

## Russia's Entanglement in Syria

### A PROTRACTED, EXTREME STRESS FACTOR FOR THE RUSSIAN NAVY

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On Russian Navy Day, July 30, 2017, a high-profile naval parade was held in St. Petersburg to demonstrate the power of the Russian Navy both to the world and to President Vladimir Putin. The ardent commander-in-chief reassured the spit-and-polished admirals that the navy is a key guarantor of Russia's great power status. However, praise and fresh marine paint cannot hide acute fissures: the Russian Navy is seriously over-stretched and under-resourced. Despite putting on a perfect show for the president (who clearly felt more at ease next to the statue of Peter the Great than Lenin's Tomb), the Russian Navy is confronting austerity measures. Russia's open-ended intervention in Syria has been placing significant pressure on its operations. This abridged analysis examines the impact of the Syrian operation on the near-term prospects for the modernization (and the lack thereof) of the Russian Navy. The overall deduction is that Russia's submarine and cruise missile programs are best positioned to be successful while other naval programs appear destined to face technical and financial challenges.

#### **Ambitions, Priorities, Setbacks**

One the eve of the pompous naval parade, Putin signed an [executive order](#) on the "Basic Principles of State Naval Policy until 2030." This was supposed to clarify the priorities for enhancing the navy, but the judgements fell rather flat. The document sets forth the usual maximalist goals of making sure the navy is prepared to deter any threat to Russia's interests. It outlines new situations of confrontation (mostly with the West) while barely acknowledging the need to significantly reduce expenditures. Some sections are perplexing, such as the call to counter potential hostilities along the North Sea Route, a proposition that has no connection to reality considering that the Arctic is a remarkably cooperative international environment. The combination of exaggerated threat assessments and entirely unrealistic guidelines on countering these threats is so

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bizarre that Dmitry Gorenburg, a keen Russian military analyst, had good reason to [describe](#) the new document as “yet another salvo in the ongoing rearguard action by the Russian Navy to protect its procurement budget.”

The most quixotic of all impractical demands in the new policy is the reaffirmed intention to add aircraft carriers to the combat order of the Russian Navy. This has been the impossible dream of Russian admirals since the autumnal years of the Soviet Union. The 2025 State Armament program, which is due to be approved by the end of the year, can turn this hope into a [working but far-fetched](#) proposition. This long-delayed program is still being shaped by furious lobbying—against the backdrop of the navy preparing to absorb more than a fair share of [budget cuts](#). Even if a compromise on allocation of funding is reached, it will have to be adjusted to the reality of a lack of technology and capacity. There are no shipyards in Russia capable of constructing aircraft or helicopter carriers.

Submarines are going to constitute the main force of the Russian Navy, particularly since the plans for constructing major surface combatants are troubled. Russia’s previous 2020 Armament program secured for the navy heavy investments in the construction of a new generation of strategic nuclear submarines. Three *Borei*-class (Project 955) submarines are now deployed with five more in different stages of construction. The main weapon system for these platforms, the *Bulava* missile (SS-N-32), has had [persistent problems](#), which could turn this provisional success into a costly setback. The concentration of resources on the *Borei* program caused delays with implementing the second most demanding project: [Yasen-class](#) cruise missile submarines (Project 885). The first in this series, the *Severodvinsk*, entered the Northern Fleet in 2014 after 20 years of construction and trials. The *Kazan*, also in this series, was launched in the spring of 2017 and five more keels have been laid down. The delay and the failure of a new design for the *Lada*-class submarine (Project 677) compelled the authorities to focus on upgrading the *Kilo*-class diesel-electric attack submarines (developed in the 1970s), resulting in new *Varshavyanka* models (Project 636.3). Six of these joined the Black Sea Fleet over 2015-2017, two more are under construction at the St. Petersburg shipyard for the Pacific Fleet, and another four have been contracted for.

The breakdown of the deal with France on purchasing two (and constructing two more) *Mistral*-class amphibious assault ships is a major blow to Russia’s maritime strategy. Assertions that these ships do not fit into the combat order are often supplemented with ironic pledges to [build](#) similar ships in the near future.

The new flagship of the Russian Navy will be the old nuclear battlecruiser *Admiral Nakhimov*, which will come out of [protracted modernization](#) in a couple of years, at which point the worn-out *Pyotr Velikiy* will enter rehabilitation. The shift to constructing frigates of the *Admiral Grigorovich*-class as well as smaller crafts is not a matter of

strategic preference but of technological necessity and the [sorry state](#) of many shipyards affected by mismanagement more than by sanctions.

What makes it possible for the naval command to make a virtue out of necessity is the possibility to deploy, on small crafts, the new 3M-54 [Kailbr](#) long-range cruise missile, and, in the near future, the 3M-22 [Zirkon](#) anti-ship missile. These weapon systems grant even light squadrons the ability to project considerable firepower onshore as well as the capacity to threaten U.S. joint task forces shepherding aircraft carriers. Still, the ability to perform missions far from home base and to form “bastions” for protecting strategic submarines will remain limited, whatever needs the Kremlin might have in demonstrating challenges to U.S. naval dominance.

### **The Syrian Test for the Russia Navy**

Launched with great global resonance in September 2015, Russia’s intervention in the Syrian civil war added a new page to Russian military history records, even if the scale has been smaller than the Soviet “air bridges” to Egypt and Syria in the 1970s. This projection of power far beyond the immediate perimeter of Russia’s borders was supposed to demonstrate, inter alia, the global reach of its navy, which had to mobilize its limited capabilities to play a major role. Russia’s main intervening instrument is the mixed squadron of Russian air forces deployed at the Khmeimim airbase outside Latakia. This grouping has performed above expectations despite some mishaps. The execution of the plan for enclosing the rebels into so-called “de-escalation zones” required deploying Russian special forces and Russian sub-contractors like the Wagner group, which led to an [increase](#) in Russian casualties in the fall of 2017.

The most important functions that the navy performs in the Syrian civil war are delivering supplies and providing logistical support. It became clear already in October 2015 that Russia did not have enough ships to move the necessary supplies. Several old freighter ships were [purchased](#) in Turkey and added to the fleet as auxiliaries, which helped boost Russia’s presence in Syria in December 2015 (the time when the Russian Su-24M bomber was shot down by a Turkish F-16 fighter). High pressure on Russia’s supply ships never abated. For example, the 30-year-old *Caesar Kunikov* large landing ship performed six trips between Novorossiysk and Tartus in the first half of 2017. The overstretch probably contributed to the accident on April 27, 2017, when the 37-year-old Russian naval intelligence vessel *Liman* sank after colliding with a livestock freighter north of the Bosphorus. In support of its Syrian intervention, the Russian Navy deployed a squadron to the Eastern Mediterranean, which was led from June 2015 to January 2016 by the Black Sea flagship cruiser *Moskva*, resulting in the 35-year-old ship currently undergoing long repairs in Sevastopol.

The intended high moment in the demonstration of naval might was perhaps the combat deployment to the Eastern Mediterranean of Russia’s only aircraft carrier, the 35-

year-old *Admiral Kuznetsov*. Its performance, however, was not exactly stellar. The air sorties from its deck were less effective than those performed from the Khmeimim base, two planes (Mig-29K and Su-33) were lost due to technical failures, and now the ship needs extensive and expensive repairs that are [expected](#) to take at least three years.

The only real success achieved by the Russian Navy in the Syrian operation is the firing of long-range *Kalibr* cruise missiles, starting with a salvo from four Caspian flotilla ships on October 7, 2015. Further salvos have come from Russian frigates and diesel-electric [submarines](#) in the Eastern Mediterranean. Besides gaining experience and testing weapon systems, these strikes are meant to demonstrate Russia's new capabilities for conventional deterrence, even if, as Nikolai Sokov [argues](#) in a PONARS Eurasia policy memo, a fully integrated system of command, control, intelligence, and target acquisition is still years away. The U.S. strike on the Shayrat airbase on April 6, 2017, with 59 Tomahawk missiles launched by two *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers (USS *Ross* and USS *Porter*), instantly [revealed](#) deficiencies in both the Russian air defence "bubbles" over Tartus and Latakia, and in comparative high-precision strike capability. Finally, the engagement of the Russian Baltic and North Sea Fleets in the recent large-scale Zapad-2017 exercises necessitated a reduction of Russia's naval presence in the Mediterranean, further highlighting Russia's naval overstretch.

### **Prospects and Implications**

Accumulating stress from the Syrian operation will affect the performance and combat readiness of the Russian Navy for years to come, particularly if indeed the navy comes out as a designated loser in the Russian 2025 Armament program. At present, the *Admiral Kuznetsov* carrier and *Petr Velikii*, *Moskva*, and *Varyag* battle cruisers are in need of overhaul and modernization, which can only be done at the Severodvinsk shipyard, the same place where the *Yasen*-class and *Borei*-class nuclear submarines are under construction, so all sorts of delays are certain to occur. The most acute problem is with amphibious ships. The 40-45-year-old *Alligator* series (three ships) and the 35-40-year-old *Ropucha-I* series (nine ships, originally built in Poland) are worn out beyond repair, and the new *Ivan Gren* series is cut down to two ships, the first of which is still undergoing trials after 13 years of construction at the Kaliningrad shipyard.

Russian naval shipbuilding is badly affected by [sanctions](#) and the interruption of cooperative ties with Ukraine, while [corruption](#) at the United Shipbuilding Corporation (OSK) is notorious even by Russian standards. At the end of the day, even as Russia seeks to ensure it continues to have the second most powerful naval force in the world, China is set to [defeat](#) this with its massive naval build-up program. This gradual but irreversible deterioration of naval might will have a significant impact on Russia's policy in the Middle East. The projection of air and naval power is still perceived in the region as a manifestation of Russia's intentions and capacity to claim a major political role; however, it may be soon recognized as a self-entrapment that denies Moscow the ability

to engage elsewhere. For that matter, [speculation](#) about a possible Russian intervention in the Libyan civil war fails to take into account the plain fact that the Russian Navy has no capacity for supporting another operation of even a modest scale. The protracted violent crisis in Yemen is clearly beyond Russia's military reach. The sustainability of the Syrian deployment also cannot be taken for granted because any accident at sea (the sinking of *Liman* provides an example) could re-expose the vulnerability of over-used equipment.

These weaknesses may be partly compensated by an expansion of the Russian naval facility in Tartus, which is often [presented](#) as a full-scale base but which is, in fact, rather small and under-developed. The lease agreement signed in January 2017 makes it possible for Russia to upgrade the base, but Russia's access remains conditional and can be terminated on a one-year notice. Because the Russian Navy is short of major surface combatants while striving to feature smaller missile platforms, it might make sense for Russia to establish a permanent base for a squadron of *Karakurt*-class missile corvettes at Tartus (eight such vessels are currently under construction and four more are under contract). This would require a considerable expansion of the Tartus facility and planners would have to ensure that the area is secure against terrorist attacks (as happened there in May 2016).

Considering the shrinking defense budget allocated to the navy, investing in naval capabilities to support the intervention in Syria, such as building proper infrastructure in Tartus, would inevitably clash with other priorities. For example, it might diminish the advancement of the *Borei* and the *Yasen* programs, the two most expensive items in the whole 2025 Armament program, and hamper plans for constructing amphibious and auxiliary ships. Russian top brass also has to consider its high-priority plan of constructing *Ivan Papanin*-class patrol craft (Project 23550) that are capable of operating in the High North. At present, the Northern Fleet does not have a single ice-class ship, while the construction of the nuclear icebreaker *Arktika* is currently experiencing delays. Arctic ambitions implicitly clash with Syrian ambitions, while the Pacific Fleet also demands its share of investments.

## **Conclusion**

The Russian high command keeps demanding resources and Putin remains reluctant to establish clear and reduced priorities for their allocation—an unsustainable posture that generates a range of implications for the United States and NATO. A particular risk here is that hostile action might be presumed or invented in order to cover technical failures. It took firm determination from Putin to overrule the “hypothesis” from his admirals that a collision with a U.S. submarine was the cause of the *Kursk* catastrophe in August 2000. He might be disinclined to master such resolution when the next disaster strikes.

Submarines constitute the main strength of the Russian Navy, but these vessels are generally familiar waters to the United States and NATO, which have operational and technological solutions for upgrading their [anti-submarine](#) capabilities. The difficulty for Western planners is the emerging challenge of Russia's expected deployment of small modular weapon systems such as the new *Zirkon* anti-ship missile, which can be placed on land, ship, or submarine platforms, and against which there are presently [no effective](#) defenses. The possible deployment in Tartus of the *Bastion* (SSC-5 *Stooge*) anti-ship missile complex equipped with *Zirkon* missiles could be a serious threat to U.S. and NATO naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean.

NATO's broader strategic perspective is to address Russian naval enhancements in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea theaters. Moscow has had to divert attention and resources from these two regions toward the Syrian entanglement. Russia's Black Sea Fleet cannot concentrate on the task of establishing dominance in the area of its direct responsibility while also shouldering a heavy flow of supplies through the congested Turkish Straits to Tartus. The inability to concentrate assets aggravates the failure to acknowledge the need to curtail ambitions in accordance with shrinking resources, setting the Russian Navy on the course of high-risk degradation.

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