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As Russia's Black Sea Fleet Flounders, Moscow Presses Onward With Massive Amphibious Assault Ship

By Bashir Kitachayev

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The Project 23900 universal landing ship. **zpkb.com**

Russia is pressing ahead with the construction of its largest-ever warship for the Black Sea Fleet — an amphibious assault ship named Ivan Rogov — in annexed Crimea.

But analysts say the vessel may prove more symbolic than strategic, as the fleet it is meant to bolster has suffered heavy losses in the invasion of Ukraine — and can no longer safely operate from its historic base in Sevastopol due to Ukrainian missile and drone strikes.

Satellite images published by the Ukrainian defense outlet Defense Express reveal accelerated progress on the Ivan Rogov in recent months. Comparing recent photos with images from July 2024, the outlet concluded that Russia has significantly ramped up construction of the vessel.

"At that time, the hull of the ship had only just begun to take shape, which means that the

Russians have made significant progress on this project in less than a year," Defense Express reported.

The Ivan Rogov is one of two Project 23900 amphibious assault ships ordered by the Kremlin to strengthen the Russian Navy. The other, the Mitrofan Moskalenko, is intended for the Pacific Fleet.

These ships are designed to carry up to 900 marines, 75 combat vehicles, three small landing craft and 15 helicopters, including Ka-29 transport and Ka-52K attack helicopters. With a displacement of 40,000 tons, the ships far surpass the size of the Moskva, the fleet's flagship missile cruiser which sank in April 2022 after being struck by Ukrainian Neptune missiles.

Russia has never operated ships of this class until now. Andriy Ryzhenko, a retired Captain 1st Rank and former deputy chief of staff of the Ukrainian Navy, said Moscow's current landing craft date back to the Soviet era and reflect outdated doctrines.

"The Soviet doctrine of the 1970s-80s was that landing ships carrying marines and armored vehicles would approach the shore under air cover and strike with their artillery and missile systems. Then the ships would land troops on the shore," Ryzhenko told The Moscow Times.

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Eventually, Ryzhenko said, Russia's military leadership decided to adapt NATO's more modern approach, relying on amphibious assault ships that resemble small aircraft carriers. Troops are deployed via helicopters or landing craft while the mother ship remains farther offshore, protected by escort vessels.

Russia had hoped to acquire such capabilities by ordering two Mistral-class ships from France in 2010. Although the ships were built, they were never delivered due to sanctions following Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea. The vessels were later sold to Egypt.

In response, Russia launched its own amphibious assault ship project. Both the Ivan Rogov and the Mitrofan Moskalenko were laid down at the Zaliv shipyard in Kerch during a July 2020 ceremony attended by President Vladimir Putin. The total contract was valued at around 100 billion rubles ($1.2 billion).

The project has since been plagued by delays. In 2021, the pro-Kremlin newspaper Izvestia reported that the Ivan Rogov would be delivered by December 2028 and the Mitrofan Moskalenko a year later. Since then, no updates on the latter have emerged.

Even if completed, the strategic utility of the Ivan Rogov is questionable, particularly in the Black Sea, Rozhenko said. Turkey commands a large and modern fleet and controls access to the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, Ukraine has demonstrated its ability to strike Russian ships across the region using naval drones and missiles.

As a result, the Ivan Rogov could realistically be used only against smaller countries such as Georgia, Ryzhenko said.

"Russia might finish building the Rogov, but its safety will be a major issue in a real conflict.

It would need to be heavily protected, and even then, it's not certain it could go to sea. At best, it might be used for search-and-rescue missions," he said.

Ukraine's innovative use of aerial and naval drones has already forced Russia to relocate much of its Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk, a port on Russia's southern mainland that offers greater security but inferior strategic positioning.

Three of the Black Sea Fleet's four bases are in occupied Crimea — Sevastopol, Feodosia and Donuzlav. Crimean ports have a special advantage over Novorossiysk as they do not freeze in winter, Ryzhenko said.

Historically, the bases in Crimea have offered Russia not only regional dominance but also the ability to project force in the Mediterranean and even the Atlantic, he said.

Founded in 1783, the Black Sea Fleet has long served as Russia's principal naval force in the Black Sea and Mediterranean, with its main base in Sevastopol. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia negotiated a lease of military harbors in Sevastopol from Ukraine, using Kyiv's debts for Russian-supplied gas as leverage.

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In 2014, following the ouster of Ukraine's pro-Kremlin president in the Maidan Revolution, Moscow seized and annexed Crimea — in part to secure control over Sevastopol's naval facilities, as the Kremlin feared that Ukraine's new leadership would refuse to extend the lease agreement.

At the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Black Sea Fleet comprised 58 ships and 74 vessels, including patrol boats. The fleet's strike force consisted of three frigates, seven submarines and the flagship Moskva cruiser, all equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles.

A vital part of the fleet was large and small landing ships intended for amphibious assaults with military equipment and personnel.

Ahead of the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin reinforced the fleet by deploying six additional landing ships from the Baltic Fleet to the Black Sea. At the time, observers and experts believed that Russia might use these ships to land troops in Ukraine, most likely near Odesa.

When the invasion began, the fleet had three objectives: blockade Ukrainian ports, launch missile strikes on Ukrainian territory and conduct amphibious landings near the Sea of Azov and Odesa.

Although Russian ground forces quickly secured the Azov coast, Ukrainian forces fortified Odesa with minefields and coastal defenses. Russian attempts to land forces near the city were abandoned after three failed approaches, Ryzhenko said.

The fleet's only successful amphibious operation was the seizure of Zmiinyi Island, also known as Snake Island. For most of the war, Russian warships have primarily been used to

launch missile strikes on Ukraine.

Russia's naval losses have been significant. In March 2022, Ukraine struck the corvette Veliky Ustyug. Several patrol vessels and military boats were later lost, including near Zmiinyi Island, which Russia was later forced to abandon. Ukraine sank the Moskva with two Neptune missiles soon after.

By late 2022, Ukraine had started deploying naval drones against Russian ships. In one such attack, the frigate Admiral Makarov, which had replaced the Moskva as flagship, was reportedly damaged.

As a result, the Kremlin began transferring vessels to Novorossiysk. Even there, security proved insufficient, with Ukrainian naval drones damaging the large landing ship Olenegorsky Gornyak in August 2023.

Ukraine's forces have since expanded their arsenal, using British- and French-supplied Storm Shadow and SCALP cruise missiles to destroy two dock landing ships, a small missile boat, a submarine and the Black Sea Fleet's headquarters in Sevastopol.

According to the Ukrainian Navy, Russia has lost more than a third of its warships in the Black Sea. British intelligence estimates that about 25% of the fleet has been destroyed or damaged.

However, the pace and effectiveness of Ukrainian attacks have recently diminished as the Black Sea Fleet has strengthened its anti-drone defenses and reduced its activity.

"[The Russians] constantly rotate their ships so they don't stay in one place," Ryzhenko said. "They have strengthened the protection of the port in Novorossiysk with aircraft, helicopters, drones and patrol boats. They have also limited the number of ships at sea. I think there are simply no ships on the routes where drones could attack them."

According to Ryzhenko, Russia now keeps only older frigates or small patrol boats in Crimean waters.

At the Zaliv shipyard in Kerch, where the Ivan Rogov is under construction, Russian forces have installed barriers to guard against Ukrainian naval drone attacks, according to the Telegram channel Krymsky Veter.

Some military analysts warn that, even if peace talks succeed, Russia could attempt to relaunch a full-scale attack on Ukraine in the coming years.

Yet the Black Sea Fleet will remain highly vulnerable to Ukrainian strikes despite the addition of the Ivan Rogov, Ryzhenko said.

"The Rogov has only short-range air defenses," he said. "That might not be enough to protect the ship from Ukraine's aerial and naval drones. We also have Neptune and Harpoon anti-ship missiles, which can be mounted on F-16 and Mirage aircraft. With massed strikes, the Rogov will likely be destroyed if it approaches Ukraine's shores."

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