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A Carrier for Admiral Gorshkov

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Admiral Gorshkov's forthcoming aircraft carrier might present us sometime in the future with the unpleasant spectacle of "a musclebound U.S. carrier force outsmarted by a smaller, less capable Soviet fleet in a Third World crisis." Is such a scene possible? If so, how do we prevent it?

A CARRIER FOR ADMIRAL GORSHKOV

by

Dov S. Zakheim

Over forty years ago, Joseph Stalin outlined to his senior naval officers his ideas for a new and powerful Soviet fleet. Among the ships he suggested for that fleet was the aircraft carrier, whose dominance in naval warfare had yet to be established—and, in fact, was not clearly demonstrated until the Battle of Midway. Stalin never lived to see his hopes fulfilled but, if Navy testimony and inrelligence reports prove accurate, the Soviet fleet will unveil its first large, fixed-wing aircraft carrier some time near the end of this decade.

Soviet ships, like American warships, enter the fleet only after a very long gestation period. But the half-century that will have elapsed between Stalin's pronouncements and rheir realization marks an unusually long span, particularly given the changes in the nature of naval warfare, indeed all warfare, that have materialized over that period. Why, then, has the Soviet Union apparently decided to construct a fixed-wing carrier? More to the point, why ar this time and with what purpose in mind?

Fathoming Soviet intentions is a hazardous effort and often a fruitless one. Nevertheless, at a time when the United States is itself determined not only to halt the decline in its seaborne firepower, but also to expand it, a rough sense of Soviet intentions may be useful. Should those intentions appear to be undergoing some change, U.S. naval development would best be served if it accounted for them, as well as for the more traditional goals ascribed to Soviet naval forces in the postwar period.

Carriers and Soviet Naval Development: A Look Back. That Joseph Stalin indicated to Adm. Nikolai Kuznetzov and others in 1937 his desire to add aircraft carriers to the Sovier fleet is less surprising than the subsequent development of that fleet into one of the world's two mosr powerful naval forces *without* the benefit of the carrier. Soviet naval leaders, like their Imperial Russian predecessors, have always been keenly aware of foreign technological developments and often have adapted those developments to their own

national needs. Britain had aircraft carriers, as did the United States and Japan. There was evidence that the days of the battleship were numbered. Stalin, inherently inclined toward large surface ships as an expression of Soviet power, understandably wished to add carriers to his dream force of large cruisers, destroyers, and battleships.

World War II interrupted Stalin's plans, however. Afterwards, though the Soviet Union possessed the world's largest submarine fleet, its overall naval order of battle was suitable only for Stalin's nightmare contingency, a requirement to defend the homeland against potential Allied amphibious assaults.

Stalin's death in 1953 further undermined the impetus for carrier construction. Instead, the Soviet Navy developed along different lines, which have been admirably chronicled by Robert Herrick, Michael MccGwire, and, more recently, by Kenneth McGruther, and Jürgen Rohwer, among others, and need not be repeated here.[1] Suffice it to say that whether for budgetary, strategic, tactical, or ideological reasons, and probably as a result of a combination of all four, the Soviet Union did not see fit to underrake a project to bring fixed-wing aircraft to sea before the early 1970s. Instead, the Soviets meshed progress in cruise missile guidance technology with nuclear warhead technology and with advances in nuclear propulsion for submarine, surface warship design, and medium-range bomber design and avionics. As a result they were able to put to sea a powerful force that, in major worldwide exercises, demonstrated its ability to launch coordinated air, surface, and subsurface attacks against enemy naval forces, including carriers, at considerable distance from Soviet territory.

Construction of the *Kiev*, the Soviet Union's first carrier capable of supporting fixed-wing aircraft, thus marked a departure from previous Soviet naval orientation. Unlike the *Moskva* and *Leningrad*, helicopter carriers, from which the *Kiev*-class carriers are lineally descended and which they resemble superficially, it could not be said that *Kiev*-class carriers were meant solely, or even primarily, for antisubmarine warfare operations. They appeared equally as consonant with the outreach in Soviet deployments that had begun in the mid-1960s and that by 1970, when the *Kiev*'s keel was laid down, included the full-time deployment of a naval squadron in the Mediterranean Sea and an Indian Ocean presence. They were true general-purpose ships, with long-range missiles and ASW weapons as well as VTOL (vertical takeoff and landing) aircraft.[2]

It must have been clear to the Soviets from the start, however, that, though she was a multipurpose warship, the *Kiev* could never aspire to be a multipurpose aircraft carrier. VTOL technology in both the East and the West had simply not advanced sufficiently far by the late 1960s and early 1970s to support anything other rhan short-legged, subsonic attack aircraft. It has yet to do so.

In the meantime, however, the Soviet Union demonstrated that its other naval advances enabled it to pose a formidable threat to U.S. carrier forces in all areas within the reach of Soviet Naval Aviation. As Admiral Zumwalt has graphically recalled, it was far from certain that the three carriers surrounded in the Eastern Mediterranean in October 1973 would have emerged victorious after an initial attack by the Soviet Fifth Squadron buttressed by Naval Aviation.[3]

Furthermore, the Soviets found that the worldwide deployment of naval forces, and their timely appearance on the scene of crises affecting friendly regimes, tended to buttress Soviet political goals. Though the linkage between forces at sea and evenrs ashore often was difficult to demonsrrate, nonetheless it appeared ro exist. Certainly, it often was perceived as such by some of the acrors in rhose crises. Most telling,

pethaps, in this tegard, was Adm. Donald Hatvey's comment before the House Armed Services Committee that the Soviet ships in the South Atlantic had in effect quarantined Angola to U.S. forces ("interposition" was the term he used),[4] thereby raising the stakes of confrontarion beyond the level that the United States was willing to accept.

The fleet's potential for influencing crises in the U.S.S.R.'s favor has never been lost on Admiral of the Fleet Gorshkov. He is credited with having invenred a new mission for the Soviet Navy termed "support of state interests,"[5] to which he accorded particular prominence in his *The Sea Power of the State*. Indeed, he is seen by some as having always intended that, publicly stated missions notwithstanding, his navy, like other powerful fleets of the past, should be capable of conducting any mission on any sea in the face of opposition.[6]

Nevertheless, whatever Admiral Gorshkov's intended views, a critical question remains unanswered: Why should a Soviet leadership that, since Stalin, did little to encourage the adaptation of carrier technology available to more than a half dozen countries for three decades, at long last press for carrier development, or at the least, accede to Gorshkov's presumed entreaties for these giant ships?

A Brief Digression: Maritime Presence Soviet Style. American naval officers generally prefer to discuss their requirements and capabilities in terms other than those arising from the needs of maritime presence. What counts, in their view, is what the fleet has at its disposal when it must fight, not what it looks like as it steams into port, or appears on the horizon, in peacetime.

For them, naval presence cannot be separated from the demands for overwhelming projection capabiliry, inasmuch as that capability most often resides in the selfsame naval forces and therefote must be imposing to be credible. Hence the frequent refrain of U.S. policymakets: "Send a carrier."

The primary sources of Soviet projection capability, however, have been not the ships of the Soviet fleet, but the forces of other states, commanded either by revolutionary groups recently ensconced in government or on the verge of seizing power, or by surrogate forces, or by both. The Soviets have provided those forces with leadership, command and control, and logistics support, both in the air and at sea. The role of the Navy has been to support this effort, particularly to ensure that a steady buildup by friendly forces was not disrupted by Western interventions from the sea.[7] Hence Admiral Harvey's remark about "interpositioning."

It is in this context that Gorshkov has built his political case for expanding the role of the Soviet fleet. His arguments regarding the fleet's role in the service of state interests imply a more subtle relationship between the Navy and the objects of its suasion than that which colors the U.S. Navy's view of presence. Gorshkov's constant references to the mission he is said to have originated embody, at the minimum, a purely *political* argument aimed at his *political* masters for resources devoted in the first instance to the achievement of a *political* mission.[8]

Whether Gorshkov himself believes that argument is less important than whether he believes that his masters will believe it, and whether they actually do so. To the extent that Gorshkov is a navy man cut from the cloth of other navy men, he probably ascribes less importance to the political case than he would admit. But no matter; the case has worked, at least in part. Operating under the guidance of a conservative leadership still wedded to the historic land force orientation of the remainder of the Soviet military, faced with budget constraints whose toll will soon be evidenr in the impending decline in the

number of major warships in service, Gorshkov has nevertheless persuaded his masters of the importance of an open ocean fleet to their political goals. He has brought the *Kiev* into the fleet; he has introduced the *Ivan Rogov*, the Soviet Union's first large amphibious ship; he has recently sent to sea the nuclear-powered *Kirov*, the most powerful surface combatant to appear on the seas since World War II; and he has provided his forces with the replenishment ship *Berezina*, the first such ship in his navy to carry helicopters for vertical replenishment.

What these developments represent first and foremost is a strengthened ability to sustain the current presence and projection-support missions rather than permit new ones. It is significant that only one other *Ivan Rogov* is expected to enter service; the Naval Infantry remains a small, elite force, scattered among the four fleets and totaling one twenty-fifth the size of the U.S. Marine Corps. The *Berezina* may be one of a kind. While the *Kirov* is imposing, given the Soviet practice of distributing its new warships among at least three of its four farflung fleets, only a very large building program will ensure that more than just one such ship could be expected to deploy to the Third World at any time. Finally, and critically, even four *Kievs* will not guarantee the Soviets airpower at sea; they lack VSTOL fighters, early warning, reconnaissance, and electronic warfare planes.

The appearance of these ships, therefore, does not yet mark an acquiescence by the Soviets in American views on the relationship of presence and the projection of power ashore. These ships do not embody an independent projection force. Instead, they strengthen the Soviet Union's ability to support other projection forces in the face of powerful naval forces that might be marshaled by an enemy.

The Missing Link between Political and Military Goals: The Aircraft Carrier. If the Soviet Navy is indeed on the verge of constructing an aircraft carrier then one must assume that the decision to consruct such a ship was taken at least several years ago. For quite some time it appeared that the United States would enter actively into a Third World crisis only with the greatest reluctance. Once it did so, however, it possessed an overwhelming capability to determine that crisis in its favor, particularly given the residual friendships it possessed in the Third World, including that of the Shah, who until 1979 dominated the Persian Gulf. For the Soviet Navy, therefore, the fundamentally political mission remained the same as it had been: to support forces on the ground and to increase the reluctance of U.S. policymakers to employ their sea-based intervention forces.

Nonetheless, the fact that the United States was a hair's breadth from sending carrier forces to Angola and the Horn of Africa, with the potential for interrupting the Soviet airlift and sealift to those regions,[9] might have contributed to the case for a true sea-based air capability consistent with the Soviet Navy's mission. The Soviets could not have missed the importance of the Sixth Fleet carriers to the protection of the airlift to Israel in 1973. In 1975 and 1977, however, it appeared that the roles of the two powers might be reversed: the threat to airlift, if carriers materialized, would come from the United States. In that circumstance, the Soviets would have been faced with the potential choice of risking the widening of a conflict, by attacking carriers whose planes might "buzz" AN-22s and IL-76s, or else calling a halt to the airlift. Neither option could have been relished in the Kremlin.

Events since the Horn of Africa war can only have confirmed the case for a carrier. With the fall of the Shah and the

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the U.S. Navy deployed two carriers to the Indian Ocean, and for a time three. Suddenly, it was the United States that had the largest naval force in the region. The carriers posed both a threat to Soviet lines of communications to Africa and a potential drain on the Soviet Naval Aviation resources that might be required to attack them. And it appeared that the carriers were in the Indian Ocean to stay: the United States announced its intention to negotiate access rights with powers in the region. For Soviet military and political planners, contemplating the benefits provided by shortened air lines of communication from the U.S.S.R. to Africa via Afghanistan, the presence of carriers could only have been disconcerting.

Thus, from a political as well as military perspective, the case for Soviet carriers must have appeared compelling as the decade came to a close. In addition, it must have assured that the new construction led to a carrier and not to another nuclear-powered icebreaker.[10]

A Soviet Carrier: Some Implications. One carrier does not a strike fleet make. An effective strike fleet requires groups of carriers, carrying multipurpose wings of aircraft specifically designed for sea-based air warfare, supported by high-speed escorts, underway replenishment ships, and support ships. It requires large numbers of highly skilled personnel operating ships and aircraft, in day and night, and in all types of weather. The Soviet Union currently possesses the escorts, together with a cadre of skilled naval personnel who spend the largest portion of their naval careers aboard them at sea. The Soviet Navy meets none of the other requirements and may not do so for the remainder of this century.

If the Soviet Union wishes to create a strike fleet after the American pattern, it will have to develop new types of carrier-based aircraft or else significantly modify its current types to provide the strengthened undercarriage and other characteristics demanded of carrier-based tactical aviation. It will have to train large numbers of personnel for flight and flight-support operations peculiar to carriers. It will have to produce more underway replenishment ships and support ships.

None of these tasks will be simple. The Soviets have encountered difficulties operating their *Forger* VTOL aircraft (they do not operate in the STOL mode). They can expect even greater problems learning to cope with takeoffs and recoveries dependent upon catapults and arresting gear. The Soviets currently deploy only a small percentage of their naval personnel overseas. They may find it difficult to add significant numbers to overseas deployments, in a period when their overall manpower pool will probably decline. The Soviets have yet to build a second *Berezina*. To support new carriers as well as the *Kievs*, they will have no alternative but to launch a major new replenishment ship program.

These and other potential obstacles (such as budget constraints and the competing demands of other Soviet military arms for defense funds) point to a long development period for a carrier strike force in the sense that the term is employed in the West. For this reason, it might be argued that during the next two decades, Soviet carriers will have tasks that fit more closely to the pattern of support for naval projection rather than of self-contained projection as embodied in the U.S. fleet. With even a small number of multipurpose carriers, and with modest underway replenishment capabilities, the Soviet Union could still more credibly support and quarantine a Third World battlefield than it can today. As few as two nuclear-powered carriers, accompanied by nuclear-powered cruisers such as *Kirov*, could ensure sustained high speed deployments to a crisis, followed

by immediate around-the-clock combat air patrol upon arrival.

The carrier's aircraft could thereby provide escort for cargo planes carrying supplies to friendly forces on shore. Carrier aviation could also form an umbrella for sealift forces. And, in the absence of Western intervention forces, carrier-based aviation could contribute to the battle on land. In regions where many countries own only a few squadrons of combat aircraft, and where even fewer squadrons are operational, such carrier-based forces could prove decisive.

The availability of Soviet carriers on the scene would deny the West (notably the United States) the ability to achieve uncontested full-time local air superiority simply by arriving in the crisis area. This air superiority has often constituted the prime offset to a potential attack coordinated between bombers transiting extremely long distances and surface and subsurface forces within missile range of the U.S. fleet. Soviet carrier-based forces, however inferior in training and even in numbers to those of the United States, nevertheless could provide some fighter escort to bombers and some umbrella for missile ships in all hours and in all weather. Their elimination could only be achieved at a cost to U.S. Navy aviation that would be felt when defenses were required against other Soviet attacking forces. Thus, the Soviet Union could once again, as in the recent past, invite the West to play Russia's own brand of roulette: either engage Soviet forces with the risk of serious destruction of carrier forces and possibly the spread of warfare worldwide, or remain out of the crisis theater, permitting the Soviet Union to seek its own preferred political and military outcome there.

Meeting a New Threat with Ideas as Well as Weapons. This essay has argued that Soviet development of an aircraft carrier has been proposed and approved in political terms and is likely to be a formidable political/military weapon. Surely the spectacle of a muscle-bound U.S. carrier force outsmarted by a smaller, less-capable Soviet fleet in a Third World crisis is unpleasant to contemplate.

The carrier, of course, may have other roles. Some analysts speculate that it is intended to enable the Soviets to conduct a "Battle of Midway" shootout with the United States in the North Atlantic. Such a scenario may be somewhat far-fetched as it involves the kinds of skills and training and the numbers of carriers that the Soviets are unlikely to amass before the end of the century.[11] History has demonstrated with considerable regularity, however, that navies in particular undertake missions for which their component systems were never originally intended.

In any event, the Third World appears to be the primary arena in which the Soviet aircraft carrier might be expected to operate for some time after its initial appearance. For the United States to cope with this new

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development, it will not be enough to build additional carriers and major warships of its own—though these are necessary anyway. In addition, however, the imaginative use of force as a political instrument will also be crucial. How do we ensure that the Soviets do not "get there first," or that if they do, it is only by a margin so small as to be meaningless? Will a flexible deployment of forces—increased forces—throughout the three major oceans be more effective than their deliberate stationing in well-defined areas? Can additional home ports ensure that the U.S. Navy can arrive on any Third World scene as quickly as that of the Soviets? Can we rely upon battleships as an initial offset to Soviet carriers? Could the large U.S. carriers serve more effectively as reinforcing elements of a U.S. presence confronting the Soviets rather than as a relatively static target for Soviet missiles and aircraft? Is there a place for small aircraft carriers in Third World operations? These longstanding questions must be addressed yet again.

One question will, however, dominate all of the others. It is the key to political as well as military posture, thus ultimately cannot be avoided. Will we have the will to shoot? If the answer is positive, we may not have to. If the answer is negative, all other questions will become problematical, and Gorshkov's claim that the maritime powers are best confronted on the world ocean will have been vindicated beyond doubt.

NOTES

This article was prepared by the author before joining the Department of Defense. The opinions expressed therein are those of the author alone and are not necessarily those of the Department of Defense.

1. See, for example, Robert W. Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1971); the contributions by George Hudson, Robert Weinland, Thomas Wolfe, and Michael McGwire in Michael McGwire, ed., *Soviet Naval Developments: Context and Capability* (New York: Praeger, 1973); Kenneth R. McGruther, *The Evolving Soviet Navy* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1978); Jürgen Rohwer, "Admiral Gorshkov and the Influence of History upon Seapower," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, Naval Review, May 1981, pp. 150-173.

2. On this point see Rohwer, pp. 171-172.

3. Elmo Zumwalt, *On Watch: A Memoir* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977), pp. 446-448. See also Robert G. Weinland, *Superpower Naval Diplomacy in the October 1973 Arab Israeli War* (Arlington, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, 1978).

4. Testimony of Donald G. Harvey, in *Military Posture and H.R. 16929* (Department of Defense Authorization for Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1979), Hearings before the House Committee on Armed Services, 95:2, 1978, Part 4, p. 8.

5. McGruther, pp. 36-37.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 35. For a diametrically opposite viewpoint, see Robert B. Bathurst, *Understanding the Soviet Navy: A Handbook* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1979). Bathurst argues that the Soviets, "while influenced by what was happening abroad [in the realm of naval technology], were usually responding to the beat of their own drums," p. 38.

7. For an extended discussion of the contrasts between Soviet and American maritime presence and projection missions see Dov S. Zakheim, "Maritime Presence, Projection, and the Constraints of Parity," in *Equivalence, Sufficiency and the International Balance*, Proceedings of the Fifth National Security Affairs Conference, Washington, D.C., National Defense University, 1978.

8. This can readily be seen in the chapter entitled "Problems of Naval Art," in S.G. Gorshkov, *The Seapower of the State* (London and New York: Pergamon, 1979).

9. The U.S. did not deploy carriers to either area. Nevertheless, Soviet deployment recognized the potential threat that the carrier embodied: See Abram H. Shulksy, ed., "Coercive Diplomacy," in Bradford Dismukes and James M. McConnell, eds., *Soviet Naval Diplomacy* (New York: Pergamon, 1979), pp. 147-150.

10. "New Soviet Types-Intelligence or Inference?" *Flight International*, 21 March 1981, p. 301.

11. This scenario begs some questions as well: Why nuclear power for carriers that are expected to operate relatively near the Soviet Union? Why a *Kirov* battle cruiser? Why the emphasis on amphibious

fleet developments? What role might be expected for medium-range bombers, whose capabilities suit them ideally for a carrier battle—though on this point see William D. O'Neil, "Backfire: Long Shadow on the Sea Lanes," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, March 1977, pp. 30-35.