

New Russian Naval Doctrine Enshrines Confrontation With NATO

By [Matthew Bodner](#)

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While the new doctrine is ambitious, Russia may find it difficult to enact.

President Vladimir Putin on Sunday approved amendments to Russia's naval doctrine that prioritize the development of Russian positions in strategic seas around the world, according to the Kremlin website.

The updated doctrine takes advantage of a huge injection of funds into Russia's naval strength to shift the emphasis of Russian naval operations toward so-called blue water operations — deployments of naval force far beyond Russian coastal waters into the world's oceans, with a focus on the Atlantic and Mediterranean.

By focusing on the Atlantic, the amended doctrine asserts the Russian navy's role as a countering force to what military planners in Moscow see as an encroaching NATO military alliance on Russian borders and interests.

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who oversees the defense industry, presented the updated doctrine to Putin on Sunday and cited two reasons for the update: “above all, the changing international situation; and, of course, strengthening Russia’s position as a sea power,” according to remarks posted on the Kremlin website.

President Putin praised the revised doctrine, calling it a vital strategic document “to provide our country with an integral, consistent naval policy that will protect Russia’s interests.”

Retired Russian Navy Commander Maxim Shepovalenko, a military expert at the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), a Moscow-based defense think tank, said the doctrine indicates Russia was preparing for prolonged confrontation with the West.

“Its updated version [signifies] a long-term standoff with the U.S. and its NATO and major non-NATO allies,” he said.

Atlantic Pivot

Speaking aboard a new Russian navy frigate during Navy Day celebrations in the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad, Rogozin said the decision to expand Russian naval activity in the Atlantic Ocean was a response to heightened tensions with NATO since the start of the Ukraine crisis.

That crisis, which began after Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine last year, led a revitalized NATO to relocate equipment and stage war games close to Russian borders.

“We emphasize the Atlantic because NATO has been developing actively of late and coming closer to our borders, and Russia is of course responding to these developments,” Rogozin said, according to the Kremlin website.

According to Shepovalenko, this change in emphasis abandons the balanced global posture held by the Russian navy in recent years in favor of a biased one that is “assertive in the West [Atlantic Ocean] and in the North, and cooperative in the East and the South,” he said. The updated doctrine has provisions for greater coordination with the Chinese and Indian navies, he added.

To effectively project force into the Atlantic would require Russia to push ahead with the militarization of the Arctic, Rogozin said. Russian military planners see the Arctic as a key access point for Russia’s northern fleet to enter the Atlantic unimpeded by NATO.

Russia’s Baltic and Black Sea forces are separated from the Atlantic by NATO countries and fleets. The ships of the Baltic Fleet, based in Kaliningrad, must pass by Germany and Denmark through the Kattegat Sea, while the Black Sea Fleet, based in Crimea, has to navigate the Turkish Bosphorus.

This heightens the Arctic’s strategic importance, because control over it would give Russia’s Northern Fleet — the largest of all four major Russian fleets — “free and unhindered access to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans,” Rogozin told Putin.

Rogozin also said the naval doctrine was important to aid Moscow's economic aims in the Arctic, which has huge oil and gas reserves and is a potential future shipping route.

Limited Assets

While the new doctrine is ambitious, Russia may find it difficult to enact.

Russian ships already have a presence in the Atlantic Ocean, and it is hard to imagine how their strength could be elevated. Ships like the Northern Fleet flagship — the Soviet-built Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier — patrol the Atlantic accompanied by the handful of Russian naval vessels capable of blue water operations far from Russian shores, such as the Black Sea Fleet's Moskva heavy cruiser. Not much more is available.

Though an effective blue-water force during the Cold War, Russia's naval inventory can no longer support long-range oceangoing operations and in recent years has mostly functioned as a coastal defense force.

"Of Russia's over 215 surface ships, only a quarter of them are capable of blue-water operations, while the remaining are primarily meant for littoral [close to home] operations," Shepovalenko said.

New ships such as large destroyers designed for oceangoing deployments are not yet under construction, and are not expected until the mid- to late-2020s.

Russia's navy is expecting almost 100 ships by 2020, but the majority of them are small vessels like frigates, corvettes and patrol boats.

This means that Russia will struggle to fulfill its new doctrine until it begins building bigger ships, and no change in shipbuilding plans has been announced.

"New missions require new ships, and no new ships equals no new missions," Shepovalenko said.

Black Sea Reversal

The new doctrine also aims to reverse the decline of Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

Headquartered in the Crimean city of Sevastopol, the Black Sea Fleet was one of Russia's most withered when Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014.

A basing agreement with Kiev prevented Moscow from adding new ships to the force, but freed from that constraint the Defense Ministry last year deployed over 10 new ships to the Black Sea Fleet and is planning to use it as the foundation of a permanent Mediterranean flotilla, Rogozin said.

Taken as a whole, the updated naval doctrine has a strong focus on reversing the navy's gradual decline in the years since the fall of the Soviet Union, when lack of funds saw many ships tied up in port, rusting away for years, and Russia's ability to pursue strategic objectives on the high seas eroded.

To achieve this, the doctrine goes beyond naming areas of strategic interest for the Russian navy, and adds all-new sections on shipbuilding and social support for sailors.

Rogozin said that Russia over the last 10–15 years has developed a domestic shipbuilding industry that “in terms of naval shipbuilding is doing work on a scale comparable to what was happening during the Soviet period.”

According to Putin, the addition of shipbuilding provisions to Russian naval doctrine “is a big event for our future navy, and for developing our shipbuilding industry, because the main customer — the navy in this case, and the Defense Ministry — formulate their future needs, and the industry must carry out these tasks.”

Putin also said that for the first time the doctrine includes provisions for improving the health care given to Russian sailors.

“People need to know that from now on, our strategic documents for developing our country’s fleet and navy will address the social aspect too, and will give people what they expect from their service,” Putin said.

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