

THE RUSSIAN BLACK SEA FLEET AFTER THE GEORGIA WAR

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Black Sea Fleet Activity in the August War

Russian ships left their bases in Sevastopol and Novorossisk and sailed for the Georgian coast on August 9, the day after hostilities began in the region. A total of 13 ships were involved in the operation, including the Slava-class cruiser *Moskva*, the Kashin-class destroyer *Smetlivyi*, several Grisha-class corvettes (*Suzdalets*, *Aleksandrovsk*, *Muromets*, and possibly *Kasimov*), the Nanuchka-class missile ship *Mirazh*, two patrol craft, three amphibious landing craft (two Ropucha-class, *Tsesar Kunikov* and *Yamal*, and one Alligator-class, *Saratov*), two mine warfare ships (*Admiral Zhelezniakov* and *Turbinist*), the transport ship *General Riabikov*, and the tugboat *Epron*.

This list includes the bulk of Black Sea Fleet (BSF) deployment-capable ships. The only major combatants not involved were the Kara-class cruiser *Kerch* and two Krivak-class frigates. The *Kerch* is currently undergoing sea trials after a decade-long period of repair and is therefore not yet ready for active service. The guided-missile frigate (FFG) *Ladnyi* was preparing for participation in operation Active Endeavor, though it subsequently returned to the Black Sea and shadowed U.S. and NATO ships that entered the region in late August. The FFG *Pytlivyi* is currently undergoing repairs. This deployment should thus be considered to demonstrate more or less the maximum possible capability of the BSF at the present time.

The stated goal of BSF ships deployed in this conflict was to provide naval support for Russian ground forces in the region and to be prepared to transport refugees out of the conflict zone. These goals were consistent with the Russian government's initial argument that it was conducting a support operation for its peacekeeping contingent in South Ossetia, which had been attacked by Georgian forces on August 8.

As the nature of the Russian military operation changed, first to focus on driving Georgian forces out of the disputed areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and then on destroying Georgian military capabilities altogether, the role of the BSF changed as well. Amphibious landing craft, accompanied by escort ships and patrol craft, were sent out of the Russian Navy's Novorossiisk base with naval infantry troops onboard. Some of these troops helped to secure the Abkhazian port of Ochamchira against the possibility of a Georgian invasion, while others secured the Georgian port city Poti.

As they approached the Russia-Abkhazia maritime border on August 9, some of the Russian ships encountered Georgian patrol boats, which were assumed to have hostile intent after they failed to respond to radio warnings to turn away. While sources are not consistent, it seems most likely that the Russian ships involved included the two amphibious ships *Tsezar Kunikov* and *Saratov*, accompanied by the corvette *Suzdalets* and the patrol ship *Mirazh*. It appears likely that the Russian ships sank at least one and possibly two of the Georgian patrol boats. The shots were fired by one of the two accompanying ships, most likely the *Mirazh*. After the initial encounter, the remaining Georgian ships fled and were later sunk at pier in Poti by Russian military forces.

We can make some suppositions about Russian naval command and control based on published reports about this battle. First, all available reports indicate that after potentially hostile ships were detected by radar on the *Mirazh*, the ship's captain contacted Vice-Admiral Meniaylo, the commander of the naval group based on the *Tsesar Kunikov*, who gave the orders to fire warning shots and then to attack the opposing ships when they did not change course. Once the opposing ships did change course, the Russian ships ceased to attack because "there were no orders to destroy all targets."

None of the reports show any indication that the fleet's actions in combat had to be approved by commanders at fleet headquarters or in Moscow. This is somewhat surprising given the Russian military's tendency toward centralization of authority. In normal situations, ship commanders in the Russian navy are given little control over decisionmaking. There are two possible explanations. The more likely one is that ship commanders are given authority to take whatever action is necessary to defend their ships if they believe they are in imminent danger. Another possibility is that the naval group commander did contact Moscow and received clearance to fire on the Georgian navy ships prior

to ordering the attack. This is less likely, given the relatively short timeframe between the ships' detection and the order to fire.

Overall, the BSF naval group's actions during the Georgia conflict provide additional support for the supposition that Russian navy ships operate with a relatively low threshold for weapons use, and ship commanders are authorized to take action on their own if they perceive an imminent threat to their ship. In situations where an imminent threat does not exist, virtually all major decisions are taken by the naval group commander, rather than the commanders of specific ships in the group. Only if the ship is operating alone does the ship commander have the authority to make major operational decisions.

Black Sea Fleet Capabilities and Performance

The Georgia war in and of itself does not allow us to say much about the capabilities of the BSF, as the Fleet was not seriously tested by the Georgian navy, which consisted solely of a few patrol craft and two small missile ships, which were most likely not actually armed with missiles at the time of the conflict. Furthermore, with the one exception discussed above, most of the Georgian navy sailors and officers abandoned their ships in port rather than engage the Russian navy or withdraw to the south. As a result, most Georgian navy ships were destroyed by the Russian military at pier in Poti. While the Russian navy is no longer one of the most powerful in the world, it was clear before the conflict that it could easily handle threats from an adversary at this level of capabilities. Having said that, BSF ships that participated in the conflict acquitted themselves fairly well, according to all observers. The navy clearly had a plan of action designed for the possibility of a conflict with Georgia, and this plan was implemented quickly and efficiently. A large percentage of the Fleet's ships were able to get underway within 24 hours of the start of hostilities. Several hundred naval infantry soldiers were placed on amphibious landing ships and deployed to Abkhazia, with missile ships and corvettes acting as escorts. These escorts successfully eliminated potential threats to the landing ships. Overall, the BSF's participation in the Georgia war showed that it is quite capable of playing a role in combat should it be called upon to do so in the future.

At the same time, the August events have not changed my overall assessment of the state and capabilities of the BSF. The Black Sea Fleet currently includes 28 operational ships and submarines with an average age of 25 years, though these are mostly smaller craft. There are six 1st class surface ships (four operational), two diesel submarines (one operational), seven Ropucha and Alligator amphibious landing craft (six operational), two relatively new Bora-class missile hovercraft, and 15 operational 3rd class ships, including small anti-submarine warfare (ASW) ships (Grisha), small missile ships, and minesweepers. Of the larger ships, only the *Moskva* and the *Smetlivyi* can be considered fully operational, though recent reports indicate that both of the Kara-class cruisers

will soon rejoin the fleet. The *Kerch* has recently emerged from overhaul and is undergoing sea trials, though some reports indicate that it still has difficulty operating in deep water environments. Following reports in June that the *Ochakov*, which has been in overhaul since 2000, has recently completed repairs and would become the Black Sea Fleet's new flagship, the ship was removed from drydock and the BSF announced that it would be scrapped in the near future.

Only four first-class combat ships have deployed outside the Black Sea in the last ten years. One of these (the *Pytlivyi*) is currently being overhauled. Even if all of the overhauls were completed successfully, the BSF would only have six large combat ships for the foreseeable future. As independent Russian military observers have noted, the entire fleet is much weaker than the assemblage of random NATO ships sent to the Black Sea in August-September 2008 in the aftermath of the Georgia war. Russian anti-ship weaponry is mostly outdated and would be unlikely to penetrate NATO's Aegis defense systems. At the same time, the guidance systems for Russian anti-ship missiles would be unlikely to survive a conflict with NATO.

Furthermore, the ships in the fleet are relatively old, and their lifespan is likely to have been negatively impacted by poor maintenance during the financially difficult 1990s. The *Moskva*, the youngest of these ships, is 26 years old, while the *Smetlivyi* was commissioned almost 40 years ago. It is likely that most of these ships will have reached the end of their useful lifespans in the next 10-15 years. This implies that by the time BSF ships may need to be relocated from Sevastopol in 2017, some of them are likely to be no longer active.

Impact on Cooperative Activity

The naval campaign of the Georgia war did not have a significant impact on the course of the war, which was fought almost entirely by both sides' ground forces. Nor did it affect the military balance in the Black Sea region to any great extent. But the use of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in combat has had a dramatic effect on political relations in the region and has led to a curtailing of the extensive program of naval cooperation between the Russian navy and NATO navies in both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

Before the recent conflict, Russian admirals often touted cooperation with foreign navies as a prime role of the Russian navy. They saw the participation of Russian naval ships in exercises and operations with foreign navies not only as a way to improve naval interoperability, but also as a means for improving interstate relations. According to them, multinational operations provided the Russian navy with opportunities to improve its skills and extend collaboration with neighboring navies, while also letting it show others that it can act as a responsible neighbor and is ready to direct multinational military operations in the region should the need arise. BSF ships participate in a number of

multilateral annual naval exercises and operations, including BlackSeaFor, Black Sea Harmony, and Active Endeavor. Together, participation in these three programs accounted for about one third of BSF ship deployments during 1999-2007. BSF ships have also participated in bilateral exercises with the navies of Italy, Greece, Turkey, and other Mediterranean littoral states.

Russian participation in NATO's Active Endeavor counter-terrorism operation in the Mediterranean provides an excellent example of the importance the Russian navy attaches to this type of activity and the active role it can play in such operations. While Active Endeavor has been an ongoing NATO operation since 2001, planning for Russian participation only got underway in 2004, with the first Russian ships participating in January 2006. The Russian navy attached particular importance to having at least a core group of officers develop sufficient English-language skills to be able to operate with the NATO group. As part of the operation, Russian ships routinely participate in joint exercises with NATO ships from a number of countries, including Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These exercises have included Russian helicopters landing on board NATO ships, practicing boarding of suspicious vessels, and other tasks typical of counter-terrorism and counter-piracy operations. In addition to the practical training provided by participation in this operation, the Russian navy values the status provided by Russian participation in a NATO operation. This was made clear in a report published in the official Russian Navy journal after the conclusion of the *Moskva's* participation in Active Endeavor in January 2006. The report noted that this was the first time ships from a state that was not a NATO member had participated in the operation and noted the historical importance of the presence of the NATO Secretary General on board the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

In retaliation for Russian action in the Georgia war, Russian ships were barred from participation in Active Endeavor, even though the *Ladnyi* had already arrived at the location of the operation off the coast of Turkey. Russian media reacted quite predictably, arguing that the operation was not so important and that Russian ships that had participated previously were exploited by being used as messenger ships rather than as full-fledged combatants. Nevertheless, as NATO and Russia slowly resume cooperative activities, it is likely that BSF ships will once again be invited to participate in Active Endeavor. In the long run, cooperative naval activities in the Black Sea are sufficiently institutionalized that they are likely to survive the current downturn in relations.

Future of the Russian Black Sea Fleet

In the aftermath of the Georgia war, the Russian government announced a significant expansion of its military activity, accompanied by a substantial increase in planned financing and a commitment to replace aging hardware. At the same time, the government announced a significant expansion of its

worldwide naval presence, with plans for four year-end long distance naval task force deployments simultaneously for the first time in well over a decade. In addition to ongoing deployments by two Northern Fleet combat ships to the Mediterranean Sea and Venezuela, and by the Baltic Fleet escort ship *Neustrashimyi* to the Gulf of Aden, the Northern Fleet's sole aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* and accompanying ships have deployed for exercises in the Mediterranean with the Black Sea Fleet flagship *Moskva*. Furthermore, the Pacific Fleet destroyer *Admiral Vinogradov* is sailing to the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea to make a series of port calls and conduct exercises with *Peter the Great* and *Admiral Chabanenko* as they return from Venezuela. The Russian navy will soon have as many as 8-10 major combat ships deployed at the same time. While this is the highest number of ships deployed simultaneously by the Russian navy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, we should not forget that the Russian navy has only approximately 18 major naval combatants capable of deploying outside their home base. This set of deployments may well represent the maximum simultaneous out of area deployment capability of the Russian navy at the present time.

Despite talk of a substantial expansion of naval construction, including plans for a new class of aircraft carriers to be built in the next 15 years, the capabilities of the Russian navy in general and the Black Sea Fleet specifically are likely to decline for at least two decades. Grandiose plans for building aircraft carriers and other as yet unspecified combat ships are unlikely to come to fruition, partly as a result of the decline in Russia's financial situation in the months after their announcement, and partly because the Russian military industrial complex is in poor condition and is not capable of building such large ships at the pace called for in the plans. Smaller ships will be built but will not be able to fully replace the capabilities possessed by the Black Sea Fleet's aging cruisers and destroyers.

In the meantime, the extensive array of cooperative activities between Western navies and the BSF is likely to be maintained at more or less the level that existed prior to the war. There have not been any announcements about curtailing Russian participation in BlackSeaFor and Black Sea Harmony, and Russian participation in Active Endeavor is likely to be resumed sometime within the next two or three years.

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