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Russia Launches Cutting-Edge Spy Ship to Track U.S. Missile Defense

By Matthew Bodner

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The ship was commissioned into the Russian navy during a large naval parade attended by President Vladimir Putin in Russia's Baltic Sea enclave of Kaliningrad on Sunday.

Russia inducted a new-generation spy ship into the Northern Fleet on Sunday during navy day celebrations. The new vessel will be tasked with monitoring U.S. anti-missile defenses on the high seas, a navy spokesman said.

The ship is known as the Yury Ivanov, the lead boat of the Project 18280 intelligence ships designed for the Russian navy. A second vessel of the same class will be launched next year, according to the United Shipbuilding Corporation, news agency RIA Novosti reported last week.

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Light on armaments, heavy on sensors and advanced electronic equipment, spy ships are purpose-built to loiter and listen to what foreign vessels are up to. The Yury Ivanov will be specifically equipped to track U.S. anti-missile defenses, which are being outfitted on American warships.

Each of Russia's four major fleets has one or two spy ships in their ranks, but these were built in the 1980s and are ill-equipped to counter the newer U.S. vessels. Each fleet is expected to receive an Ivanov-class ship over the next several years.

U.S. missile defenses have repeatedly caused friction in U.S.-Russia relations. Moscow considers the defenses an existential threat to its nuclear deterrence, which the Defense Ministry sees as its strongest guarantor of national security.

The U.S. is pursuing a sea-based missile defense strategy that will see the number of vessels fitted with Aegis anti-missile defense systems expand from 33 to 48 by the end of the 2020 fiscal year, according to a report issued by the Congressional Research Service last month.

Military planners in Moscow are making sure they can keep tabs on them.

"They are really paranoid about U.S. missile defenses being aimed at Russia, not Iran or North Korea," said Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg, a Russian naval expert at the Virginia-based CNA think tank. "So they want to observe [those deployments]."

Russian plans to pick holes if the U.S. missile defense shield goes beyond new ships. Moscow is working on several new classes of intercontinental ballistic missiles equipped with multiple nuclear warheads and countermeasures specifically designed to confuse and evade U.S. defenses in the event of a nuclear shooting war.

The Ivanov has been promoted in the Russian media as another tool in Russia's arsenal aimed at thwarting U.S. missile defenses, but the equipment required to track the U.S. system's deployment allows the vessel to perform other standard functions of a spy ship.

These tasks include serving as a communications hub for naval fleets, conducting electronic warfare — a high-tech aspect of modern war that focuses on blasting the air with electronic noise to confuse enemy sensors, jam communications and make it harder for the opponent to locate your own forces.

A spy ship also serves to gather intelligence on enemy electronic warfare capabilities, as well as listen to radio and other electronic signals emitted by foreign military forces.

Russia's navy has been a key focus of Putin's military modernization efforts, but two decades of decay following the collapse of the Soviet Union have seen its strength deteriorate significantly. No longer a major force on the high seas, the Russian navy has been mostly relegated to coastal defense.

According to Gorenburg, the Ivanov and its sister ship "will be used as intel ships for a variety of missions, they have a long range and deployment time so that can go out and observe U.S. weapons testing or naval exercises, or even monitor communications offshore somewhere."

The Ivanov isn't a large ship, displacing over 4,000 tons with a crew of 120 men — similar in

size to a frigate-type escort ship.

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