

MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2017/18

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"Guideline of Russia's Naval Policy" as a Continuation of the Soviet and Russian Bureaucratic-Military Tradition

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During 2017, Russia continued its military support of the Assad regime in Syria. As a result, Russian naval forces maintain a dominant presence in the Eastern Mediterranean with a relatively significant order of battle. In January 2017, it was even reported that an agreement had been signed for the leasing of the Port of Tartus in Syria by Russia for a period of 49 years.¹

Russia's military presence in close proximity to Israel and the activity of its naval vessels in the maritime domain near Israel requires close monitoring, as well as an understanding of Russia's motives and its policy for the use of naval force in our region. The documents related to naval doctrine that are published by Russia's political and military leadership can help us to understand Russia's naval policy.

During the first half of 2017, there were apparently no changes in Russia's naval policy relative to the preceding year. Russia's leadership continued a policy of showcasing the rejuvenation of the Russian navy and its return to the "club" of leading navies.

At the center of this activity was the voyage of Russia's only aircraft carrier, the "Admiral Kuznetsov", from the Barents Sea to the Mediterranean. The voyage, which also included a number of accompanying vessels, continued from November 2016 until February 2017, when the Kuznetsov returned to its home base at Severomorsk. In addition, during 2017 the Russians used their warships, including submarines, to launch cruise missile at targets in Syria, as it did during the previous year, as part of their support for the Assad regime.

Nonetheless, after the return of the Kuznetsov to its home base, it became known that it would be inactive due to a "scheduled renovation". According to the media, the initial estimated cost of the renovation is about \$350 million² (and it is possible that the actual amount will be much higher; for example, several months later there were rumors of the cost reaching about \$800 million³). The renovation itself (which has been referred to in a number of publications as a "renovation with modernization") is meant to last several years. At the same time, it became known that during 2018 a general renovation would begin of the "Peter the Great" nuclear missile cruiser, the flagship of the Russian North

1 Russia Signs Deal for Syria Bases; Turkey Appears to Accept Assad <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/world/middleeast/russia-turkey-syria-deal.html>

2 March 17th, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/galleries/2017/03/17/681637-admiralu-kuznetsovu-vedomosti-remont#/galleries/140737493184478/normal/1>

3 Interfax, October 7th, 2017 <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/582205>.

Sea fleet, which together with the Admiral Kuznetsov serves as the last remnant of the large Soviet ships.

In practice, this will lead to a situation in which the Russian navy will be based on only "small" ships", namely destroyers and frigates. This situation has been indirectly confirmed by Sergey Shoygu, Russia's Minister of Defense, who stated on the launch of the "Admiral Gorshkov" frigate, that ships of this type would constitute the main component of the Russian navy. It was also stated that the navy is meant to receive six such ships.⁴

In spite of these developments, the most important event related to the future of the Russian navy occurred not at sea but rather in the Kremlin. On July 20th, 2017, Russian President Putin approved a document entitled "Foundations of Russia's Naval Policy during the Period up to 2030". This document replaced the "Foundations of Naval Policy" document that was approved in 2012 and was meant to remain valid until 2020.



Figure 1 – President Putin reviews honor flotilla on Russian Navy Day (source: Kremlin website)

The official goal of the new document is to map the direction for development of Russia's naval forces, as a continuation of previous documents on the subject: "Foundations of

4 The Russian Ministry of Defense television station "Zvezda", April 21st. <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/201704211312-mdxg.htm>

Naval Policy" of 2012 and the "Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation", in its original version from 2001⁵ and its later versions.

Like the previous documents, this document specified the role of the navy within Russia's military policy, its objectives and the main directions for the buildup of naval power, as well as the geographic scope of the naval operations. The document also includes a description of potential threats. Essentially, it states that the source of the main threat at sea is the US and NATO, which are seeking a dominant position in the ocean and complete sea supremacy.⁶ It also states that the Russian navy must be able to deal with advanced rival navies from a technological perspective and must be equipped with high-precision weaponry" and also that Russia "will seek to a situation in which the Russian navy is able to maintain its number two position in the world from the viewpoint of fighting ability."⁷ Seeking to maintain second place is based on the recognition that the US navy is in first place and that it is unfeasible for Russia to build a navy equal to it.

Nonetheless, it is possible that the true purpose of the document differs from its declared purpose. First and foremost, it is meant to change (or even cancel) some of the main decisions in the previous documents, though without explicating announcing that intention. In addition, it can be assumed that its publication is a sign that the implementation of the previous plans has encountered problems.

It is possible that the purpose of the document can be explained not by changes in the economic or political situation—of which there were signs already when the doctrine was approved and therefore the document may have been a very late response to those changes—but rather by the tradition according to which the Russian regime operates and in particular its military-bureaucratic branch.

The main difference between the aforementioned document and the previous ones is in the Russian navy's scope of activity in the various theaters. The "Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation" from 2015, which is the main document that sets out Russia's naval policy, describes most of the existing naval theaters in the world.⁸ The list of "the main directions of national naval policy", which is presented in the "Doctrine", includes all of the oceans and even the Antarctic theater.⁹ The new document therefore discusses in a general way the need for operational capability in all of the theaters ("Ensuring the possibility of extended presence of naval forces in the domain of a strategically important

5 "The Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation for the Period up to 2020", approved by the Russian President on July 2001, published on the Russian Foreign Ministry website: http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/462098.

6 "Principles of Russia's Naval Policy for Period up to 2030", Chapter 2, Paragraph 24, subparagraph A.

7 Ibid., Chapter 5, Paragraph 39.

8 "The Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation", Paragraphs 49–72. Published on the official website of the Russian President – www.kremlin.ru.

9 Ibid., Paragraph 50.

ocean"),¹⁰ but in a specific manner only in the theater of the Black Sea/Mediterranean¹¹ and in the Arctic theater. The other theaters are defined as "other directions that have strategic importance."¹²

In contrast to the chapter devoted to a description of the fleet's theaters of operation, which differs from that appearing in the "Doctrine", the chapter that discusses the buildup of force is in fact not very different. In 2015, it was stated that the Russian shipbuilding industry must deal with its technological lag and work to develop modern "homemade" technologies for implementation in the building of ships, both civilian vessels and warships.¹³ The 2017 document includes identical missions, but in greater detail. It calls for the navy to raise its level of technology in general and of its weaponry in particular, such that modern weapons and ammunition will occupy a prominent place in the navy's arsenal.¹⁴

In principle, the changes appearing in the presidential directive relative to the previous documents are not significant enough so as to justify the publication of the document. In our opinion, the explanation for the document can primarily be found in what it does not explicitly say and understanding that requires a familiarity with the bureaucratic tradition according to which the Russian system operates, as well as its Soviet roots.

Despite the extent to which Russia has changed since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the basic structure and bureaucratic methods in the Soviet system remain fundamentally intact. In contrast to some of the other countries in the former Communist bloc, the leaders of post-Communist Russia decided not to rebuild the system, but rather to adopt the system inherited from the USSR and keep the bureaucrats that had started their careers as part of the Soviet system. As a result, during the post-Soviet period Russia inherited to a large extent the administrative methods, the bureaucratic language and the manner in which problems that require solution on the systemic level are handled.

One of the main principles of the Soviet system was to avoid direct mention of existing problems and to deny the possibility of a mistake having been made by any part of the government. According to the official perspective, this was liable to inflate the importance of "individual problems" and of "localized deficiencies" and would harm the reputation of the socialist system. Nonetheless, the leadership needed the option of expressing its dissatisfaction with the relevant parties and also to inform them and those they report to of the demands and the policy changes that constituted a response to the problems.

10 "The Foundations of Russia's Naval Policy for the Period up to 2030", Chapter 3, Paragraph 30, sub-paragraph D.

11 Ibid., Chapter 4, Paragraph 37, sub-paragraph F and G.

12 Ibid., Chapter 4, Paragraph 37, sub-paragraph G.

13 "The Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation", Paragraphs 77–78, published on the official site of the Russian President www.kremlin.ru.

14 "The Foundations of Russia's Naval Policy during the Period up to 2030", Chapter 5, Paragraph 43.

Although this was possible to accomplish by means of distributing confidential documents among the relevant parts of the system, not all of its representatives had the necessary clearance to read such documents. Furthermore, some of them (such as those in the lower echelons who were responsible for propaganda or, in the case of the army, junior political officers) had to explain the "party line"¹⁵ to people that did not have access to the confidential material. In addition, there was a need to inform the public of the policy's general flaws, at a time when the system essentially lacked any transparency.

The main policy principles were described in speeches by senior leaders at gatherings of the Communist Party leadership.¹⁶ These speeches served as the basis for more specific decision making of all types.¹⁷ Afterwards, the decisions of the leadership were published in editorial articles or "headline articles" written by senior functionaries. These articles appeared in the "Krasnaya Zvezda" ("The Red Star") newspaper, the official newspaper of the Ministry of Defense. Its content and publication were the responsibility of the army's office for political affairs and the magazine was received by all officers in the Soviet army. In addition, it published a monthly called "Morskoy Sbornik" ("The Naval Collection"), which was the official magazine of the navy. This publication was also exploited when the leadership felt the need to draw attention to one subject or another and the instructions to the relevant bureaucrats were not sufficient to do so.

An important principle in the operation of the Soviet system, both the civilian and the military echelons, is the desire to avoid not only the mention of problems but also the cancellation of previous decisions, since this could create the impression that a mistake was being admitted. Therefore, in the case that one decision or another appeared to be incorrect or outdated, a new decision was issued in its place and from the moment it was issued it essentially replaced the previous decision.

If the leadership identified a problem whose scope required a response beyond simply notifying a number of relevant parties, the instructions on how to resolve the problem were never given directly. Thus, for example, at the end of the 1970s a "Daily Collection" was published that contained a series of articles on the importance of safety in the Soviet navy. The articles also included mention of units that had excelled in this area. The articles appeared over a period of about nine months, with the rank of the official signed on the article rising over time. Thus, if the first article was signed by a mid-ranked officer, the last was signed by the Head of the Political Department of the "Main Naval Headquarters", i.e. the headquarters of the Soviet navy. This constituted clear evidence that the level of safety in the fleet was deteriorating and the publishing of the article by the head of the political apparatus of the navy was a sign that the problem was serious.

15 The term "semi-official" which described the Communist Party's policy at any given moment.

16 Hough, J.F., Fainsod, M., *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), p. 449.

17 Черняев, А. Шесть лет с Горбачёвым – Chernyayev, A. *Shest let s Gorbachevym (Six Years with Gorbachev)*, (Moscow, 1993), p. 128.

In view of the aforementioned, the document that was signed by President Putin in July has significance beyond the simple interpretation of what is written:

1. The focusing of attention on the Mediterranean and the Black Sea and the lack of mention (or just "by the way" mention) of other theaters (apart from the Arctic theater, whose place in this document is less important than that of the Mediterranean theater) is a signal that most of the resources and the main part of naval activity will be concentrated there. In other words, this is an instruction to reduce operations in other naval theaters that are not mentioned directly.
2. The repetition of instructions regarding the buildup of force that already appeared in the previous documents and in greater detail than previously is probably a sign that the implementation of the policy outlined previously has been too slow and there is a need to clarify the instructions. The fact that this clarification originated from the highest level, namely the President who is the supreme commander of the armed forces, is apparently a signal of the seriousness of the delay.

Therefore it is very possible that the document "Foundations of Naval Policy" does not indicate the start of a new stage in the buildup of Russia's naval power, but rather the accumulation of problems and their level of severity. This also places in doubt the achievements of the "current stage", as well as the feasibility of the goal set down in the document, namely to transform the Russian fleet into the second most powerful in the world.

The restriction of naval operations to one or two theaters is, first and foremost, an indication that the navy has given up its aspirations of being a global force. Moreover, in the main designated theater of operation (i.e. the Black Sea and the Mediterranean) the Russian fleet has played only a support role and according to the document that role remains unchanged.

In addition, although the concentrations of resources will be on operations in the Mediterranean, it is doubtful whether this will lead to the expansion of activity, since such an expansion is not mentioned in the document even in a "declaratory" manner. Moreover, the solution of problems in the buildup of force described indirectly in the document will also require the investment of significant resources, and until progress is made in solving these problems, it is unlikely that there will be any upgrade in the practical quality of operations.

For Israel, this means that the idea of Russian presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is reaffirmed by this document and even reinforced. Therefore, it can be expected that the Russian fleet will continue to sail in our region, whether or not the civil war in Syria continues and whether or not the Assad regime regains control of most of the country's territory.

However, it is possible that in view of the problems hinted at in the buildup of naval power the renovation of the large naval vessels (the "Admiral Kuznetsov" and the "Peter the Great") and the problems that apparently exist in the equipment of the new ships, it is reasonable to assume that the Russian presence will not involve large battle groups but rather other ships most of which will be brought from other theaters (and primarily the Black Sea and North Sea theaters) for limited periods of time.