



The Curator asked about Okean 2024: Show of Force or Strategic Signal?

Key finding: Okean 2024 was the largest Russian naval exercise since the Soviet collapse, reviving a Cold War format after a 39-year gap. The political message — to NATO, to China, and to Russian domestic audiences — outweighed its military substance. Its most significant deficit was the conspicuous absence of any tactical reflection of the drone and naval warfare lessons from the Black Sea.

Background: The Okean Series

The Okean exercises were the signature operational events of Admiral Sergei Gorshkov's Soviet Navy. Okean 1970 remains the largest peacetime naval exercise in history: more than 160 warships, 45 auxiliaries, and hundreds of aircraft operating simultaneously across all the world's oceans, culminating in the launch of ballistic missiles from nuclear submarines. Okean 1975 was equally ambitious, adding demonstrations of anti-carrier interdiction and multi-platform ASW. Subsequent iterations in 1977, 1983, and 1985 maintained the format. The exercises served a dual purpose: operationally, they tested command and control across multiple fleets operating in geographically separated theatres simultaneously; politically, they demonstrated to the Politburo that Gorshkov's enormous naval budget was delivering a force capable of global reach.

No equivalent exercise was held after 1985. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the decay of the fleet in the 1990s, and the shift toward smaller, more manageable exercises under budgetary constraint effectively retired the Okean format. Its revival in 2024 was therefore a deliberate statement, not an operational routine.

Okean 2024: What Happened

Okean 2024 ran from 10 to 16 September 2024, under the direct command of Navy Commander-in-Chief Admiral Aleksandr Moiseyev. Putin launched it personally on 10 September, describing it as "the first naval exercise of this scale in over 30 years." The exercise was bilateral in format: the Pacific Fleet, Baltic Fleet, and Caspian Flotilla were designated as friendly forces; the Northern Fleet acted as the opposing force. Practical activity was conducted across 13 sea zones in three strategic areas: Arctic/North Atlantic, Pacific, and the Mediterranean/Baltic/Caspian.

The Russian Ministry of Defence announced participation of more than 400 surface combatants, submarines, and auxiliaries; over 120 aircraft; approximately 7,000 weapons systems; and more than 90,000 personnel. China contributed four named vessels — the cruiser CNS Wuxi (104), destroyer CNS Xining (117), frigate CNS Linyi (Note on Sources

Section I: US Naval Institute Proceedings (October 2024, Captain Chris Bott); Naval News (September 2024); Kremlin.ru official transcript of Putin's Okean 2024 remarks; US Army TRADOC Operational Environment Enterprise. Section II: Australian Sea Power Centre, 'Battle Reading the Russian Pacific Fleet 2023–2030' (Muraviev, March 2025); Wikipedia Pacific Fleet article (April 2026); Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. Section III: Wikipedia, 155th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade and 40th Naval Infantry Brigade articles (both verified April 2026); ISW daily assessments; Grokipedia (Russian Naval Infantry, 155th Brigade); The Jamestown Foundation.

Russia Observatory | April 2026547), and fleet oiler CNS Taihu (889) — plus 15 aircraft. Observers from 15 nations attended.

Simultaneously, China and Russia were conducting the separate Northern Interaction-2024 exercise in the Sea of Japan and Sea of Okhotsk, adding a second concurrent demonstration of bilateral naval activity in the Pacific theatre.

What the Numbers Actually Mean

The claimed figures require scrutiny. Russia's entire active fleet, across all four fleets and the Caspian Flotilla, is estimated at approximately 300 vessels of all classes and types — not 400. The Black Sea Fleet, which was not mentioned by Admiral Moiseyev at any point during the exercise, is largely confined to the Caspian and the eastern Black Sea following Ukrainian attacks. The 400-vessel claim therefore almost certainly includes auxiliaries, patrol craft, coast

guard vessels, and support ships that would not normally be classified as naval combatants in Western assessments. The 90,000 personnel figure likely incorporates shore-based elements, coastal missile crews, and aviation ground staff.

This does not render the exercise meaningless. Command-and-control testing across geographically dispersed forces has genuine military value regardless of the number of hulls notionally participating. The exercise tested the Navy Commander-in-Chief's ability to coordinate simultaneous operations in three strategic areas — a capability the Soviet Navy possessed and the Russian Navy has allowed to atrophy since 1991. Even a partial restoration of that capability represents an improvement over recent years.

What Was Missing

The most pointed analytical observation about Okean 2024 came from a US Army Operational Environment assessment: the tactical scenarios practised were conventional Cold War naval drills — surface engagements, air interception, amphibious landings, convoy escort. Not a single reported element addressed the drone warfare, counter-unmanned surface vessel tactics, or distributed maritime operations that have proven decisive in the Black Sea since 2022. Russian naval forces in the Black Sea have been attacked by Ukrainian maritime drones at their bases, at sea, and in transit. The lessons of those engagements were not visible in Okean 2024.

The implication is uncomfortable: either Russian naval command has not yet integrated Black Sea lessons into broader fleet doctrine, or Okean 2024 was deliberately framed to project a Cold War image of naval power rather than to practise the warfare the Russian Navy is actually experiencing. The two explanations are not mutually exclusive.

The Strategic Signal

Putin's own framing of the exercise was explicit. He described it as a response to increased US and NATO military presence near Russia's western borders, in the Arctic, and in the Asia-Pacific. He noted the participation of the PLA Navy specifically. The audience for this framing was multiple: NATO allies being reminded that Russia retains a global naval presence; Beijing being reassured that Russia's European commitments have not hollowed out its Pacific capacity; and Russian domestic audiences, where the imagery of 400 warships at sea serves a clear purpose regardless of the precise count.

The exercise may also have served an internal function: demonstrating to the Russian General Staff and the defence industrial complex that the Navy, despite its Black Sea losses and the financial pressure of the Ukraine war, retains institutional capacity to conduct complex multi-theatre operations. The competence required to stage even a partially scripted Okean is non-trivial.

Whether Okean becomes a regular fixture is an open question. Captain Chris Bott, writing in US Naval Institute Proceedings in October 2024, suggested it could be scheduled every five years, potentially concurrent with military district exercises. If Okean 2029 occurs — and particularly if it incorporates the Black Sea warfare lessons that 2024 avoided — it will be a materially more significant event than its predecessor.

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