by historical criteria.

Changes for the better started in the early 2000s. This became possible due to an overall improvement in the national economy and the corresponding increase in defense expenditure. The amount of money allocated for The State Armament Program 2011–2020 is 20.7 trillion rubles, and almost a quarter of this (or 5.0 trillion) is reserved for the navy. By comparison, the ground forces, air forces, strategic missiles and airspace defense were given respectively 2.6 billion, 4.7 billion, 1.0 billion and 3.4 billion rubles.⁶ By 2020, advanced weaponry will constitute 70% of all armaments in the Russian Armed Forces. In the framework of this programme, the navy will be provided with many highly efficient small ships and multifunctional submarines capable of conducting high-intensity operations in Russia's immediate neighbourhood. The development of blue-water navy (excluding strategic nuclear submarines) is not a priority during the ongoing decade.

Russia's objectives in the naval sphere are clarified still further in the new *Marine Doctrine*. While the country's intentions to maintain its status as a great maritime power are clearly expressed, no traces of exclusiveness or assertiveness are found in this document. Russia remains determined to interact with its external economic partners and to rely on ocean resources for the purpose of continued modernisation. The social and ecological dimensions of maritime activities are also emphasised, along with the need to redevelop civilian shipbuilding and to maintain the global leadership in the

construction of nuclear powered icebreakers. Significantly, Russia is not opting for the power projection in the world ocean or dominance in any of its parts; on the contrary, it confirms its adherence to the open-sea principle.⁷

In sum, Russia's current naval modernisation, just like before, is defense oriented and not aimed at creating any spheres of naval influence – in a striking contrast to the vociferous propaganda campaign unleashed by its opponents during the last year or two (if not more).

Expediency Comes First

Is Russia's "defensive modernisation" a sign of weakness? Not in the opinion of the authors. Being fully aware that its naval capabilities should be improved, Russia also understands that the timeframe, cost and intensity of its naval modernisation projects must stay in line with its overall strategic interests. Obviously, the latter are primarily associated with the maintenance of security on Russia's borders and in the post-Soviet realm.

With this in view, prohibitively costly aircraft carrier programmes can be of limited use. Research and development, and production and maintenance, plus the concomitant infrastructure and support facilities for several aircraft carrier groups will consume an enormous amount of money. This will be too heavy a burden for the state budget at a time when there are several other competing needs. Besides, the strategic value of aircraft carriers in the present circumstances is debatable. Are we expecting a US–Russia showdown in which aircraft carriers are to play major roles? Can this be anticipated in the Persian Gulf, or anywhere in the Mediterranean, or in the Asia–Pacific waters, not to speak of the South China Sea? These possibilities look very remote, to say the least. Is there a chance that it may happen closer to Russia's coast – for instance, around the Kola Peninsula, or in the Sea of Japan or the Okhotsk Sea? In the midst of the current tensions between the old Cold War rivals, this would amount to something more than an ordinary provocation to tickle Russia's nerves. A step like this would be a veritable declaration of war – with all the consequences of such a declaration.

If so, is it fair to conclude that the time of aircraft carriers is gone? Visually, they still might be impressive, but essentially, are they not just a brand of the past geopolitical games? Currently, maritime capabilities are increasingly defined by support provided by relevant shore infrastructure, logistics and stable supply of armaments. In these circumstances, maritime threats are not necessarily neutralised through dominance at sea. The potential that is available on the shore is no less important. Therefore, for Russia it

is not expedient to enter the aircraft carrier race in an attempt to match, or even to outperform, the US. To protect its maritime interests, Russia does not need to be involved in a costly naval arms race. As for symbols of great power status, Russia already has enough that it should not be tempted by aircraft carrier mirage.

In contemporary warfare, coordinated interservice operations of the air–land–maritime type are most effective. This is especially true with respect to the coastal activities that call for a rational division of tasks between various forces and their branches.

Whatever rivalries are ripening in the strategic spaces adjacent to Russian waters, Russia would do much better by avoiding “symmetric responses” to these challenges. The demonstration of the flag in the global commons always has its worth, but this is not Russia’s ultimate purpose. Assuming that anti-Russian sanctions remain in place not just in the short, but in the mid term, the navy should seek ways to increase its effectiveness in these circumstances. The best way to do that is to implement a balanced and well-calculated policy based on Russia’s national interest rather than the desire to impress others.

Conclusion

Substantiating its status as a naval power, Russia is not preoccupied with increasing its abilities to fight wars far from its borders. Instead, it develops its naval potential in a peaceful, non-threatening way – as it has always done throughout the history of the Russian Navy. By doing so, Russia refuses to be dragged into a conflict which, given the size, the potential and the influence of the country, will inevitably acquire a global dimension. As international relations become progressively more volatile and less manageable, this position is especially conducive to the maintenance of global security, both continental and maritime.

In terms of naval power, maritime technologies and the exploration of world ocean resources, the emerging maritime order tends to be polycentric, and Russia clearly demonstrates its preference for peaceful polycentrism rather than one based on mutual threats and deterrence. Our friends are sure to welcome this stand.

Notes

1. See, for instance: Президент России, Совещание о развитии портов Азово-Черноморского бассейна. 23 сентября 2014. [President of Russia. “The Working Debate

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2. Rosneft. n.d. “Russia’s Arctic Seas.” http://www.rosneft.com/Upstream/Exploration/arctic_seas/ (accessed August 8, 2015).
 3. M. Hund, “Malacca Strait Traffic Hits an All Time High in 2014, VLCCs and Dry Bulk Lead Growth.” *Seatrade Maritime News*, February 27, 2015. <http://www.seatrade-maritime.com/news/asia/malacca-strait-traffic-hits-an-all-time-high-in-2014-vlccs-and-dry-bulk-lead-growth.html> (accessed August 10, 2015); Transit Statistics. Northern Sea Route Information Office. http://www.arctic-llo.com/nsr_transits (accessed August 10, 2015).
 4. Russian Navy 2015. July 6, 2015. <http://russiaships.info/eng/today/> (accessed August 2, 2015).
 5. Министерство обороны Российской Федерации, Корабли ВМФ России продолжают выполнять миссию по обеспечению безопасности судоходства в Аденском заливе. 2 января 2015. [Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, “Russian Naval Ships Will Continue Their Mission to Secure Navigation in the Gulf of Aden.” January 2, 2015] (in Russian). <http://structure.mil.ru/structure/forces/type/navy/north/news/more.htm?id=12004845@egNews> (accessed August 5, 2015).
 6. These figures are taken from: Аналитический доклад. Центр анализа стратегий и технологий, Государственные программы вооружения Российской Федерации: проблемы исполнения и потенциал оптимизации. 2015. [Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, “State Armament Programs of the Russian Federation: Problems of the Implementation and the Potential of Optimization. Analytical Report.” 2015] (in Russian). www.cast.ru/files/Report_CAST.pdf (accessed July 20, 2015).
 7. Президент России, Морская доктрина Российской Федерации. 26 июля 2015. [President of Russia, “The Marine Doctrine of the Russian Federation”]. July 26, 2015. (in Russian). <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50060> (accessed August 25, 2015).