

The Russian Navy after the Kursk: Still Proud but with Poor Navigation

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Raising the giant Russian nuclear submarine *Kursk* after it sank on August 12, 2000, in the Barents Sea and then delivering it safely to dry dock at Roslyakovo, near Murmansk, was no small feat. The operation was unique in its scale and complexity, and further complicated by late decisions on the choice of foreign contractors, rushed technical preparations and the one thing that can never be taken for granted in the Barents Sea—rough weather. Against significant odds, the President Vladimir Putin's order was fulfilled and the Navy, putting maximum positive spin on this success, expected to repair its damaged prestige. Russian society appeared ready for closure on the tragedy of the *Kursk* and the investigation was moving toward one, when suddenly Putin dismissed both the commander and the chief of staff of the Northern Fleet (Admiral Vyacheslav Popov and Admiral Mikhail Motsak), as well as 12 other high-ranking officers under Popov's and Motsak's command. This unexpected cadre "massacre" has brought back many hard questions about the causes of the catastrophe that had been so carefully swept under ceremonial carpets. Putin's decision may be based on serious thinking about the lessons of the *Kursk*, and, more likely, his determined political turn toward the West in the global antiterrorist campaign may also drive it.

The Mystery and the Media

The immediate official reaction on the *Kursk* catastrophe was so instinctively secretive and clumsy that it can only be described as a public-relations disaster. Putin was able to repair some of the damage at the long meeting he held with families of the crewmembers and as he learned to alter the format and style of his speeches. If one lesson has been learned from the tragedy of the *Kursk*, it is the need to supply information and to respond immediately to events as they unfold. This, however, runs counter to entrenched bureaucratic patterns and KGB habits of restricting information, especially in the face of national emergencies (e.g., Chernobyl). Since the realization of the need to provide information to appease the country, a rich flow of official statements and expert analysis on every development related to the *Kursk* has been maintained; a permanent press center in Murmansk was established, and a special bilingual Web site (www.kursk.strana.ru) was launched that includes updates, pictures, and even weather forecasts.

This carefully orchestrated information overload had provided the best possible cover for the embarrassing questions about the catastrophe that remain unanswered. What was the plan for the large-scale Northern Fleet exercises in which the *Kursk* participated and what were the positions of other ships at the time of the disaster? How could all of the Russian ships' acoustic stations miss the massive explosion (with the power of five to seven tons of TNT) that was registered by all seismic stations in the region)? Why did the search for the submarine begin only twelve hours after the explosion, when it had already missed three planned radio contacts? Were there any problems with the maintenance of the submarine, which was launched just five years earlier, or with the training of the crew? Collective sacking of admirals obviously means a "yes" in answer to the last question but the lack of clarity on other issues allows for the continued recycling of several extreme versions of the events, from "friendly fire" to a collision with the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* to mutiny on the *Kursk*.

The government commission on investigating the causes of the *Kursk* catastrophe, chaired by Vice Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov, has been carefully and selectively supplying information, gradually toning down the initial accusations that a collision with a U.S. or British submarine had caused the catastrophe. Several members of the commission, including the chairman himself, may have vested interests in blocking certain angles of the investigation (first and foremost, those related to the design and construction of the sub) and have had every opportunity to do so because the commission's work has been conducted with no oversight. The State Duma has not organized its own investigation and has reduced its role to holding hearings to discuss Klebanov's progress reports. The president has refrained from any statements on the causes of the catastrophe but firmly insisted that his order to raise the *Kursk* in 2001 was nonnegotiable. The operation, therefore, became a political matter of prestige and honoring the president's word, and its impressive success aroused serious expectations in the Naval Command. Thus all the more brutal was Putin's "summary execution," which not only went against the Russian tradition of 'the winners are not to be judged' but also against the new public-relations style. No information was released to the media either to prepare for the "admirals cleansing" or to justify it. Putin, after single-handedly leading Russia into the U.S.-led antiterrorist coalition, obviously feels no need to explain his cadre decisions.

The Kola Ecology: The Next Catastrophe

The issue of nuclear safety and environmental contamination was significant in the wake of the sinking of the *Kursk*. Lying on the shallow seabed 25 miles off the shore of the Kola Peninsula, the *Kursk*'s unexploded weapons and two nuclear reactors posed a major environmental risk. In fact, the environmental risk provided the only real justification for the colossal efforts invested in raising the submarine. The Northern Fleet HQ in its very first statement on the "accident" assured that the nuclear reactors had been safely shut down, which happened to be the truth. No measurements around the *Kursk* and inside its hull have indicated any worrisome increase in radiation levels. Given the power of the explosion, this is remarkable evidence of the margins of safety in the design of the reactors. Nevertheless, the possibility of leaks from the external cooling contours of the reactors was unacceptably high and further aggravated by the possibility of spontaneous explosions of several of the submarine's 24 cruise missiles. This possibility will not be eliminated until the nuclear fuel is unloaded and the "active zones" of the nuclear reactors are cut out from the *Kursk*, in early 2002, if all goes according to schedule.

Since 1957, some 250 nuclear submarines have been built in the USSR and Russia. Of these submarines, 189 have been decommissioned, including 113 in the Northern Fleet. About a half of them still have fuel in their reactors, and this number is decreasing very slowly. In the mid-1990s, the Northern Fleet had 52 submarines still loaded with nuclear fuel out of 88 decommissioned. Several international cooperative projects provided for more intensive work (26 submarines were unloaded in 1999–2000), but the tempo of retiring the aging vessels has also increased. In early 2001, the Ministry of Atomic Energy (MINATOM) approved a special program aimed at unloading all decommissioned submarines by 2005, which in the opinion of independent experts was unrealistic. Technical capacity for safe unloading is one potential bottleneck but a more serious one is the lack of spare storage, because some 60,000 spent fuel elements have already been stored ashore in the Kola with minimal (or none) safety precautions—and the large-scale international project for building in Russia vast storages for nuclear waste may materialize only by the end of the decade, if then.

The catastrophe of the *Kursk* has forced the Navy to concentrate its financial and logistical resources on the raising and dismantling operations, leading to postponements in other high-priority projects. The most serious problem here is not that in the immediate future the giant Typhoon-class submarines (Project 941) are to be retired but that many of the oldest first-generation nuclear submarines, built in the early 1960s and decommissioned in the late-1980s, still have their ancient reactors loaded with fuel. Each one of those is a disaster waiting to happen. There is no need to engage in guesswork about where the next catastrophe is going to happen, but finding much reassurance in the appointment of Admiral Popov as a top official in MINATOM is difficult.

The Navy Goes for Damage Limitation

The loss of the newest nuclear submarine, designed to be “unsinkable,” was indeed a heavy blow to the prestige of the Russian Navy. Although not the first case of a submarine disaster (the *Komsomolets* sunk in the Barents Sea in 1989) and not the largest catastrophe on the record (600 sailors were lost when the battleship *Novorossiisk* sunk in Sevastopol harbor in 1955), it attracted massive attention in the country and abroad due in part to the disastrous posture of the Navy and its inability to perform a rescue operation

The Navy Command was absolutely unprepared for such public awareness; in fact, in late August 2000 the Northern Fleet had to hold its first-ever press conference. Being close to panic under such pressure, the naval authorities built their main line of defense on the hypotheses of a collision with a U.S. or British submarine. Scant evidence was presented to support this hypothesis, but retired admirals (Eduard Baltin and Valery Aleksin were the most outspoken) immediately added all sorts of expert analysis. Their strongest point was the United States’ and Great Britain’s refusal to allow Russian specialists to inspect three suspect submarines. Although there were probably sound reasons for such refusals, with hindsight it is possible to say that a more cooperative attitude might have been a wiser course of action. Admiral Motsak, chief of staff of the Northern Fleet and commander of the special expedition for raising the *Kursk*, recently emphasized the possibility of a collision in an interview with *Izvestiya* (November 16, 2001).

Quite remarkably, the Navy Command did not try to find a scapegoat or push the blame onto the constructors or to make an outcry over underfinancing; instead, a special point was made to

praise *Kursk* Commander Gennadiy Lyachin and his crew and to portray the heroic efforts of the Navy personnel involved in the rescue operation, the first entry into the submarine in November 2000, and the final recovery. Every effort was made to lift the prestige of the Navy together with the *Kursk*, to emphasize the readiness to perform complex missions and the high morale among the submariners. Up to 86 percent of Russians are estimated to have followed the raising operation, so these efforts were not entirely futile.

Has the Navy Sailed Through?

As the *Kursk* is being dismantled and scrapped, a new submarine, the *Hepard* (the last one in Project 971), undergoes trials with the Northern Fleet after being launched in Severodvinsk. The Navy Command has placed maximum possible symbolic load on this event, as if it compensates not only for the tragic loss of one submarine but for the approximately 80 percent decline in the strength of the fleet since 1990. Putin's refrainment from any scapegoating and even congratulations on the success of the raising operation was a major relief for CinC Admiral Vladimir Kuroedov and his subordinates. Playing on Putin's own guilt complex and his "feelings" toward the Navy (being from St. Petersburg, he is expected to have some), in May 2001 the admirals secured his approval of the Naval Doctrine. This document, with its sweeping statements on the importance of the Navy to advance Russia's national interests and its ambitious goals to prevent hostile powers from dominating the oceans, would have made Admiral Sergei Gorshkov proud. Putin's ability to provide resources for implementing the "blue-water" strategy, something his successors are obviously lacking, is what makes a difference.

With all the impressive increases in the military expenditures of 2000 and 2001, the Navy has failed to increase its share of budget allocation and, in particular, to secure sufficient funds for maintenance of its assets. During the 1990s, the Navy command concentrated its meager resources on completing a few high-profile shipbuilding projects at the expense of maintenance and training; thus, for instance, the heavy cruiser *Petr Veliky* was launched in 1996, but her three sister ships (*Ushakov*, *Lazarev*, and *Nakhimov*) had to be decommissioned due to lack of repair. Russia's only aircraft carrier, *Kuznetsov*, was not able to show its flag in the Mediterranean after 1995; in fact, the Kosovo war prompted the high-level political decision to deploy a naval squadron there again—and the fatal exercises in August 2000 were the final stage of preparation for this deployment.

The only practical lesson the Navy has drawn from the catastrophe of the *Kursk* is on rebuilding rescue services, especially in the Northern Fleet and with special attention to submarines. As for larger lessons, they were not just ignored but firmly and deliberately blocked out. The problem is not just that the major Soviet-era ships will continue to dominate the combat order of the Navy for the next decade. A more significant problem lies with the vested interests of the Naval Command in preserving the strategic profile of the Navy and denying the downsizing trend toward a coastal defense force. The Northern Fleet duly performed launches of SLBMs in February and May 2001, but there has not been a serious debate on the size and composition of a Navy that would be affordable and sustainable in the second decade of the post-Cold War era. Designs for new generation of patrol and coastal ships and significant interest in implementing those designs are promising but ample evidence also suggests that Russian naval thinking continues to focus on defending the "strategic bastions" in the Barents Sea and interrupting NATO's Atlantic SLOCs. This conservatism, bordering the denial

syndrome, seriously undermines the prospects for revival of the Russian Navy and essentially amounts to its self-destruction.

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