

2022

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Johannes Riber Royal Danish Navy

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Recommended Citation

Riber, Johannes Royal Danish Navy (2022) "Russia's Twenty-First-Century Naval Strategy—Combining Admiral Gorshkov with the Jeune École," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 75: No. 3, Article 6.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss3/6>

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RUSSIA'S TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY NAVAL STRATEGY

Combining Admiral Gorshkov with the Jeune École

Johannes Riber

After the Cold War, the Russian navy quickly disintegrated; new-construction programs were postponed or canceled, while many existing units were abandoned or provided only limited maintenance.¹ However, over the course of Vladimir V. Putin's political ascendancy since 1999, the Russian navy slowly has been resurrected. This development escaped much international notice—until September 2015, when Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war. As part of that intervention, Russia's Caspian Flotilla launched its first-ever cruise-missile attack, firing twenty-six missiles at targets over 750 miles away.² Two months later, a Russian submarine similarly fired missiles into Syria from the Mediterranean, and other Russian submarines repeated those attacks in 2017.³ Most recently, the Black Sea Fleet has fired cruise missiles into Ukraine.⁴

The development of cruise missiles, together with other naval improvements and innovations, has raised concerns in the West about the resurrection of Russian sea power. Both the reestablishment of the U.S. Navy's Second Fleet—responsible for the North Atlantic—and the reopening of the military part of Keflavík Airport in Iceland are clear reactions to Russia's naval developments and its worrying political posturing.⁵

Commander Johannes Riber is a career officer in the Royal Danish Navy. He holds an MA in international security studies from the University of Leicester, United Kingdom, and is a PhD fellow at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. He most recently published a chapter on Danish naval strategy as a part of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies Series, King's College London.

While the Russo-Ukrainian war since February 2022 has called into question Russian military abilities in general, including at sea, it would be careless to assume—regardless of the future course of that conflict—that Russia will not continue to be a significant security factor in the future. Yes, Russia runs the risk of total defeat in Ukraine,

yet that only underlines this article's main observation: the similarities between France after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 and the Russia of today, each squeezed in a multipolar world, with a poor economy and a diminishment of its industrial power.

To make this comparison, the article will analyze the contemporary Russian navy to offer a better understanding of the service's thinking and strategy—a strategy whose execution the Ukraine war only will speed up. On paper, Russia harbors the ambition to become the world's second-largest sea power—the position the Soviet Union held during the Cold War. However, both Russia's economy and its political geography have changed since that era, and Russia is dividing its naval development along two separate lines of effort. The first is influenced by Russian strategic culture and ideas about nuclear deterrence inherited from Admiral Sergey G. Gorshkov (1910–88), the longtime head of the Soviet navy (1956–85); this line of effort centers on bastion defense and submarine warfare in the North Atlantic area. The second line is a Russian version of the French *Jeune École*, sometimes referred to as a naval strategy of the weak; it centers on building smaller units with offensive weapon capabilities, with the aim of deterring adversaries—in Russia's case, to enable it to establish sea control in the Baltic and Black Seas and sea denial in parts of the Mediterranean Sea. This second line of development will be increasingly important in a context that includes the war in Ukraine and Russia's resultant naval losses.

The biggest evolution in Russian naval thinking has been toward this second emphasis, on smaller surface units armed with advanced capabilities such as cruise missiles. Such an approach contrasts with that characteristic of the Soviet era, when the Soviet navy would have been capable of fighting larger sea battles in the North Atlantic.⁶ To force an adversary to divide its fleet as it attempts to overbalance the new Russian navy locally, today's service likely will focus on conducting multiple smaller, geographically dispersed engagements in the North Atlantic while exercising sea control in the Baltic and Black Seas.

This article first will analyze Soviet and Russian naval histories, to establish Russia's strategic culture and Admiral Gorshkov's continuing influence on modern Russian naval thinking. Next will come a discussion of the French *Jeune École* and its development at the end of the nineteenth century, highlighting the similarities between France's strategic position then and Russia's today. That will be followed by an analysis of the two parts of current Russian naval strategy: first, the implications of Russia's traditional strategic culture; second, how Russia's naval strategic ambitions, combined with the country's financial constraints and its current and projected diplomatic and economic isolation, have and will put its conventional surface navy on a course similar to that suggested by the *Jeune École* concept. The last-mentioned analysis examines the naval development of

the Caspian Flotilla and Black Sea Fleet since 2008. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these developments for the Baltic Sea and how Western naval and defense planning should address Russia's naval development.

RUSSIA AS A SEA POWER—A “STRATEGIC CULTURE” PERSPECTIVE

In his 1976 book *The Sea Power of the State*, Admiral Gorshkov argues that Russia's historical successes and failures in war were linked to the successes and failures of the Russian navy, either directly or indirectly.⁷ The validity of his argument can be questioned, but his overall message is clear: Russia has an important sea-power history. Other prominent sea-power scholars echo this point.⁸ Russian naval officers often remind audiences that Peter the Great (1672–1725) founded both the Russian navy and its naval academy, making the latter one of the oldest in the world, and that sea power subsequently had profound impacts on Russian history, especially with victories in the battles of Gangut (1714), Chesma (1770), and Sinop (1853).⁹

However, despite this early imperial history, Russia's contemporary strategic and sea-power culture is influenced more directly by the later tsarist navy and subsequently by the Soviet one. Thus, the historical sketch that follows will concentrate on Russia's naval history in the twentieth century and the navy's development—driven by Admiral Gorshkov's vision—from a coastal-defense fleet into a great sea power, then the Russian fleet's disintegration after the Cold War.

The Russian navy suffered two significant setbacks in the twentieth century: its devastating defeat by Japan at the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 and the Russian Revolution in 1917.¹⁰ Emerging from these disasters in the 1920s, the Soviet navy developed the “Russian New School.”¹¹ This school of thought held that the navy should play a principally defensive role, protecting the Soviet coast and supporting Soviet land operations. This meant that the Soviet fleet would focus on submarines, sea mines, coastal batteries, and similar near-seas capabilities. With no large surface combatants, the Soviet navy made the submarine its principal offensive platform. The L-class submarines of the early 1930s were part of the service's first large submarine-construction program after the revolution. The first two submarines of the class were *Leninets* and *Stalinets* (meaning the followers of Lenin and Stalin, respectively)—heavily politically freighted names that suggest the program's political and institutional importance at the time.¹²

Several attempts were made to move away from the Russian New School. Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), for one, supported a more traditional view on naval development that emphasized large warships, but new-construction programs were postponed by more-pressing military needs at the outset of the Second World War and by subsequent economic restraints.¹³ The Russian New School regained political prominence under Nikita S. Khrushchev's leadership (1953–64).

Khrushchev (1894–1971) opposed the idea of large surface combatants, viewing them as dinosaurs in a world dominated by nuclear conflict; he called them nothing more than “big metal eaters.”¹⁴

While Stalin may have understood the need for large warships and Khrushchev did not, neither of them fully understood the navy’s potential role in diplomacy. The whole idea of maritime or “gunboat” diplomacy was absent from Soviet naval thinking up to the 1960s—a deficit put on stark display during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. It has been argued that Russia did not have enough large, modern warships to escort the merchant vessels bound for Cuba, which forced those ships to attempt individual clandestine transits.¹⁵ This is not entirely true; Russia did have cruisers, and, while they were not as modern as the U.S. Navy’s, they were sufficient to make a clear statement of Soviet strategic will.¹⁶ Instead, the Soviet navy’s biggest shortcoming was in auxiliary vessels, especially oceangoing oilers, to support such a deployment.¹⁷ The Soviet navy therefore could not replenish its warships at sea during long transits. In the case of Cuba, the Soviet navy planned to use shore-based logistical support, but for this to work the initial phase of the missile transportation had to remain secret; the Soviet navy would not begin operating overtly from Cuba before a deterrence capability had been installed on the island.¹⁸ In this crisis, the Soviet navy demonstrated that it had neither the ability nor the experience to deploy naval task groups in the absence of logistical support from shore—a clear indication that Russian naval strategic thinking at the time largely was limited to coastal-defense and nuclear-second-strike capabilities.

In the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, this orientation changed completely, as the Soviet navy realized it needed large surface combatants. Admiral Gorshkov started an ambitious shipbuilding program. However, he argued that the most important function of a modern navy was not to engage in decisive sea battles against enemy fleets but to maintain the capability to strike an adversary’s homeland with nuclear missiles; the mission of the rest of the navy was to protect Russia’s submarine-based second-strike deterrent.¹⁹ In the 1970s, this idea gave birth to the strategic concept of *bastion defense*: creating protected enclaves where the Soviet Union’s nuclear-missile-armed submarines could operate safe from American attack submarines.²⁰ Gorshkov also saw the Soviet navy’s ability to threaten the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) from North America as an important support operation during any war in Europe. Finally, Gorshkov understood a navy’s potential diplomatic importance.²¹ Gorshkov was particularly inspired by British naval strategist Sir Julian S. Corbett (1854–1922). This was especially so with respect to the importance of avoiding needless decisive battles, using blockades, and understanding the role of navies during crises or proxy wars.²²

Five years after the Cuban missile crisis, during the Six-Day War of June 1967 between Israel and its Arab adversaries, the Soviet navy deployed significant forces to the Mediterranean, and it did so again during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, both times to balance U.S. involvement and show political support for the USSR's Egyptian and Syrian allies.²³ Similarly, beginning in 1964 the Black Sea Fleet conducted regular deployments into the Mediterranean; ten years on, the fleet averaged forty warships. The Soviet navy also maintained a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean and made regular visits to client states such as Angola.²⁴ Thus, the Soviet Union had learned its lessons during the Cuban missile crisis, including the value of navies as diplomatic tools.

Even though by the 1970s the Soviet navy surpassed the U.S. Navy in number of ships, it was not designed to fight large, decisive sea battles far from Russia's shores. The Soviet navy could not wage such a battle in the middle of the North Atlantic without organic tactical air support. Yet while it remained a continuing Soviet ambition to build aircraft carriers similar to those of the U.S. Navy, the costs were too high.²⁵ Therefore, the Soviet Union developed long-range bombers that it could send to the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap, as an integrated part of its sea-denial strategy—a strategy so important that its naval air force became one of the largest air forces in the world.²⁶ This focus on accomplishing sea denial in the North Atlantic was intended partly to prevent reinforcements from reaching Europe from North America and partly to protect the Soviet submarine-based nuclear-second-strike capability residing in the North Sea and Arctic Ocean.²⁷ Beyond exercising a degree of sea denial in the North Atlantic, the Soviet naval strategy aimed to establish local sea control in the Baltic and Black Seas. It sought to accomplish all this with a combination of submarines, large surface combatants, and long-range bombers.

But with the end of the Cold War the Soviet navy went from zenith to nadir. The Russian navy quickly disintegrated and returned to being a coastal-defense navy, although it retained a capability for nuclear deterrence.²⁸ The service was forced to readopt the strategy of the New Russian School, from which it had escaped in the 1960s. It was not until the presidency of Vladimir Putin (1999–) that the Russian navy, together with the other military services, experienced significant rearmament.²⁹ This rearmament was influenced heavily by Russian strategic culture—not least the lessons of the Cold War—but also by the necessity to accept heavy compromises that can be explained best by reference to the *Jeune École*.

THE JEUNE ÉCOLE AND RUSSIA

The *Jeune École* is an alternative approach to naval strategy, in that it offers a different path for states that cannot establish themselves as dominant sea

powers but nonetheless have global political ambitions. Reference to the Jeune École therefore can contribute to an understanding of Russia's present naval strategy.

As a naval strategic theory, the Jeune École originated from a French debate on how to balance a superior British Royal Navy in the 1880s and 1890s. The theory therefore was labeled a strategy of the weak, suggesting an intent to avoid decisive (Mahanian) sea battles against a superior force.³⁰

While the ideas of Corbett and Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) were presented in one or more of their respective books and spread from there, the Jeune École originated in a variety of writings by multiple authors and debates among many on the future of the French navy, spearheaded by Admiral H. L. Théophile Aube (1826–90) and journalist Gabriel Charmes (1850–86).³¹ The Jeune École therefore is not a strategic theory originated by a single intellect and propounded by a single author but rather the result of a dynamic debate at the end of the nineteenth century in France.

The debate was motivated partly by the costly naval competition with Great Britain, and partly by geostrategic changes in continental Europe. The France of the 1890s inhabited a multipolar world presenting various strategic challenges. In 1871, the country had been defeated in the Franco-Prussian War, resulting in enormous financial losses. France also suffered an 8 percent loss of industrial capacity because it had to cede Alsace-Lorraine to Germany.³² Furthermore, the Triple Alliance, created in 1882 among the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, was aimed primarily at France.³³ And while France did not see Britain as having any territorial ambitions in continental Europe, it did view it as the single largest threat to French colonies.³⁴ Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century France was squeezed in a geostrategically multipolar world with Britain on one side and its rival continental powers on the opposite side, while it lacked the economic strength to balance them all.

It was out of these conditions and constraints that the Jeune École developed. Admiral Aube argued that the only way the French navy could afford to fight both in the Mediterranean and against Britain was by taking advantage of technical innovations (steam, steel, submarines, torpedoes, communications, etc.) that the Industrial Revolution had brought to navies. Technology would be a force multiplier in that it could make even large battleships vulnerable. Naval blockades would be a thing of the past because large warships no longer could defend themselves against submarines and high-speed torpedo boats. Technology would substitute for the battleships that France could not afford.³⁵

Aube was aware that change in technological *means* could not do the job alone; to make the change work, new strategic and tactical *ways* were required as well. The French navy still should be able to face and defeat, say, the Italian

navy, but it also still should avoid facing the British in any decisive naval battle. The French focus on the Italian navy arose from the strategic need to deny Italy sea control of the Mediterranean. Therefore, a part of the *Jeune École* argued in favor of a naval strategy of defeating the Italian fleet before it could leave its harbors, by taking offensive action that combined harbor bombardment with naval maneuvers by small units such as torpedo boats.³⁶

However, the strategic approach to the Royal Navy needed to be completely different. Here, France would focus on attacking British merchant ships with high-speed cruisers in an unlimited *guerre de course*.³⁷ The aim of the *guerre de course* was to raise the costs of sea transportation so high that the British public would consider the price of continuing the war too great.³⁸ At the same time, French colonies should be protected by modern coastal batteries and small, fast units such as torpedo boats.³⁹

Thus, the ideas of the *Jeune École* were distilled into a two-pronged strategy. An inferior enemy navy should be attacked preemptively, while a superior fleet should be addressed with an effect-based, asymmetric approach.

The *Jeune École* faced some obvious challenges. Range was an issue with regard to commerce raiding; while cruisers could travel a fair distance, they needed coal, just like any other ship. The French answer to this problem was to operate a dispersed fleet from multiple bases that were placed such that the navy could concentrate its power at a given time, then disperse its units again.⁴⁰

The *Jeune École* constituted a completely new way of naval strategic thinking. While the *ends* (winning the war) were the same, the *means* and *ways* were completely different. Abandoning the concept of the decisive sea battle meant that the *means* could be in the form of smaller but highly technical units; the *ways* were either preemptive or asymmetric attacks, depending on the opponent.

For the concepts of the *Jeune École* to work today, a number of strategic preconditions would need to be present.

- A state would need to have the ambition of maintaining a position as a dominant sea power. It was France's relative loss of power, including sea power, that changed its mode of thinking, in hopes of regaining its position.
- There must be a geostrategic need to divide military forces. France saw itself surrounded by enemies and felt it had to divide its forces.
- There must be economic constraints, a geographical loss, or both. France had lost the Franco-Prussian War, resulting in enormous financial and territorial losses, which put financial restraints on its naval-construction programs.
- The technological revolution has to be so significant that a state can seek to incorporate alternative *ways* and *means* into its naval strategy.

Combined, these strategic preconditions would result in a navy consisting mainly of smaller but heavily armed and technologically advanced units operating from multiple harbors, in combination with robust coastal defenses.

Russia's present strategic environment is similar in many ways to that of France during the era of Admiral Aube. Russia clearly is ambitious to return to a great-power position similar to the Soviet Union's during the Cold War; its invasions of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), together with its intervention in Syria (2015), make this clear. Furthermore, Russia sees a world that is multipolar, and thus perceives a need to divide its navy among the various relevant seas. While this also was the case during the Cold War, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, combined with enlargements of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has underlined Russia's need to maintain a credible naval presence in both the Black and Baltic Seas.⁴¹ A more independent Turkey and a rising China only add to the multipolarity and therefore to the naval complexity.

On top of these geostrategic challenges, the Russian economy went into a big decline in the first decade after the Cold War, and the country still struggles to compete with the United States, China, and the EU; while Russian gross domestic product (GDP) per capita had been increasing prior to the Ukraine war, Russia's share of the global GDP has been decreasing since 2008.⁴² While the full, long-term impacts on the Russian economy of the sanctions the West has imposed in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine remain to be seen, there is little doubt they will be severe.

Finally, in recent decades the world has seen a digital and technological revolution in military affairs, similar to the industrial development experienced a century ago.⁴³ Since Russian defense spending began to increase in 2008, the Russian armed forces have benefited significantly from this technological revolution.⁴⁴

Thus, Russia's present strategic ambitions and environment, combined with the economic restraints to which it is and will continue to be subject, offer clear similarities to France's challenging situation a century ago. But the global digital revolution makes it possible for Russia to investigate new strategic naval *ways* and *means*, providing alternatives to building a traditional, conventional, great-power, blue-water navy—which it remains incapable of doing.

THE CONTINUING INFLUENCE OF STRATEGIC CULTURE ON CURRENT RUSSIAN NAVAL STRATEGY

Russian strategic culture is influenced heavily by mistrust of the West and a feeling of humiliation since the end of the Cold War, when the country lost its status as one of the world's two superpowers.⁴⁵ Russian security and global influence

were never better than during the Cold War, and Russia looks back to what made it a great power following the Second World War.

Therefore, from a naval perspective it was no coincidence that President Putin approved the country's most recently issued maritime doctrine on board the frigate *Admiral Gorshkov*, named after the founder of the modern Soviet navy.⁴⁶ The doctrine leaves little doubt regarding Russian naval ambitions and lays the groundwork for a revised naval policy paper issued two years later. The latter document includes verbiage such as the following:

The Russian Federation still maintains the status of a great maritime power, possessing maritime potential that supports the implementation and defense of its national interests in any area of the World Ocean. . . . The Russian Federation will not allow significant superiority of naval forces of other states over its Navy and will strive to secure its position as the second most combat capable Navy in the world. . . . [It would possess] powerful balanced fleets in all strategic areas consisting of ships intended to carry out missions in near and far sea zones and ocean areas, as well as naval aviation and coastal forces equipped with effective high-precision strike weapons, and [an] advanced basing and supply system.⁴⁷

Plans included replacement of the majority of Russian naval units by 2030.

Both the maritime and naval doctrines aim to develop the Russian navy, if not into a Mahanian navy, then at least into a tool of sea power equal to that of the United States. Admiral Gorshkov would have no objections to these ambitions. Thus, Russia's heritage as a naval great power sets the frame for the country's naval strategic goals: nuclear deterrence, bastion defense, credible blue-water war-fighting capabilities, and global reach in maritime diplomacy.

However, today's economic challenges remain, and Russia's ambition to build a navy in the image of the former Soviet fleet poses an extremely difficult challenge. According to a RAND analysis from 2019, the Russian navy can perform three overall functions: strategic deterrence, coastal defense, and short-term ocean-presence operations.⁴⁸ But another study emphasizes that Russian financing and shipbuilding capacities are incapable of rebuilding a blue-water navy while simultaneously maintaining Russian strategic nuclear deterrence.⁴⁹ As an example, the Crimea conflict caused a significant setback in the *Admiral Grigovich*-class frigate program—the necessary gas turbines were produced in Ukraine.⁵⁰

Since Russia seems unwilling to compromise on its strategic ambitions, it must find a path forward that will align those ambitions with the existing economic constraints. Submarines, both nuclear and conventional, always have had a prominent position in the Russian navy. While large-scale construction of large, modern surface warships started only in the 1960s, submarines have had a presence in the Russian naval inventory since imperial times, and they were an important naval asset during the eras of both the Russian New School and Admiral

Gorshkov. As an example, the fraction of total Russian naval tonnage consisting of submarines increased from one-fifth at the beginning of the 1960s to nearly half in the 1980s.⁵¹ Importantly, submarines long have provided and continue to form an integral part of Russia's naval culture, not simply a component of its fleet. They are connected closely to Soviet-era nuclear deterrence and bastion defense, and thus form a link back to the country's history as a great power. Therefore, Russia's focus today on submarines comes as no surprise. As discussed below, the commissioning of new and the updating of existing submarines constitute the highest priorities for the Russian navy.

Russia plans to replace its present second-strike capability with ten Borey-class, nuclear-powered, ballistic-missile-carrying submarines (i.e., SSBNs) by 2027.⁵² While the Russian shipbuilding industry is renowned for its delays, four Borey boats have been commissioned, with an additional four under construction.⁵³ Similarly, Russia is planning a significant upgrade of its Akula-class attack submarines.⁵⁴ The Russian navy also is expecting nine Yasen-class guided-missile submarines by 2027, with six commissioned by the end of 2022.⁵⁵ These heavy Russian investments in submarines, nuclear as well as conventional, seem to be an echo from the Gorshkov era four-plus decades ago, partly because they modernize Russia's nuclear-second-strike capability and partly because of the similarities to the naval leg of the Soviet bastion defense of the 1970s.

However, these submarines come at a steep financial cost, and the scale of these investments will limit the Russian navy's ability to fulfill its other ambitions, including building large surface combatants. Pre-Russo-Ukrainian war estimates indicated that it would take decades for Russia to commission ships above frigate size (seven-thousand-plus tons); the various costs of the war in Ukraine have moved attainment of such an ambition even further away.⁵⁶

Russia therefore must find new ways either to increase its available resources or to mitigate its shortcomings when it comes to blue-water operations and maritime diplomacy. Russia will have to rethink its naval strategy because its navy, including both its fleet and its naval air force, will not have the power to threaten North Atlantic SLOCs as it could during Soviet times. Russia also is well aware that great-power status requires maintaining the capability both to establish sea control in adjacent waters and to conduct maritime diplomacy.

This combination of requirements dictates a strategy similar to that of the *Jeune École* for the Russian fleet, its naval air force, and the country's coastal batteries. It is an incremental strategy, with naval power increasing in steps, enabling the gradual establishment of a broader naval presence without compromising a continuing strong defensive role. The Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla are prominent examples of Russia's pursuit of this strategy and of how the country intends to use its conventional fleet abroad.

The Caspian Flotilla and Gunboat Diplomacy

The Caspian Flotilla normally lives a quiet life on its own, attracting little international notice. However, in 2015 the flotilla for the first time engaged targets in Syria, employing cruise missiles from a range of at least 1,200 kilometers.⁵⁷ From a military, tactical perspective, attacking rebel groups in Syria with cruise missiles did not make much sense; the Syrian rebel groups had no effective anti-air systems, so Russia just as well could have continued using aircraft and bombs—a far cheaper solution.

But the attack had an important strategic purpose. By firing missiles from the Caspian Sea, Russia demonstrated its new capability to exercise gunboat diplomacy toward the coastal states in the Caspian region. In 2014, Russia had signed a political declaration with the Caspian coastal states of Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan to keep the Caspian Sea NATO-free.⁵⁸ Four years later—after the Syria strikes—the same coastal states signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, which, among other things, allows military presence in the Caspian Sea only by Caspian coastal states.⁵⁹

Given Russia's perpetual concern over NATO enlargement, these agreements can be interpreted only as an attempt to vitiate NATO's individual partnership agreements, such as the Partnership for Peace programs it has with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.⁶⁰ Since the Caspian Sea is a lake and can be reached only through Russian rivers, future access for NATO forces would have to be provided through membership in the organization by or partnership with one or more Caspian states. Installation by Russia of modern cruise missiles on its modern (albeit small—just under one-thousand-tons-displacement) corvettes hardly would be necessary, given that the area in question is reachable by the Russian air force; however, the action sends a clear message about Russia's strategic will and its capability to practice gunboat diplomacy. The Caspian Flotilla's engagement in Syria sent exactly this type of message, providing a reminder of what might happen if any Caspian state should question Russian hegemony in the region.

The Black Sea Fleet: From the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and Beyond

The first indication since the Cold War of the increased importance of Russia's Black Sea Fleet was seen during the Russo-Georgian conflict in 2008, during which a naval task group conducted amphibious landings in Abkhazia.⁶¹ These landings in themselves had little if any significant effect on the opponent; plus, given that Georgia's navy was almost nonexistent and Russia's Black Sea Fleet was then in a poor state overall, the naval aspect as a whole had little influence on the outcome of the larger conflict. Yet the landing served as an important signal to other Black Sea coastal states, such as Ukraine, that Russia still could conduct

offensive naval, including amphibious, operations. Russia used the intervention in Georgia to reestablish itself as a naval power in the Black Sea. More importantly, it was the first clear example since the Cold War of Russia using coercive maritime, or “gunboat,” diplomacy.⁶²

Russia’s position as a naval power in the Black Sea was strengthened further during the annexation of Crimea in 2014. While Russia, in the Kharkiv Accords, had rented the naval facilities in Crimea from Ukraine until 2042, its annexation of the peninsula allowed it to establish a larger military presence and eradicate any uncertainty regarding Russian access to those naval facilities in the future.⁶³ With the annexation, Russia could strengthen its naval-deterrence profile, in combination with all its military assets, including air and land forces. It better could support its ambitions of establishing sea control in the Black Sea and a jumping-off place for operations in southern Ukraine.

Similarly, it better could support its ambitions of developing a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean. Since the annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea Fleet has played an increasingly important role in Russia’s larger military strategy. In the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015, the Black Sea Fleet’s main task was to provide supplies to Syria and protect those shipments, which included significant amounts of military equipment. This function became known as the “Syrian Express.”⁶⁴ Beyond that, however, also in 2015, the Russian submarine *Rostov-on-Don* fired a number of cruise missiles from the Mediterranean before it joined the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol.⁶⁵ Two years later, an additional four Russian submarines (*Krasnodar*, *Velikiy*, *Novgorod*, and *Kolpino*) did the same.⁶⁶ All the submarines were newly built, modernized, Kilo-class boats. Six of these have been delivered to the Black Sea Fleet, accomplishing a complete refit of its submarine forces.⁶⁷

The Black Sea Fleet also is undergoing a large renovation of its surface units. Apart from its older units, some of which will be decommissioned before 2023, it is projected to have three new frigates and approximately twenty corvettes (displacement 800–1,800 tons) by 2030. All these units are capable of firing Kalibr cruise missiles, and some can switch roles, owing to their modular design and systems. A common denominator is the vessels’ relatively small size, measured by displacement and complement, but they are heavily armed and capable of conducting offensive naval operations. Finally, on the land and air sides, Russia has developed mobile antiship and surface-to-surface systems for coastal defense, and it has modernized its naval airframes to carry and deliver different types of new air-to-surface missiles, including the Kalibr.⁶⁸

Russian naval strategy in the Black Sea aims to use the Black Sea Fleet to establish sea control by combining submarines, smaller units, aircraft, and coastal defenses, all armed with modern weapon systems such as long-range cruise

missiles. Beyond the Black Sea, Russia aims to establish a level of sea denial in the Mediterranean, using mainly the Black Sea Fleet but supported by units from other parts of the Russian navy; the latter aspect is exemplified best by the deployment in recent years of submarines and the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* from the Northern Fleet. However, an important limitation on the Black Sea Fleet is its (in)ability to sustain operations. First, the Montreux Convention (1936) puts restrictions on Russian submarines' transits through the Bosphorus Strait.⁶⁹ Second, sustained operations outside the Black Sea require some sort of logistical setup, with resupply and the like provided either afloat or from Russian bases abroad.

Russia has plans to establish the latter, and in January 2018 it signed a forty-nine-year rental agreement with Syria regarding the naval base in Tartus and a similar agreement on a military airport.⁷⁰ In December 2020, Russia also signed a twenty-five-year agreement with Sudan to build a base at Port Sudan on the Red Sea.⁷¹ The symbolism of a frigate from the Black Sea Fleet conducting a port call in Port Sudan two months later cannot be mistaken.⁷² The base in Tartus will ease Russian naval operations in the Mediterranean, especially submarine operations, given the limitations imposed by the Montreux Convention. The importance of this has been underlined during the present war in Ukraine, in response to which Turkey has prohibited Russian naval units from transiting the Bosphorus.⁷³ Without the naval base in Tartus, Russian units in the Mediterranean would have been forced to return either to the Northern Fleet or to the Baltic Sea.

While the availability of the Tartus base may not enable Russia to exercise sea control over the eastern Mediterranean for any prolonged period, it will make sea denial possible by facilitating the combination of contributions from submarines, aircraft, smaller combat units, and coastal-defense systems. Similarly, the naval base in Port Sudan will make it possible for Russia to deploy and sustain its most modern surface units—its corvettes—to the Red Sea, as well as its submarines. A corvette berthed in Port Sudan will enable Russia to engage any target in the Red Sea with Kalibr missiles without the ship even leaving harbor, and while there it can serve as a coastal battery system.

RUSSIAN NAVAL STRATEGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Even as Russia modernizes its surface fleet with a large number of smaller, technologically capable units, it will maintain a limited number of older, larger units such as those of the *Kirov*, *Slava*, and *Udaloy* classes. Being a global sea power—as called for in Russia's published maritime strategy—requires having large warships that can deploy on a global scale. It was the large warships—in addition to the powerful submarines—that Admiral Gorshkov saw as crucial to the Soviet Union becoming a major sea power. For Russia now to abandon large surface

combatants would be the same as rejecting Gorshkov's ideas and the legacy of the Soviet navy. Therefore, Ukraine's sinking of the Russian cruiser *Moskva* in April 2022 was not just a matter of depriving the Russian navy of lives and capability but equally an attack on Russia's perception of itself as a sea power.⁷⁴

Yet Russia cannot afford to build new, large, warships of greater than seven thousand tons displacement. Therefore the only option is to maintain and modernize its current units. For example, Russia's sole aircraft carrier, *Admiral Kuznetsov*, seems to be "kept alive" despite years of challenges to keep it operational and a number of severe setbacks during its recent refit in Murmansk.⁷⁵ As noted, scrapping *Kuznetsov* would be the same as scrapping the idea of Russia being a great sea power. Therefore the Russian navy will go far to retain its only aircraft carrier, even if only on paper. If nothing else, *Kuznetsov* is a clear symbol of the continuing influence of Soviet strategic culture on current Russian naval strategy.

Russia will continue to prioritize its nuclear-second-strike capability and bastion defense. As discussed previously, submarines have played and continue to play a crucial role in Russian strategy; however, the Russian navy, in contrast to the Soviet service, is not designed to threaten NATO's SLOCs in the North Atlantic by marshaling those submarines with large surface combatants and long-range bombers, because the modern service has fewer boats.⁷⁶ Therefore, while the Russian navy's bastion defense will continue to focus on protecting the service's nuclear submarines, it will do so from a more drawn-in position.

This change will allow far-more-unhindered transit by American, other NATO, and other allied shipping across the North Atlantic SLOCs than was true during Soviet times. Russia instead has focused on developing and deploying long-range air-to-surface and surface-to-surface missiles, and it intends to replace the old Soviet strategy of high-seas naval attacks with one aimed at threatening harbor approaches in the northeastern Atlantic—a strategy more similar to the ideas of the Jeune École than to those of Admiral Gorshkov. Such missiles could be fired from ground batteries, submarines, and air and surface units in the Norwegian and Barents Seas. A Tsirkon missile fired from the Norwegian Sea would take around seven minutes to travel a thousand kilometers to a target located near the Faeroe Islands.⁷⁷ Western naval strategists should be more concerned with air and submarine threats in the eastern North Atlantic and with protecting SLOCs near the European approaches than with a Russian submarine threat to the GIUK gap; therefore, NATO's capability to conduct antisubmarine warfare must be shifted from the GIUK gap to the Norwegian Sea and the United Kingdom–Faeroes–Norway gap. This will be necessary to suppress Russian submarines that can threaten high-value targets, while remaining prepared to conduct multidomain defense.

Russia's other strategic focus—on smaller naval combat units and foreign naval bases—is linked closely with the country's broader global naval ambitions. While the Ukraine war will result in a setback for these ambitions, the future economic constraints on Russia's economy will mean that the combination of smaller naval units with foreign bases will constitute the country's primary naval option for years to come.

Once the Russian armed forces have established (or reestablished) the capability to exercise sea control in the Black Sea, the next step will be the Mediterranean, then beyond. The naval bases in Tartus and Port Sudan are the first examples of this incremental effort. Strategists should ask themselves where else Russia might extend its network of naval bases. An obvious candidate is Libya, where Russia first supported Khalifa Haftar, leader of the Libyan National Army, then contributed to the negotiation of a cease-fire.⁷⁸ While Russia's present role and influence in Libya are unclear, access to a naval base there would give the Russian navy a strategic presence in the center of the Mediterranean that it lacks today. Preventing Russia from establishing new naval bases abroad would be one of the most effective ways to restrain Russian sea power, because Russia's most capable but smaller units must depend entirely on their support.

In the Baltic, Russia cannot establish bases similar to those in the Mediterranean or Red Sea. Just as important, however, there is not the same necessity for them, since Russia's Northern Fleet can provide the navy's main access to the North Sea and North Atlantic. Therefore Russia can establish sea control in the Baltic using long-range shore batteries and aircraft, in combination with minor surface units. Russia already has brought about this situation.⁷⁹

Finally, Russia's ability to establish sea control in coastal regions using a combination of shore batteries, aircraft, and smaller units—all armed with long-range missiles—will require NATO naval strategists to rely on strike warfare using cruise missiles as the most effective way to reduce Russian sea control there. The idea of “classic sea battles” in confined waters between opposing naval units is gone, and—with the exception of submarine warfare—sea control will determine how power is projected to and from the shore.

Western naval strategists looking into the future should focus on three overall areas: first, how to restrain Russia's establishment of foreign bases; second, how to establish sea control, when needed, in the Baltic, Black, and Mediterranean Seas; and third, how to deter and counter Russian submarine and missile threats in the North Atlantic. While the first task resides at the political-strategic level, the other two tasks are naval-strategic considerations. Achieving those objectives will require navies able to fight in a multidomain environment, mainly against submarines, smaller surface units, and aircraft, while protecting high-value units

from long-range missile engagements. Allied navies also should be capable of conducting long-range strike warfare with cruise missiles to engage land-based missile batteries and naval and air force bases as an integrated part of establishing sea control in confined waters such as the Baltic, Black, and Mediterranean Seas.

In the future, the responsibility to meet such demands should fall not only on large, global or regional sea powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France but also on any navy that considers the Baltic, Black, or Mediterranean Sea its home waters. Such naval services must maintain the capabilities and readiness necessary to balance and deter Russia's sea-power ambitions.

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