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Prioritizing Russia's Navy Is Pointless (Op-Ed)

By Mark Galeotti

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As President Vladimir Putin joined the annual Navy Day celebrations in Kaliningrad on Sunday, and at the same time approved a new Maritime Doctrine, it is worth asking a single, basic question: Just what is the Russian Navy for?

The Kremlin certainly feels it is good for something: It is devoting a lot of money to modernizing a fleet that is still, 25 years on, essentially a legacy Soviet one. Warships, after all, are expensive and even in the best of times take years to plan, build and commission. Beyond that, truth to tell, Russia also has something of a tradition of going over time and budget when it comes to naval construction.

Of course, given that Russia sourced its gas turbine engines from Ukraine, this is also going to hold things up, until it can build its own.

Speaking at a Kennan Institute/RAND Corporation event earlier this month, Dmitry Gorenburg of Harvard and the think tank CNA made the point that despite Russia's general

rearmament program, bringing the navy back to strength was "very much a work in progress."

For all its talk of building full-size aircraft carriers able to project Russian power across the globe, the navy's primary mission is still defensive: strategic deterrence through its fleet of submarines armed with nuclear missiles and security for Russia's coastlines and neighboring waters.

To this end, Moscow has continued to sink money into its nuclear submarine fleet. After long delays caused by development problems with its Bulava ballistic missile, three of the new Borei-class boats are in service, with three more under construction.

The Russians are also loading smaller and shorter-range ships with advanced and effective cruise missiles. This might sound like a traditional over-reliance on firepower over survivability and reliability, but it makes sense. Coastal defense is about deterring approaching incursions with sufficiently sharp teeth, and the Russians don't need ships that can range far from their home bases.

So far, so practical. However, these conservative moves stand in stark contrast to some of the showy rhetoric heard in recent times, as well as a clear commitment to increasing the navy's foreign deployments.

There have been periodic claims that the navy plans to build full-size aircraft carriers some time after 2020, and the Krylov State Research Center this year even came up with a speculative model of a new supercarrier, the 23000E Shtorm. With a displacement of some 100,000 tons and a wing of 90 aircraft, this would be equivalent to the latest U.S. Ford-class carriers.

It would also be completely impossible at present for the Russians to build. They don't have the money; they don't even have a shipyard large enough for such a project. (Their last, much smaller carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, was built in the Mykolaiv South Shipyard — in Ukraine. Oops.)

More to the point, Russia has no need of such a ship. A carrier is an extraordinary tool of long-range power projection, but first of all it needs a whole battle group around it to protect and support it, and secondly it needs a mission.

Even Russia's current rearmament program — one already being quietly pruned and staged in response to economic pressures — is really designed to create a force able to defend the motherland and assert regional hegemony.

Although the navy played a minor role in the 2008 Georgian war, Moscow does not need a fleet to bully Ukraine, "protect ethnic Russians" in Kazakhstan or whatever else it decides to do in its strategic neighborhood.

Likewise, although it occasionally sends a few ships to visit Vietnam or Venezuela, and maintains a small squadron patrolling for pirates off Somalia, this is not a navy that can carry out such missions comfortably or often. Whenever they do send out long-range flag-flying missions, the ships in question usually need a serious maintenance overhaul when they

return.

So why bother?

Sometimes, to make a direct point. This year, for example, the Black Sea Fleet will get another couple of advanced attack submarines.

This would give Moscow greater opportunities to interdict enemy shipping in the Black Sea or even the Mediterranean. Given that any such sea war is pretty unlikely — although in theory the Ukrainian conflict could escalate to direct hostilities — this is rather another example of "military diplomacy," of signaling determination and confidence.

More generally, though, it speaks to the Kremlin's desperate desire to present itself as some kind of counterpart and counterbalance to the United States. The U.S. has carrier battle groups and global "blue water" — ocean-spanning — capability? Then by heavens, Russia must have it too!

Yet this is pointless posturing. Even established maritime powers France and Britain are having to give up their pretenses of competing with the United States. Britain's plans to build a second aircraft carrier are coming under question because it may well not be able to afford to buy the planes for it.

Even in the context of a newly assertive Russia, a navy ought to be at the bottom of Putin's shopping list.

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