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Soviet Aircraft Carriers

Unfortunate Timing for a Long-held Dream

Norman Cigar

AIRCRAFT CARRIERS have long been a subject of controversy in the U.S.S.R. Paradoxically, rather than laying the debate to rest, the decision to build the Soviet navy's first large-deck aircraft carrier, the 64,000-ton *Admiral Kuznetsov* (originally named the *Leonid Brezhnev* and then the *Tbilisi*), and two additional ships, only fueled the controversy further.¹ The debate that has raged over the last few years has been symptomatic of the Gorbachev period, which has been remarkable for increasingly far-reaching discussions on virtually every aspect of national security. Given the visibility and symbolism of aircraft carriers, it is not surprising that particular attention has centered on this weapon system.

The fruition of the plans for aircraft carriers came at an unfortunate time for the Soviet navy, a time increasingly dominated in the U.S.S.R. by considerations of defense spending cuts, diminishing threat perceptions, a decline in the military's impact on decision making, and—more recently—general political upheaval. This article maintains that these broad political and economic currents will limit or possibly abort the Soviet aircraft carrier program. This would probably have happened even before the apparent unraveling of the country, which is only likely to drive this process even more strongly. As a result, construction will probably be limited to just the three units named above, under the best of circumstances.

Of course, in analyzing the future of aircraft carriers, one can not abstract this from the recent tumultuous developments in the U.S.S.R., which provide the broader context for all issues and which is beyond the control of the Soviet navy and the military establishment as a whole. Even the shape and existence of what has been the U.S.S.R. is open to speculation, and discussions on the Soviet military rapidly acquire only a historical relevance. Nevertheless, this case study may also be representative of the pattern of decision making on defense programs that could emerge in a more open political atmosphere. If the U.S.S.R. does disappear, one can assume that Russia, in particular, as the presumed legatee of

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most of the country's naval assets and interests, will find itself grappling with some of the same issues surrounding aircraft carriers. As such, this case study may also provide valid insights into how various substantive political and economic, as well as security, considerations will interact in the future.

The Slow, Painful Evolution

In the past, while some Soviet leaders such as Stalin had hoped to acquire aircraft carriers, others have been adamantly opposed. Khrushchev, for example, reportedly "was extremely negative about aircraft carriers. According to him, only the Americans needed that type of ship."² The Soviet navy was able to put aircraft at sea for the first time only in 1967, with the deployment of the 17,000-ton aircraft-carrying cruiser or helicopter carrier *Moskva*, joined by a sister ship the following year. In 1974, the second-generation 37,000-ton *Kiev* aircraft-carrying cruiser—vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) aircraft carrier—entered the fleet, joined by three more of the same class in subsequent years.

Although the Soviets, in part to circumvent the 1936 Montreux Convention's strictures against the transit of aircraft carriers through the Dardanelles, classify it as a "heavy aircraft-carrying cruiser," the *Kuznetsov* has represented a qualitative advance in capabilities. For the first time, in effect, conventionally launched aircraft—the MiG-29 Fulcrum, Su-25 Frogfoot, Su-27 Flanker, and Su-24 Fencer—would be at sea.

The Parameters of the Debate

Despite the navy's success in finally establishing an aircraft carrier program, it found itself increasingly on the defensive on this issue even before the recent upheavals. Soviet reformers, in particular, have come increasingly to the conclusion that the U.S.S.R. does not face a significant threat from the West and that it can not afford to continue to spend as much as it has in the past on systems such as aircraft carriers. Although critics over the past few years could be found among parliamentarians, journalists, and ordinary citizens, civilian experts from the country's think tanks took the lead in articulating the parameters of debate on this and other defense issues. These think tanks have gained unprecedented prominence in Soviet military affairs, not least by providing an alternate source of expertise and policy options apart from the military establishment, and have furnished expert support for the political leadership's reshaping of defense policies.

Basic change in the U.S.S.R. has made possible a wide-ranging debate on aircraft carriers that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier. However, until a short time ago, despite the advent of *glasnost* in the Gorbachev era, the navy still made its arguments discreetly and obliquely, often by historical analogy,

in the traditional manner of Soviet military discourse. More recently however, apparently stung by the open public challenges and its own deteriorating prospects, the navy too has "taken off its gloves" in the public fight swirling around aircraft carriers.

The Case against the Carrier

Sniping against aircraft carriers has focused on their cost, their vulnerability, their decreasing general utility, and their contradiction of the U.S.S.R.'s emerging defensive doctrine. One of the first attacks on the Soviet aircraft carrier program occurred in a 1987 article in *SShA* [U.S.A.], the journal of the Institute for the U.S. and Canada. The article's authors saw the U.S.S.R.'s decision to build aircraft carriers as the equivalent of falling into a U.S. trap. The article argued that during the Reagan administration the United States had sought to "provoke" the U.S.S.R. into competing "in the area of building large surface warships, including aircraft carriers." This allegedly would have played to U.S. strengths, including the latter's advantages in geography, developed shipbuilding capabilities, and scientific-technical potential. In fact, "a symmetric response," i.e., the U.S.S.R.'s building of aircraft carriers, was seen as "exhausting," while on the contrary a "refusal to 'play by American rules' up to now has been viewed negatively in Washington."³

In what is the single most comprehensive attack yet against Soviet aircraft carriers, two prominent Soviet arms control experts, Andrei Kortunov and Igor Malashenko, subsequently focused not only on the cost of construction but also on the costs of maintenance, fuel, basing, and personnel, as well as of the accompanying task force. The authors called for the cost figures for the *Kuznetsov* to be made public and asked rhetorically, "Can we really afford it in the current economic situation? Do we need aircraft carriers at all?"⁴

As for the utility of aircraft carriers, here again civilian critics have taken a negative stance. Allegedly, the United States needs aircraft carriers for missions in the Third World and because of the long distances involved in its naval operations.⁵ Kortunov and Malashenko, however, state that the U.S.S.R.'s reassessment of its own involvement in the Third World has made such a mission unnecessary for Soviet carriers.

They add that the deployment of aircraft carriers reflects the navy's overall strategy of a "sustained non-nuclear large-scale naval conflict" in which "the enemy will try to break through to the Soviet coastal strategic centres," but they dismiss this as unlikely and as harkening back to "the now remote past."⁶ Moreover, in a nuclear conflict, they point out, aircraft carriers would be irrelevant in any case, and the idea that they could provide effective protection is taxed as "utopian." Georgiy Sturua, a civilian expert on maritime affairs, pressed the argument further by claiming that even the United States might now

view aircraft carriers as among those systems which are "unnecessary or have poor prospects" and whose missions can be accomplished by other ships with "relatively cheap cruise missiles."⁷

A key element in the utility argument has been the alleged vulnerability of aircraft carriers. Calling them "a lucrative and vulnerable target," Kortunov and Malashenko claimed that it is other ships that have to protect carriers rather than the other way around. They even asked sarcastically: "But perhaps this unorthodox solution is a revolutionary approach to naval strategies and a manifestation of new thinking in the military sphere?"⁸

To sustain their argument, critics have had recourse especially to the Falkland Islands War, although they have been obliged to reinterpret the evidence in a rather cavalier fashion. Thus, Sturua presents the fact that "high-precision anti-ship weapons were used to destroy several British ships" as alleged proof for his case on the vulnerability of aircraft carriers.⁹ The authors of the *SShA* article cited above, on the other hand, perhaps sensitive to the fact that such arguments could be turned easily into support for shipborne aviation, were to go out of their way to downplay any lessons from the war, dismissing it arbitrarily as "an exception" and "a pseudowar" [*kvazivoyna*]. Rather, the United States, they maintain, has continued to build carriers *despite* evidence of their vulnerability.¹⁰

Domestic critics, moreover, have claimed that Soviet aircraft carriers contradict Moscow's new "defensive doctrine" and would have a counterproductive effect on the less threatening foreign policy image that Gorbachev has wished to create. Kortunov and Malashenko, for example, who speak of Soviet "aircraft carriers" (rather than the more benign term "heavy aircraft-carrying cruisers" used by its supporters) note that the Su-25, which has flown from the *Kuznetsov*, "can't be viewed as a purely defensive weapon," and have drawn a parallel to U.S. carriers as an offensive system. They add that aircraft carriers could be perceived as a threat by other countries with which the U.S.S.R. seeks to improve relations, noting that "the presence of powerful aircraft-carrier task forces in the vicinity of [neighboring countries'] territories (and far from Soviet territorial waters) can cause a serious concern in these countries' leadership and possibly affect political relations."¹¹ In a similar vein, a retired naval figure, Admiral Nikolay Amel'ko (formerly commander of the Pacific Fleet and deputy chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces), has noted that the Japanese had used the deployment of the *Kiev*-class *Minsk* to the Pacific Fleet in 1979 to whip up the image of a "Soviet threat."¹²

The Soviet Navy's Case

At various times in the past even the Soviet navy, in part making a virtue out of necessity, had been critical of aircraft carriers. However, as the acquisition of

its own aircraft carriers approached, the Soviet navy, not surprisingly, reversed itself and began a campaign to create a more favorable atmosphere for its new ships. Initially the navy's approach was indirect and low-key. Navy sources began by giving publicity to earlier abortive plans to acquire aircraft carriers in order to establish a Soviet tradition for such ships and to portray their absence up to now as just a temporary postponement caused by both valid and invalid reasons.

In the preface to a new edition of a book on the Soviet navy, for example, Admiral of the Fleet Vladimir Chernavin, the navy's commander-in-chief, claimed that planning for two aircraft carriers had already begun in the 1930s, but had had to be abandoned in 1940 in favor of other ships because of the imminent threat of war.¹³ While by no means an overt endorsement of aircraft carriers, this nevertheless stood out as a departure from Admiral of the Fleet Sergey G. Gorshkov's classic work *The Sea Power of the State*, which pointedly had omitted any mention of Soviet aircraft carriers in the place where one would have expected it, that is, in the discussion of the 1930s. Likewise, an article in *Morskoy sbornik* was to note that the first post-war Five Year Plan (1946-50) had originally envisioned the construction of the first of a projected fifteen aircraft carriers.¹⁴

The well-publicized campaign beginning in 1987 to rehabilitate Admiral Nikolay G. Kuznetsov (1904-1974) also appears to have been related, at least in part, to the navy's promotion of aircraft carriers. Kuznetsov was well known as a strong early supporter of this system.¹⁵ In fact, Khrushchev had demoted and sacked him unceremoniously in 1956 in great part for arguing too energetically in favor of a strong surface fleet, including aircraft carriers.

By 1988, Kuznetsov had been restored in rank posthumously, and his rehabilitation process served as a convenient vehicle for the navy to express its views, if only by historical analogy. For example, one article extolling Kuznetsov openly affirmed that World War II "even more clearly revealed the vulnerability of large ships without reliable air cover" and concluded that this was what had prompted Kuznetsov to propose the acquisition of aircraft carriers after the war.¹⁶ Reading between the lines of virtually all navy writings dealing with Kuznetsov, one can detect during this period a clear emphasis on the harm to the nation's interests at the hands of past malevolent or misguided civilian and military leaders for their neglect of the navy in areas such as that of aircraft carriers.¹⁷ In fact, by portraying Kuznetsov as a martyr persecuted for his ideas by someone as unreasonable and narrow-minded as Khrushchev, naval writers could tar present-day critics of aircraft carriers with the same brush.¹⁸ The renaming in late 1990 of the *Tbilisi* as the *Admiral Kuznetsov* was almost certainly intended to underline support for what Admiral Kuznetsov had stood for—as well as to disassociate the navy from the dissident republic of Georgia, whose capital city had provided the previous name.

Utility. Addressing the question of utility, already in 1988 an authoritative book, *Voyenno-morskoy flot* [The Navy], had defended aircraft carriers in general, although using only less controversial foreign sources. After making the obligatory obeisance to nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) as the primary naval strike force, *The Navy* had gone on to say that far from being obsolete, aircraft carriers would continue to be significant for some time to come. According to this book, "In the view of many foreign experts, nuclear strike carriers . . . will retain their significance up to the first part of the next century," and, for the West at least, "strike carriers will continue as the basis of surface fleets into the 21st century."¹⁹ *The Navy*, in fact, argues that "Western naval specialists" believe that ships carrying VTOL aircraft, helicopters, and cruise missiles will even have "new, more versatile combat capabilities," including in the areas of anti-submarine warfare, the transport of troops, and the demonstration of power in maritime regions.²⁰

As the completion of its first aircraft carrier approached, the Soviet navy's case became increasingly more explicit. For example, one of the most comprehensive defenses of aircraft carriers, which appeared in *Morskoy sbornik*, was in direct response to the attacks leveled by Kortunov and Malashenko and other critics. Although dismissing their views as "incompetent judgments," the author, Captain 1st Rank S. Kozyrev was careful in his rejoinder to rebut in detail the specific points raised by such detractors.²¹ Kozyrev openly stressed that today U.S. naval forces do not have to approach the Soviet coast and that, therefore, a defense would have to be conducted much farther out at sea than before. Only ship-based naval air cover, he maintained, could provide the necessary defense of Soviet naval forces in such a scenario.²² Another naval source, in fact, concluded that "the successful conduct of combat operations at sea has become impossible without the widespread use of shipborne aviation."²³ Admiral Chernavin himself, responding to a question on whether the earlier decision to reject building "aircraft-carrying ships" was correct and whether "aircraft carriers" were needed, bluntly replied, "I do not think that is correct." He added that the navy's existing aircraft-carrying ships were not able to fulfill all the necessary air defense roles that the *Kuznetsov* could.²⁴

Vulnerability. On the issue of the aircraft carrier's vulnerability, criticism in the past on this score had come even from within the navy establishment. In a 1981 article on aircraft carriers, for example, Vice Admiral K.A. Stalbo, who was close to Gorshkov, had focused on their vulnerability, claiming that "the aircraft carrier, as a very large warship, has always been considered a wonderful target for torpedoes," and that *a fortiori*, the presence of nuclear arms at sea "raised serious doubts" about the use of aircraft carriers in general.²⁵

In a more typical vein, Kozyrev has argued strongly that "the experience of World War II, local wars, and post-war armed conflicts is a most persuasive

example that aircraft carriers are now one of the least vulnerable naval targets.²⁶ Another naval source, in fact, while acknowledging that aircraft carriers “are not considered invincible” and that they have to take precautions when operating, turns the tables on his critics who cite the Falklands War by stressing that it was precisely weak air cover for the fleet that was to blame for British ship losses.²⁷

Cost. The Soviet navy has been particularly sensitive in the realm of economics and has sought to minimize the perception that aircraft carriers are too expensive for the U.S.S.R. In earlier times, the Soviet navy had emphasized as a matter of course the allegedly disproportionate cost of Western aircraft carriers, and especially so for those with nuclear power. In the 1970s, for example, even a source friendly to the navy had claimed in a discussion of aircraft carriers that “given the conditions of the uninterrupted course of the increasing complexity and cost of naval technology, the cost of building large surface ships has risen sharply.”²⁸ Characteristically, the same source had explicitly compared the cost of the pre-war USS *Enterprise* and its post-war nuclear-powered namesake to highlight the difference in cost. Admiral Gorshkov, likewise, had claimed that “in order to ensure the combat activity of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, the U.S. is undertaking *production-line construction* of nuclear-powered guided missile cruisers.”²⁹

With the start of construction on the *Kuznetsov*, the navy’s strategy shifted to an avoidance of any attention to the issue of cost, even as applied to foreign navies, since this could rebound to the Soviet navy’s detriment. More recently, however, the navy has had to counterattack and now seeks to prove that Soviet aircraft carriers are not expensive, if properly understood. Kozyrev, for example, blandly was to maintain that since the *Kuznetsov* is not the same as U.S. carriers and is subject to different cost-accounting criteria, it is therefore cheaper than U.S. carriers. Another navy spokesman, Admiral V. N. Ponikarovskiy, conversely, was to argue that even cutting aircraft carriers would not solve the U.S.S.R.’s economic problems and that, supposedly, according to “research carried out in the United States” shipborne aviation has been shown to be more cost-effective than land-based aviation.³⁰ Indeed, Vice Admiral A.M. Vstyantsev maintained that by focusing on aircraft carriers as a way to save money “our economists . . . are looking for money in the wrong places. The search for money should be centered [instead] in the backyards of our plants and factories. . . . We could rake up enough not only to build one aircraft carrier [sic]. . . .”³¹

Increasingly, the navy has also sought to deflect the criticism of cost by arguing that the alternative, that is, a lack of aircraft carriers, could prove to be much more costly in the long run. According to this view, inadequate air defense for the fleet could result in increased ship and personnel losses in case of war. Admiral Chernavin, for example, when asked whether the U.S.S.R. could afford aircraft carriers, responded, “It is dangerous to simply judge things by their low cost and

to place our bets on cheap weapons. Cheap weapons can result in costly losses. . . . Ships without [air] cover . . . are helpless. . . . So there are two possibilities, first to pursue a penny-pinching course and send our ships and our people to their destruction—this would be cheap. There is a second way, when we do not consider human life cheap and want to ensure the survival of these people in a complex combat situation. . . . I think that every normal person would choose the second path over the first.”³² Moreover, Kozyrev points out that the necessary escort ships exist already, so that there will not be any additional expense tied to the program.³³ Another naval source likewise asserted that “all Soviet citizens who are really concerned about our country’s defense sufficiency are only too aware of the longstanding and acute need for this type of ship,” thus implying that the *Kuznetsov* was within even the new “sufficiency” guidelines set on defense spending.³⁴

The Soviet navy nowadays also makes a strong case for the advantages of nuclear propulsion for aircraft carriers, even in economic terms, and the *Ul’yanovsk* will be nuclear-powered.³⁵ According to *The Navy*, in effect, “the long-term use of nuclear-powered ships has shown that they are more economical [than conventionally powered ones],” with the nuclear-powered USS *Nimitz* given as proof for this assertion. The use of nuclear power is also said to allow aircraft carriers to be less dependent on fuel supply lines and to free fuel for other purposes, such as for ship-borne aircraft. Moreover, *The Navy* argues that, since task forces with nuclear-powered aircraft carriers do not require as many escort ships to protect unnecessary oil tankers, “The numerous escort ships, freed from convoying oil tankers, can be assigned to carry out other missions, with the result that the overall combat potential of the fleet will increase greatly.” Nuclear-powered aircraft carriers now elicit strong praise overall, with *The Navy*, for example, concluding: “It is calculated that the effectiveness of carrier strike groups composed of nuclear-powered ships will be approximately one-and-a-half times greater than similar carrier strike groups consisting of ships without nuclear power.”³⁶

Defensive Doctrine. In rebutting charges that aircraft carriers contradict Moscow’s new defensive doctrine, the Soviet navy has stressed that the *Kuznetsov* is different from U.S. aircraft carriers. Despite their outward similarity, the *Kuznetsov*, it is claimed, is intended for fleet air defense rather than for air strikes against the shore.³⁷ To be sure, in responding to a question on whether the new aircraft carriers are a defensive system, Admiral Chernavin qualified his interpretation of “defensive” by noting, “Yes. But what does defensive mean? Some people understand this in a simplistic and primitive manner. They think that once we have adopted such a doctrine we must be totally passive, and [only] defend ourselves, and in case of conflict retreat deep into our own territory. Yet modern warfare, whether on land, at sea, or in the air, is above all a war of

maneuver. Today, how can a warship fight by ‘sitting in the trenches?’³⁸ Some have gone even further in stretching the “defensive” mission of the new Soviet ships, at least in theory. One naval officer, for example, implicitly proposed extending the Soviet aircraft carrier’s mission to attacking the sea lines of communication: “I do not oppose that [i.e., defensive doctrine]. But, the question naturally arises . . . ‘Is the destruction of convoys transporting troops and military equipment to the European continent or to Asia for the purpose of conducting military operations against us to be considered as defensive or offensive?’”³⁹

To justify Soviet aircraft carriers, supporters have also claimed that they are needed as a strategic deterrent to the Western threat, which the Soviet navy has been reluctant to see as having changed. In mid-1990, arguing the case for the *Kuznetsov* and her sister-ships, Admiral V.N. Ponikarovskiy, typically, still noted, “Can anyone today prove scientifically that there is no threat to the Soviet Union from the sea?”⁴⁰ Even a year later, Rear Admiral V.A. Polvanskiy, Chief of the Main Shipbuilding Directorate, in speaking of “aircraft carriers” was to affirm that “with a defensive doctrine their role increases to a greater degree, because they must ensure the stability, the combat stability and operation of naval forces, or rather general purpose forces.”⁴¹

Admiral Chernavin, for his part, has had recourse to the argument that even more countries will acquire aircraft carriers in the future. Specifically, he made the point in an interview that “we cannot fail to take into consideration the program for the future buildup of Japan’s naval power because of its construction and inclusion of aircraft carriers in its naval arsenal.”⁴²

Status Symbol. Finally, supporters of the aircraft carrier have tried to appeal to emotion and national pride. One writer, for example, speaking of the *Kuznetsov*, equated it to a symbol of the U.S.S.R.’s international status, noting that “the world even now as it collects [aid] packages for us, which—and I say this openly—I find personally humiliating, nevertheless still calls the Soviet Union a superpower. But how can a superpower not have such a type of ocean-going ship?”⁴³

Divided Military Views?

All this is not to say that there have been no disagreements on aircraft carriers even within the Soviet navy or that they have necessarily all disappeared. As with any organization, it is a safe bet that there are still varying views and personal interests involved. Admiral Amel’ko, for example, has noted publicly that “the Soviet Navy should not have made a desperate effort to have the same type of ships as the U.S. Navy,” a clear allusion to aircraft carriers. Indeed, he concludes in retrospect that even the *Kiev*-class ships are “too fragile, expensive, and

inefficient." He claims that he had been against them all along and that he and Gorshkov had clashed on this issue.⁴⁴ While in this instance Amel'ko was not speaking for the navy, but in his subsequent capacity as an adviser to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it does indicate the possibility of unresolved internal differences of opinion, as in the past.

Given the corporate equities involved, dissenting navy views are not always likely to reach the public domain, however, and those who are retired are likely to feel more secure professionally to express themselves openly. For example, even before the current debate opened up, one book, while admitting the high effectiveness of U.S. aircraft carriers, also noted that "specialists point to their vulnerability because of their large size and, especially, to the fantastic cost of their construction, maintenance, and operation."⁴⁵ Although the author was apparently a civilian, the book's "scholarly editor" was a retired submariner, Vice Admiral G. I. Shchedrin, who also provided the book's postscript. As a retiree, Admiral Shchedrin could be expected to be more outspoken than if he had still been on active duty. However, the fact that the book was in a series said to be intended for adolescents (despite the fairly sophisticated level of discussion) may indicate a lack of appropriate naval fora available for alternative views.

What is more, in this era of shrinking resources, the Soviet land services may also be joining the skeptics. At least one low-level military writer (a political officer who, however, may be fronting for more senior figures on this sensitive issue) recently questioned the need for the U.S.S.R. to develop aircraft carriers at all and to continue building them. He argues that the U.S.S.R., unlike the United States, does not need to protect sources of vital materials abroad; he asks rhetorically, "In effect, what role can these ships [i.e., aircraft carriers] have in defending, let us say, the Trans-Siberian Highway or the Kuzbass coal basin?"⁴⁶ He adds that even their alleged air defense role is spurious, since he sees no reason for the Soviet navy to venture out to sea beyond the radius of land-based air defense. Focusing on their high cost, in fact, he concludes that scarce resources for Soviet aircraft carriers would have to come at the expense of the ground forces, "traditionally the chief support of our military power."⁴⁷ Indeed, he concludes that landpowers, such as Germany, fared badly when they tried to compete with "the traditional masters of the oceans."⁴⁸

Prospects for Future Development

What are the prospects for this debate and for the U.S.S.R.'s nascent aircraft carrier program, given its controversial nature and the direction of political change in the country? In ordinary times, one could reasonably have expected at least four units of the *Kuznetsov* and its larger follow-on to be built eventually, as was true of the *Kiev* and *Kirov*-class ships. However, the debate outlined above has taken place within the context of major upheaval. Institutional interests will

have to be balanced with such overriding factors as the shift in decision-making power on national security issues, the shrinking defense budget, and the even more basic one of the breakup of the country.

Arms Control and Aircraft Carriers. Over the past few years, Moscow has also placed new emphasis on proposals for arms control at sea. There is convincing evidence that both Soviet military and civilian experts have long appreciated fully the combat capabilities of the U.S. Navy, the challenge it could pose to Soviet strategy, and the substantial benefits that would accrue to Moscow if the U.S. Navy were restricted. Now, more than ever, any progress in naval arms control would not only result in financial savings for Moscow but would also make it easier for the government to convince the Soviet military to accept additional defense cuts.

In particular, Soviet experts have increasingly recognized the significant capability of U.S. aircraft carriers and have singled them out frequently as an item of particular concern. The former Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, Marshal Sergey Akhromeyev, for example, identified U.S. aircraft carriers immediately after SSBNs as a threat to the U.S.S.R., noting that aircraft carriers "have vast power" and that "each such aircraft carrier is a floating aircraft division."⁴⁹ While perhaps containing elements of hyperbole, this nevertheless appears to be a fair reflection of the Soviet military's view. In fact, during his visit to the United States in July 1988, Marshal Akhromeyev had made it a point to focus on this as a system requiring special attention. In an interview following his visit, he had noted: "By the way, it is precisely aircraft carriers which represent a military threat to the Soviet Union, and I said so to Admiral Crowe [then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff]."⁵⁰

Negative views by Soviet civilians of the general utility of aircraft carriers, likewise, appear to be to a large extent only for use in domestic debates. Even a critic such as Sturua, quoting former secretary of the navy John Lehman, concludes that it is precisely aircraft carriers that give the United States "the margin of superiority that can make the difference between a successful resupply and an unsuccessful one, that protects our men and equipment, that gives meaning to our pledges of reinforcement, and that makes credible our commitment to our allies."⁵¹ From a purely military standpoint, limits on the number of existing or new U.S. carriers would clearly be a significant gain for Soviet military planners.

Not surprisingly, given the low realistic level of the threat and domestic pressures, the Soviet military itself has led the call for cuts in this type of ship. Given the importance of aircraft carriers to the United States, the U.S.S.R. may eventually seek to use its own fledgling program, along with reductions in its considerably more significant submarine force, as a bargaining chip for reductions in U.S. aircraft carriers. Sacrificing the U.S.S.R.'s own limited capability

as part of a deal would probably seem a small price to achieve this. In the past, the Soviets may have believed that only propaganda points might be scored with such proposals. However, they may feel that now, in the current atmosphere of improved international relations, they have a more realistic chance of achieving some of their goals in this area.

The Soviet navy has found itself obliged to support proposals for naval arms reductions but, having the most to lose as an institution, has done so only grudgingly and outwardly. Admiral Ponikarovskiy, for example, has grumbled that "it is possible to ensure peaceful economic development, not only for the Soviet people but for the world as a whole, only if our parliamentarians, academics, and experts convince their foreign colleagues—and above all those across the ocean—and the military-political leadership of the NATO navies to do away with their twenty-three aircraft carriers."⁵² In order to preserve such hard-won achievements as the *Kuznetsov*, the Soviet navy's leadership at base probably still hopes that naval arms control will not occur. Defending the *Kuznetsov*, Admiral Ponikarovskiy concluded in the same article that "it will be possible to dispense with aircraft-carrying cruisers only when there is a basis for dispensing with the U.S.S.R.'s navy as a whole," an unwelcome prospect which he apparently hopes will not occur.

Unilateral Soviet Defense Cuts? However, even if no Western *quid pro quo* is forthcoming, the consideration of cost, which has become an increasingly significant concern in defense matters, coupled with the fading of a foreign threat, may be sufficient to spell doom for the further development of the U.S.S.R.'s aircraft carrier program. The broadly shared conclusion in the U.S.S.R. that the economy can no longer keep up with the West in spending on defense without mortgaging the country's future development—and that there is no reason to do so in any case—has become increasingly a leitmotiv in Moscow's defense planning, initially under the rubric of "reasonable sufficiency"—or deterrence at a lower level. Despite continuing uncertainty about the U.S.S.R.'s political future, economic realities will probably make unilateral cuts in defense spending increasingly difficult to avoid, as long as the likely conservative opposition can be managed.

Naval spokesmen such as Kozyrev, of course, believe that it will be necessary to build even more aircraft carriers in the future.⁵³ However, big-ticket items which are still on paper, such as future aircraft carriers, may be among the easiest and most tempting targets for cuts even though the effect would only be felt quite a few years down the road given the long lead-time involved in such projects. While the embedded investment has endowed the first three carriers with a certain built-in guarantee, the precedent of Khrushchev's scrapping of ships already under construction may make at least some in the Soviet navy uncomfortable even on this score. Kortunov and Malashenko, leading

proponents of even unilateral arms cuts suggested that the Supreme Soviet examine the carrier program closely and concluded that “it is imperative that we shouldn’t succumb to the familiar temptation: since millions (or billions?) have already been spent, the project must be concluded. Perhaps it would be better if we halted it in time?”⁵⁴

What may be of particular concern to the navy is the fact that the debate has moved out of the narrow academic circles to which it had been confined in the mid-1980s and is now in the public domain, where aircraft carriers have been even harder to defend. Already in 1989, Georgiy Arbatov, Director of the Institute for the U.S. and Canada, had spoken out against aircraft carriers both on television and in a session of the Congress of People’s Deputies on defense spending—which was also televised. Criticizing “military extravagance” and the fall in the standard of living of military personnel, he offered the military a harsh choice: “evidently in the rush for quality, economies are made at the expense of people’s social needs. After all, there are places where it [i.e., the military establishment] can get funds. This is not an impoverished local council. The aircraft cruisers alone, which it is building, will demand expenditure which would be more than sufficient for the solution of not only the housing problem but also many other social problems in the Armed Forces.”⁵⁵

The Soviet Navy—Forced to Make the Best of It?

The navy is probably fortunate to have obtained a commitment on aircraft carriers when it did. There was probably little that Gorbachev could do but proceed with the project, due to its advanced stage, when he came to power. However, since the *Kuznetsov* program was inherited from a previous administration, he and other political leaders are even less committed than would otherwise be the case.

The Soviet navy will probably seek to complete the aircraft carriers being built as quickly as possible to ensure their continued existence. However, it will take some time for the navy to master this new system and to perfect the capabilities needed for the conventional launch of aircraft. As one naval writer noted candidly when discussing U.S. naval aviation, “despite the [U.S. Navy’s] wide experience in the use of carrier-based aviation . . . conducting flight operations on aircraft carriers still remains a complicated and fairly dangerous procedure.”⁵⁶ Beyond that, the upheavals in society will also complicate establishing an effective program quickly. Indications are that the *Kuznetsov*, in fact, has been plagued by problems in getting the large skilled crew it requires and by dismal morale among those assigned, as well as by delays in the availability of new fighter aircraft.⁵⁷

Ultimately, the future of the Soviet carrier program will be a function of the balance of domestic political forces, as well as of economic and security

imperatives. For now at least, and particularly after the political revolution in the wake of the coup attempt of August 1991, it appears that the broader currents will continue to work to the disadvantage of weapons programs such as the aircraft carrier. The result will probably be the derailment of future construction plans. The loss of the Black Sea ports and construction facilities if the Ukraine severs all ties with Russia would only contribute further to the obstacles faced by this program. The Soviet navy's principal hope, though uncertain, may be that by the time it has integrated this new system the environment will have changed to one more conducive to naval concerns, even if only in a consolidated Russian state, and that this will offer greater prospects for a resumed development of aircraft carriers.⁵⁸

Notes

1. A second unit in the same class, the *Varyag* (originally named the *Riga*), has also been launched. In addition, construction on an even larger 75,000-ton aircraft carrier, the *Ulyanovsk*, is under way.
2. As reported by Marshal Rodion Malinovskiy, then Minister of Defense, quoted by O. Odnokolenko, "People's Commissar Kuznetsov," *Krasnaya zvezda*, 21 May 1988, (hereafter KZ), p. 4.
3. V.V. Zhurkin, S.A. Karaganov, and A.V. Kortunov, "On Reasonable Sufficiency," *SShA*, December 1987, p. 17 (Emphasis added).
4. Andrei Kortunov and Igor Malashenko, "'Tbilisi,' 'Riga,' and the Rest?" *New Times*, 19-25 December 1989, p. 27.
5. G[eorgiy] Sturua, *Mirovomu okeanu—mirnye vody* [Peaceful waters for the world ocean] (Moscow: Nauka, 1988) p. 94.
6. Kortunov and Malashenko, p. 27.
7. Sturua, pp. 98-99.
8. Kortunov and Malashenko, p. 26.
9. Sturua, pp. 98-99.
10. Zhurkin, Karaganov, and Kortunov, p. 19.
11. Kortunov and Malashenko, p. 27.
12. Interview conducted by Akira Furumoto with Admiral Vladimir Chernavin, *Tokyo shinbun*, 25 October 1988, p. 9.
13. V.N. Chernavin, preface to A.V. Basov, A.I. Sumin et al., *Boevoy put' sovetskogo voenno-morskogo flota* [The combat path of the Soviet navy] 4th ed. (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1988), p.7.
14. Sergey Zonin, "Improper Court," *Morskoy sbornik*, February 1989, p. 78.
15. He had noted, for example, that during World War II "The flow of events in the Pacific Ocean had shown that aircraft carriers had become the new strike force at sea" and, speaking of the U.S.S.R., that "much more attention should have been given not to battleships and heavy cruisers, but to ships of other types including aircraft carriers, even if only medium-sized or small ones." Nikolay G. Kuznetsov, *Kursom k pobede* [On course toward victory], 2nd ed. (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1987), pp. 141, 459.
16. Odnokolenko, p.4.
17. For example, there is implicit criticism of Stalin's appointment of military leaders who lacked interest or empathy for naval matters in general. *Ibid.*, p.4.
18. Khrushchev, in fact, is made to look like a fool by attributing to him the view that "ships simultaneously should be able to fly, dive, and float, and be armed only with missiles." *Ibid.*, p.4.
19. N.P. V'yunenko, B.N. Makeyev, and V.D. Skugarev, *Voyenno-morskoy flot: rol', perspektivy, razvitiye, ispol'zovaniye* [The navy: its role, prospects, development, and use] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1988), pp. 92, 138 (hereafter *The Navy*).
20. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
21. S. Kozzyrev, "'Tbilisi,' 'Riga,' and so on. . . ." *Morskoy sbornik*, February 1990, pp. 13-17.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
23. Colonel General of Aviation G. Kuznetsov, "Naval Aviation in Combat at Sea," *Morskoy sbornik*, August 1989, p. 25.
24. "Commentary by the Commander of the Country's Navy, Admiral of the Fleet V.N. Chernavin," *Pravda*, 19 October 1989, p.3.

25. Vice Admiral K.A. Stalbo, "The U.S.'s Aircraft Carriers—Instruments of Aggression," *KZ*, 10 September 1981, p. 3.
26. Kozyrev, p. 16.
27. Vice Admiral I. Khurs, "Combat Actions at Sea and Problems of Early Warning," *Zarubezhnoe voennoe obozreniye*, part 1, June 1987, p. 50; part 2, July 1987, p. 51.
28. Ivan Potopov, *Nauchno-tekhnicheskii progress i flot* [Scientific-technical progress and the navy] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1977), p. 136.
29. S.G. Gorshkov, *Morskaya moshch' gosudarstva* [The sea power of the state] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1979), p. 249 (Emphasis added).
30. V.N. Ponikarovskiy, "Do We Need Aircraft-carrying Cruisers?" *Voennaya mysl'*, August 1990, pp. 39, 40.
31. Roundtable on Moscow Central TV, First Program, 30 March 1990, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)-Soviet Union (SOV)-91-067*, 8 April 1991, p. 56.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
33. Kozyrev, p. 14.
34. V. Zaborskiy, "Rejoinder," *KZ*, 22 December 1989, p. 3.
35. U.S. Department of Defense, *Military Forces in Transition—1991*, (Washington: 1991), p. 55.
36. *The Navy*, pp. 94-95.
37. Kozyrev, p. 14.
38. "Commentary by the Commander," *Pravda*, 19 October 1989.
39. V. Kirillov, "What Kind of Ships are Needed?" *Kommunist voenizhennykh sil*, 17 September 1990, p. 44.
40. Ponikarovskiy, p. 40.
41. "Radar" Program on Soviet Navy Day, Moscow Central Television First Program and Orbita Network, 27 July 1991, *FBIS-SOV-91-161*, 20 August 1991, p. 39.
42. "Confrontation," *Agitator armii i flota*, May 1988, p. 7.
43. V. Izgarshhev, "Very Personal: Three Meetings with the Admiral; Reflections on Board the Heavy Aircraft-carrying Cruiser," *Pravda*, 2 January 1991, p. 2.
44. Furumoto, *Tokyo shinbun*, p.9.
45. G[erman] Smirnov, *Korabli i srazheniya* [Ships and battles] (Moscow: Detskaya literatura, 1987), p. 153.
46. Yu. Selivanov, "Does the USSR Really Need Aircraft Carriers?" *Kommunist voenizhennykh sil*, May 1991, p. 20.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
49. "Naval Forces and General Security," *Pravda*, 5 September 1988, p. 6.
50. S. Guk, "The Sprouts of Trust," *Izvestiya*, 23 July 1988, p. 6.
51. Sturua, pp. 93-94.
52. Ponikarovskiy, p. 39.
53. Kozyrev, p. 16.
54. Kortunov and Malashenko, p. 28.
55. Moscow Television, in *FBIS-SOV-89-241*, 18 December 1989, p.69.
56. A. Georgiyev, "The Organization of Flight Operations on the U.S. Navy's Aircraft Carriers," *Zarubezhnoe voennoe obozreniye*, June 1988, p. 52.
57. V. Grinchevich and M. Sevast'yanov, "Between Two Fleets; It is Not an Easy Life for the Crew of the Newest Cruiser," *KZ*, 2 August 1991, p. 2; *Military Forces in Transition—1991*, p. 55.
58. After this article was completed, indications appeared of the possible suspension of the aircraft carrier building program. In the wake of the Ukraine's declaration of sovereignty, the director of the Nikolayev shipyard announced that he would be shifting priorities from the aircraft carriers to foreign orders. Rear Admiral V. Polenskiy, chief of the Main Directorate of Shipbuilding of the Navy, confirmed this and noted that his agency's position is now that "the hulls must be preserved and mothballed." Reserve Captain 1st Rank V. Zaborskiy and Reserve Major General A. Kubarev, "Aircraft Carriers: To Build Them or Not?" *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 12 November 1991, p.3, *FBIS-SOV-91-221*, 15 November 1991, p. 47.