

Reviving the Russian Navy

Written by Christopher Whyte

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CHRISTOPHER WHYTE, JUN 13 2012

For some years now, geo-strategic analysis has been predominantly concerned with the rise of China. With so much focus in the foreign policy world placed on geopolitics in that region, it has, in many ways, become easy to forget another great East Asian power – Russia. Indeed, though new leadership in Moscow has been touting a return to great power preeminence in world politics for some years, Western eyes are only now reorienting towards what some have labeled the “awakening” of the slumbering bear.^[1]

Indeed, such a reorientation may be timely. Though Moscow’s military forces, the Navy in particular, have long been dismissed as stagnant and ill-equipped, recent shipbuilding successes and other near-term projects may be signaling the reemergence of Russia as an influential stakeholder in global affairs. Moreover, Russia’s drive to produce new capabilities to a budget may provide a procurement model that other countries, including the United States, would do well to emulate.

It is certainly true that a Russian drive to rebuild militarily and regain some measure of past superpower status is not new. For over a decade, the Russian government has consistently pledged to restore to the armed forces the effectiveness and respectable capabilities associated with a great power. And yet, over the past decade, the country’s few power projection exercises have only served to tease out and highlight the lack of cohesion and general inwards orientation that have characterized Russia’s military and political presence in international affairs since the end of the Cold War.

Most notably, conflict in Georgia against vastly inferior forces stretched for some days longer than most commentators expected and reminded the world that the Russia army, though strong, had been left behind in technological and operational terms. Even flamboyant gestures like deploying the country’s only nuclear-powered ships to the Mediterranean and South America have only served to remind policymakers around the world of one simple fact – that Russia is only capable of making gestures.

As such, the question of what form a revival for the Russian armed forces, particularly the navy, might take on the international stage has generally been given a low profile in Western policy and analytic circles. Though it is without a doubt strong militarily, particularly given a nuclear arsenal numerically superior to that of America and a large at-arms conventional army, Russia lacks much of the key technological and command infrastructure needed to effectively project hard power around the world. More importantly, the country has little access in the short-term to much of the construction-based infrastructure needed to produce such capabilities. For instance, dry dock facilities for large aircraft carrying ships are primarily located in Ukraine and, given their disuse in the past twenty years, will take time to usefully refurbish.

However, government promises to expand the capabilities of the military, particularly those of the navy, may have finally begun to see translation into real developments. In March of 2012, then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Roughead surprised US policymakers when he testified before a Senate subcommittee that the Russian navy, long stagnant and only minimally considered a threat by the US military, was on the developmental move. From a low point in 2007, he stated, when Moscow’s fleet was barely a fourth of the size of the Soviet Navy at its 1985-87 peak, Russia has begun to reconstruct the force assets necessary to once again make the country a maritime power to be reckoned with. The outcome of Admiral Roughead’s report, though it failed to demonstrate significant new

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construction or unit procurements, has clearly been a renewed appreciation for the country's near-term naval development plans, since the deployment of significant air-sea assets would allow Russia to influence international affairs in a manner only within the reach of the United States.

In particular, he stated, these advances will likely come from new ship construction. From plans to build new nuclear-powered aircraft carriers to modernization schemes for the submarine and surface fleets, the Kremlin under Putin and Medvedev has increasingly funded the accelerated construction of new vessels and new facilities designed to meet a variety of stated goals in the near- to medium-term. Specifically, Russia is interested in expanding its operational capabilities in the Arctic, the Pacific and, on a more specialized level, to deal with security concerns centered around the Caspian Sea region. Key for securing national interests in these areas will be the handful of fast-attack carrier groups that Moscow is slated to be planning and a revitalized nuclear and conventional submarine force.

However, as is to be expected given the productive challenges facing the country, visible progress to date has not centered on such high-profile parts of the Russian Navy. With the development of aircraft carrier and amphibious assets still in the developmental stage, save for a number of French-designed *Mistral*-class ships that are still some years from deployable readiness, it is smaller ship-building projects that have begun to produce results and that may end up having significant impact on strategic planning, particularly in East Asia where the developing navies of several countries will increasingly operate in close proximity.

Perhaps the best example of this is Moscow's littoral shipbuilding program. In late May, the Russian Navy launched a brand new *Stereguschy*-class corvette from the Severnaya Verf shipyard, the fourth vessel in what will become a veritable fleet of speedy, small, multi-role surface combatants. Built for an estimated cost of between \$US100-150 million apiece, the *Stereguschy*-class of ship shares many attributes of America's troubled line of new Littoral Combat Ships. Displacing an almost identical frigate-sized 2,100 tons, both corvette-style vessels are designed to be stealthy and variously capable of engaging in amphibious, anti-submarine and anti-aircraft operations. Though not as fast as the LCS, Russia's new ships will operate with a relatively small crew in shallow and deep waters alike, giving Moscow the ability to cheaply field multi-purpose support units in a wide range of scenarios.

If Moscow continues to make good progress in this and other shipbuilding activities, then it becomes fairly easy to see how the consequences of Russian naval development, finally transitioning from conceptual viability to real construction, could once again begin to factor into strategic thinking for planners across Eurasia. With strong potential littoral and amphibious capabilities in the medium-term, Moscow may become far more valuable to countries like Japan and the United States as a partner for dealing with a rising China, particularly should diplomatic bargaining evolve into military conflict. On the flip side, countries in northeast Asia and the Pacific might also find themselves having to treat Russia with a greater degree of caution and respect, particularly as the country's new capabilities impact upon enduring points of interest, such as the long-standing disagreement over the status of the Kuril Islands.

The Russian Navy's success in producing this kind of ship also says something about how other navies can effectively and economically bring powerful forces to bear in the Asia-Pacific region, a highly relevant topic for strategic planners as America pivots to Asia and China's neighbors search for ways to balance the Middle Kingdom.

The equilibrium Russia has struck between budget and capabilities might even act as a wake-up call for fiscal planners in the United States. After all, the LCS may end up being more capable than Moscow's *Stereguschy*-class, but the gap in capabilities is minimal when compared with the almost half-billion difference in price tags. Moscow has even budgeted for a relatively cheap variant of its newest surface combatant, the higher-endurance and cruise missile-capable *Gremyashchy*-class corvette, to compensate for the potential shortcomings of fielding a limited fleet of littoral combat vessels and to avoid having to resort to modular technologies that require significant time and cost to both develop and install.

In the end, the policy community is only now witnessing the beginning of a revival for the Russian Navy and other armed forces. Production challenges and traditional geo-strategic issues, from poor access to warm water port

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facilities to technological hurdles, remain. But the message that naval developments like this send is fairly simple. The Kremlin plans to get back its naval power, to do it efficiently and to become relevant once more. Russia's neighbors, both in East Asia and farther afield, need to assume, if the on-track production of the *Streguschy*-class corvette and its variants is anything to go by, that the country will play a much greater role in regional security affairs in the years to come and plan engagement accordingly. That being said, there is also the opportunity to learn. After all, if Russia can produce effective combat assets cheaply and within the confines of distinct geo-strategic developmental challenges, shouldn't others be motivated to avoid busting budgets in the quest to build for the future?

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^[1] Fedyszyn, Cpt. Thomas R., *Renaissance of the Russian Navy*, Proceedings, March 2012, Vol. 138/3/1, 309

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Christopher Whyte is a Contributing Editor of *e-IR*. He completed his Bachelor's double degree in both economics and international relations at the College of William and Mary in 2010. He has recently performed research interning at the Cato Institute and is currently finishing his Master's thesis and coursework at George Mason University in Virginia in the United States.