

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2020/21

Chief editor: Prof. Shaul Chorev

Edited and produced by: Ehud Gonen



  
אוניברסיטת חיפה  
University of Haifa  
جامعة حيفا

  
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## Russia in the Pacific: A Historical Perspective and the Current Situation

*Tzevy Mirkin*

### Geographical Conditions

The Russian Pacific Fleet, which is considered to be one of Russia's "strategic fleets"<sup>1</sup>, is responsible for activity in the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Its two main bases are at Vladivostok, where the fleet headquarters and its main forces are stationed, and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, a port on the Kamchatka Peninsula which is the base for the nuclear submarines of the Pacific Fleet.

In addition to the fact that this fleet is the most remotely deployed of Russia's naval forces, it also suffers from geographic isolation from Russia's most important regions (as well as Russia's industrial centers and shipyards) and a lack of infrastructure in its theater of operations.

First and foremost, the Russian Far East is Russia's most outlying area (the flight from Moscow to Vladivostok takes more than 8 hours and the trip by railway is about 6 to 7 days). Furthermore, land transportation between the Far East and the rest of the country is based primarily on the Trans-Siberian railway, which has only a limited capacity. With respect to the Far East itself, a large part of it is not connected to the other parts of the country or to the industrial centers by a land route, such that there is no overland route connecting the Kamchatka Peninsula even to neighboring regions and therefore all transportation is by air or by sea.

There are also problems for vessels to leave the naval bases in the region for the open sea – between Vladivostok and the bases in its vicinity. Between the Pacific Ocean and those bases are Japanese islands and north of them the Kuril Islands. Even if the latter are under Russian control, the straits between some of them are frozen in winter, thus further limiting the naval forces' ability to maneuver there. This is essentially the reason that the nuclear submarine base is located in Kamchatka, since despite the major problems in supplying the base, its location allows the submarines direct access to the open sea.

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1 A phrase coined during the Soviet era. This is a fleet that has strategic weapons, i.e. submarines (primarily nuclear), that are armed with ballistic missiles. Russia's other (and primary) strategic fleet is the Northern Fleet.



Figure 1: Map of east Asia and the naval bases that was mentioned

### The appearance of Russian naval forces in the Far East

The Siberian Fleet was official established in 1799 according to the decision of the Russian Emperor Pavel the First. In 1849, it was stationed in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, which was established about one hundred years previously by Russian sailors who were mapping the country's eastern border. In 1871, the Fleet's main base was moved to Vladivostok as part of the efforts to develop Southern Siberia. In 1898, after the lease of Port Arthur from China (now the Lüshunkou District), the main headquarters of the maritime forces in the Pacific Ocean was moved there, and from that point onward these forces were composed of two main parts:

1. The First Fleet of the Pacific Ocean which stationed at Port Arthur; and
2. The Siberian Naval Squadron whose base was at Vladivostok.

The Russian naval forces in this theater were relatively weak. This is the result of insufficient investment in the forces in the Far East due to the theater's neglected position within Russia's threat perception and due to reasons that can be called "objective": the absence of any shipyards in the Far East (and the almost total lack of any real industry) and the fact that its ships are built in the Baltic Sea and must sail from there to the Pacific. Moreover, the low capacity of the land infrastructure, which connects between Russia's central regions and the Far East, has limited the ability to supply the forces in the Russian Far East.

The isolation of the theater from the main regions of Russia and its primary forces was a central factor in the Russo-Japanese war that broke out in 1904. When it became clear at the beginning of the war that Russia's naval forces in the Far East were unable to deal with the Japanese navy, a decision was made to reinforce them by dispatching a fleet from the Baltic Navy. The voyage of the fleet took about 8 months and during that time, Port Arthur fell and the reinforcements, on arriving in the theater of battle, found themselves cut off from the bases and sources of supply. The total defeat of the Russian navy in the Battle of Tsushima and the defeat of the Russian army by Japan led to the loss of some of Russia's strongholds in the Far East. Together with the decision to concentrate effort and resources on building up forces in the West to meet the growing threat from Germany, this essentially led to a major slowdown in the development of the Far East and the buildup of forces there.

## **The Soviet era**

The Far East was the last region of Russia taken over by the Bolshevik regime – the Civil war continued there until 1921. Almost immediately on its completion and with the stabilization of the new government, the buildup of military power began in the region. This included the reestablishment of naval strength. The Far East Naval Forces were established in 1922 and continued to exist (with short interruptions) until 1935, when they became the Pacific Fleet. The significance of this change was that it "upgraded" the status of the naval forces in the region, which was now formally equivalent to a regional command. Apparently, the reason for this was the change in the form of the threat in this region. Until the beginning of the 1930s, China was perceived as the main threat (to the point of open and large-scale conflict in 1929) and the main attention of the Soviet leadership was concentrated on China's land forces. At the beginning of the 1930s, Japan began to occupy this position following its invasion of Manchuria and the entrenchment of its forces there. Although the main friction with Japan was on land and since the naval forces did not participate in the two conflicts between the USSR and Japan (in 1938 and 1939), the Soviet

leadership could not ignore the presence of the growing Japanese navy and the importance of the naval route linking Japan and its forces in Manchuria.

The signing of the Mutual Neutrality Agreement between the USSR and Japan on April 13th 1941 significantly reduced the level of tension in the Far East theater. Thus, in the autumn of 1941, as the German army approached Moscow, the Soviet could bring significant forces from the Far East in order to defend the capital. In the war between Russia and Japan, which began in mid-August 1945 and lasted only a few weeks, the function of the naval forces was quite limited: the fighting occurred mainly on land and the navy was primarily involved in a number of tactical amphibious landings of forces in China and Korea. In the final days of the war, it participated in the operation to take over the Kuril Islands.

The changes that occurred worldwide and in particular in the Far East following Second World War led to a change in the Soviet leadership's attitude toward the region. Prior to that, the threat in the Far East was perceived as secondary, although important. The start of the Cold War and the emergence of the US as Russia's main rival gave the Far East unique importance, particularly in light of the US Navy's control of the Pacific Ocean and the presence of the American army in Japan.<sup>2</sup> The experience accumulated by the Americans in the Second World War in carrying out amphibious landings and the landing of its forces in Korea in 1950 created a new threat in the eyes of the Soviets, namely an American intention to land forces on the Soviet coast, and the Far East was viewed by the Soviets as an ideal arena for American goals to be achieved.

Therefore, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a program was initiated to transform the navy in the Pacific Ocean into a strategic fleet. In 1961, the navy received its first nuclear-powered submarine and the following decade saw a buildup of the fleet's forces. The Pacific Fleet began the newly-built missile-carrying surface vessels, and in 1978 it received the Minsk aircraft carrier, one of the USSR's first two aircraft carriers. The second aircraft carrier, the Kiev, was deployed in the North Sea.

The new ships were provided to the Pacific Fleet mainly from the Northern Fleet. The local building of ships was problematic due to the limited capabilities of the shipyards in the Far East. New ships, including both submarines and surface vessels, travelled to the Pacific Ocean by way of the Northern Sea Route. After that difficult journey, the ships required repairs and sometimes did not manage to cover the whole route in one sailing season. In such cases, there was a need to supply them

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2 Захаров, С.Е. (Zakharov, S.) *Краснознамённый Тихоокеанский флот (The Red Banner Pacific Fleet)*, (Moscow, 1973), p. 252.

during their stay near the Bering Strait, and due to the lack of land transportation infrastructure the supplies were delivered by air.<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-1960s, the new threat from China was added to those which the Soviet forces in the Far East—and in particular the naval forces—were meant to deal with. The decline in relations with Communist China, which began in the previous decade, got the point where the two countries found themselves on the brink of war.<sup>4</sup> New missions led to an expansion of the Pacific Fleet, primarily with respect to its land units which are part of the coastal defenses.<sup>5</sup>

Another component was added to the Pacific Fleet's activity in the early 1970s. Even prior to that, Soviet ships appeared in the Indian Ocean, but in 1971 a framework was specifically created for that purpose – the 8<sup>th</sup> Operational Squadron. It was under the command of the Pacific Fleet and its responsibility was the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

### Following the breakup of the Soviet Union

Like the other parts of the Soviet armed forces, the Pacific Fleet was adversely affected by the economic crisis during the final years of the Soviet Union, a situation that reached its peak a short time after its breakup. Many ships, including the Minsk aircraft carrier and missile cruisers, which constituted the Fleet's main fighting capability, went out of service and were sold. During the 1990s, this theater was low on the Russian leadership's order of priorities, to the point that the fleet did not manage to maintain its strategic potential, and the active forces that remained in the theater consisted of only one strategic submarine.<sup>6</sup> This was at a time when strategic nuclear forces were essentially the only component of the armed forces that the leadership was making a real effort to preserve.

The efforts to rehabilitate the armed forces, which was initiated by Putin towards the end of the first decade of his regime, was felt less by the Pacific Fleet than other fleets.

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3 Амелько, Н.Н. (Amelko, N.) *В интересах флота и государства (In the Interests of the Navy and the State)*, (Moscow, 2003), p. 78.

4 In 1969, there were indeed a series of armed clashes on the border between the two countries. the forces of the Pacific Fleet were not involved.

5 Манойлин, В.И. (Manoylin, V.) *Базирование Военно-Морского Флота СССР (Deployment of the Navy of the USSR)*, (Petersburg, 2004), p. 171.

6 Иванов, В. (Ivanov, V.) "Тихоокеанский флот вооружится подводными стратегическими крейсерами" ("The Pacific Fleet Will Be Equipped By Strategic Submarines"), *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 2020, Mar. 23.

Currently, the forces of the Pacific Fleet include the following: one missile cruiser (out of a total of three Slava-model cruisers that were built back in the 1980s and which are currently the navy's flagships); one destroyer (another one being renovated); four frigates (with another under construction and which will be delivered in 2025); two corvettes (and another four, according to official estimates, which are in the late stages of construction or are being test run) which are primarily used for activity in "green water"; about 14 small missile boats that are intended only for green water; four strategic nuclear submarines; four nuclear attack submarines; six non-nuclear-propulsion submarines; and a number of landing vessels and auxiliary ships of various kinds. Periodically, there are reports in the media about various plans to strengthen the Pacific Fleet, including the rehabilitation of its strategic component<sup>7</sup>; however, in the meantime the only program that appears to be feasible in the near future is the reinforcement of the underwater component of the fleet with a number of Kilo submarines.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, a comparison of the level of investment in the Northern Fleet relative to that in the Pacific Fleet shows that the forces in the Arctic have a much higher priority among the leadership.<sup>9</sup> A similar situation exists with respect to the "visibility" of the fleets in the media – reports on the activity of the Northern Fleet appear much more frequently than that of the Pacific Fleet.

Moreover, there are signs that the activity of the Northern Fleet is being expanded at the expense of the Pacific Fleet. Thus, in September 2020, the Northern Fleet held an amphibious exercise in the Bering Sea. A group of the Fleet's ships sailed from the North Sea to the Pacific Ocean by way of the Bering Strait and landed a force on a beach on the Chukotka Peninsula.<sup>10</sup> It is worth mentioning that the Bering Strait served, until recently, as the boundary between the theaters of the two fleets. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the amphibious forces of the Northern Fleet are stationed permanently in the western part of its arena of activity rather near the Bering Strait.

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7 Ibid.

8 Завершены государственные испытания подлодки "Петропавловск-Камчатский" ("The Tests of the Submarine "Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky" Are Completed", *Kommersant*, 2019, Oct. 11.

9 For further details about the buildup in the North see: Mirkin, T. "Russia's "Arctic Strategy" As a Result of the Inter-Systemic Power Struggles", at: *Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel*, 2019/20, (Haifa, 2020).

10 Северный флот провёл учение по высадке десанта недалеко от Аляски ("The Northern Fleet Conducted Landing Exercise Not Far from Alaska") *Interfax*, 2020, Sep. 21.  
<https://www.interfax.ru/russia/727906>

This trend is not unique to the Russian navy. Russia's efforts to build up its forces during the past decade have been concentrated in the Northwest of the country, where in fact the military threat appears to be only imagined. This is often at the expense of the forces in the eastern part of the country, namely those opposite China, and some independent military commentators in Russia have been claiming for a while that it is in fact China that is the primary threat to Russia.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

The reasons for the situation of the Pacific Fleet are apparently to be found both in the political domain and the domestic-military domain. With respect to the former, the forces in the Far East (to which the Pacific Fleet belongs) have been neglected due to the efforts to avoid any problem in the relations with China, which is viewed by many in the Russian leadership as a partner against the "hostile West". This perception is in line with the views of a not insignificant number of senior officers in the Russian army who continue to view the West as Russia's main rival and consider the end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of forces from Central Europe as having been a surrender to the West.

In the domestic-military domain, the situation is apparently influenced by the balance of power in the navy's leadership. Most of the senior officers in the navy during the last two decades arrived at the navy's headquarters after holding senior positions in the Northern Fleet. Thus, the setting of priorities and the division of resources are to a great extent determined by their interests as a group within the naval command. This is even manifested in the gap created in the fleet's status: while the Northern Fleet has been granted an independent status equal to that of the army's regional commands, the Pacific Fleet has remained part of the eastern regional command, whose commanders originate from the land forces.

At the moment, there does not appear much chance of a change in the situation, and therefore it may be that Russia will remain without any major naval power in the Pacific theater. It appears that major parts of the Pacific will remain under the control of the US navy and in those areas near to Eastern Asia, including the eastern areas of Russia itself, Russia will be able to do no more than watch the competition between China on the one hand and the US and its allies on the other for control of the sea.

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11 Храмчихин, А. (Khranchikhin, A.) "Почему необходимо обезопасить восточные границы России" ("Why Is Necessary To Secure Russia's Eastern Border") *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 2018, Sep. 02; Гольц, А. (Goltz, A.) "Военно-дипломатические маневры" ("Military-Diplomatic Exercise"), *Ezhednevny Zhurnal*, 2019, Sep. 24.