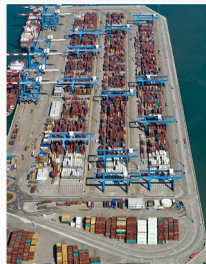
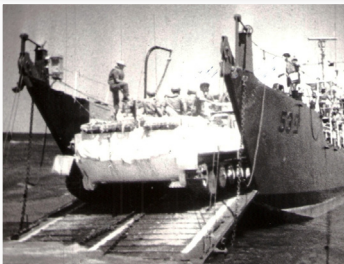


MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2019/20

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Russia's 'Arctic Strategy' As a Result of The Inter-Systemic Power Struggles

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The emergence of Russian naval forces in the Arctic region

The Russian establishment in the Northern Ocean basin has a very long history. Arkhangelsk port was established close to Northern Dvina River's estuary in the end of the 16th century and served as Russia's only exit to the sea using the sea route leading to northern Europe. The conquest of the Baltic seashores on its ports Tallinn and Riga, and the Establishment of Saint Petersburg at Neiva River's estuary during the Great Northern War (1700-1721) enabled Russia additional exit routes to the sea, and caused a significant decline of the importance of the northern region in general and of Arkhangelsk in particular, and as a result a decline in the efforts aimed at developing this region. In the year 1913 passed through Arkhangelsk that remained Russia's only northern port only 4.3% of the country's maritime traffic.¹

The situation changed with the outbreak of the First World War. Russia was in need of a safe route with its allies- France and Britain, when its western border- both maritime and continental- became the war zone. In this situation, the only practical option was establishing a sea route through Barents Sea. For its implementation, in March 1915 was established on Kola Bay's Coast of Barents Sea the city Murmansk, which became Russia's northern maritime gate. At that same time began the construction of a railroad leading to the city Murmansk and of a military port. During that year a number of battleships and auxiliary ships were stationed in Kola Bay, and in early 1916 a decision was made to set up an independent flotilla that will be responsible for the Northern Ocean arena.²

The construction of the naval force in the north continued up until the Bolshevik Revolution. The new regime that came into power in late 1917 did not deal with this matter for the first 15 years of its existence, and most of the military activity in the arena amounted to a number of training cruises of the Baltic Sea navy ships that were staffed in teams composed of naval officers' schools cadets.

1 The northern Fleet of Russia, Россия флот ед Северный .О ,Ерофеев Murmansk, (1996), p. 37.

2 The northern Fleet of Russia, Россия флот ед Северный .О ,Ерофеев Murmansk, (1996), p. 42.

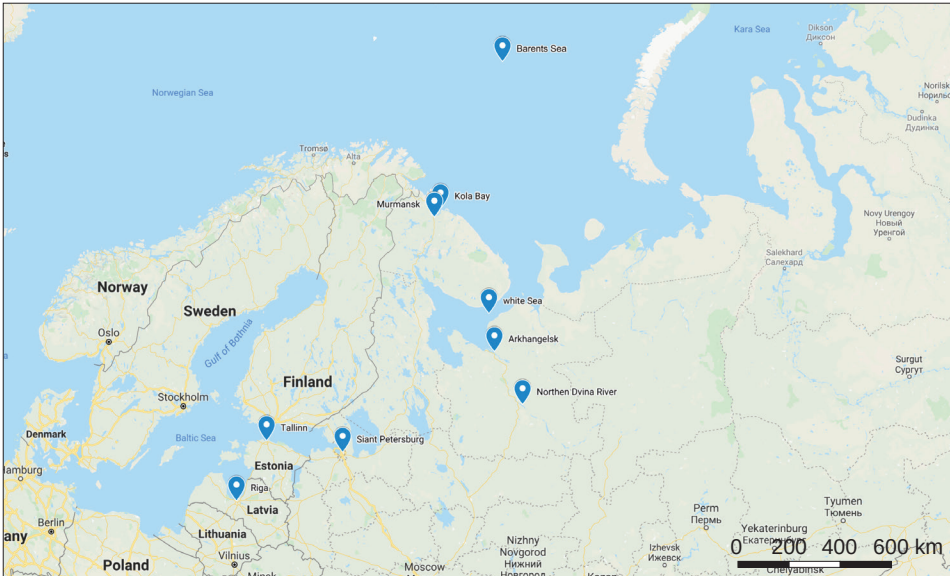


Figure 1: Russia's Northwest region

The situation changed in the early 30's of the 20th century, when the soviet government intensified its deliberate efforts to develop the Arctic region.³ As part of these efforts the canal connecting the Baltic Sea and the White Sea was constructed. And this enabled, among other things, ships transportation from the Baltic Sea to the Northern Ocean without encircling the Scandinavian peninsula. During 1933 a number of destroyers and submarines from the Baltic sea passed in this route to the north, and on June 1st of that same year the command for the assembly of "The Northern Military flotilla" was signed, which became the "Northern fleet" in 1937.

During the Second World War the Northern fleet was, in fact, the Soviet Union's only active fleet after the Baltic fleet and the Black Sea fleet were neutralized by the Germans. However, its role was secondary – it provided support to the northern front who operated 'trench warfare' against the Germans in Kola Peninsula and was responsible for securing the "Arctic convoys" in the final section of their path.

3 On the development of the Far North see in detail: Mirkin, "The Russian Northern Maritime Route" – Statements and Realities", in: *Greater Marine Strategic Assessment for Israel, 2018/19*, Shaul Horev and Ehud Gonen editors (Haifa, 2019).



Figure 2: The White Sea Canal route, opened in 1933

Turning the Northern fleet into a "strategic fleet"

The changes in the northern fleet's status and role began in the mid 50's of the 20th century, when the Soviet leadership made a strategic decision to build a "blue waters fleet" (or in Russian terminology "The Ocean Fleet").⁴

The direct result of this decision was a decline in the Baltic Sea and the Black sea fleets' status, which were formerly the leading fleets of the Soviet forces, and the rise of the Northern fleet and the Pacific Ocean fleet. Among the reasons for this were three main ones:

1. Change in the perception of threat- throughout all of the Russian navy's history it was preparing for combat against the European powers' fleets, and especially against their attempts to prevent Russia (and the Soviet Union later on) from using the maritime routes and attacking its navy bases. After the Second World War, as the cold war began, Moscow began to perceive the US navy as its main threat.

4 Ерофеев ,О .ed. Северный флот России The Northern Fleet of Russia, 4 Murmansk, (1996), p. 198.

2. The geographical circumstances – both the decision to build a "blue waters fleet" and the change in perception of threat (that are obviously connected), demanded that the Soviet Navy will have an exit to the open ocean. The two major old maritime arenas – the Black and Baltic seas – were therefore small and closed. They did not provide the fleet forces that were built enough space for maneuvering, and additionally the exit from them required passing through straits that were under the control of countries that were US allies. In fact, Russia's naval forces were locked in these two seas. Stationing the fleet in the Arctic Ocean and in the Far East at that time enabled access to the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The Atlantic was of special importance as a territory from which the US could be attacked, as well as a main route for transferring forces from the US to Europe, which was perceived by the Soviet headquarters as the main battle zone of a possible war between Warsaw alliance and the north Atlantic alliance.
3. With the development of the strategic submarine array the importance of the arctic region in the Soviet Union's threat perception and strategy increased. The first cruises of the US nuclear submarines in the arctic region created an impression in Moscow that "the main opponent" might use this region as a stance for a surprise attack.

Those circumstances made the Northern fleet a major strategic component of the Soviet navy. It was the first of the Soviet fleets that was equipped with nuclear submarines, and afterwards the main nuclear submarine forces belonged to it as well, and from it also came most of the ships that operated within the framework of two important and powerful "operational fleets" – the seventh whose area of responsibility was the northern Atlantic Ocean, and the fifth that operated in the Mediterranean. The northern fleet was also in the first place in the entire Soviet naval arm in terms of resource allocation, and the vast majority of the officers who have held senior commanding positions in the arm were positioned at one point or another of their career for service in the northern fleet.

The Post-Soviet Period

Like the entire Soviet army, the northern fleet was affected by the collapse of the state's economy in the late 80's and early 90's. The system that has enjoyed decades of almost unlimited budgets,⁵ had to function under extremely severe saving terms. The result was a reduction of forces array, removing many ships from use, and an

5 Mikhail Gorbachev described in his memoirs, published after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the situation where senior figures responsible for managing the Soviet economy not only had no effect on the scope of the security budget, but sometimes were denied access to full data on this part of the budget: Gorbachev, M. *The Life and the Reforms* (Moscow, 1995).

almost complete halt of extensive activity in regions far from the Russian coast. The situation has not changed even during the first attempts to revive the Russian army after Vladimir Putin's rise to power. For example, the only aircraft carrier of the Russian navy, 'Admiral Kuznetsov', that entered the Northern Navy's operational array at the end of 1991, performed between the years 1991 and 2008 only two long-distanced cruises: one in 1995-1996, and the other in 2007-2008, both were presented in the media as exceptional events.⁶

The situation began to change only in 2008 with the initiation of the military reform by the new minister of defense Anatoliy Serdyukov. Although land forces and air forces were given a very high priority, the navy was also given additional resources. With that, the reform also included unexpected changes.

In 2010 the northern fleet ceased to exist as an independent command and in the framework of the regional commands⁷ reform it was added (along with the Baltic Sea fleet) to the "Western Regional Command", which was responsible for protecting the west and the northwest of the country. This situation didn't last long, and in as soon as 2014 (about two years after the dismissal of the reform initiator Anatoliy Serdyukov) the northern fleet was removed from the "Western Command" and on its base the "United Strategic Command of the North" was established. Within the latter command's area of responsibility is the whole arctic region, and to it are subjected the fleet's naval forces and air forces, "The Coastal Forces"⁸ and the air defense forces that are responsible for protecting the northern sky.⁹

These changes were carried out simultaneously with the rise of the importance of the subject of "the Arctic Region Security" in Russia's political and security discourse. The discussion of "threats to national security in the Arctic" and "the need to strengthen Russia's control in the Arctic region" began as early as the 2000's, and brought about

6 "Тяжёлый авианесущий крейсер "Адмирал Флота Советского Союза Кузнецов": Досье" (Heavy Aircraft Cruiser "Admiral Flota Sovetskogo Soyuza Kuznetsov": The file), TASS, Apr. 23, 2018. tass.ru/info/5150368

7 The reform of the regional commands was carried out in the years 2008-2010 as part of the general reform of the Russian army. Within this reform the Russian army gave up the division into fleets and regional commands which existed, more or less, since the 60's of the 19th century, and moved to a command system based on the "strategic directions" similar to the one existing in the US armed forces.

8 The Russian navy arm's "Coastal Forces" are subjected to the naval commands and include the coastal units that are intended for coastline protection (Coast-sea missiles array, coastal cannons array, mechanized infantry units and marines' units).

9 "Север Арктики: Создано новое стратегическое командование" (The North of the Arctic: New Strategic Command Has Been Created), *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Dec. 1, 2014. rg.ru/2014/12/01/komandovanie-site.html

the revision of Russia's "maritime doctrine" in 2015, to which were added clauses about these subjects. Additionally, in the "doctrine" a clause appeared on "the key role of the northern fleet in ensuring Russia's security from the sea".¹⁰

The Russian leadership declares also about strengthening the northern fleet's force array. Officially, the order of battle (ORBAT) of the northern fleet includes one aircraft carrier, three cruisers, seven destroyers, one frigate, six landing crafts and about twenty battleships and auxiliary ships, intended for "brown waters" activity. The submarine forces include eight strategic nuclear submarines, seventeen attack submarines and multi-purposed submarines, and eight submarines with diesel engines armed with torpedo. Additionally, exists an array of "coastal forces" that includes missiles forces and air forces and three infantry brigades.

The naval forces ORBAT of "the northern command" is relatively small, especially for the framework that is, at least officially, the main component of the Russian naval power. Furthermore- some of the ships, including the main ones- "Kuznetsov" aircraft carriers and two cruisers out of three – are under general renovation, the deadline of which is unclear. As for the infantry and artillery forces it's not so clear what is the threat they are supposed to face, given the fact that the threat of hostile forces landing in the Arctic has not been practically in existence since the ending of "the cold war".

It's important to note, that in addition to the operational and management aspects, the changes described above had a very important consciousness aspect. Indeed, since 1953 the independent navy bureau was nullified, the navy commander turned from being a minister to being one of the Soviet Union's deputy defense ministers, and therefore the status of the navy's main headquarters declined (that was previously equal to the general staff's status).¹¹ With that, the navy kept a certain independence. One of the main components of this independence is the fleets' status, which was equal to the status of the coastal regional commands, and their commanders were subjected to the force's main headquarters, and only through it to the general staff. The meaning of the fleets being a part of the regional commands was the absence of their independence (even if this independence was only mostly formal) and their subjugation to the coastal forces. With transforming the navy's headquarters from Moscow to Petersburg in 2012

10 Морская доктрина России – Крым и Арктика в приоритете (The Naval Doctrine of Russia – the Crimea and the Arctics Are the Priorities), *RIAN*, Jul. 26, 2015. ria.ru/20150726/1148852131.html

11 This was expressed even in the name change: up until 1953 the body was called "the general naval headquarters", and after the nullification of the navy bureau its named was change to "the main headquarters of the navy".

these changes caused a significant decline in the navy's status in comparison with the other components of the armed forces.¹²

Taking into consideration these circumstances, the significance of the creation of "the northern strategic command" that is based on the northern fleet headed by navy personal, was not only from an operational aspect but also from a consciousness aspect- or even more from the consciousness aspect than the operational one. The fact that part of the reasonability fields of the coastal forces (defense on the 'far north') and its units (three mechanized infantry brigades, one in Chokotka peninsula and two in Kola peninsula) and of the air force (the 45th air force and air defense's division)¹³ were transferred to the navy, was to some extent a "compensation" to the navy for the humiliation of previous years.

It's possible that the subject of "the threat in the arctic" is taken advantage of by the navy's top command, which a significant part of its representatives, including the force commander Nikolay Yevmenov are the "graduates" of the northern fleet, for the inter-systemic struggle about influence and budgets. Here will be noted, that in between the years 2008 and 2016 Russia's defense expenses were on the rise: starting at 48 Billion US dollar in 2008 and up until about 82.5 Billion US dollar in 2016. Afterwards began a decline, in 2017 Russia's defense expenses were about 66.5 Billion US dollar, and in 2018 about 64.2 Billion US dollar.¹⁴ This situation may cause an intensification of the inter-systematic competition for the budgets, and undoubtedly, the strengthening of the "naval component" in Russia's perception of threat will play into the hands of the admirals.

12 The transfer of the navy's headquarters from Moscow to Petersburg was presented, indeed, as returning the navy's command bodies to their historical location, in which the Russian navy was born and developed, but in practice its meaning was, in Russia's centralist bureaucratic system, the removal of the heads of the navy from decision making center and from the top leadership of the state and the army.

13 Полярное влияние: Северный флот получит статус военного округа (The Polar Influence: The Northern Fleet Will Get a Status of a Regional Military Command), *Izvestiya*, 2019, Apr. 19, iz.ru/869512/aleksei-ramm-aleksei-kozachenko-bogdan-stepovoi/poliarnoe-vlianie-severnyi-flot-poluchit-status-voennogo-okruga

14 SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, www.sipri.org/databases/milex