

Russian Naval Deployments

A Return to Global Power Projection or a Temporary Blip?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 57

Dmitry Gorenburg

Harvard University

May 2009

In the last six months, the Russian Navy has undertaken several high profile deployments. The number and geographic scope of these deployments is unprecedented in the history of the Russian Navy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In late January 2009 ships from all four Russian fleets were engaged in long distance deployments, and the Russian media reported that the number of Russian ships simultaneously at sea was greater than at any time since 1991. Is this the first step in a return to global power projection by the Russian military? Or is it a one-time event spurred by the financial windfall generated by the unprecedented rise in oil prices in 2007 and the first half of 2008? This memo assesses the significance of Russia's recent naval deployments. Despite some increase in Russian naval capabilities in the last few years, the Russian Navy has a long way to go before it can compete with other regional navies, much less that of the United States.

Overview of Recent Russian Deployments

The most significant and lengthy of these deployments is the six-month cruise of the Northern Fleet nuclear cruiser *Peter the Great* and destroyer *Admiral Chabanenko*, with accompanying escort ships and, most likely, a submarine escort. The ships left Severodvinsk on September 22, 2008 and entered the Mediterranean on October 5. On the way, they conducted a number of exercises, including flight operations with two Ka-27 helicopters, a gunnery exercise, and

naval infantry exercises in repelling boarders and boarding an enemy ship to rescue hostages. Shortly after the naval group's arrival in the Mediterranean, it conducted an exercise with the Baltic Fleet frigate *Neustrashimyi* and the Black Sea Fleet frigate *Ladnyi*. This was followed by a three-day port visit to Tripoli, Libya with the *Neustrashimyi* and a subsequent visit to Akzas-Karagach in Turkey on October 22-26. A previously announced port visit to Syria did not take place. Before departing the Mediterranean, the naval group made a brief port visit to Toulon, France. Vice Admiral Korolev, deputy commander of the Northern Fleet, met with France's Vice Admiral Obrio and Vice Admiral Tandonne to discuss naval cooperation, the results of recent joint maneuvers, and stability in the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean. At all these port visits, Russian ships were made available for civilian visits.

In early November, the naval group left the Mediterranean and sailed for Venezuela. This was the first visit by Russian ships to Latin America since 1988. On November 23, the group was met by Venezuelan ships and escorted into La Gueira on November 26. After several days in port, the naval group participated in an exercise with the Venezuelan Navy in early December. This exercise was initially supposed to include joint patrol, reconnaissance, anti-air warfare, and submarine search-and-destroy components. In the end, the Commander of the Venezuelan Navy cancelled the participation of the Venezuelan submarine, so this portion of the exercise did not take place. The Venezuelan side did include three frigates, four patrol boats, several amphibious ships, and both naval aviation and a squadron of Su-30s from the Venezuelan air force.

After departing Venezuela, *Admiral Chabanenko* traversed the Panama Canal on December 6 and stopped for a port visit in Rodman on Panama's Pacific Coast. This was the first transit of the Panama Canal by a Russian navy ship since the 1940s. It returned to the Caribbean, again through the Panama Canal, on December 10. With some escort ships, *Admiral Chabanenko* then visited Nicaragua on December 13-14, dropping off a humanitarian aid shipment of medical supplies, computers, office equipment, and power generators. These ships then headed to Havana for a four-day port visit lasting through December 23. During this time, *Peter the Great* remained in the Caribbean but did not dock in Nicaragua or Cuba.

The ships then parted ways. *Admiral Chabanenko* headed back toward home waters, where it docked in Baltiisk in Kaliningrad Oblast on January 15. Meanwhile, *Peter the Great* sailed around the southern coast of Africa, visiting Cape Town in mid-January. It then headed to Goa, India for a port visit and subsequent participation in the INDRA 2009 bilateral exercise, where it was joined by several other Russian navy ships. It traversed the Suez Canal in late February 2009 and returned to its home port on March 11, 2009. At just under six months and 22,000 nautical miles, this was the longest deployment by Russian Navy ships since 1991, both in time and distance.

A second Northern Fleet naval group, consisting of the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*, the destroyer *Admiral Levchenko*, and two support ships, left Severomorsk on December 5 headed for the Mediterranean. *Admiral Levchenko* visited Lisbon from December 19-22. All four ships then entered the Mediterranean, where they conducted bilateral exercises with Turkey and Greece and visited ports in those countries and in Syria. Plans to rendezvous with the cruiser *Moskva* and the *Neustrashimyi* for a month-long exercise simulating a battle between two naval strike groups did not materialize. Instead, *Admiral Kuznetsov* suffered an electrical fire on January 6 while in port in Turkey. Though the damage was relatively minor, one sailor died and the ship did not participate in a planned exercise with Turkish ships. After engaging in some flight exercises for its onboard aircraft, the *Kuznetsov* was met by *Admiral Chabanenko*, which had sailed for the Mediterranean after only four days in port in Baltiisk. The two ships, together with their support ships, then returned to Severdvinsk on March 1. Along the way, the *Kuznetsov* was involved in another mishap, spilling oil off the Irish coast during a refueling operation. The Russian Navy initially denied responsibility but was forced to admit its fault after it became obvious that only its ships were in the area at the time of the spill.

Meanwhile, *Admiral Levchenko* traversed the Suez Canal and joined the Pacific Fleet's destroyer *Admiral Vinogradov* and *Peter the Great* to participate in INDRA 2009 with the Indian Navy. INDRA 2009 was originally planned as an anti-piracy exercise but due to the recent increase in piracy off the coast of Somalia, it turned into a real-life operation. The three ships conducted anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden for two weeks in early February.

This exercise was a small part of a more sustained anti-piracy operation undertaken by the Russian Navy virtually uninterrupted since October 2008. The operation began in response to the hijacking of the Ukrainian merchant vessel *Faina* in late September 2008. The Russian Navy quickly sent the Baltic Fleet's *Neustrashimyi* to the region. Between its arrival in the Gulf of Aden on October 27, 2008 and its departure from the region on January 11, 2009, *Neustrashimyi* provided protection for over 50 ships and used its weapons against pirate vessels on three occasions. *Admiral Vinogradov* of the Pacific Fleet then took over the operation and provided protection for another 54 vessels, preventing the hijacking of several merchant vessels. *Admiral Vinogradov* departed the region in mid-March. The operation was continued by its sister ship, the *Admiral Panteleyev*, which departed Vladivostok on March 29, 2009 and arrived in the Gulf of Aden in late April. It is likely that the Russian Navy will continue to send ships to conduct anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia for the foreseeable future.

Significance of Deployments

While the number and geographical scope of Russian naval deployments has

increased dramatically in the last several months, these deployments are not going to contribute much to Russian naval capabilities and will have only a limited political impact.

With the exception of the anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, these deployments were politically, rather than militarily, motivated. They are part of an effort to show that the Russian military and state are no longer as weak as they were believed by many to be for most of the last 15 years. As such, they are important primarily for the propaganda value of showing how far and how long the Russian Navy can deploy. Official communiqués often emphasize the unprecedented length of some of the deployments. They also often focus on the distance covered and describe, in great detail, the capabilities of the ships' main weapons systems.

The deployment to Venezuela, initially announced on September 8, 2008, appeared motivated, at least in part, by the arrival of several U.S. and NATO warships in the Black Sea after the Georgian conflict. This reasoning was made explicit by Prime Minister Putin in his comments at a meeting of the Valdai Club in early September, in which he said, "God forbid Russia from engaging in any kind of controversy in the American continent. This is considered the holiest of the holy. And yet they [the United States] drive ships with weapons to a place just ten kilometers from where we are? Is this normal? Is this an equitable move?"

Given the timing of the deployment and the public rhetoric surrounding it, it seems likely that the original plan for the Northern Fleet's extended deployment included only its travel to the Mediterranean and that the Caribbean component was a last minute addition. Initially confused reporting about which ships would undertake the deployment, the deployment's timing, and its missions support this view. It may also be that the initial plan was to conduct two separate deployments, one by *Peter the Great* to the Mediterranean and another by ships from the Pacific Fleet to Venezuela and that the two deployments were then combined.

Reports in the Russian press also made it clear that the exercise was conceived primarily as a public relations move rather than an actual training exercise. As Viktor Baranets wrote:

The close approach of Russian naval and air forces to the United States is a fitting reply to the USA and NATO bringing their military bases closer to Russian borders. In this way, Russia seeks to reach strategic parity and to make Washington understand that it will no longer limit itself only to verbal objections to military threats.

The hope, at least among the more anti-American and nationalist segments of the Russian foreign policy community, was that the appearance of Russian warships in America's backyard would cause American naval commanders and politicians

a significant amount of worry.

The Russian media was not uniformly positive in its reaction to the Russian deployment to Latin America. Some analysts were concerned about the cost of the deployment, given the uncertainty of government revenues due to the financial crisis, noting that issues paramount in the immediate aftermath of the Georgian conflict were no longer of concern to the international community or to Russia. Retired Admiral Komoedov, the former commander of the Black Sea Fleet, argued that the VENRUS exercise was so basic that it was a waste of resources for Russian ships to participate in it and that there were no military objectives that it could possibly accomplish.

A second possible reason for the deployment to Venezuela is the potential for an increase in arms sales to Latin America. Russia has sold a number of helicopters and fighter aircraft to Venezuela and is eager to expand military sales beyond aviation. Russian officials may hope that South American navies will be interested in purchasing Russian ships, particularly Udaloy-class destroyers such as *Admiral Chabanenko*. The Russian navy has several Udaloy destroyers in reserve that it might be willing to sell.

After departing Venezuela, the Russian ships visited Panama, Nicaragua, and Cuba. These visits were clearly political in nature. Traversing the Panama Canal was portrayed in the Russian media as an effort to insert the Russian military into a zone the U.S. military has long considered to be of critical importance. The delivery of humanitarian aid to Nicaragua was seen as a direct response to the delivery of humanitarian aid to Georgia by U.S. warships in August 2008 and as a reward to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega for his recognition of Abkhazia's independence in August. The ship's visit was followed by President Ortega's state visit to Moscow the following week, during which the Russian government announced a significant increase in economic investment in Nicaragua.

Although the Russian Navy's deployment to the Caribbean has received more press coverage both in Russia and the United States, the anti-piracy operations currently underway are the ones likely to prove the most politically and operationally significant in the long run. In order to conduct this operation effectively, the Russian Navy had to establish communication and coordinate activities with NATO and EU ships conducting similar operations in the area. Russian ships have worked together with British and other foreign ships to prevent pirate attacks on merchant vessels. Undoubtedly, this cooperation was made easier by previous Russian participation in multinational anti-piracy exercises through venues such as FRUKUS. Furthermore, these actions took place despite the official freeze on Russian-NATO cooperation in the aftermath of the Georgian war. As a result of the requirements of this operation, Russia and the European Union have signed an agreement on cooperation in anti-piracy

operations and have begun to cooperate in this effort. The anti-piracy operation will reinforce the practical need for Russian naval cooperation with the major NATO naval powers and is likely to help resume contacts and restore confidence damaged by the conflict in Georgia. Russian naval participation in the anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden shows that the Russian Navy is beginning to play a constructive role in helping to solve important security problems around the world.

The other deployments are mostly significant as indicators that the Russian Navy now feels that it has the financial resources and training to send multiple ships on lengthy cruises within the same calendar year. When announcing the deployments, the Russian government emphasized that the 13 Russian Navy ships at sea in December 2008 were the most since 1991. In fact, one report noted that since the collapse of the Soviet Union there had never been more than ten Russian Navy ships at sea concurrently. Of course, many of these ships were actually support ships.

While Russian naval activity in the last six months represents their highest levels since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the majority of these activities have been merely “show the flag” exercises which demonstrate the Russian Navy’s capability for extended long-distance cruises. It is not clear that such activity can be sustained in coming years given the rapid decline of Russian government revenues in the wake of the global economic crisis. Also, the number of recent accidents onboard Russian ships and submarines indicate that naval maintenance and personnel training still present problems for the Russian Navy (There have been at least four fatal incidents on Russian Navy ships and submarines in the last several months: the accidental release of fire retardant on the *Nerpa* submarine and fires on the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, the destroyer *Marshal Shaposhnikov*, and the frigate *Neukrotimyi*).

Future Plans

The Russian Navy has continued to increase the tempo of its blue water deployments over the last year, so much so that it is now approaching the Navy’s current maximum capability. The major constraints for the future are a limited number of available ships, both combat and escort, and the rigidity of the training calendar. Given the limited progress in shipbuilding, the constraints on ship availability remain unchanged. The training calendar, on the other hand, has become somewhat less rigid over the last year, most likely because of the decreased role of conscripts in the Russian armed forces. While this change will not increase the overall number of Russian naval deployments, it will allow the Navy to be more flexible in the timing and duration of deployments in coming years. Major cruises would no longer be limited to the fall season but could be scheduled at any time during the year.

The other major advance for the Russian Navy in 2008 was its ability to

demonstrate that it could deploy ships with little to no advance notice. In the past, deployments and major exercises were scheduled months, if not years, in advance and significant deviations from the exercise plan were not possible. In August, the Black Sea Fleet showed that it could deploy ships to an unexpected conflict within 24 hours of the conflict's start. Although the government has officially stated that the deployment to the Caribbean had been planned well in advance, the timing of its announcement and the initial confusion about which fleet would actually be sending the ships hint at the likelihood that the deployment was actually the result of a last minute order from Russia's top political leaders. *Admiral Chabanenko's* speedy departure from Baltiisk in mid-January to escort *Admiral Kuznetsov* also showed signs of being unexpected.

The Russian Navy's activities over the last six months do not represent a qualitative jump either in a desire to deploy around the world or in its capability to do so. In coming years, the Russian Navy will continue to deploy regularly to the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, and it is likely to establish a semi-permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea and a temporary one in the Gulf of Aden as long as piracy remains a major threat in that region. The current economic crisis may limit the scope of deployments to some extent in the short to medium term and is likely to curtail any kind of extensive shipbuilding program. Without new ships, the Russian Navy will not be able to maintain, much less increase, its deployment schedule in the long term.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, or the Carnegie Corporation.

© PONARS Eurasia 2009