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Russia Weighs Scrapping Its Only Aircraft Carrier After Years of Restoration Delays

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Russian Defense Ministry

Russia is considering scrapping its only aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, which has been undergoing repairs since 2018, the pro-Kremlin daily Izvestia reported, citing a source familiar with the matter.

Repair and modernization efforts on the vessel have been suspended and a decision regarding the carrier's future is expected soon, the paper reported Friday.

Representatives of the Navy High Command and the United Shipbuilding Corporation, responsible for the repairs, are currently discussing the feasibility of returning the ship to active duty, the source said.

Sergei Avakyants, a former commander of the Russian Pacific Fleet, backed discontinuing the repairs, calling it "absolutely the right move."

“The Kuznetsov is from a different era…This is a very expensive and ineffective naval weapon. The future lies with robotic systems and unmanned aircraft,” Avakyants said.

Despite Avakyants’ view, many current naval strategy documents still call for aircraft carrier groups in both the Northern and Pacific Fleets, noted retired rear admiral Mikhail Chekmasov.

“The main obstacle lies in financing, particularly in light of the ongoing special military operation in Ukraine. Victory there is the immediate priority, after which future shipbuilding plans may become clearer,” Chekmasov said.

Military expert Vasily Dandykin contended that “despite advancements in unmanned systems, the need for air support during long-range deployments remains.”

Dandykin noted that countries such as India and China continue to expand their carrier fleets, which suggests that such vessels continue to play a role in naval strategy.

Ilya Kramnik, a researcher from the Center for Strategic Planning Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of World Economy and International Relations, holds a similar perspective.

Kramnik said the Russian navy requires a floating airfield, making aircraft carriers essential. However, he acknowledged that the Admiral Kuznetsov, launched in 1985 and commissioned in 1991, is now significantly outdated.

“With the experience gained from operating the vessel, Russia can construct a new ship of similar size,” Kramnik added.

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The Admiral Kuznetsov is designed to engage major surface targets, provide protection to naval groups against enemy attacks and support amphibious operations.

It entered its current overhaul after returning from a mission in the Mediterranean, where it conducted airstrikes on Syria.

The initial reconstruction cost was estimated at 20 billion rubles ($257 million).

A December 2019 fire aboard the ship resulted in two fatalities and 14 injuries, further delaying reconstruction.

The vessel was originally scheduled to rejoin the fleet in 2022, but that deadline has been repeatedly postponed.

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