

Which course will Russia's navy steer?

The Russian Navy is celebrating its tercentenary amid a painful post-Soviet transition. Richard Scott reports from the Main Naval Parade in St. Petersburg.



The Russian Federation Navy will officially mark the 300th anniversary of its establishment on 20 October, 300 years to the day after Peter the Great's decree on the navy was passed by the Boyar Duma.

However, a series of events to commemorate the tercentenary have been tempered by the scale of problems affecting a fleet hit hard by the post-Soviet economic and political transition.

Celebrations culminated in the Main Naval Parade on the Neva River in St. Petersburg on 28 July. Adm Felix Gromov, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy, was joined by Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin and defence minister Gen Igor Rodinov for a parade and march past in Senate Square (President Yeltsin was prevented from attending by poor health).

The parade was followed by a review of a 16-ship Russian naval flotilla, joined by warships from 10 overseas navies, and a flypast by aircraft from Maritime Aviation. Other events included boat races on the Neva and a set-piece "assault" on the beach of the St Peter and Paul Fortress.

In their addresses to the Senate Square parade, Chernomyrdin and Rodinov both paid tribute to the foresight of Peter the Great, and the achievements of the Russian fleet over three centuries, recalling admirals such as Kuznetsov, Isakov, Tributs, Golovko, Ushakov, Lazarev and Nakhimov. But their speeches also touched on the "great difficulties" which today's navy is living with.

Security Council Secretary Aleksandr Lebed said the Russian people were proud of their navy, but also felt "bitterness and shame for the low point we have reached, for the state in which the navy is seeing in its great day of celebration." He expressed the hope that the "300th anniversary of the Russian Navy could become the beginning of an upswing, a starting point for a new and progressive history of the navy."

Russia's naval history has been characterized by cycles of expansion followed by dramatic decline. The last seven years have seen the demise of the Soviet fleet built up under Gorshkov and Chernavin. With it has gone the long-cherished ambition to deploy large aircraft carriers and compete with the US Navy for global supremacy of the seas.

Senior naval officers are today pressing the government to reverse the recent decline and commit to the rebuilding of the fleet. In its high-profile commemoration of the tercentenary, Russia's Main Naval Staff has sought to raise public awareness and support for the navy. But

in doing so, it has publicly acknowledged the scale of the difficulties it faces.

It is estimated that the navy is today receiving less than 20 per cent of the funds needed to pay for operations, new construction, maintenance, basing, support and its personnel.

The impact on operations has been acute, with fuel shortages cutting sea time drastically. The situation is mirrored ashore, with huge arrears accruing for power supplies to naval bases, dockyards and other shore facilities.



Admiral Felix Gromov takes the salute at the St. Petersburg Main Naval Parade. (photo: R. Scott/Jane's)

Naval personnel and their families have suffered. Wages have failed to keep pace with inflation and often arrive late, and there are acute accommodation shortages.

Deliveries of new ships and submarines have been disrupted by the navy's inability to pay for new material. Submarine construction continues, albeit at a slower pace, but surface ship deliveries have almost ground to a halt.

Fleet repair and maintenance have likewise suffered, a situation exacerbated by the legacy of a support infrastructure which never kept pace with the fleet expansion of the Soviet era. As a result, ship and submarine refit and refuelling cycles are being stretched out or abandoned altogether. Spares shortages add to the problem.

The Black Sea Fleet, the future of which has been the subject of a protracted and

acrimonious dispute with Ukraine, has suffered worst. Only a few major units remain operable. While agreement has been reached on basing rights in Sevastopol, the loss of several bases along the Crimean coast means that the navy must now fund the expansion of the minor naval base at Novorossiysk.

There is also the serious environmental problem posed by the disposal of over 100 nuclear-powered submarines laid up awaiting decommissioning. An already large stockpile of nuclear waste has accumulated at Northern and Pacific Fleet facilities.

Nevertheless, while the operational tempo is down, the core of the service's warfighting potential – its technologically advanced submarine force – remains intact. Already this year the Russian Navy has demonstrated its ability, amid severe economic constraints, to deploy strategic submarines and maintain regular nuclear-attack and cruise-missile submarine patrols.

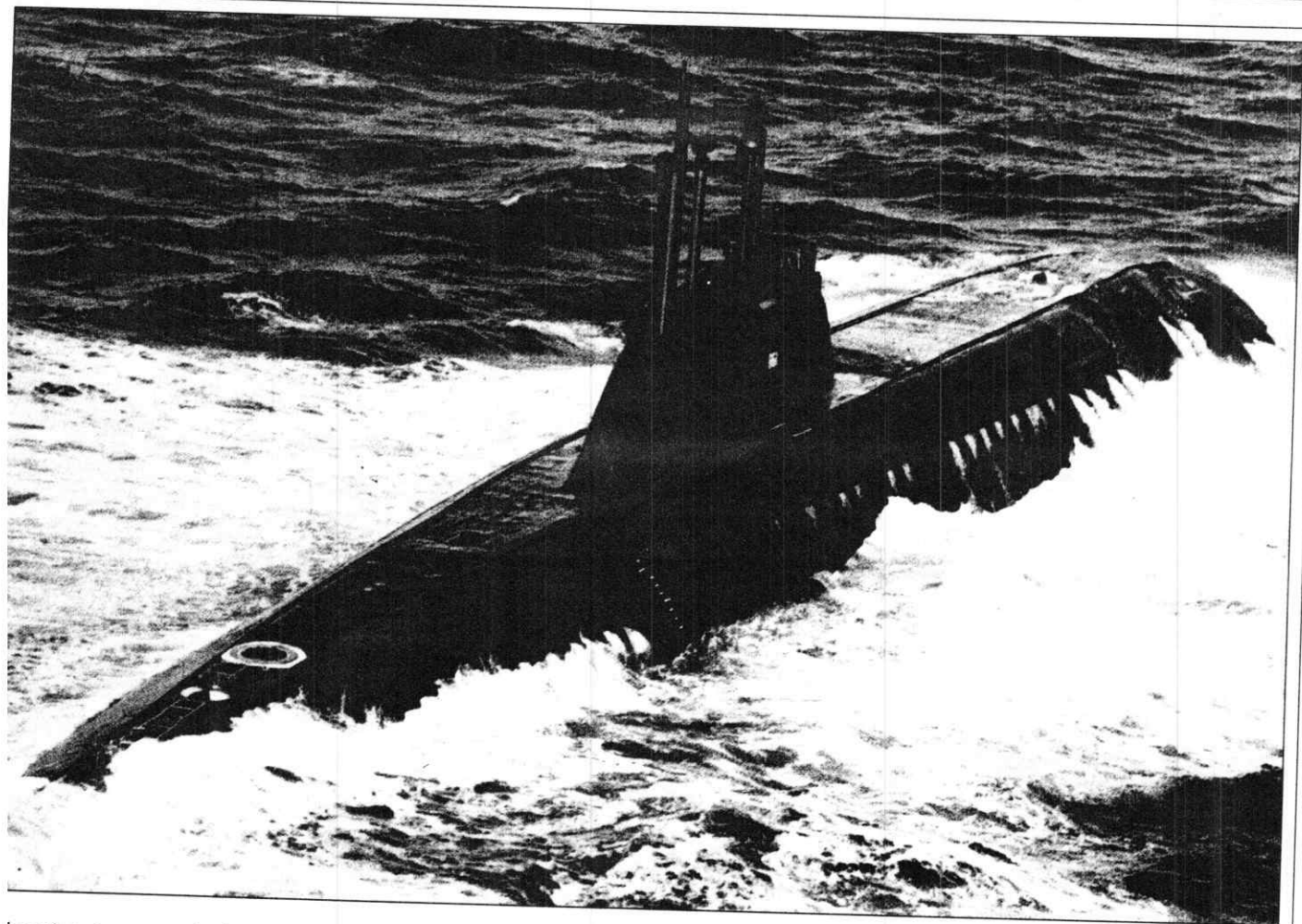
The Main Naval Staff is particularly anxious to ensure the integrity of its territorial waters and to maintain a visible presence in the adjacent seas of its "near abroad" – the Barents and Okhotsk seas and the Sea of Japan. It has frequently complained of violations by foreign submarines in sensitive areas near naval bases or during exercises.

NATO's presence in the Baltic and the Black Sea, coupled with the eastward encroachment of NATO influence through the Partnership for Peace programme, is also a source of unease.

The maintenance of the strategic submarine force has assumed top priority. On 28 June the Russian Navy undertook an unprecedented multiple launch from three Pacific Fleet ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) to demonstrate its continued deterrent capability. A multiple launch from two Northern Fleet SSBNs followed on 15 July.

The beginning of this year also saw the high-profile 80-day deployment of the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* and two escorts to the Mediterranean. As well being a prestigious flag-waving exercise involving several port calls, the deployment also provided an opportunity to work-up the *Kuznetsov's* air group and test the concept of an out-of-area carrier "multipurpose group".

'Akula', 'Improved Akula' and 'Victor III' class nuclear-powered attack submarines have continued to mount patrols in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Meanwhile, 'Oscar II' cruise-missile



A 'Victor III' class nuclear attack submarine at sea. The submarine force remains the core capability of Russia's fleet.

Submarines have practised interdiction operations against carrier task groups. As fuel shortages have forced sea time to be strictly rationed, the navy is also trying to maintain the operational readiness of the surface fleet by putting greater emphasis on on-ship training and equipment drills.

Large numbers of surface units were put to sea in March to participate in concentrated exercises in the Arctic, the Barents Sea and the Pacific. Northern Fleet ships engaged in an exercise in late August, while the Black Sea began exercises involving over 40 ships at the end of September.

Although the number of major units has increased dramatically in the last six years, many of those ships and submarines are stricken or in a poor state of repair. Their overhaul has in part reduced the strain on the stretched support infrastructure.

"Our navy is 300 years old this year. The history of its formation and development, and also its contribution to Russia's transformation into a world power, offer a key to understanding important principles that must be correctly applied in today's conditions, rather than rejected as outdated. The future usually takes revenge for such arrogance."

Capt First Rank Boris Usvyatov, Professor Candidate in Military Sciences, "Navy in crisis," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 18 July 1996.

Equally, while the naval scientific and engineering base has contracted, it retains most of its core capabilities and continues to conduct advanced research in key areas of signature

reduction, hydrodynamics, materials, structures and sensors. There is also continuing research and development into advanced anti-ship missiles and long-range "reconnaissance/strike complexes", regarded by the Russian Navy as cost-effective equalizers to large carrier battle-groups.

New units are still reaching the fleet, albeit slowly. Since 1992, construction work has been progressing on almost 50 ships in various states of completion, with the navy so far taking delivery of four SSGNs,

seven SSNs, two SSKs, two destroyers, 12 small combatants and seven patrol craft.

In early 1995 it was decided to channel most of the available new-construction funds into the

completion of four major units: the 11th Project 949A 'Oscar II' SSGN *Tomsk*; a Project 971 'Akula II' submarine; the Project 1144.2 nuclear-powered cruiser *Petr Veliky*; and the Project 1155.1 frigate *Admiral Chabanenko*.

This approach is being continued. Priorities include funds for the completion of the last 'Improved Akula' being built at the Amur Shipyard in Komsomolsk-na-Amur.

Moves to reform the Russian fleet began in 1992. According to Adm Gromov, the service "requires a credible definition of its roles and strategic missions for the years ahead, the drafting of long-term plans for shipbuilding, weapon and equipment acquisition, and plans for the construction of basing facilities."

Additionally, the transition to a fully professional force structure is planned by 2000 as part of wider reform of the military.

Gromov's aim is to establish a smaller, more balanced fleet placing greater emphasis on the qualitative performance of individual units, and reducing the number of ship classes in order to simplify fleet support. However, economic austerity dictates that reform in the near-term simply means trying to preserve core capabilities, notably a sea-based strategic deterrent maintained by Project 941 'Typhoon' and Project 667BDRM 'Delta IV' class SSBNs.

The design of a fourth-generation SSBN – known as Project 935 – has in fact been completed, although construction has not begun. Russian officials have stated a planned in-service date of 2002: Western intelligence sources believe 2005 to be more realistic.

What is clear is that the navy's strategic role will increase, with a greater number of warheads being allocated to SSBNs. The US Office of Naval Intelligence estimates that if the START II arms-reduction treaty is ratified then 55 per cent of Russia's 3,000 nuclear warheads would be on board SSBNs, compared to 30 per cent of today's 8,500 warheads.

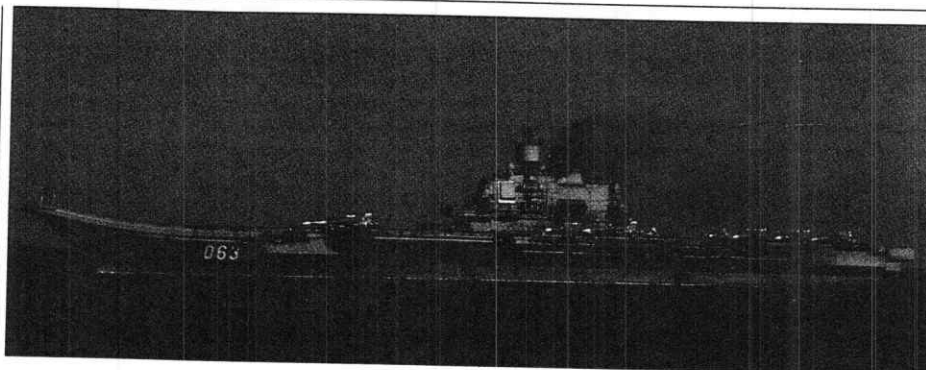
Russia is also continuing to build advanced "multipurpose" submarines. The first Project 885 *Severodvinsk* class submarine was laid down in late 1993. Construction continues at a modest pace, with service entry set for 2000. Described as a fourth-generation SSN, Project 885 boats will be the mainstay of Russia's submarine force by 2010.

Progress is well advanced on the detailed design of the new *Amur* class of diesel-electric submarine, successor to the ubiquitous 'Kilo'. A first unit – equipped with fuel cell air-independent propulsion – is planned to enter service around the turn of the century. Production of the 'Kilo' is now restricted to export orders.

Surface ship construction has fared rather well. Work on three Project 956 *Sovremenny* class destroyers has come to a virtual standstill, although there are some indications that the furthest advanced, *Vazhny*, may be launched soon. Two Project 1154 *Neustrashimy* frigates are also awaiting funding for their eventual completion.

Gromov has also outlined plans for a new class of multi-purpose escort, and has stated an intention to place a first order next year. In fact, the Severnoye Project Design Bureau is completing design options for both a new class of destroyer and a smaller frigate type.

In the much longer term, Gromov believes



The aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* completed an 80-day Mediterranean deployment earlier this year. (photo: H.M. Steele collection)

there is a requirement for additional "air-capable" ships, though acknowledging that these would probably be somewhat smaller than the 65,000t *Admiral Kuznetsov*.

Technology is also important. Much emphasis is being placed on the development of command information systems, a new generation of guided weapons and increased ship automation to allow for more cost-efficient crewing.

However, all these plans are immaterial without the money to implement them. A 10–15 year State Shipbuilding Programme has been formulated, but it has yet to be approved or funded. Its implementation is seen as providing the kick-start required for the navy's long-range reform plan.

Furthermore, from 1997 the navy will be funded as a separate item outside the main defence vote. According to President Boris Yeltsin: "In this way, we will be able to deal with the task of maintaining the combat readiness of naval strategic nuclear forces as well as ensuring construction of new ships and the long-term

development of the navy. I shall personally supervise these issues."

Speaking at the St. Petersburg naval parade, Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin issued this assurance: "No-one should doubt that Russia will possess a navy that meets the most modern requirements – a powerful and sophisticated navy that is capable of tackling any tasks for the good of the nation. The president and the government see this as their direct duty, and I confirm again the decision adopted on priority financing for the construction and maintenance of the navy."

Western analysts see the separate budget as an important move, allowing the navy to "ring-fence" its priority programmes. However, with Russia's economic and political difficulties showing no sign of abating, and defence minister Rodinov still not receiving the budget allocation he has demanded, the reform and reconstruction of the navy will be a long and painful process. Only time will judge whether the service's 300th anniversary truly marks the start of an upturn. ■

Petr Velikiy, the fourth and final Project 1144 nuclear-powered cruiser, alongside at the Baltisky Zavod yard in St. Petersburg. (photo: R.Scott/Jane's)

