

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2022/23

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## Russia's New "Naval Doctrine" in the Context of the War in Ukraine

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On July 31, 2022, during a visit to Saint Petersburg, President Vladimir Putin signed Russia's new naval doctrine.<sup>1</sup> The ceremonial signing was held at the State Museum of History, located in the Peter and Paul Fortress, which was built in 1703, marking the beginning of Saint Petersburg's construction. The fortress was meant to defend the mouth of the Neva River but was mainly used as a prison for political prisoners.

The new doctrine replaced the previous one, approved in 2015. Although this signing took place about five months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is not likely that the new doctrine was written as a result of the war. The preparation of such a document (which is 56 pages long), usually takes a long while, and before it was presented for the President's signature, it would have gone through several stages of approval at all levels of military leadership, as well as a process of coordination with non-military entities whose activities it affects, including those managing civilian shipping, the defense industries and the shipping industry. For this reason, it is more likely that most of this doctrine's preparation took place before the war began.

The main changes to the doctrine reflect Russian leadership's evolution when it comes to the perception of threat. The new version includes a classification of various naval categories, according to their level of importance for Russia. These categories were divided into three groups: "vital", "important" and "others". According to the doctrine, the "vital" category is "directly related to the state's development, to the protection of its sovereignty, to its territorial integrity as well as to the strengthening of its defense; and has a critical effect on the socio-economic development of the state". This category includes Russia's internal waters, its territorial waters, economic waters and the continental slope, the Arctic arena, including the Northern Sea Route, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Russian part of the Caspian Sea.<sup>2</sup>

The "important" category relates to issues that "largely influence Russia's economic development and national security". This category is tied to the oceans and seas to which Russia has direct access (including the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov), the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea straits, the Baltic Sea, the Kuril Islands, and "areas

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<sup>1</sup> A video of the signing ceremony [Путин утвердил Морскую доктрину РФ и Корабельный устав ВМФ](#).

<sup>2</sup> "The Russian 2022 Naval Doctrine", section 14.

of international shipping routes, including those along the coasts of Africa and Asia".<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the Black Sea, which in the past six months has become Russia's main naval arena, is included only in the second level of importance to Russia.

Another change is the further emphasis on the definition of threat. Although the 2015 doctrine mentions various threats to Russia, the phrasing in the previous version is not as pronounced, and this topic is spread out among the various chapters dedicated to different geographical arenas. The new version specifically notes that "The independent domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Federation causes opposition from the United States and its allies, which strive to maintain their dominance in the world, including in the oceans".<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it mentions "The United States's strategic policy for dominance of the oceans and its influence on international trends", as well as "the ambition of the United States and its allies to limit Russia's access to ocean resources and critical sea routes". Moreover, the "Claims of several countries to Russian territories located on the coasts" were defined by the authors of the 2022 doctrine as "major challenges and threats to Russia in the maritime context".<sup>5</sup>

The changes in the definition of threats are also reflected in the chapters dedicated to the various arenas. Thus, the chapter of the 2015 doctrine discussing the Atlantic arena, states that the "national naval policy" in this arena "stems from the existing conditions in the arena that are adapted to the North Atlantic Alliance alone, and create ineffectiveness when it comes to existing tools meant to ensure international security".<sup>6</sup> The 2022 doctrine states that "the national maritime policy in the Atlantic arena is determined taking into account the existence of NATO, whose activities are aimed to create direct confrontation with the Russian Federation and its allies".<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, which are perceived by the Russians as part of the Atlantic arena, the 2015 doctrine stated that its main objectives are "the creation of a naval regime based on international maritime law that is convenient for Russia,<sup>8</sup> "the organization of navigation rules based on international law in the Kerch strait"<sup>9</sup> and "Improving the order of forces and the organization of the forces in the Black Sea Fleet, as well as developing their infrastructure in Crimea and on the coasts of the Krasnodar

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, section 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, section 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, section 22.

<sup>6</sup> "The Russian 2015 Naval Doctrine", section 51.

<sup>7</sup> "The Russian 2022 Naval Doctrine", section 53.

<sup>8</sup> "The Russian 2015 Naval Doctrine", section 57a.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, section 57b.

district".<sup>10</sup> The only change in the 2022 doctrine is the definition of the first goal as a "comprehensive strengthening of the Russian Federation's positions in the region" and the omission of the mention of the Kerch Strait, while the other goals remain unchanged.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly to the previous doctrine, the new doctrine refers to the development of shipping abilities as well. The chapter discussing this mainly repeats the previous version, especially in regard to the need to ensure "independence" in the field of shipping.<sup>12</sup> However, it was precisely this chapter that caused very significant reactions, perhaps even more noticeable than those that arose following any other chapter. This is related to subchapter 9, which describes one of the objectives as ensuring the capabilities of the Russian shipping industry to build large ships, including aircraft carriers.<sup>13</sup> Many interpretations considered this to be a statement of intent regarding the building of aircraft carriers. The government news agency "RIA-Novosti" reported that "the naval doctrine turned the construction of aircraft carriers into a priority when it comes to shipping".<sup>14</sup> The leading Russian economic newspaper "Vedomosti" commented on the new doctrine in an article titled "Russia's New Naval Doctrine Enables the Construction of Aircraft Carriers", in which it mentioned that neither the previous doctrine nor the government plan for the development of shipping, previously mentioned these type of ships.<sup>15</sup> However, it is important to emphasize that the doctrine does not mention the intention to build aircraft carriers but the need to ensure the ability to build large ships, including aircraft carriers. The meaning of this wording is an admission that Russia does not currently have such capabilities and the intention here is to create these abilities.

Despite all of the changes and the new wording in this document, the most striking characteristic of the new doctrine is the complete absence of the mention of the war between Russia and Ukraine, which since beginning in late February 2022, became the most significant influence on Russian strategic thinking, and the main factor influencing

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, section 57c.

<sup>11</sup> "The Russian 2022 Naval Doctrine", sections 56-3.

<sup>12</sup> "The Russian 2015 Naval Doctrine", section 75, "The Russian 2022 Naval Doctrine", sections 66a, 66b.

<sup>13</sup> "The Russian 2022 Naval Doctrine", section 66i.

<sup>14</sup> "Naval Doctrine Calls Construction of Aircraft Carriers the Preferred Objective of Shipping Industry" ([Морская доктрина называет строительство авианосцев приоритетом судостроения](#)), RIA-Novosti news agency website, July 31, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> "Russia's New Naval Doctrine Allows for the Construction of Aircraft Carriers: During 30 Post-Soviet Years, no Such Ships were Built for the Russian Navy" ([В новой морской доктрине России допустили строительство авианесущих кораблей: Все постсоветское 30-летие для российского ВМФ такие суда не строились](#)), the *Vedomosti* website, July 31, 2022.

the country's strategic situation. The sanctions mentioned in this document (such as those against the defense industries and the shipping industry, as well as limitations on the supply of technologies in these areas) were all previously imposed, shortly after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.<sup>16</sup>

This fact supports the assumption that the doctrine has almost nothing to do with the war, and is a pre-planned updated version of the previous doctrine. However, its importance is not only in its content but also (and perhaps even more so) in the circumstances of its appearance.

The doctrine appeared after several events that became signifiers of the Russian navy's failure, first and foremost, the sinking of the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, the "*Moskva*" cruiser, on April 14, 2022. As a result, the commander of the Black Sea Fleet, Admiral Igor Osipov, was dismissed, and there were even rumors of his arrest.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, during the war, the navy only participated in auxiliary roles. Landing operations that seemed to be pre-planned were canceled, and the two marine brigades that were concentrated in this arena were used as infantry units in land operations and suffered heavy losses.<sup>18</sup> These developments damaged the reputation of the navy, which was presented during the past decade as a sign of the revival of Russia's military power. As a result, Russian leadership was forced to take steps to try and improve this situation. For example, it was decided to turn the signing ceremony into a demonstration of political leadership's support and trust in the Navy.

Under these circumstances, the signing ceremony was no less important than the doctrine itself. Usually, the signing of such documents (and the signing of official documents in general) is not televised or held in places like the State Museum of History in Saint Petersburg, but in one of the president's residences. Moreover, alongside the naval doctrine, the president signed the "Naval Service Regulations" – a document outlining the conduct of the entire naval force at the everyday level. The signing took place in the presence of the navy commander and the minister of defense and was even accompanied by honor guard soldiers in ceremonial naval uniforms.

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<sup>16</sup> "The Russian 2022 Naval Doctrine", section 23d.

<sup>17</sup> "The Black Sea Fleet has a New Commander" ([У Черноморского флота сменился командующий](#)), *BBC News Russian Service*, August 17, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> "What do we Know about Russia's Losses During Ukraine's Counterattack?" ([Что мы знаем о потерях России в ходе контрнаступления Украины](#)), *BBC News Russian Service*, September 16, 2022.

It is also important to note that the issues emphasized in the media (such as the ones related to the possible construction of aircraft carriers and the deployment of naval bases in distant arenas), were not related to the Black Sea arena. In addition to the fact that the doctrine was hardly adapted to the situation created after February 24, 2022, its introduction was probably meant to divert attention from the navy's participation in this war. In other words, this is an event whose media significance exceeds its strategic one.

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