



The history of Russia's Pacific Fleet is the history of the trials and tribulations of Russia. So is its current status that of a Phoenix rising from the ashes or just a Potemkin village, all show but no substance, writes Joseph E Fallon?

The answer is..... read more

In an April 14, 2023 interview with Task & Purpose, James Holmes, the J. C. Wylie Chair of Maritime Strategy at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, stated "Russia's Pacific Fleet has practiced with China's People's Liberation Army Navy for years, and the combination of Russia's stealthy nuclear-powered submarines and China's silent-running electric diesel boats – all of which would be armed with anti-ship missiles – would pose a formidable challenge to the United States and its allies."

In that same article, "How much of a threat does Russia's Pacific Fleet pose to the U.S.," retired Navy Capt. Thomas Shugart, a military innovation expert with the Center for a New American Security in Washington, D.C., stated his belief. "On its own, Russia's Pacific Fleet would not last long in a conflict with the U.S. Navy," but conceded "the United States would face a much more serious threat if it had to fight both the Russian and Chinese navies in the Pacific."

Retired Navy Capt. Brent Sadler, senior fellow for naval warfare and advanced technology at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. added "Russia's Pacific Fleet has conducted 'provocative and pretty far distant operations,' including joint military exercises with the Chinese navy...The Russian Pacific Fleet has been very active working with the Chinese in driving around the Japanese islands to send a strategic message throughout this war in Ukraine...It's basically telling the United States and Japan and everyone else: 'While we may be involved in a land war in Europe, our navy is still very active in the Pacific.'"

Russia's Pacific Fleet was originally founded in 1731 as the "Okhotsk Military Flotilla." In 1856, it was renamed the "Siberian Military Flotilla". In 1871, Vladivostok became the headquarters of the flotilla (1871-1926 and 1932-2012).

But the waters around Vladivostok "freezes and remains frozen for about four months." So in 2012, Moscow announced the headquarters of the Pacific Fleet would be relocated to Fokino, "a city with the status of a closed administrative-territorial entity", 28 miles south of Vladivostok, that is more accessible year round.

SOME HISTORY

The Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905, saw the defeat of Russia and the destruction of most of its naval forces in the Pacific. [Editor's note : Both sides had ships built on the Tyne in England, the spiritual home of Defence Viewpoints] But Moscow quickly rebuilt its naval strength in the East.

In the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920, most of the reconstituted "Siberian Military Flotilla" was seized either by White forces or the Japanese.

After the Bolshevik victory, the "Siberian Military Flotilla" along with the rest of the Imperial Navy was appropriated by the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, then transferred to the newly established Soviet Union in 1922. The "Siberian Military Flotilla" was officially disbanded in 1926.

April 13, 1932, in reaction to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, Stalin created "the Naval Forces in the Far East." In 1935, the fleet was renamed the Pacific Fleet. It was more commonly known as "the Red Banner Pacific Fleet."

In the 1930's, the size of the fleet was expanded, naval aviation was added for projecting power and coastal artillery was established for its defense. A Pacific Military School was founded in

1937, which was elevated to the status of a university in 1940. It was renamed the Makarov Pacific Higher Naval school in 1954 after the "accomplished Russian oceanographer and commander of the Imperial Russian Navy."

The Makarov Pacific Higher Naval school remains "one of the Russian Navy's two higher educational institutions under the Ministry of Defense of Russia, with this school being located in Vladivostok in Eastern Russia, the only naval educational institution in this region. It serves as an naval officer commissioning school for officers in the Pacific Fleet."

At the close of World War II, the Pacific Fleet played a pivotal role in the Soviet expulsion of Japanese forces from Northern Korea, Southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands.

During the Cold War, the Pacific Fleet was deployed to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea to counter the U.S. presence. It served not just to project Soviet military power but Soviet diplomatic power as well by making calls to ports "in the Indian subcontinent, the Persian Gulf, and the East African coast." By 1985, the Pacific Fleet "constituted 32% of all Soviet naval assets."

The collapse of the Soviet Union saw the subsequent collapse of the Pacific Fleet. This was "due to insufficient maintenance, lack of funding, and subsequent effects on the training of personnel and timely replacement of equipment. Another setback was attributed to Russia's domestic shipbuilding industry, which was in decline due to the absence of modern hardware and technology...Within a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Fleet lost all its aircraft carriers, and by early 2000 only one cruiser remained active with the Fleet."

By the end of the 2010s, however, Moscow had succeeded in again rebuilding its Pacific Fleet.

Global Security noted September 13, 2021, "By 2020, the Pacific Fleet consisted of five destroyers, two corvettes and a Slava-class cruiser [Editor's note : The same class as the Moskva in the Black Sea Fleet, sunk during the Russia-Ukraine War] and was also home to eight ballistic and cruise missile submarines, nearly a dozen attack subs, and dozens of smaller ships, as well as aircraft and Naval Infantry units. In March 2020 the Pacific Fleet has formed two new anti-submarine warfare strike groups in Kamchatka, with the vessels to be tasked with searching for potential enemy submarines..."

According to Geopolitical Futures July 7, 2020, "the Pacific Fleet is the second-largest and most efficient of Russia's fleets and has a wide range of tasks, including protecting Russia's exclusive economic zone and ensuring access through these waters for commercial and military vessels. Its operational area, which includes the Arctic, Southern Hemisphere, Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean, is the largest of all of Russia's fleets."

THE MODERNISATION AND EXPANSION CONTINUES

2024 Global firepower ranking of naval power/fleet strength lists the Russian Navy first, China second, North Korea third and the U.S. fourth by number of vessels (not combat effectiveness).

The Russian Navy currently has 781 total assets that include 1 Aircraft Carrier, 14 Destroyers, 12 Frigates, 83 Corvettes, 65 Submarines, 122 Patrol Vessels, and 47 Mine Warfare Vessels, plus a substantial number of smaller and specialist vessels.

It is comprised of four fleets, from largest to smallest, Northern, Pacific, Black Sea, and Baltic Sea, and one flotilla, Caspian. (Editor's note : See previous analyses of each fleet on Defence Viewpoints) The Russian Ministry of Defense states the Russian Navy is organised into four combat services -- surface forces, submarines, naval aviation, and coastal troops.

According to the U.S. Naval Institute, May 2022, "At the center of [the Russian Navy's] strategic deterrence mission is a military philosophy that emphasizes long-range precision strikes against critical targets on land. This is a role [the Russian Navy] has long prepared for."

The Congressional Research Service report, "Russia's Nuclear Weapons," May 24, 2024, summarises the impact of Russia's resurgence. "Russia presents an 'acute threat' to the United States and its allies, according to the 2022 National Defense Strategy. The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, a Biden Administration review of U.S. nuclear policy, states: Russia remains the U.S. rival with the most capable and diverse nuclear forces."

The greatest threat comes from Russia's nuclear armed submarines because they don't have the vulnerability of fixed land based intercontinental ballistic missile systems. These submarines are deployed with the Pacific and Northern Fleets. [Editor's note : global climate change has made the interchange of vessels between these two fleets via the Northern Sea Rout, and thus the strategic capability of both. Three new submarines originally intended for the Pacific Fleet were reassigned to the Northern Fleet early in 2024)

On September 10, 2021, "Rear Adm. Brian Davies, commanding officer of Submarine Group 2 and deputy commander of the 2nd Fleet, told Navy Times '...Russian submarines now have advanced cruise missiles that have the range and accuracy to strike military and civilian targets throughout the U.S. and Canada.'"

The number of Russian nuclear armed submarines has only increased in the subsequent three years as have the range, speed, accuracy, and explosive power of Russian submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM). This increases the possibility for a Russian decapitation strike on U.S. command and control centers.

In "How much of a threat does Russia's Pacific Fleet pose to the U.S.," Task & Purpose, April 14, 2023, Jeff Schogol, wrote "The Russians are also increasingly sending their more modern surface ships and diesel submarines to the Pacific."

In that same article, Katarzyna Zysk, Russian military expert with the Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C. stated Russia's Pacific Fleet contains "modern surface ships and submarines that give it the ability to do considerable damage to an adversary...Now Russia has deployed four Borei-class nuclear-powered submarines, its newest ballistic missile submarines, to the Pacific...Russia's Pacific Fleet also has one Yasen-class attack submarine, and it is expected to receive another one. Those attack boats, which can carry cruise missiles, have proven to be very hard for the U.S. Navy and NATO partners to detect."

As Tomasz Grotnik of the Polish based Military Research and Analysis Group wrote in Naval News, January 5, 2024, "In keeping with tradition, dating back to Soviet times, new ships and submarines were commissioned in the Russian Navy with the end of the year. It must be admitted that this reinforcement in the past 2023 was impressive..."

The first event related to the strengthening of the Russian Navy, specifically the Pacific Fleet, took place on 11 December. On that day, the flags on two nuclear submarines were raised at the Sevmash Shipyard in Severodvinsk.

The first of these was the strategic submarine "Imperator Aleksandr III" of Project 955A Borey-A. It is the fourth SSBN of this class, and the third in the Pacific Fleet.

The second vessel to raise the flag on 11 December was the nuclear powered attack submarine K-571 "Krasnoyarsk" of Project 885M (08851) Yasen'-M. It is the third unit of this project, and the second of its class intended for the Pacific Fleet. These submarines will be, for the time being, the main underwater carriers of the hypersonic missile 3M22 Tsircon.

As tensions with NATO increase over the war in Ukraine, High North News reported, March 22, 2024, "the ballistic missile submarines Tsar Alexander III and Krasnoyarsk ...have since then been redirected to the Northern Fleet." From the Kola peninsular, Baltic states are believed to be within range of Tsircon.

To date, eight Alexandrites [minehunters] have entered service. Two are in the Baltic, three in the Black Sea and three in the Pacific. Three more are under construction and a fourth has been contracted.

In "Australia can no longer afford to ignore Russia's expanding naval power in the Pacific," The Conversation, December 20, 2023, Dr Alexey D. Muraviev, Associate Professor of National Security and Strategic Studies, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia, wrote on the growing power of the Russian Pacific Fleet, as evidenced by deployment.

"In recent months,...a naval task group of the Pacific Fleet embarked on a tour across southeast and south Asia.

"The Russian warships spent four days in Indonesia, then staged their first-ever joint naval exercises with Myanmar and another exercise later with India. The ships then visited Bangladesh for the first time in 50 years, followed by stops in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and

the Philippines.

"According to my estimates, by the time the Royal Australian Navy commissions its first Hunter class frigate and the first Virginia-class, nuclear-powered attack submarine begins operations in 2032, the replenished Russian Pacific Fleet would have a battle force of at least 45 core warships. This is expected to include 19 nuclear-powered and conventional submarines, supported by minor combat and auxiliary elements. Most of these units would be newly designed and built.

"This clearly shows that if war someday breaks out in the Pacific, the Russian Pacific Fleet could present a formidable challenge to Australian and allied naval fleets in the western and northwestern Pacific, as well as the Arctic."

In another article on December 30, 2023, "The Russian Navy: Sinking In The Black Sea But Surging In The Pacific, Dr. Muraviev added "Furthermore, Russia's war in Ukraine has not had a considerable impact on the Pacific Fleet's ongoing modernization or its various exercises and other activities. Between early 2022 and October 2023, for instance, the Pacific Fleet staged eight strategic-level naval exercises, in addition to numerous smaller-scale activities."

Given this situation, how can the U.S. assist Australia if war erupts with Russia in the Pacific? And how can the U.S. win such a war if it does occur?

IT CAN'T

Not alone. Not in conjunction with AUKUS. Within three years of its formation, this security pact among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, has already been made redundant by four factors.

First is the vast distance separating the three countries. The distance from Mainland U.S. to Australia is 8,224 nautical miles. The distance from the UK to Australia is 9,188 nautical miles via the Suez Canal. By the time British and American military assistance reached Australia, the war would be over.

Second should the British try to use the Northern Sea Route as an alternative and quicker route to Australia, Russia's Northern Fleet with the advantage of a larger fleet and backed by sea and air support bases along the Russian Arctic coast could destroy such a British naval flotilla. It would be a defeat analogous to the Battle of Tsushima.

Third, the U.S. navy is shrinking in size and firepower. It has already fallen from first place to fourth in Global Firepower's ranking of the world navies. As Mackenzie Eaglen of the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., wrote on October 31, 2023, "the U.S. has a combat-ready fleet size of 291...the Navy's FY24 shipbuilding plan projects that it will keep getting smaller. Our fleet will shrink to 285 ships in 2025 and remain less than its size today, at 290 ships in 2030, as ship retirements consistently outpace new ship construction." By comparison, China and Russia each have fleets of over 700 ships.

Fourth is the rise of the Russian Pacific Fleet. As the U.S. Navy shrinks, Russia's Pacific Fleet grows in size, strength and reach. In June 2021, Russia's Pacific Fleet conducted a historic naval exercise, never undertaken by the Soviet Navy, deep into the Central Pacific, thousands of miles east of its homebase in Fokino.

Of this naval exercise, The Institute for the Study of War reported, "US Navy Indo-Pacific Command spokesperson said some of the Russian vessels operated 20 to 30 nautical miles off the coast of Hawaii. The US scrambled F-22 fighters in Hawaii on June 14, likely in response to this Russian activity."

On June 13, 2021, in "Russian Pacific Fleet breaks out: First exercise in Central Pacific," J.E. Dyer, a retired U.S. Naval Intelligence officer, writing of this unprecedented Russian naval exercise reported "Back in 2013, Russia sent the interesting, but largely missed, signal that she could approach Guam by air, via a path along which the U.S. had no rapid-reaction interdiction capabilities until after the Russian bombers were in air-launched cruise missile range. In the geography Russia demonstrated, Guam was at essentially undefended risk. Nothing has really changed the dynamics of that conundrum in the years since."

This means the Russian Pacific Fleet has the capability to isolate and neutralize Guam, the most important U.S. military base in the Western Pacific, half the distance from Russia than Hawaii. It could, thereby, break the U.S. second island chain that stretches from Japan to Guam

to Papua New Guinea undermining the strategic position of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific Theatre.

That October, "Adm. Phil Davidson, head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, told Congress in written testimony...Russia will begin fielding the Kalibr cruise missile across its Pacific fleet this year -- a weapon that other Pentagon officials have warned could be used to offset U.S. military power-projection advantages and limit U.S. diplomatic options in a crisis."

Without U.S. military power-projection in the Indo-Pacific Theatre, the British cannot assist Australia in a war, unless many elements have been forward deployed to the Gulf, a capability it has been expanding slowly.

In geostrategic terms, the Russian Pacific Fleet is truly the proverbial Phoenix risen from its own ashes.QED

Joseph E Fallon, Senior Research Associate, U K Defence Forum, was commissioned to write this article for publication at www.defenceviewpoints.co.uk and submission to the Eurodefense Russia Observatory