

# Russia: A Land Power meets Seapower

---

**Thomas Fedyszyn**  
U.S. Naval War College

Russia's great power status has always rested solidly on its foundation as the world's largest and most formidable land power. In fact, both Peter and Catherine the Great, nominally the father and mother of Russia's Navy, had to defy Russian culture and tradition as they built navies in pursuit of territorial expansion and great power status. Only in the "Gorshkov Era" of Soviet times (1956-1985) did the Russian navy ply the world's oceans in great numbers, and even then, its vessel of choice was the submarine. The current chapter of Russian naval rejuvenation under Vladimir Putin is putting a new spin on how Russia uses its navy, although completely within the parameters set by his predecessors.

## To refresh...

Throughout the Cold War and until 1989, the Soviet Navy was the quantitative equal of the U.S. Fleet in every element of naval power except carrier aviation. Her submarine force, while qualitatively inferior, outnumbered ours. Her ballistic missile submarines patrolled off our coasts and her attack submarines were routinely tracked as they transited the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap in large numbers. It all came to a screeching halt with the fall of the Soviet Union. The now Russian Navy was tied to the pier, submarines leaking radioactive waste, and surface ships unable to operate without frequent engineering breakdowns. The small number of ships built by Russian shipyards were mostly sold to clients in search of economical naval platforms.

This changed abruptly in 2008 with the confluence of three events. First, Russia began its recovery from the global recession and the price of oil skyrocketed. This was Russia's great enabler. Second, Anatoliy Serdyukov took over as Minister of Defense with a reform agenda aimed at professionalization and jointness, and, finally, the Putin-Medvedev team put together a military building and modernization 10-year plan that gave great emphasis to the Navy.

Over this last decade, Russia's navy has seen steady growth and qualitative improvements. Today, Russia is slowly beginning to deliver ships and submarines to its navy, along with exporting them to India, Vietnam, Egypt and Indonesia. But most importantly, the Russian Federation Navy (RFN) is going back to sea. Their submarines are once again patrolling the world's oceans in limited numbers -- and we all know about their intelligence gatherers off our eastern seaboard. The Commander of NATO's Maritime Command asserted that "Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic is currently equaling or surpassing Cold War levels."<sup>1</sup> The former Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe, Admiral Mark Ferguson, characterizes the RFN as having developed an 'arc of steel' from the Arctic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.

The admiral's point was not that Russian seapower was equal to the U.S. and NATO navies on the high seas. Rather, that the Russian Navy had put us on notice in the Atlantic as well as developed the European equivalent of an 'anti-access/area denial' capability in those regions near the Russian homeland. Additionally, this naval capability could be used both to punish weak adversaries, to add to Russia's international diplomatic presence and prestige and to showcase Russian naval technology for arms export, Russia's second leading source of foreign currency after petroleum products.

## Witness Syria

In 2013, Russia established a ‘permanent flotilla’ in the eastern Mediterranean, to be manned by ships from all four of its fleets. After the Obama administration’s ‘red line’ pronouncement on Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapons, only this Russian force was in position to escort the Norwegian vessels carrying Syrian chemical weapons to their destruction destination. The world acknowledged Putin’s naval diplomatic initiative. Then, as the Russian Air Force needed additional air defense for its base in Humaymim (Syria), the Black Sea Fleet cruiser *Moskva* assumed the role of air defense commander. Russian air forces were then augmented by the arrival of Russia’s sole aircraft carrier, *Admiral Kuznetsov*, last fall. Finally, in an act that surprised most of the world, the Russian Navy launched multiple cruise missile attacks on so-called terrorist positions in Syria from over a thousand miles away, with *Kalibr* cruise missiles from both Buyan-M patrol boats in the Caspian Sea as well as diesel submarines in the Mediterranean. At a cost of probably less than the deployment of a U.S. Navy carrier strike group, Russia achieved significant diplomatic and military leverage in the Eastern Mediterranean while also creating significant interest in the sale of its cruise missiles, through the judicious and efficient use of its style of seapower.

The speed with which the Russian Federation Navy (RFN) has moved in the “joint” direction is noteworthy over the last decade. In the Arctic Ocean, the Baltic and Black Seas, the RFN is now protected by ground-based air defense systems incorporating Russia’s latest S-300 and S-400 systems. Russian aviation units supporting all four fleets routinely practice locating and destroying naval targets. This, along with improved diesel submarines (largely operating in the Black Sea), is what Admiral Ferguson had in mind as he used his post-Cold War mantra, reminiscent of the “Iron Curtain.”

Seapower, therefore can take many shapes and sizes in great power calculus. A historic land power whose second-rate economy is hardly dependent on the global commons ought to have no interest in control of the world’s oceans. Russia does not. However, Russian seapower today provides Vladimir Putin with precisely the tools of national power that the leader of a land power requires. First, his growing fleet of ballistic missile submarines will provide a reliable second-strike nuclear deterrent force as his attack submarines keep NATO navies on edge. Second, the global presence of small numbers of his surface combatants provides diplomatic presence and prestige while also showcasing Russian weapons technology. Third, the RFN can conduct selective operations against limited opponents, as long as they are near Russian territory. Fourth, and most importantly, Russian seapower can control Russia’s flanks and deny naval entry into the region. The Russian Navy, without carrier-based aviation, can still act as a deterrent to encroaching foreign navies planning to reclaim recently annexed land (Crimea) as well to intimidate NATO Alliance partners into disunity.

## One Last Thought

President Putin loves to use his navy. At a recent press conference, he boasted that *Admiral Kuznetsov*’s deployment to the Mediterranean was his “personal initiative.”<sup>2</sup> Based on the frequency with which he attends naval events and dresses in its uniforms, it is not unreasonable that he identifies with his navy. After all, as a judo master, he may very well fashion himself the naval destroyer: sleek, lean, vicious, lethal, stealthy and a very impressive sight to witness.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Janes Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS*, IHS, London, 2017, Executive Summary, p.9

<sup>2</sup> “Putin thanked Sailors and Industrialists for the Sortie of the *Admiral Kuznetsov* to the Mediterranean,” Press Conference 23 February, 2017,  
<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ui=2&ik=c35103f459&view=pt&search=inbox&th=15a703e8815181c1&siml=15a703e8815181c1>