



# Russia Building Out Nuclear Capabilities in Its Fleet

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During the Cold War two of Russia's four fleets were nuclear ones, the Northern Fleet based out of Murmansk in the Kola Peninsula in the Arctic, and the Pacific Fleet based out of Vladivostok and Petropavlovsk.

Most analysts have maintained that this disposition has remained the case until now.

But can we be certain of that?

Indeed, already in 2008 then Foreign Minister of Sweden, Carl Bildt, announced that, "According to the information to which we have access, there are already tactical nuclear weapons in the Kaliningrad area. They are located both at and in the vicinity of units belonging to the Russia fleet,"<sup>1</sup>

Since then Russia has also sent nuclear-capable Iskander missiles to be based in Kaliningrad.

So while those are land-based missiles, there is good reason to see these missiles as potentially usable to gain command of the Baltic Sea and deny that to NATO.

But apart from the possibility of elements of the Baltic Fleet being nuclear we should also have concerns that Russia may be nuclearizing the Black Fleet and/or the Mediterranean Eskadra parts of which are based at Tartus in Syria.

As this writer and others have observed, since 2014 a sustained buildup of Russian forces in Crimea and the Black Sea have gone far towards creating a layered A2AD (anti-access and area denial) zone in that sea although NATO has begun to react to the threat and exercise forces there.<sup>2</sup>

That layered defense consists of a combined arms (air, land, and sea) integrated air defense system (IADS) and powerful anti-ship missiles deliverable from each of those forces. Moscow has also moved nuclear-capable forces to the Crimea and Black Sea to further display its determination to keep NATO out but also to use the umbrella it has created as the basis for an even more expansive strategy (resembling that used by the Egyptian Army in the Yom Kippur War of 1973) from which it can project power further out and deny those areas to NATO or at least threaten NATO with heavy costs.<sup>3</sup>

And beyond that Russia in 2017 began work on the Syrian bases at Tartus and Khmeimim to make them ready for hosting nuclear-capable warships and planes as well.<sup>4</sup>

These trends clearly bespeak an interest in warfighting operations under conditions of a nuclear and conventional umbrella as suggested throughout this article.

Moscow is evidently building a nuclear –weapons storage facility in Crimea suggesting it will base if not deploy nuclear weapons there.<sup>5</sup>

Among the weapons being deployed are nuclear-capable Kalibr' sea launched cruise missiles (SLCM) that have now also been deployed to the coast of Syria.

It is clear that Moscow intends to raise the specter of nuclear escalation in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup>

Thus today we are at a point where prominent experts, e.g. James Sherr of Chatham House, and former USAREUR Commander Lt. General Fredrick (Ben) Hodges (Ret) all see "the wider Black Sea region as the major area of potential friction with Russia in the next decade."<sup>7</sup>

We must also keep in mind that Russian ships based in the Caspian Sea also have the range to hit targets in the Middle East with the Kalibr' as they have done in October 2015 for Putin's birthday.<sup>8</sup>

Moscow has learned how to deploy nuclear-capable SLCMs with great lethality on cheaper, smaller ships like corvettes.

At that time it became clear that:

"This was not a missile seen as being normally carried by the corvettes, which had [shorter-range] Klub missiles as opposed to the land-attack version," said Bryan Clark, a naval analyst with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington.

The Kalibr, he said, "changes it from being a sea-control ship to one with distributed lethality.

The US has been aspiring to that, but the Russians have shown they already have it."<sup>9</sup>

As Clark observed then, as well the new Russian capability for distributed lethality poses serious problems for the U.S.

"The Russians are adopting distributed lethality faster than the US," he noted.

"The arguments made for distributed lethality are to put firepower on a bunch of smaller ships, have them disperse, in turn increase targeting problems for the enemy, and you may be able to generate the same kind of firepower if you concentrate the platforms.

"With the Russians, these 900-ton corvettes are harder to find than a [4,000-ton US] littoral combat ship.

"You can buy them in larger numbers, and they also carry land-attack weapons," unlike LCS.

"It would seem to give you a much more effective land-attack lethality than what the US Navy is pursuing."

Clearly the deployment of such capabilities along with UAV's massive integrated air defense networks, fighters and strike air craft, plus land-based shore and air defense is making the Black Sea a n increasingly inhospitable zone for the U.S. and NATO.

But given Russia's quest for bases throughout the Levant, Mediterranean, and even Red Sea areas the objective of an anti-access are a denial capability being extended out to the Eastern Mediterranean, well beyond the Black Sea, is taking shape.

Moreover, Russia is refining this capability to include Caspian based ships as well.

In October 2018 Moscow fired Kalibr' SLCMs at targets during Caspian exercises.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond that, at present the specific threats we see in the Black Sea are directed against Ukraine and Romania.

But because Romania is a NATO ally and Ukraine is steadily drawing ever closer to European security organizations who identify its cause with their own, any further fighting in this maritime zone is fraught with danger and is unlikely to be confined to the Black Sea.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, there is good reason to believe that naval operations in and around the Black Sea will inevitably entail operations a on shore and against land-based forces and defenses in both countries. Russian writers, in assessing the lessons of Syria, have argued that,

It follows from what has been said that in implementing future construction plans for new submarines, and also in the modernization of the majority of the surface fleet, the Russian Navy will, by the end of the next decade, be capable of carrying out massed missile strikes against the surface and land targets of the likely opponent.

Each fleet will have enough ships and submarines armed with Kalibr' and Polymet-Redut (missiles) to have a seriously enhanced combat capability. <sup>12</sup>

For example, in response to talk of NATO exercises, Andrei Kelin, a spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs labeled such exercises destabilizing and further added that, "This is not NATO's maritime space and it has no relation to the alliance."<sup>13</sup>

More recently, Russian defense establishment has announced that nuclear-capable "Kalibr"(SS-N-27) ship-based missiles will be "permanently based" in the Eastern Mediterranean, thus providing a capable and reliable reach for Moscow's forces in the region.<sup>14</sup>

These deployments began in the fall of 2018.<sup>15</sup>

Such missiles, with a range of up to 300 kilometers, give even older Russian vessels a sufficient offensive as well as defensive counter-punch to strike at naval or even shore-based targets.

Moreover, Russia will also conduct permanent exercises in the Mediterranean to go with its permanent deployment there. <sup>16</sup>

Consequently as a result of the annexation of Crimea it is not just Ukraine that is in the eye of the Russian hurricane but also other littoral countries, e.g. Romania. Russia's seizure of the Crimea and buildup in the Black Sea makes its maritime zone contiguous to that of Russia and that this puts Romania at great risk from both maritime operations and land attacks to the Dniester or beyond.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the treaty on Crimea's annexation to the Russian Federation states that, "the demarcation of Black Sea territorial waters is established based on the international treaties made by the Russian federation." According to the Munich-based expert, Vladimir Socor, "This vague wording appears to imply that Russia deems the agreements made with Ukraine on territorial demarcation with other countries are no longer valid, and suggest that Russia might try to negotiate and modify the current demarcation agreements."<sup>18</sup>

And that means Russia could easily incite pressure against Romania and its critical maritime energy facilities that it has already frequently menaced by overflights and the like.<sup>19</sup>

While we have no definitive answers as to whether or not Russia has nuclearized the Black Sea Fleet and/or the Mediterranean Eskadra, it clearly can do so if it so desires and has reserved that option for itself in the future.

Thus Romania now experiences what one writer calls “periodic threats of annihilation for hosting American ballistic missile defense, exercises simulating Romania’s invasion, and repeated violations of air (and naval) space.”<sup>20</sup>

But Russian pressure is not confined to military threats either by land through Transnistria and Moldova or by sea and air from the Black Sea.

Russia’s maritime and other incursions or probes also seem to be directed against Romania’s efforts to secure its energy independence and integrate fully with Western energy institutions and companies.

It is quite likely that Moscow, for example wants to prevent Moldova from escaping its dependence on Russian gas transmissions from Ukraine or perhaps from Russian gas in general as President Igor Dodon has now expressed interest in alternative gas routes like the Iasi–Ungheni (Romania)–Chisinau gas pipeline.<sup>21</sup>

But it also clearly wants to retain a capacity to threaten Romania, the most pro-American state in the Balkans.

In other words, the Kerch Strait incident of November 2018 should bring home to us the fact that the threats posed by Russia in the Black Sea do not end with Ukraine and are potentially not confined to the conventional level of war.

These SLCM capabilities also are not the only ones in Moscow’s arsenal of naval warfare.

In 2009, Vice-Admiral Oleg Burtsev, the Navy’s Deputy Chief of Staff, told RIA Novosti that, “Probably, tactical nuclear weapons will play a key role in the future,” and that the navy may fit new, less powerful nuclear warheads to the existing types of cruise missiles. “There is no longer any need to equip missiles with powerful nuclear warheads,” Burtsev said. “We can install low-yield warheads (possibly fusion weapons? -Author) on existing cruise missiles.”<sup>22</sup>

Given the lack of progress on reducing Moscow’s arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons, those systems are also still potentially available to Russian commanders for use in regional contingencies.

In the light of Russian deployments in the Baltic and Black Seas not only U.S. and NATO commanders have to be vigilant and able to devise countermeasures and deployments to the threats ranged against NATO allies by those Russian capabilities.

In the context of the apparent unraveling of arms control agreements like the INF, other cases of Russian violations the danger of heightened nuclear threats to Europe (as Russia has made clear it will launch when and if the U.S. leaves the INF treaty), and new Russian capabilities it can be argued that the temptation to use these SLCMs or tactical nuclear weapons or to rethink using them in warfighting scenarios has grown and will continue to grow.

This represents a renewed nuclear threat to Europe and our allies if not allies elsewhere so that from now on we need to think not only about conventional naval warfare but also about the possibility of nuclear war generated from the sea.

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**Editor’s Note: Dr. Blank has highlighted the return of the nuclear dimension and what Paul Bracken has highlighted in terms of the second nuclear age.**

The Putin Administration has certainly focused on creating the impression that it is lowering the nuclear threshold.

They have done so in part in my view because of the relative weakness of their conventional forces directed against Europe and with the significant shift in Western forces towards distributed operations and new approaches to force integration which in my view will make it much harder for the Russians to defeat Western forces.

From this point of view, we are the reactive enemy.

But clearly we have to take the second nuclear age very seriously think through crisis response approaches and capabilities.

## Footnotes

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