1999-03

Russian Navy Listing, but Afloat

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3563

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At the start of NATO's Operation Allied Force, speculation was rampant that Russian warships might sail towards the Adriatic in response to NATO's actions. In the event, only one intelligence-gathering ship, the Liman, actually sailed to the area, but for a brief moment talk of Russian warships received prominent coverage in the Western media. It turns out that there was much more naval activity taking place than was being reported by most Western sources. Important questions arise from all this naval activity: Is the activity significant? Does it really have anything to do with the Balkans? What does it mean for the West and more importantly, for Russia?

From late March until the end of April, Russia's Northern, Pacific, Baltic and Black Sea Fleets conducted numerous exercises which occurred despite persistent pay problems, personnel shortages, and a lack of adequately funded training and of maintenance of its vessels. Dr. Richard Staar, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace and frequent Perspective contributor, detailed the declining state of the Russian Navy in a recent article in the US Naval Institute's Proceedings. Dr. Staar forecast a continuing decline in the fleets' capabilities, due in large part to Russia's economic woes, and he noted that "the aspirations to a blue-water Navy belong to the past." (1)

Given these conditions, it is natural to ask why Russia would spend scarce resources on naval exercises. Also, the timing of the exercises may appear to be suspect. Were the exercises intended to send a message to the West that Russia still had military
means to influence events which it feels work against its interests and allies? The answer to the last question is "maybe."

The springtime exercises did not suddenly take place as a reaction to NATO's combat operations in the Balkans. They were previously scheduled, and indeed routinely occur at that time. In April 1998, the Black Fleet held joint exercises with Ukraine's Navy, and the Northern Fleet conducted surface and subsurface operations in the Barents Sea. (2) Somewhat surprising is the fact that the four fleets conducted essentially concurrent, relatively large-scale operations, and this took place in a much changed economic atmosphere as compared to April 1998. After Russia's economic meltdown of last August, and the extensive coverage of the hardships faced by the military forces, it would have been entirely justifiable to cancel, postpone, or at least scale back this April's training cycle.(3)

The specific details of the various exercises are not all that important or noteworthy. The training included missile firings by surface combatants as well as at least one instance of a missile launch by a submarine, anti-air defense events, assault landings, and air support sorties.

The significant aspects of the exercises are that the various commands were given the opportunity to practice their craft, and that the sailors, soldiers and airmen were given opportunities to use their equipment. Many Russian military members were not receiving regular rations, much less steady paychecks, as recently as last winter. The Baltic Fleet could not pay its bakery, electrical and water bills last fall, which led Lithuania to offer humanitarian aid to the Kaliningrad oblast'. (4)

It may just be that the timing is coincidentally beneficial. The Russians, driven by monetary constraints and the lack of a guiding doctrine and vision in the post-Cold War era, reduced their military strength from 3.9 million in 1990 to 1.2 million by January 1999.(5) Retaining superpower status only by virtue of the nuclear arsenal, Russia's once mighty conventional forces became just pale shadows of their Soviet
predecessors. Though occurring in the expected cycle, the exercises are surely intended to demonstrate, to the Russian people as well as to the rest of the world, that the military is not moribund, that it still has the capability for action if the need arises. Russian officials did link the exercises with events in the Balkans, using the conflict to justify combat training. Thus, the timing of the naval exercises works, fortuitously, to further the political-military agenda of the Russian leadership. The fleet isn't dead yet.

There is a larger political dimension in effect. NATO's military action is troubling to many Russians, for if NATO could justify intervention in a sovereign country, within internationally recognized borders, what would prevent the alliance, or another entity, from interjecting itself into a trouble spot within the CIS? Citing this premise, there was much discussion from Russia's leadership on the need to revise its national security doctrine, and prevent the further erosion of Russia's combat capability.

Those are the external aspects to the naval maneuverings. From the internal Russian perspective, to maintain any level of viable conventional naval force, the Russian fleets had to train, and prove to themselves that they are capable of more than just launching ships. Russia does have defensive requirements to maintain naval, land and air forces. A professional military, ideally well-fed and well-led, could be a stabilizing factor. One of the many challenges Russia faces is to maintain its armed forces adequately.

Does Russia's surface navy pose a threat to US or NATO navies? The short answer is "no." Training events, no matter how impressive outwardly in terms of missile firings or combined arms operations, do not in any way make up for the daily hardships faced by Russia's military personnel. Huge budget increases will not be flowing suddenly to the nonstrategic armed forces. The Russian Navy cannot undertake sustained combat operations. NTV, in an unconfirmed assertion, stated in early April that the Northern Fleet was "catastrophically short of fuel." (6) If the Navy has to scrounge for fuel just to conduct exercises, its chances of operating effectively outside of its home waters are slim indeed.
Notes:

In a follow-up letter to the editor, Mr. A.D. Baker, editor of the Naval Institute's Guide to Combat Fleets of the World, took issue with some of Dr. Staar's figures, and in essence gave the impression that the article was too optimistic of a report on the Russian Navy.

(2) Agence France-Presse, 14 April 1998; clari. net, and NTV, 1200 GMT, 10 April 1998; FBIS-SOV-98-100.

(3) For a look at the current state of the Russian Air Force, as another example of military decline, see "Russian Air Force, Besieged, Broke," Aviation Week and Space Technology, 14 October 1998.


(6) NTV, 1200 GMT, 3 April 1999; FBIS-SOV-99-0437.