

The Sea in Russian Strategy

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BOOK REVIEWS

CONFLICTS PAST, PRESENT, AND POTENTIAL

The Sea in Russian Strategy, ed. Andrew Monaghan and Richard Connolly. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester Univ. Press, 2023. 272 pages. \$21.95.

In 1989, Bryan Ranft and Geoffrey Till published the second edition of their *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*. This was one of the last in a long line of books about Soviet naval strategy written before the Soviet Union collapsed and its navy was disbanded. The Russian navy that emerged in the 1990s declined rapidly, shedding ships and personnel as its budget collapsed. The need for expertise on the Russian fleet seemed to disappear, and writing on the topic became sparse.

When I began studying the Russian navy in 2011 *The Sea in Soviet Strategy* remained the most recent comprehensive treatment of Russian maritime power. I eagerly read it and tried to match what I learned with the modern Russian fleet described in piecemeal academic articles, think-tank studies, and news reports. Much of the book remained relevant, but the public literature on naval strategy desperately needed a new baseline study of Russian maritime strategy. *The Sea in Russian Strategy* is that study.

The book begins by discussing the nature of Russian sea power.

Andrew Lambert argues it is not a true seapower, because Russian power has never been dependent on the oceans. Geoffrey Till then argues that Russia is a seapower “of a sort” and that we should take seriously how Russia approaches sea power and how that differs from U.S. or British views. Striking here, in light of Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, is his contention that Russia has never considered its poor maritime geography immutable.

Next comes an examination of Russian naval strategy and missions. Michael Kofman argues that Russia has no “naval” strategy. The navy is just one of the military services governed by the Russian state’s overall military doctrine and national security strategy. Within this military strategy, the Russian navy has four key missions: defense against long-range strike, long-range strike against the enemy, strategic nuclear deterrence, and naval diplomacy. The Russian navy plans an “active defense” approach to executing its wartime missions. From defended areas near the Russian coast it will launch strikes to disorganize and attrit the enemy while

simultaneously attempting to reduce the damage caused by enemy strikes. The Russian navy's role in strikes against enemy land targets provides it a degree of freedom from the ground forces, which dominate the Russian military.

A discussion of Russian defense budgets, shipbuilding industry, and current and future orders of battle follows. Despite the ground forces' control over the Russian Defense Ministry, through 2020 the Russian navy received the largest portion of Russian defense spending. The shrinking Russian naval order of battle—in both quantity and size of hulls—is not caused by a lack of funds but rather a consequence of a defective shipbuilding industry. Despite shipyards operating at nearly full capacity, obsolete facilities, an aging workforce, and Western sanctions and export controls combine to delay ship construction and modernization. Delays are a perennial issue in Russian shipbuilding. The Russian navy's aspiration of a balanced fleet becomes the reality of a largely green-water one after colliding with the Russian shipbuilding industry.

In the final chapter, Michael Petersen examines the Russian navy's capabilities and concepts in the context of a large-scale conventional war. He emphasizes that in concept the Russian navy should attempt to seize the initiative at the start of the war and attempt to inflict crushing blows on Moscow's enemies as part of a joint strategic operation. This concept runs into the challenges of unfavorable maritime geography, limited means to detect enemy naval forces, and a small order of battle. This places Russia in a strategic dilemma; its strategy is based on limiting escalation and carefully dosing damage, but the operational

reality facing the Russian navy requires horizontal escalation and the early use of capabilities before they are destroyed.

As with any book there are gaps and shortcomings. The two chapters by former Royal Navy officers do not add analytic value and could profitably have been replaced by discussions of Russian seaborne trade, commercial maritime industry, and paramilitary maritime forces. These are gaps in the book's otherwise wide scope, and remarkable given the book's emphasis on Russia's comprehensive approach to sea power. The absence of a thorough discussion of Russian maritime exports is also notable given the attention the world has devoted to Ukrainian grain exports over the last year and a half and Russia's place as the world's largest grain exporter. These gaps all present avenues for future research, which Andrew Monaghan acknowledges in the introduction.

Individual facts should also be treated cautiously. Order-of-battle tables continue to count *Moskva* and *Saratov*, ships that were sunk over a year before the book's publication. The book also declares the Delta III, Borei, and Yasen classes as having been designed in the twenty-first century. The first is wrong and the second and third only true if you ignore the fact that the first hulls of those classes, while commissioned in 2013 and 2014, respectively, were laid down in the mid-1990s. This is not an indictment of the authors, but rather a cautionary note to readers that getting perfect information about this subject is difficult and this book should be read for its analysis of themes and trends, not as a repository of vetted facts.

Ultimately, this book is a much-needed contribution to a better understanding of Russian strategy. It makes valuable

contributions to the discussion of Russian sea power and will help correct issues of “mirror-imaging and imposing Western concepts on Russian thinking” that are unfortunately as prevalent today as they were during the Cold War. At the end of the book the reader will understand that the Russian navy struggles with many deep-seated challenges but nevertheless poses an existential threat to its adversaries. In that sense it is not so different from the navy Russia’s admirals face from across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

IAN SUNDSTROM



Always Faithful: A Story of the War in Afghanistan, the Fall of Kabul, and the Unshakable Bond between a Marine and an Interpreter, by Tom Schueman and Zainullah Zaki, with Russell Worth Parker. New York: HarperCollins, 2022. 336 pages. \$29.99.

Always Faithful: A Story of the War in Afghanistan, the Fall of Kabul, and the Unshakable Bond between a Marine and an Interpreter provides a unique perspective on the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Authors Tom Schueman, a major in the United States Marine Corps, and Zainullah Zaki, Schueman’s friend and former interpreter, describe their formative experiences, their service together during the war, and Zaki’s escape from Afghanistan in 2021. At the center of the story is Schueman’s desperate, and ultimately successful, efforts to secure passage out of Afghanistan for Zaki and his family as Kabul fell to the Taliban in late August 2021.

Always Faithful is a first-rate war memoir. The authors describe the camaraderie and exhilaration of combat as well as the shock of seeing fellow

Marines injured and killed. However, three things make this book unique. First, the authors take a long view and show how twenty years of war wove in and out of the protagonists’ lives. They cover their formative experiences and how over the course of the war they matured from boys to men and then became fathers themselves. Schueman also goes into detail on his training in the Marine Corps as well as the stress his service placed on his marriage. From Zaki, the reader gains an appreciation of life under Taliban rule, the initial U.S. invasion and its aftermath, and the Taliban’s resurgence. It is impressive how much ground the authors cover in three hundred pages.

Second, *Always Faithful* provides a first-person account of the chaotic fall of Afghanistan from both American and Afghan perspectives. The authors’ employment of a parallel narrative structure captures Schueman’s desperation as he drew on his connections to help Zaki escape what most likely would have been death under the Taliban. The authors do a masterful job of explaining their thoughts and feelings as the country for which they had fought came apart.

Third, *Always Faithful* is refreshing in that it offers a non-U.S. perspective. Most post-9/11 war memoirs focus on the experiences of U.S. servicemembers. While Schueman’s wartime experiences are central to the story, they make up less than a quarter of the book, with Zaki’s experiences given equal treatment. Similarly, the authors incorporate the viewpoints of their parents, spouses, and children, when possible. By including multiple points of view, the authors do a better job of showing the human costs of war in their totality.