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Students of such important questions as U.S.-Soviet naval matters require some sort of framework for analyzing the naval balance overall and for analyzing the forces that go to make up that balance. Very nearly institutionalized is the ascription of "defensive" and "sea denial" strategies to the Soviets (as distinguished from "offensive" and "sea control" for the U.S. Navy). Blind acceptance of the strategic asymmetry framework can lead to circulus in probando analysis, comfortable because familiar but never very useful. The framework has become so loaded with anomalies that rather than have to explain them away, perhaps a different framework is in order.

RETHINKING THE SOVIET NAVY

by

J.S. Breemer

Introduction. Some years ago then Secretary of Defense Schlesinger paraphrased Winston Churchill's oft-cited characterization of the Soviet Union to describe the Soviet Fleet "as a force, . . . that is to some degree a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."¹ In an effort to unravel the "riddle" of the Soviet Fleet, Western analysts have, over the past 15 years or so, evolved a structure of related concepts and propositions that have lent a sense of coherence and meaning to the evolving role of the Soviet Navy. Among the more important ideas that are now at the foundation of our understanding of the Soviet Fleet are: the concepts of "mission asymmetry" and of "sea denial," the "one-shot navy" thesis, and the more general propositions that (a) the Soviet Fleet is "defense-oriented" and (b) the Soviet Union "does not need a navy."

It is important to emphasize that these notions are not merely intellectual

conveniences; on the contrary, they are used, for example, to explain the differences in design characteristics between U.S. and Soviet surface combatants, and they are basic to the constant concern with the possibility of a surprise "shoot-out" against the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier force. Taking a broader view, the prevailing framework of analysis of Soviet naval affairs has become institutionalized to the extent that "anomalous" developments may be recognized only belatedly if at all.

This essay summarizes and reviews the key concepts that have helped "explain" the role of the Soviet Navy since the mid-1960s. It argues that it is time to reconsider their continued validity, particularly in light of current Soviet naval shipbuilding programs.

The Soviet Need for Naval Power.

A recurring theme in Western analyses of Soviet naval affairs is that the Soviet Union as a continental power, with near

self-sufficiency in raw materials and unencumbered by an overseas alliance system, does not have a "legitimate" need for a blue-water navy.² Because it possesses such a navy in fact (even though, as former Secretary of the Navy J. William Middendorf II put it, the Soviet Union does not have "its most vital interests on the oceans of the world"³), the question must be asked: "Why has the Soviet Union developed such a Navy?" Two explanations have usually been advanced.⁴ The first holds that the Soviets will probably use their fleet in a "spoiling" role against the West whose dependence on overseas trade and alliances does justify the possession of strong naval forces.⁵ The second, more elaborate explanation ties the growth of the Soviet surface fleet to the increasingly important role of the strategic missile submarine (SSBN) within the overall Soviet strategic deterrent. Its proponents submit as evidence (a) the Soviets' stated naval mission priority of the strategic nuclear strike, (b) Admiral Gorshkov's insistence that strong surface forces are needed to help protect submarines, (c) the emphasis on antisubmarine armament on the Soviet Fleet's most recent surface warships, and (d) the regular Soviet practice of combined surface ship and submarine operations. The subordination of the Soviet surface fleet to the security requirements of the SSBN force has been summarized by one author as follows:

The fleet ballistic-missile submarines constitute the sword, while the naval air forces (both land and sea-based) and the surface forces constitute the shield, not of the state, but of the sword itself.⁶

The linkage that has been drawn between the evolution of the Soviet Union's sea-based strategic deterrent and the expansion of its surface fleet is quite prominent in current Western analyses. Consistent with the logic of their argument, proponents have

advanced the thesis that Soviet deployment in home waters of the new *Delta*-class SSBNs with their 4,200 nautical miles SS-N-8s, the so-called SSBN "bastions," may mean the end of "forward deployment." According to the author cited previously:

... the future may well bring something of a shift *away* from forward deployment in home waters. To the extent that forward deployment was mandated first by *Polaris* and then by the short range of the SS-N-6 on board the "Yankees," it will have become irrelevant to strategic requirements.⁷ (Emphasis in the original.)

Michael McCWire, another expert on Soviet naval affairs, also stresses the subordination of Soviet surface forces to the requirements of the SSBN force. Rather than a contraction of the areas of forward deployment, however, he maintains that the SSBN bastion strategy will generate the need for Soviet surface forces actually to secure their command. The purpose of this shift in emphasis from "sea denial" to "sea control" in such areas as the Norwegian Sea and North Pacific, according to McCWire, is to establish an antisubmarine perimeter that can be defended against the most powerful strike forces that the opponent could bring to bear. This strategy, he states, explains the current trend in Soviet warship design toward larger and more heavily armed combatants, including one or more 30,000-plus ton nuclear "battlecruisers," and possibly several "conventional" aircraft carriers.⁸

The question of whether the SSBN bastion concept will signify a contraction or a reinforcement of Soviet forward deployment is secondary to the broader issue of the SSBN-surface fleet relationship. There is no dispute that the SSBN is a key element in the Soviet (as well as U.S.) Navy. Questionable, however, is the strong inference that (a) Soviet surface forces will fight a

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generally defensive battle, and (b) will do so within the boundaries of fairly well-defined geographic areas. The estimated size and composition of the Soviet Navy in the 1990s does not convey such an image. Rather, a surface fleet that McCWire has estimated may include about fifteen 12,000-ton cruisers, sixty-five 8,000-ton destroyers (including the current *Kara* and *Kresta II* cruisers), 55 frigates of about 4,000 tons each, five 32,000-ton nuclear battle cruisers, and seven or eight air-capable ships, including one or two "fully capable air-superiority carriers," has all the appearances of a truly "balanced" high seas fleet that is capable of all offensive and defensive, near-shore and distant waters missions.⁹

The argument that the Soviet Union does not have a "legitimate" need for a large navy is based on a one-sided view of the relationship between navies and international influence. While history shows that nations with large navies have also tended to be the ones with large colonial empires or important overseas alliance responsibilities, it is by no means clear what comes first, the navy or the overseas commitment. For example, even though the U.S. Navy justifiably argues the need for a powerful navy to defend its overseas economic and military interests, a strong argument can also be made that those interests were made possible by the existence of a strong fleet in the first place. The connection between naval strength and international power and influence is probably a two-way street, with each side in the equation reinforcing the other. In the "real world" the relationship between means and ends is rarely completely rational; military capabilities that were created with a given national objective in mind frequently lose their original rationale. Instead, the twists and turns of international events may create opportunities to use those capabilities towards ends not previously considered.

Almost certainly, defense against amphibious attack in the late 1940s, countercarrier operations in the 1950s, and defense against Western SSBNs since the early 1960s have been the critical motivating force for the present shape of the Soviet Navy. Also quite clearly, the Soviet Fleet that was ordered to sea in the early 1960s was not built for the 1960s' role. Given the assignment, however, the need for a larger and more capable fleet evolved naturally. The *Kiev*, *Kara*, and *Berezhina* classes are among the tangible results.

In parallel with forward deployment has evolved an international network of local situations of Soviet influence and access. Soviet overseas involvements vary greatly in kind and in scope. Some are limited to economic aid or to the establishment of cultural exchange programs. Still other nations have received massive amounts of military assistance and advice. It is not known to what, if any, extent the international visibility of the Soviet Navy may have paved the way for Soviet "internationalism"; the fact is that the two phenomena have coincided as they have throughout history. Whether by design or by accident, the acquisition of new international "stakes" will have its own influence on the size and shape of the Soviet Fleet.

The Defensive Orientation of the Soviet Navy. One of the most important books to influence prevailing Western thinking about the Soviet Navy appeared in 1968: Robert W. Herrick's *Soviet Naval Strategy—Fifty Years of Theory in Practice*. In it, the author brings to bear a wealth of historical, doctrinal and operational evidence to demonstrate "the essentially deterrent defensive nature of post-Stalin naval strategy and the factors that now greatly inhibit the possibility of changing it."¹⁰ Soviet maritime defense, according to the book, is based on the "zone" concept: basically three

concentric areas extending from the Soviet coast with the outer limit of each area determined by the strike radius of different weapon systems.¹¹ Forward deployment into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Norwegian and East China seas has been explained accordingly as a basically "defensive" reaction to the threat of *Polaris* submarines, one that necessitated the extension of the Soviet Union's maritime defense zone.¹²

The distinction between a defensive and an offensive navy is an obscure one at best. As used by Western analysts, it appears to be based on two criteria. The first has to do with the relative ability (or perceived intention) of a fleet to seek engagement with enemy sea- or shore-based forces at long distances from its home base. The second criterion is the possession of aircraft carriers. As Herrick has put it:

Even though the Soviet Navy is second in tonnage only to the U.S. Navy, its complete lack of strike carrier forces constitutes a fundamental, qualitative difference that necessitates resorting to the defensive in naval strategy.¹³

Naturally, the two criteria are held to be highly interdependent.

There are some serious conceptual and operational difficulties with the distinction between offense and defense; it is highly situation-dependent, rather than the function of some independently verifiable criteria. "Defense" means different things to different nations. Mexico's defense is likely to be limited to its national borders—a territorial defense. The defense of the United States is a forward defense in Western Europe and the Far East. The Soviets may well consider an attack across the Central Front a defensive strategy. On a different level, the general thrust of a nation's military posture may fairly be labeled "defensive" (say, Germany in 1944); however, such an overall posture does not rule out

individual strategic and tactical offensives (for example, the German Ardennes offensive in December of 1944).

Undoubtedly, the primary purpose of the Soviet Fleet is "defense of the homeland." What must be doubted, however, is the implication in many Western analyses that such defense will be tied to a series of self-imposed geographic defense zones; that Western navies will be able to operate almost at will as long as they do not cross this perimeter.

The Soviet Fleet is continuing its evolution from a coastal defense force to a high seas defense force. Even if a Soviet carrier battle group were to appear off the U.S. east coast, the Soviets would still insist on its defensive mission.

Sea Denial. Whether the Soviet Union's strategic circumstances "justify" a large navy is closely connected with the proposition that the Soviet Fleet is aimed primarily at "sea denial." The term is used to contrast the presumed Soviet objective of preventing the West from using the seas versus the U.S. and allied naval purpose of "sea control," i.e., the securing of the seas for one's own purposes. Without belaboring the conceptual and operational difficulties of the sea control-versus-sea denial question, it can be said that sea denial clearly implies that the Soviet Union "does not need" the use of the seas. Sea control has a *positive* connotation in the sense that it is a necessary precondition for the ultimate reason for "legitimate" naval power, the overseas extension of national power, whether in the form of convoys or amphibious assaults. On the other hand, the very term "sea denial" has a strong negative association. Other than spoiling the opponent's "legitimate" need for the use of the seas, the sea denial navy has no indispensable

defensive purpose. The following excerpt illustrates this view:

The smaller amount of space allocated to propulsion and electronics in Soviet ships reflects less concern for compartmentation and damage control and... minimum provision for future maintenance... many of the Soviet warships characteristics derive directly from the fact that the Soviet Union is an economically independent continental power *which could lose its entire surface navy without hazarding national security.* (Emphasis added.)¹⁴

The labels "sea control" and "sea denial" have probably confused rather than clarified our understanding of seapower. At one time convenient shorthand descriptors of broad naval objectives, they have now become associated with distinct strategic concepts, different operational tactics, and even differences in naval force structure and ship design. Probably the most influential article to set the tone for the tendency among analysts to point to Soviet warship construction as evidence of the Soviet Fleet's sea denial strategy was Capt. James W. Kehoe's essay "Warship Design: Ours and Theirs." Kehoe wrote:

Soviet mission requirements account for the character of Soviet warship designs. Their sea denial mission is intended to deny other nations certain uses of the sea... Their sea denial mission requires a design emphasis on a heavy firepower, first strike capability against a multiple air, sea and submarine threat, rather than an inherent shipboard self-sufficiency for extended deployment with limited dependency on shore based maintenance and resupply and the combat support of aircraft carriers. Finally, their sea denial mission requires emphasis on high speed and good

seakeeping ability in all weather, rather than on endurance.¹⁵

Granted that U.S. and Soviet warship design practices differ, it does not follow that such differences confirm the sea denial role of the Soviet Navy. In particular, the debatable inference is made that given sea control for the U.S. Navy and sea denial for the Soviet Fleet, it therefore follows that observed design differences are, in fact, accounted for by this "basic asymmetry." As Ken Booth has pointed out, "Different navies have different ways of approaching similar missions."¹⁶ All that can be said with certainty is that U.S. and Soviet surface combatants appear to be built with different priorities in mind. For that matter, U.S. and Western European warships also tend to reflect different design philosophies. Modern European designs may, in fact, bear a closer resemblance to their Soviet counterparts than to U.S. Navy ships. Like Soviet warships, British, French and Dutch naval vessels are commonly fitted with fin stabilizers and twin screws. The seakeeping performance of Western European combatants in general, like those of Soviet ships, are often recognized as superior to those of equivalent-size U.S. Navy ships. Also, in common with their Soviet counterparts, modern European NATO combatants tend to "outarm" U.S. ships of the same size. For example, using Captain Kehoe's system for measuring shipboard armament trends, which basically involves counting the number of weapon launchers per 1,000 tons of displacement, it turns out that recently built Western European naval vessels between 2,500 and 6,000 tons displacement (fully loaded) have armament values from a low of 2.4 to a high of 3.9 launchers per 1,000 tons.¹⁷ By comparison, Kehoe's calculations indicate U.S. values between 0.8 and 1.2, and values from 1.8 to 2.4 for recent Soviet-built combatants.¹⁸

One final area of similarity between Soviet and European-built warships is that of endurance. Western European ships tend to be "short-legged" like Soviet vessels, typically exhibiting ranges of 5,000 to 6,000 nautical miles at cruising speeds in the neighborhood of 18 knots.

In sum, it appears that U.S. Navy ships, rather than Soviet combatants, stand out for their different design features. Rather than to attribute this difference to a sea control-versus-sea denial asymmetry, a more practical explanation can be found in the fact that Soviet, like Western European warships, are intended to operate primarily in North Atlantic waters without the protection of aircraft carriers. Weather conditions in the North Atlantic force good seakeeping qualities, including such features as fin stabilizers. U.S. Navy ships, by contrast, are built for worldwide operations. The need to deploy to tropical latitudes, for example, requires air conditioning, meaning an additional electrical power requirement, which imposes, in turn, a space and weight penalty. To keep shipbuilding costs manageable, compromises are necessary; hence the ship that is optimized for worldwide deployment (which also accounts for the emphasis on endurance on U.S. ships) may well be inferior in particular geographic regions.

The U.S. Navy has been built "around" the aircraft carrier—not so the Western European and Soviet Fleets. The comparatively light armament of major U.S. surface combatants reflects their first line of defense. With the reduction of the carrier force level in recent years, the U.S. Navy, like its Western European and Soviet equivalents before it, has chosen to add more organic attack weapons (e.g., the *Harpoon* antiship missile) to the individual combatants.

"Sea denial" can be a useful description of a navy's activities as long

as the following limitations are borne in mind:

(a) Sea denial, like sea control, is not a generalized strategy in the sense that it embodies a well-defined set of tactical rules toward a military end;

(b) Sea denial, like sea control, is a military pursuit that is quite limited both temporarily and spatially; both are neither absolute nor mutually exclusive;

(c) Sea denial, like sea control, can exist in various degrees and at different levels—strategic and tactical. In naval warfare, sea denial shades over imperceptibly into sea control and vice versa.

(d) Sea denial and sea control are meaningless concepts to the individual warship or task force. They are not naval "missions," and do not bear on how the captain fights his ship or how the task force commander fights his battle group.

The One-Shot Navy Theme. The classification of the Soviet Navy as a sea denial fleet and the ship design characteristics that have been linked with this role have been related in turn to the label "one-shot" fleet. Basically, the reasoning goes, Soviet warships do not meet the high standards of habitability, on-board equipment maintenance, endurance, and weapon reload capability that are required to conduct wartime operations over extended periods. Moreover, the Soviet Fleet in general falls short of the needed logistical capability, whether in at-sea replenishment ships or overseas basing. Given these limitations, plus the Soviet doctrinal emphasis on the short war, it has generally been estimated that the offensive portion of the Soviet surface campaign will probably conclude with the initial (surprise) shoot-out.

The one-shot fleet characterization has had an important influence on the

U.S. Navy's perception of the possibility of a preemptive surprise attack, the so-called "D-Day shoot-out." A second important influence has been the Soviet practice of trailing and "marking" U.S. warships during periods of international tension. One author has summarized the U.S. Navy's concern as follows:

...the Soviet fleet is essentially a one-salvo fleet. It has to be: many individual launch platforms are required to fire enough missiles to saturate the American defenses. Therefore they can be of only modest unit size and consequently in general carry no reloads... most [Soviet] ships and missile submarines are essentially disarming themselves by firing... Hence, once war has begun, [Soviet] platforms, wherever they may be found, will be fair—and quite possibly easy—game. What this means is that the Soviets must begin their war by striking every U.S. carrier they can reach simultaneously.¹⁹

The implication that the Soviets view their fleet as an "expendable" asset has been stated cogently by Joynt and Smolanski:

...[the Soviet] concept does not require the ability to survive a naval contest, since Russian ships would be within range of American units at the outset of war, but only the ability to survive long enough to launch their missiles at U.S. carriers... In short, the role of the Soviet Mediterranean fleet in a general war involves a suicide mission.²⁰

The potentiality of a surprise attack is a legitimate concern, and should be guarded against. Certainly Soviet military writers have gone out of their way to stress the benefits of surprise in warfare. The suggestion that after the initial shoot-out the wartime role of the Soviet surface fleet will probably be

reduced to coastal defense may be comforting; however it may also reflect some wishful thinking. It certainly does not square with Adm. Sergei G. Gorshkov's stated view of the role and meaning of seapower. It is difficult to imagine that the Soviets are building several 30,000-plus ton nuclear battle cruisers, 12,000-ton *Kresta* follow-on cruisers, a new series of "heavy" 8,000-ton destroyers, frigates, and possibly several "true" aircraft carriers, with an eye on limiting their "finest hour" to a chancy D-day shoot-out. Capt. G. Nikolayev's pronouncement on the purpose of his country's navy in a recent issue of *Morskoy Sbornik* is probably much closer to the truth:

... Pentagons strategists even today have no objection to reviving those times when they were capable of performing their piratical deeds in any area of the World Ocean practically with impunity. However, today they must consider the immutable fact that there exists in the world a force capable of stopping any of their aggressive actions at sea. The name of this force is the USSR Navy.²¹

Conclusion. The notion of a "basic asymmetry" between U.S. and Soviet naval goals and missions has been a valuable contribution to the debate of more than a decade over the meaning of Soviet naval initiatives. It provided a dispassionate and intelligent explanation for the forward deployment of new classes of missile-armed submarines, cruisers and destroyers, when the initial (over)reaction on the part of many was to proclaim that the U.S. Navy had been relegated to second place. Unfortunately, the mission asymmetry idea and its related concepts of sea denial, defensive orientation, and one-shot navy have become institutionalized in our thinking about the Soviet Navy; they have become the "accepted"

frame of reference for addressing and evaluating U.S.-Soviet naval relations in general, questions about the naval balance in particular, and even the performance characteristics of new Soviet warships, aircraft, and different weapon systems. It is time for a major review of our current intellectual structure about Soviet naval affairs. In the logic of Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, there are too many "anomalies" that do not "fit" in the prevailing system of explanation.²²

One of the marks of human society is the drive to explain different phenomena—to give order and reason to seemingly unrelated and randomly occurring events. The explanation provides the basis, in turn, for our ultimate aim—the ability to predict and control events. Usually, the explanation has become possible only after it has been learned how to describe the phenomena and the circumstances of their occurrence. With enough data amassed, trends might become discernible. Our current knowledge about the Soviet Navy is based, in large

part, on a reverse process; the explanation of why the Soviets are building a navy has been leading our fact-gathering and analysis. The point is that we simply do not know enough at this time about the interrelationship among strategic choice, political opportunity, and sheer momentum that is shaping the Soviet Fleet and its missions into the 1990s. Prudence should be our counsel when attempting to apply rigor to the Soviet naval "enigma."

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Jan S. Breemer, born in the Netherlands, was educated in International Relations (specializing in national security affairs) at the University of Southern California. He is a Senior Research Analyst responsible for threat analysis in support of various U.S. Navy warship design/modernization programs for Presearch, Inc.

NOTES

1. James B. Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report FY 1976 and FY 1977* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1975), p. III-21.

2. The argument is not a new one. Winston Churchill is reported to have said the same of the Imperial German Navy: "The British Navy is to us a necessity, while the German Navy is more in the nature of luxury." Cited in K. Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), pp. 58-59.

3. J. William Middendorf II, "American Maritime Strategy and Soviet Naval Expansion," *Strategic Review*, Winter 1976, p. 20.

4. Actually, there has been a third answer, namely that the Soviets are simply intent on replacing the U.S. Navy as the dominant naval power. However, this argument has received little serious attention among the defense intelligentsia.

5. See, for example, John M. Collins, *American and Soviet Military Trends since the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington: Georgetown University, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1978), p. 237.

6. Gary Charbonneau, "The Soviet Navy and Forward Deployment," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, March 1979, p. 38.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

8. Michael McGwire, "The Rationale for the Development of Soviet Seapower," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 1980, pp. 155-183.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

10. Robert W. Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy—Fifty Years of Theory and Practice* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1968), p. xxxiv.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-139.

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12. See, for example, Michael McCWire, "The Evolution of Soviet Naval Policy: 1960-74," in Michael McCWire, et al., eds., *Soviet Naval Policy—Objectives and Constraints* (New York: Praeger, 1975), pp. 512-514.
13. Herrick, p. 149.
14. David G. Clark, "Destroyers for the 21st Century," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, March 1977, p. 29.
15. James W. Kehoe, Jr., "Warship Design: Ours and Theirs," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, August 1975, p. 64.
16. Booth, p. 179.
17. Calculations based on the French F-67 and C-70 classes of frigates, the Dutch *Tromp*-class destroyer and *Kortenaer*-class frigate, and the Royal Navy *Amazon*-class frigate. Source: Jean Laboye Couhat, ed., *Combat Fleets of the World 1976/77: Their Ships, Aircrafts, and Armament* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1976).
18. Kehoe, p. 61. Actually, depending on how the data are presented, the difference in armament trends between U.S. and Soviet ships is not as great as is suggested by Figure 5 in Kehoe's article. For example, if the comparison had been made strictly on the basis of tonnage, rather than the arbitrary distinction between "frigates" and "destroyers/cruisers," ships like the FFG-7 and FF-1052 would give the U.S. Navy a much better score.
19. Norman Friedman, "C³ War at Sea," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 1977, pp. 136, 137.
20. C.B. Joynt and O.M. Smolanski, *Soviet Naval Policy in the Mediterranean*, Research Monograph No. 5 (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University, Department of International Relations, 1972), p. 15.
21. G. Nikolayev, "From Myth to Myth," *Morskoy Sbornik*, October 1979, p. 95.
22. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

