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**Current status, March 1997:**

## **Nuclear shipbuilding in Russia**

**The once feared Russian nuclear submarine fleet is crumbling. Submarines are taken out of service before their allotted time, due to lacking maintenance. Ongoing new building projects are progressing at a snail's pace and turning into dangerous toys, while budgeted funds keep showing up only as vapour figures. Equipment needed for handling radioactive wastes is malfunctioning. This month's *Current Status* focus on military shipbuilding.**

Due to the lack of proper financing, military boats currently under construction are nearing completeness only by 0.5-1 % annually, reports Russian Navy magazine "Morskoy Sbornik". The situation leads to a doubling of the construction costs, while the vessels will require repairment shortly after being commissioned due to the long term of construction.

The industry involved in nuclear submarine building incorporated 1200 plants and scientific research institutes in the former USSR. Till the year 1992, between 5 and 10 nuclear powered submarines were commissioned annually. Today, the annual number of commissioned vessels both nuclear and conventional, is reduced by 80 to 90 percent. In 1996 only one strategic submarine, the "Tambov" of Oscar-II class, was commissioned. The Sevmash yard, which built the submarine, is still waiting for payment from the State.

Since 1990 no strategic nuclear-powered vessel have been laid down for construction. One prototype "multi purpose" submarine of the new "Severodvinsk" class has been under construction at Sevmash yard in Severodvinsk since December 1993. Although the construction period for prototype submarines usually is about four years, by now only the hull of the submarine has been finished, due to the lack of funding.

Current funding covers only 20 percent of the actual construction budgets of ongoing projects. As a result no financing has been provided for the construction of submarines of new projects, practically halting construction on the submarines within project 949A (Oscar-II class) and project 971 (Akula class). The planned modernisation of the Typhoon class submarine (project 941) has not been financed. Two submarines of this class were recently taken out of service before their scheduled operational limit was reached, due to lacking maintenance. The planned repairment of the nuclear submarine of project 667 BDRM (Delta-IV class), which arrived at Sevmash in Severodvinsk in the first half of November 1996, is unlikely to be financed in 1997. Taking current finances into account, Russia will possess between 5 and 7 strategic nuclear powered submarines by the year 2003, armed with some 450-470 nuclear warheads, warns Morskoy Sbornik magazine. The Start-II agreement limits the number of Russian nuclear warheads to 3500, max. 1750 of which can be placed on submarines.

Although planned to be put into operation by the end of 1996, the Oscar-II class submarine (project

949A) "Tomsk" has not been commissioned by Sevmash yard. Quite likely it will happen in the course of 1997. Testing of the nuclear installation and rocket complex at "Tomsk" was performed during October 1996. In the end of October the yard started mantling the safe navigation systems. In the end of November the submarine left Severodvinsk for open sea testing.

In addition to the commissioning of the Oscar-II class "Tambov", the year 1996 was distinguished by nuclear-powered surface cruiser "Peter the Great" being commissioned, and by the seremony of laying down of the "Uriy Dolgorukiy", of the new generation "Borey" class strategic submarines, at Sevmash yard. "Peter the Great" is currently inactive in Severomorsk on the Kola Peninsula. The laying down of the "Borey" class submarine on November 2, 1996, was little more than a symbolic gesture, since practically nothing has been done on the project, while ordinarily a submarine is not laid down before having reached a technical readiness equalling 6-9 % of the total project. The "Borey"-project has not received any funds this year. The total cost of the submarine is estimated at 2 billion US dollars.

The 1997 shipbuilding budget allocates enough funds to cover the debts of the previous year. This, according to Morskoy Sbornik, means a freeze on ship construction throughout the current year. But - allowing that a military doctrine has not been established yet - the Russian Navy believes it needs 16 strategic nuclear-powered vessels and 50 "multi purpose" nuclear-powered submarines to be in operation. To maintain this potential in addition to conventional vessels, military shipbuilding expenses must be increased by a factor of between 8 and 10 for the period 1997-2005 - adding up to no less than 2 billion US dollars a year.

A number of leading Russian newspapers are sceptical towards these ambitious plans, and the corresponding demands for additional funding, emanating from the Russian Navy headquarters. The continuing construction of expensive nuclear cruisers, nuclear-powered submarines and conventional vessels, when no infrastructure for their maintenance or operational requirements exists, makes them costly, single use toys. The vessels built in this manner are prone to incidents and accidents due to prolonged terms of construction and lack of proper spare parts, comment independent Naval experts.

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