# Russia's New Maritime Strategy

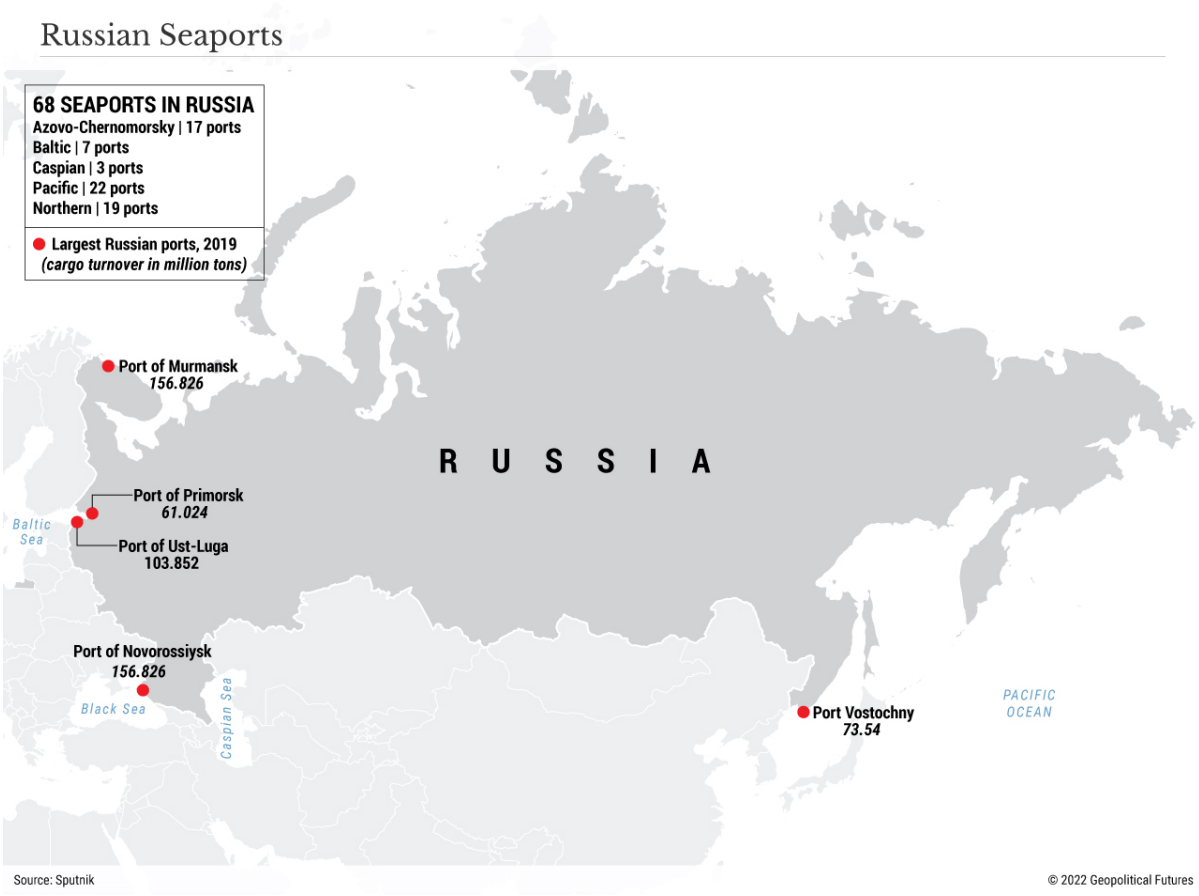
**by Ekaterina Zolotova -** August 7, 2022

On July 31, just before the start of a naval parade, President Vladimir Putin approved Russia's new maritime doctrine, replacing one that had been in place since 2001 and amended in 2015. The new document states outright that America's dominance of the world's oceans is a primary threat to the Russian mainland, and more clearly outlines Russia's economic and strategic interests with regard to the seas.

The timing is hardly coincidental. Sanctions imposed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine have negatively affected value chains and have hindered Russian trade with traditional Western partners. (Cargo turnover in Russian seaports is expected to fall by as much as 50 percent, curbing the export of coal, grain, oil products, fertilizers and liquefied natural gas in a country whose budget depends heavily on exports.) The war, and in particular the destruction of its third largest warship in April, convinced Russia that it needs to decommission its older ships in favor of more modernized ones.

The increased presence of hostile forces would worry any country, of course, but Russia is particularly sensitive to these kinds of naval matters. In fact, it's helpful to think of Russia as a landlocked country. Despite its long maritime border and proximity to the seas, Russia does not actually have direct access to the open oceans – hence why it is so active in the Black Sea. It lost a lot of its port infrastructure, and thus a lot of its entree to trade routes, when it lost its Soviet satellite states. Put simply, Russia requires a strong naval strategy to compensate for what it lacks in maritime access, which it correctly sees as a strategic vulnerability. For Russia, being able to unlock the ocean is a way to forestall the strangulation of its economy and the isolation of its people.

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Curiously, Russia's neighbors with a presence in the Baltic, Black and Caspian seas, as well as those oriented toward the Arctic and Pacific oceans, don't see Russia's new naval doctrine as a newfound threat. They understand better than most that Russia's capacities at sea are limited, often due to internal reasons.

## Purpose

The new strategy has two main purposes. The first is to clearly define Russia's zones of interest. Vital seas are those that directly influence state and socio-economic development – Russia's territorial waters, its exclusive economic zone and its continental shelf, the Arctic basin, including the Northern Sea Route. These are the very areas that bring Russia into collision with other powers – Norway and the United States from the Arctic basin, Japan from the Sea of Okhotsk, and Turkey, Iran, some of Central Asia and **much of Europe** in the Caspian Sea. Areas that "significantly affect economic development" include the Sea of ??Azov and the Black Sea, the eastern part of the

Mediterranean Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Kuril Straits. Russia's largest ports are located in the Black and Baltic seas, which are also home to the TurkStream and Nord Stream pipelines. In essence, Russia has said that the presence of other countries in these areas is a threat to which the Russian fleet will be ready to respond.

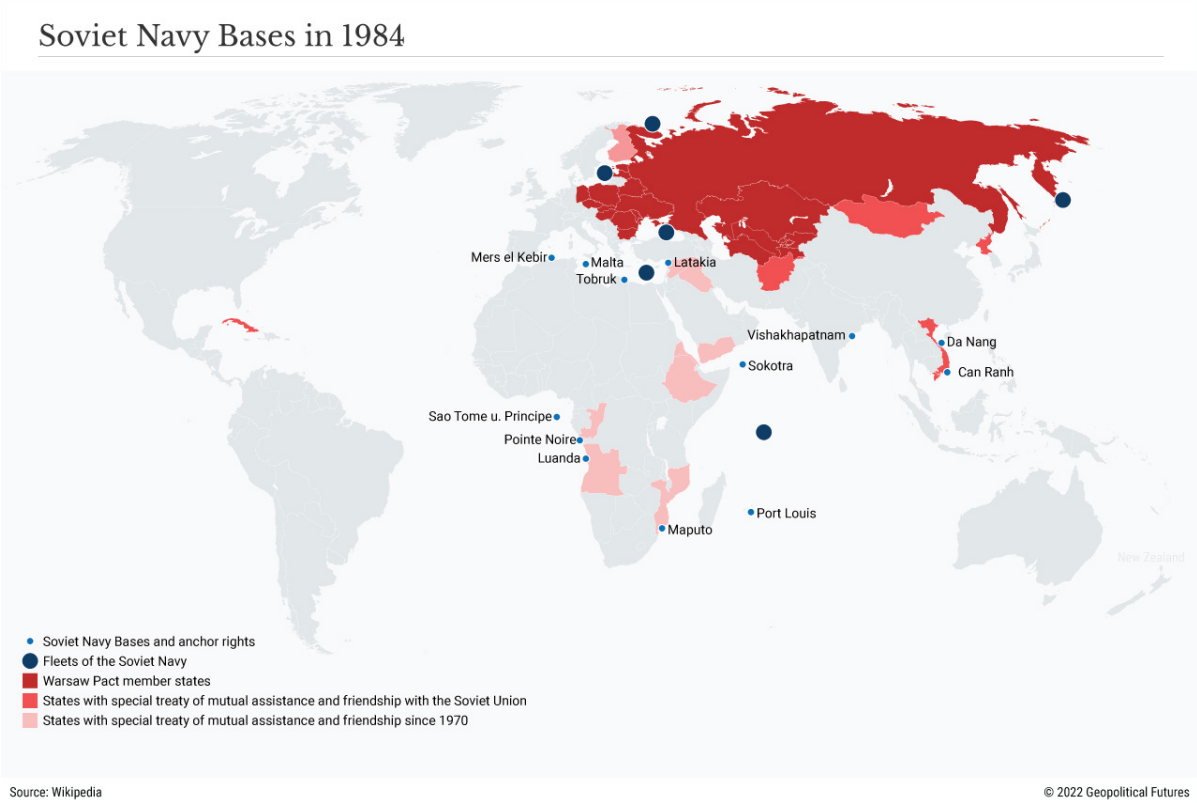
The second purpose is to define Russia's priorities. Whereas the previous doctrine could be considered Atlantic-focused, the new one places a heavier emphasis on the Arctic and Pacific oceans. This shows that Moscow is attempting to transform Russia into a link between the two oceans, thereby avoiding isolation and, optimistically, strengthening its role as a maritime power. The Arctic Sea is particularly important to Russia because of the Northern Sea Route, which Moscow considers an opportunity to ensure competitiveness in the world market. There, the doctrine calls on Russia to intensify maritime activities in the archipelagos of Svalbard, Franz Josef Land, Novaya Zemlya and Wrangel Island, increasing its combat potential and developing the basing system for the Northern Fleet and the Pacific Fleet. It also includes the development of a shipbuilding complex and the construction of aircraft carriers in the Far East, as well as a liquefied natural gas plant there, and provides for more active development of the natural resources in the continental shelf, including an increase in the level of geological knowledge of the Sea of ??Japan, the Sea of ??Okhotsk and the Bering Sea.

For any of this to be possible, Russia will have to build more military and commercial ships and be able to send them where it needs to send them. The creation of modern large maritime transport and logistics centers on the basis of domestic seaports, according to the Kremlin's plan, will ensure the processing of all maritime imports and exports and create conditions to compete with the port complexes of other states. The doctrine also stresses the need to create logistics networks that can facilitate the transition of vessels from one theater to another, and it beefs up the existing infrastructure in Crimea and on the coast of Krasnodar.

## Constraints

Of course, it's much easier to draw up a strategic plan than to implement it. The tacit admission of the new doctrine is that the Russian navy is in disrepair. What was a powerful fleet in the 1970s has since been relegated to the minor leagues. Moscow has not been able to regain its potential in things like transportation fishing and research despite efforts to modernize its vessels. This means that to ensure the implementation of this strategy, Russia will need to make up a lot of ground, which will take years, a lot of money and a lot of new and independent technologies.

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First, Russia needs a fleet, military and civil. Its fleet is significantly inferior to that of the Soviet fleet. For comparison, in the 1980s, the navy included more than 1,300 ships, including 64 nuclear- and 15 diesel-powered ballistic missile submarines, 79 cruise missile submarines (including 63 nuclear submarines), 80 multi-purpose torpedo nuclear submarines, four aircraft carriers, 96 cruisers, and destroyers and missile frigates. Today, the navy has about 70 submarines (13 nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, 27 nuclear-powered missile and torpedo submarines, 19 diesel submarines, eight special-purpose nuclear submarines and 1 diesel submarine) and more than 200 surface warships and boats (including one Soviet heavy aircraft carrier). The majority of its surface ships, although powerful, are outdated, and many need to be decommissioned.

The civil fleet is no more impressive. The Soviet research fleet consisted of more than 200 ships, including freshwater vessels. Today, there are no more than 80. The merchant fleet consists of only about 1,400 vessels (including those sailing under the Russian flag and those of Russian shipping companies registered under foreign flags) with a total tonnage of 22.3 million tons, of which 65.7 percent is operated under foreign flags. The average age of the ships is between 13 and 20 years. Unsurprisingly, the Russian fleet has an extremely low share of world cargo transportation, at

roughly 0.1 percent.

Second, Russia needs independent technologies to build the fleet out. Currently, Russian shipbuilding is highly dependent on imports. Foreign components account for anywhere from 40 to 85 percent of the entire civil sector.

Finally, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, inadequate basing options and poor maintenance inflicted heavy losses on the Russian navy. This reflects two problems: a lack of funding and insufficient planning for the restructuring and reduction of the force. Limited funds and outdated shipyards make it difficult to repair large Soviet ships and construct new ones. The most optimistic scenario in the Shipbuilding Development Strategy, which runs through 2035, foresees construction of 250 sea transport vessels and more than 1,500 river-sea transport vessels. However, because of their dire financial situations, **shipbuilders can meet just a fraction of their targets**, including just 18 percent of demand for sea transport vessels, 6 percent for river-sea transport vessels, 8 percent for fishing fleet vessels, 11 percent for research vessels, 63 percent for icebreakers and no more than 40 percent for ships and marine equipment to develop offshore energy fields. These difficulties are gradually eroding Russia's share of global maritime transport.

Ultimately, one of the main threats to Russia's maritime activities is the lack of sufficient foreign bases to support operations in distant and remote areas. Russia will need time, money and technology to expand its naval presence.

## Conclusion

The Russian navy is still strong regionally. And Russia continues to spend on infrastructure projects. For example, it's committed almost 1.8 trillion rubles ($30 billion) for the development of the Northern Sea Route through 2035. Nonetheless, Russia needs greater maritime capabilities to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. It thus needs better basing and logistics, port infrastructure, and significant investment in both the military and merchant fleets. The new doctrine is intended to do this over the long term, not to be a temporary solution to sanctions. The bigger issue is funding, and it is unclear where Russia will find the money. This will require Moscow to get creative. For instance, the doctrine mentions that Russia could prepare civilian ships and crews to convert to military purposes during wartime.

Russia needs to be a great maritime power to accomplish other important goals, like ensuring the safe operation of its offshore pipelines and environmental safety as well as developing the Northern Sea Route. This will take decades of effective management and billions of rubles in spending. In the short term, this isn't a threat to other regional powers, but it could be over the long term. And the

  

notion that Russia will be able to overcome extreme competition from regional powers in the near future seems unrealistic.

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