



Reports on the Russian Navy
by John McLearn

Several recent articles have noted that the Russian Fleet is being modernized and will be a force to contend with in the relatively near future. One might disagree. The Russian Fleet is still mainly equipped with Soviet era ships and submarines at various levels of serviceability. The Russian official press is filled with modernization plans, including eight to ten new ballistic submarines, eight to ten multi-role nuclear submarines, and an unspecified number but at least six to ten new diesel electric submarines of several different classes. Also being considered are 35 corvettes, 15 frigates, a new class of destroyers of up to twelve ships, a new class of cruiser, and aircraft carriers of a conventional design of about 50,000 tons. While all this may be a concern, reality is very different.

The Russian press has mentioned that the main program for surface fleet replacement has been stopped until Russia can develop its own source of turbines for ships. The normal supplier is Ukrainian, which means availability of ship engines has completely dried up for the interim. Russia has asked several Russian companies to design and build a wholly Russian turbine for the engines of their frigate and corvette programs. Currently, the Russian press states there are two frigates partially completed without engines.

The aircraft carriers are reportedly conventional, not like the Kiev-class with its heavy missile armament. The Russians have some experience with their sole carrier the *Admiral Kuznetsov* which has recently come out of refit. The biggest obstacle is a lack of building facilities. Russian carriers were built at Nikolayev, now in Ukraine. The current commander of the Russian fleet is calling for a total of six carriers to be stationed in the Pacific and Northern Fleets. These are planned but are not funded at this point. The other problem is that Russia has not built a carrier in some time, and a level of expertise will now have to be re-developed. A new Russian carrier fleet is therefore not likely to be seen for at least fifteen to twenty years.

Another issue are the four Russian battle cruisers of the Kirov-class that are listed in an article about the US Office of Naval Intelligence. Only one ship is serviceable, the *Pytor Velikiy*, currently is the Northern Fleet. The others are long out of service with only the *Admiral Nakhimov* being considered for return to service, and even that is doubtful as there is discussion whether the money being spent to refurbish this ship might be better spent on more and smaller corvettes or frigates. Modernization of the cruiser would be the same cost as at least three modern corvettes. The other battle cruisers are considered beyond economical repair. The Russian fleet is now down to one battle cruiser and three Slava-class cruisers, a far cry from the heights of the Cold War Soviet Navy. Three battle cruisers and one Kara-class cruiser are still listed as in reserve but in very poor shape.

The Lada-class diesel electric submarine has ceased production due to engineering issues with only the *Sankt Petersburg* being built. Two more were halted pending a redesign. Construction may have resumed but the redesign may constitute a new class. A modernized Kilo-class submarine is also being built. With over 57 submarines of this class world-wide, it makes sense to continue with a known quantity and quality. Depending what articles one reads, all four to six submarines for the Black Sea Fleet will be new construction, modernized Kilos.

Further with submarines, Russia is also producing the new Borei-class ballistic missile submarine and the multi-role Yassin-class, both nuclear powered. These submarines are being produced at Sevmash in the far north. Originally there were to be ten submarines of each class. More recent figures in the Russian press put the numbers at eight each. The reason for the smaller number is unknown but likely a combination of cost and production capability. The Bulava missile is due to be employed in the Borei-class - three boats are built and two more are currently building. Two are scheduled to be stationed in the Pacific Fleet to replace the oldest ballistic submarines still in service, the three Delta III which have been marginally capable for the last few years. Capability has been hampered by issues of base modernization which could affect the serviceability of the new submarines.

Modernization is taking place, but there is more to modernization of any fleet. Base facilities are in poor shape. In the Pacific, corrupt practices and poor construction will delay effective use of modern vessels. The Pacific is not the only fleet effected, and most Russian bases are in poor shape throughout country. Maintenance and training have always been weak points, and a change to these problems has not been observed. The Russian Navy still requires a large number of conscripts to man the fleet. The reforms of 2008 reduced the amount of time one has to serve, however, technical skills require more than the time allotted. Although Russia is moving to a “contract” service person, read professional servicemen, this is not universal as yet and not entirely satisfactory. The skill sets of service members on contract do not necessarily meet the technical requirements of the fleet.

The Russian Navy has far to go before being considered truly effective. It is thus a work in progress hampered by wishful thinking, political interference, corruption and lack of long term technical capability, a lack of modernized bases and with a marginal service population of semi-trained personnel.

The Chinese, on the other hand, may be a more difficult problem. A fit subject for future comment.

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