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Troubled Russian Aircraft Carrier Kuznetsov Returns to Sea

By Matthew Bodner

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The Kuznetsov is Russia's only aircraft carrier of its type to enter service.

Russia's only aircraft carrier, the Soviet-era flagship Admiral Kuznetsov, has returned to sea after going into port for maintenance at the Sevmash Shipyards near Arkhangelsk, Interfax reported Monday.

The vessel, Russia's largest, is now heading out into the Barents Sea for post-repair sea trials, ensuring that the ship is in working order before resuming normal combat duties, Western Military District spokesperson Vadim Serga was quoted by Interfax as saying.

In Russian naval parlance, the Kuznetsov is not a proper aircraft carrier but rather a heavy aircraft-carrying cruiser, about half the size of a modern U.S. Nimitz-class aircraft carrier. But the Kuznetsov's cruiser capabilities mean that in addition to launching fighter planes, the warship can pummel enemy surface vessels with anti-ship guided missiles.

A U.S. Nimitz-class super-carrier displaces more than 100,000 tons — the standard of measurement for ship sizes. The Kuznetsov, by comparison, displaces a mere 55,000 tons with a full load.

In July, state news agency TASS reported that the Kuznetsov would undergo a massive retrofit at the Sevmash Shipyards in the next three to four years. The vessel has not been extensively serviced since it was launched in 1985, despite having been plagued with a slew of serious problems during the course of its lifetime.

While on deployment in the Mediterranean in 2009, a short circuit aboard the vessel caused a fire that killed one crew member. A month after the incident, an attempt to refuel the vessel at sea caused a large oil spill off the coast of Ireland.

Last year The Daily Beast reported that the U.S. Mediterranean Fleet trailed the Kuznetsov into the Mediterranean to lend a hand in case of an emergency, according to an unidentified U.S. Navy source. "The Kuznetsov might sink," the source said.

The Kuznetsov is Russia's only aircraft carrier of its type to enter service. Its sister ship, the Varyag, was not completed before the collapse of the Soviet Union and was later sold to China for completion after rusting in a Ukrainian shipyard for nearly a decade. The Varyag entered service in the Chinese navy as "the Liaoning" in 2012, making it China's first aircraft carrier.

An older Soviet-era Kiev-class aircraft-carrying cruiser was retrofitted by Sevmash for the Indian Navy and entered service last year as the Vikramaditya.

Although the navy does not have any immediate plans to build any new aircraft carriers of its own, Russia is waiting on the delivery of two French-built Mistral-class amphibious assault carriers over the next two years.

But amid the ongoing sanctions spat between Russia and the West, many NATO members are lobbying Paris to ax the deal, which would bolster Russian naval power.

French President Francois Hollande said in September that France will only deliver the first vessel at the end of October if tensions in Ukraine subside.

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