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Russian Maritime Strategy and the Pacific

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SYNOPSIS

*The Russian maritime strategy doctrine issued last year shows the importance of thinking about Maritime Security in a holistic and connected way. **GEOFFREY TILL** argues that in its discussion of the various maritime theatres, the document also emphasises the importance of the Pacific region in supporting Russia's war in Ukraine.*

COMMENTARY

In July 2022, five months into the Ukraine war, President Vladimir Putin signed off "[The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation](#)". Developed and modified over the years, the document represents authoritative Russian thinking across the whole Maritime Security spectrum.

In part, the document deals with safety concerns at sea and environmental protection. In common with the maritime strategy statements of most other countries, it emphasises the importance of what the Russians call "the World Ocean" for its boundless resources and for the trade it makes possible. Again, similarly to the maritime doctrines of most other countries, it stresses the need for Russia to further develop national maritime capabilities across the board that will allow the country to exploit this potential for economic benefit and, if need be, to protect Russian interests against threats that range from environmental degradation through criminal activity to aggression from hostile states.

Its coverage of mid-level threats to Maritime Security is extensive, taking up nearly half of the document. In this, it echoes the emphasis given in the seminal *Sea Power of the State* by Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, which appeared in the 1970s. In that work,

Gorshkov, then a long-term commander-in-chief of the old Soviet navy, went out of his way to situate his recommendations for naval policy in the broader maritime setting, much more than his Western naval equivalents did, and for that matter do. One of the most distinctive aspects of this document is that it shows just how integrated and holistic Russian maritime thinking is – at least in theory.

Turning aspiration into fact requires a thoroughly integrated whole-of-nation approach. “The Russian Federation”, the document says, “employs the entire range of political, diplomatic, economic, informational, military and other state policy instruments to implement and protect its national interests in the World Ocean” (#102). Another lesson for everyone else.

Finally, produced in the midst of a vicious war in Ukraine, the document is also interesting for two other reasons: first, for its coverage of the all-important naval element which weaves its way through the whole of this maritime package; and second, for its discussion of the relative importance to Russia of the various geographic areas in which its national interests in the World Ocean are critically at stake.

The naval narrative is based on perceptions of unambiguous threat, mainly in the Atlantic area, but more generally throughout the World Ocean.

The United States and its allies are set on containing and undermining Russia’s status as a great power – both on land and sea – that is capable of global, not just regional, action. NATO’s continental and military advance to the very borders of the Russian Federation is intended to contain and undermine Russia in the first domain, and the West’s current naval dominance is clearly aimed at the second. Russia’s economy depends on its commodity-based (oil, gas, grain, fertilisers) export trade. Safe and unimpeded use of sea lines of communication is essential to this.

With its access to the World Ocean thus daily threatened by the maritime dominance of the United States and its allies, Russia’s capacity to develop its maritime potential is at significant risk and so has to be invested in, protected, and defended in a hostile and unstable world where, as the document specifically says, the use of force has not diminished. The document emphasises that “the modern Russian Federation cannot exist without a strong Navy”, being “a great continental and maritime power” (#104).

As far as the world’s maritime regions are concerned, much attention is paid, unsurprisingly, to the Arctic, as it is the only area identified to be vital to “the national security of the Russian Federation ... and the very existence of the state.” Alongside the Northern Sea Route, the Arctic is seen as a “strategic resource” area. Discussion of the Atlantic region, by contrast, is dominated by Russia’s immediate defence needs, given the malign “... existence of NATO which focuses its activities on direct confrontation with the Russian Federation and its allies.”



Soldiers from the Russian Arctic military base, Northern Clover, on Kotelny Island, 2019. Russia's maritime strategy emphasises building up and defending the Arctic region, a strategically vital area for Russia's security and resources. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

In the document's treatment of the Pacific region, on the other hand, there is no such sense of threat, apart from a passing reference to the importance of the Sea of Okhotsk and the Kuril Strait and the need to maintain strategic stability. The "colossal" resources of the Russian Far East, not least its marine bioresources, justify huge investment to overcome its geographic isolation and to develop its economic and industrial potential. Notably, this will include the construction of a high-tech shipyard to build heavy-tonnage vessels, including "modern aircraft carriers for the Navy", an aspiration repeated elsewhere in the document. Of course, an area so economically valuable will require naval defence, although here, no specific threat is identified.

So how does this theory compare with today's practice? Russia has always been an empire which, like its emblematic double-headed eagle, looks both to the east and west. At any one time, its priority depends on circumstances. Today, both the Arctic and the Pacific are supporting (in terms of resources, strategic depth and national resilience) the main effort taking place in the west. The emphasis in this document on building up and defending the country's long-term resource base in both areas is in part a hedge against the likelihood of a long-lasting struggle with the West.

More immediately, the Russian Far East provides strategic depth, as well as human and material resources, for this possibly existential struggle in the west. It has now become a sanctuary for some of the Russian strategic bombers driven from their western bases by their apparent vulnerability to Ukrainian drone attacks such as those on the Engels-2 airbase deep inside Russia in December 2022.

So far, the peoples of Russia's Far East have figured disproportionately in manpower mobilisations for the Ukraine war effort, with 16,000 men from a number of combined arms armies of the Eastern District having been transferred 6,000 km into the Ukraine theatre. The Russian Pacific Fleet has also transferred amphibious warfare vessels and the elite 155th Naval Infantry Brigade to the Black Sea, where the latter got badly and publicly mauled in the battles of Pavliika in November 2022 and Vuhledar in February 2023.

Displays of naval power in the east through patrols in the Northeast Pacific, sometimes in company with the Chinese navy, are demonstrations of Russian resolve and serve to distract the main enemy, the US navy, from its focus on the west. For the longer term, China and North Korea are seen as actual and potential sources of very significant political and material support that need nurturing.

In summary, “The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation” is a highly significant document which implicitly states Russia’s strategic priorities. It underlines the extent to which Maritime Security needs to be thought of as an indivisible whole, covering all aspects of sea-based threat. It discusses the Pacific and all other areas in the World Ocean seen as essential for the success – and even survival – of the Russian Federation, in the midst of the Ukraine war.

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