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## Navy, Russian (1991-)

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## **Navy, Russian (1991-)**

After arguably achieving rough parity with the U.S. Navy during the Cold War, the Russian Federation Navy has experienced significant decline over the subsequent two decades. Some of this decline has been due to serious financial constraints preventing fleet modernization with other contributing factors being the superior political clout of the Army, and problems with the navy's supporting industrial infrastructure which have kept it from maintaining anything resembling Soviet era blue water strength and capabilities.

A vivid demonstration of the Navy's declining power includes the August 12, 2000 sinking of the nuclear submarine *Kursk* in the Arctic Ocean producing 118 deaths. This tragedy produced a rare public outcry against the government's and navy's incompetence. Another notable demonstration of Russian Navy inability to modernize and demonstrate professional competence has been the failure to successfully test and deploy the Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missile. This program began development in the late 1990s and has experienced cost overruns and repeated test-launch failures although some successful launches prompted former President Dmitry Medvedev to say it was ready for service in December 2011. The Navy's political clout was further diminished by its 2012 relocation to St. Petersburg from Moscow which removes it from ready access to the centers of

Russian Federation political power--although President Vladimir Putin's hometown is St. Petersburg.

Navy ships are constructed by the United Shipbuilding Corporation which is a collaboration between the Russian Government and privately managed companies; its technological skill and capacity are far behind global competitors and pacesetters. However, the preponderance of Russian Navy ships still date from the Soviet era and slow production timetables are a serious problem with the *Lada* class submarine *St. Petersburg* taking nearly 10 years to reach the testing stage. The Russian Navy has ended its traditional autarkic supply policy by importing unmanned aerial vehicles from Israel and *Mistral*-class ships from France.

Russian Navy strategy and doctrine place increasing emphasis on accessing and using the Arctic Ocean. This was visibly demonstrated on August 2, 2007 when two Russian mini-submarines planted a flag on the North Pole seabed, thus staking claim to immense Arctic oil and natural gas reserves and Moscow's desire to increase its global maritime influence. Climate change in the Arctic is making it possible for ships to use the Northern Sea Route with greater frequency, and Russia seeks to take advantage of that to enhance its economic and military influence along with transportation links between Europe, Asia, and North

America. This could increase the possibility of conflict with the United States, China, and other Arctic countries. Russia is also concerned with having the ability to conduct naval operations in the Baltic, Black, and Caspian seas and in the Pacific Ocean, although the navy's amphibious assault ships were unable to support Russian ground forces fighting Georgian troops during the August 2008 war between these countries.

The Russian Federation Navy still aspires to Soviet-era power and prestige, and seeks to include a mixture of nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers in its arsenal though it lacks the industrial base capacity to achieve its objectives. The Kola Peninsula remains the headquarters for Russia's nuclear deterrent; the navy retains 172 submarine-launched ballistic missiles and 612 nuclear warheads. Climate change in the Arctic is making it possible for ships to use the Northern Sea Route with greater frequency and Russia seeks to take advantage of that to enhance its economic and military influence along with transportation links between Europe, Asia, and North America. This could increase the possibility of conflict with the U.S., China, and other Arctic countries.

An even more serious problem is the delusional belief under President Vladimir Putin's leadership that the U.S. and NATO have military designs on Russia

requiring the maintenance of a large Cold War size fleet.

Russia is likely to use its naval forces to influence Arctic Ocean activities to its benefit, and to apply maritime and other pressure on neighboring countries such as Ukraine, which used to be part of the former Soviet Union and are not NATO members. The possibility of economically constrained NATO countries and the United States not being willing or able to intervene on behalf of maritime countries adjacent to Russia may increase the possibility of even a weakened Russia being able to exert greater influence or even outright domination of these countries. This was very much the case when Crimean separatists, likely backed by Russia, forced Ukraine to cede the peninsula back to Russia in the spring of 2014.

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**See also:** Georgian War (2008); *Kursk* (Submarine); Navy, Soviet (1917-1991); Putin, Vladimir V. (1952-).

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