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Summary: The Russian Pacific Fleet is the second largest of Russia's four fleets and, in submarine terms, the most consequential after the Northern Fleet. Unlike the Baltic and Black Sea Fleets, it has not been materially degraded by the Ukraine war: its surface ships remain operational, its SSBN force has been reinforced, and its programme of new-build submarines continued without interruption through 2025. Its strategic purpose is nuclear deterrence from the Sea of Okhotsk bastion, sea-denial against the US Seventh Fleet and Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force, and the projection of Russian presence across a theatre stretching from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean. The Russia-China naval relationship, exercised annually since 2012 and deepened in 2025 to include the first joint submarine patrols, adds a dimension that changes the strategic calculus for every US and allied planner in the Indo-Pacific.

The Long View: History and the Warm Water Imperative

Russia's strategic yearning for warm-water access is one of the most durable threads in its foreign and military policy — older than the Soviet Union, older than the Romanov dynasty in its final form, rooted in the geographic reality of a vast continental state whose ports freeze and whose oceanic access is perpetually contested. In the Pacific this imperative has driven three centuries of eastward expansion, from the Okhotsk Military Flotilla of 1731 to the seizure of Vladivostok from China in 1860 and the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway to supply it.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 was, at its core, a contest for warm-water dominance in the Far East: Russia's Baltic Squadron sailed 18,000 miles to its destruction at Tsushima in May

1905, the most complete naval defeat of the modern era. The lesson Moscow drew was not that maritime ambition was futile but that it required local superiority rather than distant reinforcement — a lesson that has shaped Pacific Fleet basing and doctrine ever since.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought the fleet to its nadir. Within a decade it had lost all its aircraft carriers, its maintenance infrastructure had decayed, and by 2000 a single cruiser — the Varyag — was the sole major surface combatant in active service. The subsequent rebuilding, accelerating sharply after 2010, is one of the less-remarked strategic stories of the past quarter-century. It deserves more analytical attention than it has received in Western commentary, which has been transfixed by the Black Sea.

Strategic Purpose: What the Pacific Fleet Is For

The Pacific Fleet's area of operational responsibility, as defined by Russian military doctrine, extends from the eastern sector of the Arctic Ocean through the entire Pacific to the Indian Ocean as far as Sri Lanka. This is the largest operational theatre of any Russian fleet — and it is the only one whose principal adversary, the US Seventh Fleet, is a genuine peer competitor rather than a constrained regional opponent.

Russian naval doctrine identifies three primary missions for the Pacific Fleet. First, nuclear deterrence: the Sea of Okhotsk, bounded by Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands, Sakhalin, and Hokkaido, functions as Russia's Pacific SSBN bastion, analogous to the Barents Sea in the Northern Fleet's strategic calculus. The Kuril chain and the Kamchatka coastal defences are designed to keep hostile ASW forces out of the bastion, preserving the second-strike survivability of the SSBN force. Second, sea-denial: the fleet is not expected to defeat the US Seventh Fleet in open-ocean combat but to impose costs, complicate carrier operations, and threaten the sea lanes through which US reinforcement of the Western Pacific would flow. Third, presence and influence: the deployment of surface task groups to South-East Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Western Pacific signals that Russia remains a Pacific power regardless of its commitment on the European land front.

The 2022 Naval Doctrine articulates this directly, identifying the Sea of Okhotsk as a strategic area of Russian national interest — language that carries operational implications for how the fleet defends access to the bastion and responds to foreign naval activity within it.

Command Architecture: Fleet, District, and the Boundary Question

The Pacific Fleet sits within the Eastern Military District (EMD), established in 2010 and headquartered in Khabarovsk. The EMD is the second-largest military district in Russia by geographic area at seven million square kilometres, and encompasses four Combined Arms Army headquarters — the 5th, 29th, 35th, and 36th — plus the 68th Guards Corps on Sakhalin. The 11th Air and Air Defence Forces Army provides aviation and air defence for the district, and the Pacific Fleet's own aviation is described as heavily dependent on this support.
The command boundary question is analytically important. The Pacific Fleet is an operational-strategic formation — responsible for theatre-level and above operations across its vast area of responsibility — but in a land war scenario, ground forces in the EMD come under army headquarters that are organisationally distinct from the fleet. The joint headquarters established on Kamchatka in the 1990s, integrating land, naval, and air units for the peninsula's defence, represents the practical answer to this coordination problem at the local level. The Vostok quadrennial exercises, to which we return below, are the theatre-level test of how well the seams between fleet, district, and aerospace forces are managed.
The current Pacific Fleet commander is Admiral Viktor Liina, appointed April 2023. In 2024, as part of the broader reorganisation that also transferred the Baltic Fleet to the Leningrad Military District, the Russian Navy's four fleets were formally re-subordinated to the Navy Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Aleksandr Moiseyev — a structural clarification of command authority over the fleets that had become ambiguous under the military district system.

Vostok: The Eastern Exercise Series

Where Zapad tests the western theatre and has attracted sustained Western analytical attention, Vostok — 'East' — is its quadrennial eastern counterpart, conducted under the auspices of the Eastern Military District and the Pacific Fleet. It deserves equivalent scrutiny.
Vostok 2018 was the first to include Chinese PLA participation at scale: 3,200 troops and substantial equipment deployed to the Tsugol range in Zabaykalsky Krai. The political signal — an exercise that had historically been configured against a notional eastern threat was recast with China as partner rather than adversary — was as significant as the military content. Vostok 2022, held from 1–7 September, included China, India, Laos, Mongolia, Nicaragua, and Syria, though India notably withheld its maritime units to avoid complications with Japan. The naval component exercised joint operations in the Sea of Japan, covering sea-lane defence and support to ground forces in maritime directions.
In September 2024, Russia revived the Soviet-era Okean exercise — the largest Russian naval exercise since the Soviet collapse. Okean 2024 ran from 10–16 September across 13 sea zones in three strategic areas: Arctic, Pacific, and the Baltic/Mediterranean. The Pacific and Baltic Fleets were designated friendly forces; the Northern Fleet and Caspian Flotilla acted as

the opposing force. Russia claimed 400 surface combatants, submarines, and auxiliaries, 120 aircraft, 7,000 weapons systems, and 90,000 personnel — figures that should be treated with healthy scepticism, but whose scale, even heavily discounted, represented a significant demonstration of coordinated multi-fleet exercise activity not seen since the Soviet era. The next Vostok is due in 2026.

Order of Battle: Early 2026

The Pacific Fleet's order of battle divides into two organisational groupings: the Primorskaya Flotilla (PRIMFLOT), responsible for surface operations and based principally around Vladivostok and Fokino in Primorsky Krai; and the Submarine Forces Command of the Pacific Fleet, whose nuclear submarine divisions are based at Vilyuchinsk on Kamchatka, and whose conventional submarine brigade is at Malyy Ulliss Bay near Vladivostok. Principal bases are at Vladivostok/Fokino, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, and Vilyuchinsk. The Rybachy submarine base in Avacha Bay was damaged by a magnitude 8.8 earthquake in 2025, with satellite imagery showing pier damage; the operational impact on submarine deployments has not been definitively assessed from open sources.

Submarines: The Strategic Core

In early 2025, the Australian Sea Power Centre assessed the Pacific Fleet's submarine force at 25 boats — nuclear-powered and conventional — with a total surfaced displacement of approximately 212,000 tonnes. Six comprise the strategic nuclear deterrent element; the remaining 19 are sub-strategic and tactical multi-role platforms. This is the number that matters most, and it has grown consistently.

• SSBNs — Borei and Borei-A class (Project 955/955A) — Three Borei-A SSBNs are now assigned to the Pacific Fleet: K-550 Aleksandr Nevsky, K-551 Vladimir Monomakh, and K-552 Knyaz Oleg. In December 2024, K-554 Imperator Aleksandr III, the fourth Borei-A, was commissioned and assigned to the Pacific Fleet, bringing the SSBN total to four boats at Vilyuchinsk. Each carries 16 R-30 Bulava SLBMs with MIRV warheads. One Delta III-class SSBN, the Ryazan (K-44), remains nominally in service as a legacy platform. The planned Borei-A boats Perm and Vladivostok are scheduled for Pacific Fleet delivery in 2026 and 2029 respectively, which would bring the SSBN complement to six modern boats.

• Note on SSBN reassignments — As reported in March 2024, Imperator Aleksandr III and the

Yasen-M SSGN Krasnoyarsk, both originally destined for the Pacific Fleet, were redirected to the Northern Fleet following commissioning in December 2023 — a reminder that the boundary between fleet assignments remains fluid and determined by strategic priority rather than administrative tidiness. Both are believed to have subsequently returned to the Pacific Fleet assignment pipeline, but the episode illustrates the Northern Fleet's first call on new strategic assets.

• SSGNs — Yasen-M class (Project 885M) — K-573 Novosibirsk, the first Yasen-M SSGN assigned to the Pacific Fleet, commissioned in 2021. K-571 Krasnoyarsk followed in December 2023. These are among the most capable attack submarines Russia operates, able to carry Oniks anti-ship missiles, Kalibr cruise missiles, and — critically — 3M22 Tsirkon hypersonic missiles. Two further Yasen-M boats, Perm and Vladivostok, are under construction for the Pacific Fleet. The US Navy has described the Yasen-M as extremely difficult to detect.

• SSGNs — Oscar II class (Project 949A) — Two Oscar II cruise missile submarines — K-132 Irkutsk and K-442 Chelyabinsk — remain assigned to the Pacific Fleet. Both are undergoing or have undergone extended modernisation refits at the Zvezda shipyard in Bolshoy Kamen. At 19,400 tonnes submerged, these are the largest attack submarines in Russian service, carrying 24 P-700 Granit anti-ship missiles. Their primary purpose is anti-carrier warfare, and their eventual return to full operational status would significantly enhance the fleet's ability to threaten US carrier strike groups.

• SSNs — Shchuka-B class (Project 971 Akula) — Multiple Akula-class SSNs remain in Pacific Fleet service, though the number in operational condition at any given time is difficult to assess precisely from open sources. Third-generation boats of this class have not been modernised to avoid block obsolescence before 2030, according to assessments by Dr Alexey Muraviev of Curtin University — the most authoritative open-source analyst of the Pacific Fleet.

• SSKs — Improved Kilo class (Project 636.3) — Six Improved Kilo-class conventional submarines were ordered in 2016 specifically for the Pacific Fleet, and all six had commissioned by 2025. The final boat, Yakutsk, was commissioned in June 2025. These boats carry Kalibr cruise missiles and represent a significant enhancement of the fleet's conventional strike and patrol capability. The 19th Submarine Brigade at Malyy Ulliss Bay operates this force.

Surface Combatants

• Flagship: Varyag (Slava-class cruiser, Project 1164) — The sole remaining Slava-class cruiser in the Pacific Fleet — sistership of the Moskva, sunk in the Black Sea in April 2022. At 11,500 tonnes and armed with 16 P-1000 Vulkan anti-ship missiles plus S-300F SAMs, she is the fleet's most capable surface combatant. Commissioned 1989; has conducted deployments to the Indian Ocean and East China Sea as recently as August 2024. Her continued serviceability depends on maintenance at the Dalzavod yard in Vladivostok.

• Marshal Shaposhnikov (Udaloy-class, Project 1155, modernised) — Completed a major refit that included Kalibr cruise missile capability, transforming what was a dedicated ASW destroyer

into a multi-mission frigate. Deployed to Vietnam (Cam Ranh) in October 2025 and participated in India's MILAN 2026 multinational naval exercises. Active and operational. Admiral Tributs and Admiral Panteleyev are additional Udaloy-class ships in the Pacific Fleet; Admiral Vinogradov is likely to undergo a similar modernisation refit.
• Steregushchiy/Gremyashchiy-class corvettes (Project 20380/20385) — Four modern corvettes: Sovershenny, Gromky, Aldar Tsydenzhapov (Hero of the Russian Federation), and Gremyashchy. These are the fleet's most modern surface units, equipped with Uran anti-ship missiles, Redut SAMs, and Paket-NK ASW systems. Gremyashchy is a Project 20385 variant, slightly larger with enhanced missile fit. All four have been active in exercises with the Chinese Navy.
• Karakurt-class missile corvettes (Project 22800) — Newer Kalibr-armed small missile ships being commissioned to supplement the surface force. Numbers assigned to the Pacific Fleet are growing incrementally.
• Amphibious shipping — The Pacific Fleet retains Ropucha-class large landing ships, though amphibious capability has been compromised by the commitment of naval infantry to Ukraine.

Naval Aviation

The Pacific Fleet's aviation element operates Tu-142 Bear-F maritime patrol and ASW aircraft, and Ka-27 Helix ASW helicopters embarked on surface ships. The fleet is described as heavily dependent on the 11th Air and Air Defence Forces Army for broader air support. Tu-95MS Bear-H strategic bombers and Tu-22M3 Backfire bombers, assigned to Russian Long-Range Aviation and based in the Eastern Military District, can be tasked in a maritime anti-ship role carrying Kh-32 supersonic anti-ship missiles and Kh-47M2 Kinzhal hypersonic missiles respectively. Plans reportedly exist for a new heavy bomber regiment equipped with Tu-160 Blackjack strategic bombers to be based in the Amur and Irkutsk regions, though this remains aspirational.

Coastal Defence

The Pacific Fleet's coastal missile forces are substantial and form a key component of the Sea of Okhotsk bastion defence. Bastion-P systems with Oniks P-800 missiles are deployed on Kamchatka, along the Kuril chain, and — since late 2020 — on Sakhalin Island (the 75th Coastal Missile Brigade) with a battalion positioned on Matua Island in the central Kurils. A new coastal defence division is being formed in Chukotka, responsible for the arc from Anadyr to

Sakhalin. This progressive layering of coastal missile capability reflects the doctrinal priority of maintaining the integrity of the Sea of Okhotsk bastion against penetration by hostile ASW forces.

Naval Infantry: The Ukraine Price

Both of the Pacific Fleet's naval infantry brigades — the 155th Guards and the 40th — were transferred to Ukraine in 2022 and sustained heavy casualties in the initial phase of the invasion. As of December 2025, the 155th Brigade, awarded Guards status in April 2022 for its performance in combat, had been upgraded to division status as the 55th Guards Naval Infantry Division — though ISW assessments note it is not staffed to doctrinal strength. Elements of both formations were still operating in eastern Ukraine near Pokrovsk in late 2025. The amphibious capacity of the Pacific Fleet, never its primary capability, has been further degraded by the sustained commitment of its ground combat element to a land war 5,000 miles from its home station.

The China Dimension: Partnership, Competition, and the First Submarine Patrol

No analysis of the Pacific Fleet is complete without addressing the Russia-China naval relationship, which has moved in 2025 into territory that would have seemed improbable a decade ago. The Maritime Interaction exercises — known in China as Joint Sea — have been conducted annually since 2012. In August 2025, Maritime Interaction-2025 was held in the Sea of Japan, involving surface ships, diesel-electric submarines, and naval aviation. What followed was without precedent: at the end of August 2025, Russian and Chinese diesel-electric submarines conducted the first joint underwater manoeuvres in the Sea of Japan and East China Sea, each boat accompanied by a surface warship and submarine rescue vessel. Rear Admiral Mikhail Chekmasov, commenting on the exercise, described joint underwater manoeuvring as a complex operation requiring the highest level of training. The significance is not merely operational: it signals a willingness to share underwater tactical procedures — information that navies have historically been reluctant to expose even to close allies. James Holmes of the US Naval War College identified the core challenge for Western planners as early as 2023: the combination of Russian stealthy nuclear submarines and Chinese quiet-running diesel boats, all armed with anti-ship missiles, poses a qualitatively different ASW problem than either fleet presents individually.

The relationship is not without its tensions. Russia's Pacific Fleet patrols areas — including in the western Pacific and the Sea of Japan — where Chinese and American interests intersect in complex ways. Russia is simultaneously a Chinese economic lifeline, a military partner, and a long-term strategic uncertainty on China's northern flank. The Oscar II submarines at Zvezda, whose anti-carrier mission is directed at US carrier strike groups, could in a different strategic configuration be pointed elsewhere. Neither side discusses this publicly. Neither has forgotten it.

Assessment: Phoenix, Not Potemkin

Fallon's original paper posed the question in its opening line: Phoenix or Potemkin village? The answer, as of 2026, is unambiguously Phoenix — with one important qualification.

The submarine force is real, modern, and growing. Four Borei-A SSBNs at Vilyuchinsk, with Perm and Vladivostok to follow, give the Pacific Fleet a credible and survivable second-strike nuclear deterrent force that the Ukraine war has not touched. Two Yasen-M SSGNs, with more to come, provide a long-range conventional and hypersonic strike capability that Western navies are only beginning to reckon with seriously. Six new Improved Kilo SSKs, all commissioned by 2025, add conventional patrol and strike depth. The Australian Sea Power Centre's assessment that the fleet will have 45 core warships including 19 submarines by 2032 is, if anything, conservative.

The surface force is the qualification. When the National Interest's correspondent observed in October 2025 that a Pacific Fleet 'long-distance deployment' consisted of the 1985-vintage Marshal Shaposhnikov, a corvette four years in service, and a tanker older than most of its crew, the observation was fair. The Varyag is 37 years old. The Udaloy destroyers are Cold War designs. The surface-force modernisation programme — new frigates of the Project 22350 class, more corvettes — is real but slow, constrained by shipbuilding capacity and sanctions-driven component shortages. Russia can build submarines in Severodvinsk faster than it can build surface ships in St. Petersburg.

What this means strategically is that the Pacific Fleet fights from below the surface, not above it. Its SSBNs deter; its SSGNs threaten carriers and land targets; its SSKs complicate ASW; its surface ships project presence and carry the flag to Cam Ranh and Cochin and Doha. That is a coherent strategic design, not a deficiency — provided the submarine modernisation programme is sustained. The single vulnerability is infrastructure: the Zvezda shipyard at Bolshoy Kamen remains the chokepoint for Pacific Fleet maintenance and refit, and the Rybachy pier damage from the 2025 Kamchatka earthquake is a reminder that the physical plant supporting the bastion is not immune to disruption from sources other than adversary action.

The final dimension that Western analysis consistently undersells is the exercise tempo. Between February 2022 and October 2023, the Pacific Fleet conducted eight strategic-level naval exercises, in addition to numerous smaller activities. It has continued through 2024 and 2025. A fleet that exercises is a fleet that trains; a fleet that trains is a fleet that improves. The

Black Sea Fleet has been fighting for its survival. The Pacific Fleet has been getting better. See companion papers in this series: The Baltic Fleet: Encircled and Constrained; The Black Sea Fleet: Attrition and Adaptation (forthcoming); and Russian Submarine Forces: The Crown Jewels, which examines the SSBN and SSGN forces across all fleets in the context of Russia's nuclear deterrence posture.

Pacific Fleet: Order of Battle Summary (Early 2026)

Commander: Admiral Viktor Liina (from April 2023). Principal bases: Vladivostok/Fokino (Primorsky Krai); Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky and Vilyuchinsk (Kamchatka). Sources: Wikipedia Pacific Fleet article (updated April 2026); Australian Sea Power Centre (March 2025); open-source naval tracking. Figures are best estimates; operational status of older Soviet-era vessels is variable.

Submarines (25 boats, early 2025 assessment)

• SSBNs — Borei-A (Project 955A) — K-550 Aleksandr Nevsky, K-551 Vladimir Monomakh, K-552 Knyaz Oleg, K-554 Imperator Aleksandr III — all at Vilyuchinsk. R-30 Bulava SLBMs × 16. Perm and Vladivostok (due 2026/2029)

• SSBN — Delta III legacy (Project 667BDR) — Ryazan (K-44) — nominally in service; operational status uncertain

• SSGNs — Yasen-M (Project 885M) — Novosibirsk (K-573), Krasnoyarsk (K-571) — Oniks, Kalibr, Tsirkon. Perm and Vladivostok under construction

• SSGNs — Oscar II (Project 949A) — Irkutsk (K-132), Chelyabinsk (K-442) — in extended refit at Zvezda, Bolshoy Kamen; anti-carrier role

• SSNs — Shchuka-B/Akula (Project 971) — Multiple boats; third-generation; modernisation status variable; risk of block obsolescence pre-2030

• SSKs — Improved Kilo (Project 636.3) — Six boats, all commissioned by 2025 (final: Yakutsk, June 2025) — 19th Submarine Brigade, Malyy Ulliss Bay; Kalibr-armed

Principal Surface Combatants

• Varyag (Slava-class cruiser, Project 1164) — Fleet flagship; 16 × P-1000 Vulkan anti-ship missiles; S-300F SAMs; commissioned 1989; active 2026

• Marshal Shaposhnikov (modernised Udaloy, Project 1155M) — Kalibr-capable post-refit; deployed Indian Ocean/SE Asia Oct 2025–early 2026; active

• Admiral Tributs, Admiral Panteleyev, Admiral Vinogradov (Udaloy, Project 1155) — ASW destroyers; Admiral Vinogradov likely for modernisation refit

• Sovershenny, Gromky, Aldar Tsydenzhapov, Gremyashchy (corvettes, Project 20380/20385) — Modern multi-mission corvettes; active in China exercises

• Karakurt-class missile corvettes (Project 22800) — Kalibr-armed; numbers growing incrementally

Naval Aviation

• Tu-142 Bear-F — Maritime patrol and ASW — Pacific Fleet organic

• Ka-27 Helix — Shipborne ASW helicopters

• Tu-95MS, Tu-22M3 (Long-Range Aviation, Eastern MD) — Maritime strike role with Kh-32 and Kh-47M2 Kinzhal; not organic to fleet but taskable

Coastal Defence

• Bastion-P (Oniks P-800) — Deployed on Kamchatka, Kuril chain (incl. Matua Island), Sakhalin (75th Coastal Missile Brigade). New coastal defence division forming in Chukotka

Naval Infantry

• 55th Guards Naval Infantry Division (formerly 155th Brigade) — Upgraded December 2025; operating near Pokrovsk, Ukraine; not at doctrinal strength

• 40th Naval Infantry Brigade — Elements in Ukraine; reconstitution timeline unclear

Note on Sources and Methodology

Principal sources: Wikipedia Pacific Fleet article (verified, updated April 2026); Australian Sea Power Centre, 'Moscow's Pacific Trident' (March 2025) and 'Battle Reading the Russian Pacific Fleet 2023–2030' — both by Dr Alexey D. Muraviev, Curtin University, the most authoritative open-source analyst of this fleet; Jamestown Foundation on Maritime Interaction-2025 (September 2025); The National Interest (October 2025, March 2026); Institute for the Study of War daily assessments.

The Russia Observatory applies the same methodology as the Mind the Gap series (concerning Russia's Northern Fleet, tasks and strategic scenario). Also published her at Defence Viewpoints March 2026 : named platforms, specific dates and figures, honest assessment of both capability and limitation.

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