

Rebuilding Capabilities of Russian Navy to Be Long Process

Defense-aerospace



Russian shipyards have undertaken a substantial shipbuilding program to renew the Russian Navy's fleet, which had slowly grown obsolete because of low and irregular funding. Here, the Black Sea fleet's latest frigate, Admiral Grigoryevich, arrives in Sebastopol. (Russian MoD photo)

MOSCOW - In spite of the construction of advanced surface warships, the restoration of the Russian Navy's capabilities will take a long time, expert Konstantin Sivkov writes in an article published by the Military Industrial Courier weekly.

In 2015-2016, the Russian Navy has managed to display its capabilities to the nation and the world for the first time in the latest half of the century, the capabilities of the ships participating in the Syrian operation in the first place. The Kalibr long-range cruise missile attacks by the Caspian Flotilla and Black Sea Fleet demonstrated to the whole world that the Russian Navy had formidable effective weapons and was in an excellent technical state - at least its part represented by the advanced ships was.

Actually, the missile strikes highlighted a novel approach to the development of strategic-range weapon systems: the 'mosquito' fleet - corvettes and littoral guided missile boats - have become capable of missile attacks like the above. Even missile craft, which are large enough, may be equipped with similar systems. Such forces will be able to reach targets several thousand kilometers away with missiles packing both the conventional and nuclear punch. In other words, a corvette displacing fewer than 1,000 tons can deliver a nuclear strike out to

2,500-3,000 km or longer. This threat is far more difficult to neutralize than the one posed by the same weapons carried by large-displacement ships.

Superiority over foreign ships?

The Navy's new approach to force development has contributed to the superiority of Russia's latest ships over their foreign counterparts. For instance, the comparison of the Project 22350 (Admiral Gorshkov-class) frigates' performance and especially design combat capabilities with those of the adversary's latest analogs demonstrates the obvious superiority of the Admiral Gorshkov class.

Foreign navies have nothing close enough to the Gepard (Gepard-class) escort ships in the Russian Navy's inventory. With the Gepard displacing a mere 1,930 tons, she carries a formidable enough array of weapons: her Kalibr missile vertical launch system (VLS) is complemented with sophisticated radio electronic equipment including the highly effective Sigma action information system and Monolit surface surveillance radar, and air defense and antisubmarine warfare (ASW) weapons as well.

The Buyan-M (Buyan-M-class) corvette is worth mentioning in the same vein. With her displacement being much smaller than the above ships - 949 tons, she has the same VLS for eight Kalibr missiles and lethal 100-mm A-190 gun capable of fire support of friendly forces on land.

Launching an attack on the Russian Navy, the enemy will prioritize the ships posing the highest threat to him - those able to hit targets in his rear area with both conventional and nuclear weapons. From then on, virtually the enemy may regard any Russian small combatant ship or even a boat as a strategic weapon platform subject to elimination in the first place, and the latter is impossible even if the enemy enjoys overwhelming superiority.

Aircraft carrier and escort group

The Russian aircraft carrier's weapons suite makes her quite adequate to accomplish the missions she was designed for. She is quite capable of providing coverage to friendly forces on the high ocean. With the adequate operational support, both Project 1144 heavy nuclear-powered and Project 1164 conventional-powered missile cruisers operating as part of naval squadrons remain capable of doing their job, using the weaponry available to them.

The Project 956 destroyers, Project 1155/1155.1 large ASW ships and patrol ships remain up-to-date too. Provision has been made for the Russian Navy receive numerous combatants and auxiliary vessels soon.

Only key US-made naval weapons may be regarded as rivals of the Russian-made ones. Compared with the latest US-built naval weapon systems, the Russian ones are inferior in some respects while being superior in others. As to the naval arms of the rest of the countries,

they are lagging far behind the Russian ones, as far as the basic classes of weapons are concerned.

Long-range cruise missiles

For instance, only the Russian and US navies operate long-range land-attack cruise missiles - the Kalibr and Tomahawk respectively. France is developing similar missiles, but their design characteristics lagged far behind those of their Russian and US opposite numbers from the outset. In particular, their range is not more than 1,000 km. Chinese long-range cruise missiles are no match for the Russian and US ones either. Long-range antiship cruise missiles are available only to Russia and the United States too, with the former operating the Granit, Vulkan and Oniks and the latter the ubiquitous Tomahawk. Antiship missiles available to other nations are medium-range ones at best.

At the same time, Russia also is developing cutting-edge systems that may be fielded with the Russian Navy further down the road. Their conceptual sophistication and tactical performance are anybody's guess, because this kind of information is heavily classified. They are proof of Russia having a sufficient intellectual potential to develop and successfully employ cutting-edge naval weapon systems.

Mentioning the progress made by the Russian Navy, however, one cannot overlook the problems facing the service, and they are so numerous that they heavily undermine its achievements.

Many problems undermine capabilities

First off, mention should be made that the composition of the Russian Navy's combatant fleet makes the service unable to effectively counter threats emanating from the high ocean and accomplish other peacetime and wartime missions. Showing the flag and implementing other measures in support of Russia's diplomatic efforts necessitates naval forces of three to five mostly ocean-going surface ships led by a cruiser or an aircraft carrier. The assessment of Russia's current and future foreign policies implies the need for each of the Russian Navy's four fleets to have its task forces like this conduct at least three to five cruises per annum.

Russia's participation in peacekeeping operations and the demonstration of its resolve to stand up for its interests in war zones will require a naval force with its strengths ranging from six to 30 surface ships, including at least one aircraft carrier, and from two to six submarines. The personnel strength of the Marine expeditionary element may have to be battalion-strong or stronger.

A naval force like this will have to be needed for a rather long time in case of rather long military conflicts affecting Russia's interest.

The full-fledged abilities to search for and track foreign naval forces and reconnoiter ocean-wide theaters of operations will necessitate satellites to watch the ocean's key areas every two to five hours and a surface ship/submarine or two in each of the areas, namely the south of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and the whole of the Indian Ocean.

Air reconnaissance of the key areas of ocean theaters of operations have to be carried out at least once a day. This will call for three to 12 daily sorties or more.

Combat patrolling of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) all set to launch their SLBMs on the enemy needs three to four SSBNs out on patrol at any time, with their salvos guaranteeing unacceptable damage to the enemy even if one of the subs is lost. To support their operations, 10-12 green-water ships, three-to-four nuclear-powered attack submarines, five to eight diesel-electric attack submarines and three-to-four ASW planes are required. To keep an eye on airspace in the combat patrol areas of the SSBNs, at least one airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) plane or helicopter per area is needed.

The control of the situation near the Russian naval bases and logistic installations and the Navy's combat training necessitates all theaters of operations to be allocated a naval force of 20-30 green-water surface ships in various classes and 10-12 diesel-electric submarines.

The number of ships on the high seas will have to be increased with the beginning of hostilities. To weaken the enemy's aircraft carrier force in every theater of operations on the high seas (there may be four to five carrier strike groups in each of the ocean theaters of operations), an adequate strike group will have to be formed. It will have to comprise at least 10-12 multirole submarines and six to eight cruise missile submarines, an aircraft carrier or two, five to eight missile cruisers and missile destroyers with long-range (500-800 km) missiles, 10-15 frigates carrying medium-range missiles, a naval missile-carrying (or long-range) aircraft division and at least a regiment of long-range maritime patrol aircraft.

Green water ASW operations

The green-water antisubmarine operations against enemy boats numbering 10-15 and the provision of the combat stability for the SSBNs in each of the ocean theaters of operations will call for an ASW force of three to five nuclear-powered and 15-20 diesel-electric submarines, 30-40 corvettes, escort ships and small ASW ships, 25-35 planes and up to 40 ASW helicopters.

In the enclosed maritime theaters of operations - the Baltic and Black seas - there may be a need for ASW forces made up of 15 diesel-electric submarines, 20-25 corvettes, patrol ships or small ASW ships, 20 planes and 25 ASW helicopters.

To fight enemy ships in the waters immediately adjacent to the Russian coasts, each of the Russian Navy's fleets has to form a force of 10-15 corvettes and missile boats armed with medium-range missiles, 20-25 missile craft, three to four medium-range coastal defense

missile systems and a naval strike air regiment operating Sukhoi Su-24M (Fencer) or Su-34 (Fullback) bombers.

The specific nature of the coverage of naval forces on the high seas implies that each of the fleets has to have at least a fighter air regiment and an AEW&C carrier-borne planes or helicopters at its disposal.

Amphibious ships

Supporting the coastal flank of the Army implies that each of the fleets has to form a naval force of 10-25 amphibious landing ships, a transport/assault helicopter regiment and a Marine regiment or division. The force will be capable of tactical amphibious assault and attacking-echelon landing operations. Dealing with sea mines near naval bases, on deployment routes and on the lines of communication will require up to 50 minesweepers for each of the fleets.

The comparison of the available and required combat assets shows that the fleets have got even less than 20-25% of the latter, with most of the ships being in need of medium repair or even overhaul. The percentage of aircraft in good running order is low too.

In case of local conflicts with countries inferior in naval terms, Russia will manage to establish a force capable of accomplishing the mission, if it draws combat-capable ships from all of its fleets. However, enabling the force to remain on station in the war zone for a long time will be a big problem too.

Limited missions, local conflicts

Today, the Russian Navy can handle a limited number of missions in local conflicts only. In large-scale wars, its capabilities are not enough to repel aggression from the sea. Therefore, against the backdrop of the general heightening of tensions in the world, measures must be taken urgently to beef up the Russian Navy. The current shipbuilding program implies a rather high rate of ship deliveries for the service. However, it does not allow meeting at least 50-60% of the requirement. Hence, the in-service ships should be repaired or overhauled so that 85-90% of them are ready for combat. The Soviet-built combatants do their jobs well enough, albeit not as well as the latest ones. Therefore, their overhaul and commissioning even without heavy upgrade may be an effective and inexpensive way to beef up the Russian Navy's fleets. In so doing, it makes sense to reassign the naval missile-carrying bombers from the Long-Range Aviation back to the Navy.

A priority is to rebuild the personnel of the Navy, naval aviators in particular. The airfield network of the Naval Aviation should be restored and then doubled or tripled at the least. Another priority is to rebuild the ship basing system, especially that of the ocean-going fleets. The number and capacity of dispersed logistic and repair facilities should be at least doubled or trebled.

The Navy needs full-fledged land infrastructure for its fleets, which is especially relevant to the Pacific Fleet. An extremely important task is to strengthen the capabilities of the maritime patrol aircraft, especially those operating far out in the ocean. The present-day intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities of the fleets do not meet the requirements at all. Once these measures are taken, the Russian Navy will be quite capable of maintaining Russian interests in the ocean. We have to admit, however, that there will not be enough resources for restoring Russia's naval power even in the medium term, given the nation's current economic and political tendencies. Therefore, one should not expect the rebuilding of the Russian Navy's capabilities to the required level in an period of time, expert Konstantin Sivkov writes in his article in the Military Industrial Courier weekly.