

OUT OF THE BLUE

The Cold War Soviet naval challenge, the mirroring fallacy and the navies of today

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Fig. 1 – Naval Jack of the Soviet Union (Public Domain)

Abstract (93 words):

In the mid-Cold War, Western strategists faced the sudden appearance of a capable Soviet Navy. Soviet ships deployed around the world, establishing a regular presence across strategically significant maritime chokepoints. As now declassified reports reveal, Western analysts misunderstood Soviet intent, interpreting this naval build-up as aggressive and expansionist. The consequence of this misperception was a Western naval build-up in the 1980s which still influences global security today. The misinterpretation was caused by analytical failure, specifically an over-reliance on capability assessments causing the ‘mirroring fallacy’ – expecting the adversary to mirror one’s own intent.

Keywords (7): Soviet Navy; Gorshkov; mirroring; sea power; Cold War; maritime strategy; intelligence bias.

Introduction

In the 1960s, the Soviet Navy expanded significantly. Western analysts faced Soviet warships supporting socialist revolutions around the world and establishing bases astride key maritime chokepoints. Largely ignored in the West after the Second World War, the USSR had hankered after sea power for a generation. The chief proponent, Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, conceived a maritime strategy different to traditional Western models of expansive ‘blue water’ fleets. An over-reliance on capability assessments of new Soviet units caused this different strategic intent to be inferred rather than fully analysed. In doing so, UK and US naval intelligence analysts committed the mirroring fallacy – they assumed Soviet capabilities would be used for the same strategic ends as in Western navies.

Countervailing analyses were in the minority during the Cold War, receiving academic and professional rebuttal as new Soviet warships were commissioned and deployments expanded in duration and reach. Intent assessments affected by the mirroring fallacy predominated, particularly during a period of mild panic in the West as Soviet naval expansion peaked in the 1970s. Misperceptions of Soviet naval intent as aggressive led to a dramatic over-correction, particularly by the United States. US naval leaders used a fallaciously aggressive assessment of Soviet naval intent to argue for a substantial expansion of the US fleet. Coinciding with President Ronald Reagan's more confrontational approach to the Cold War, US strategic intent was codified as the seminal *US Maritime Strategy* of 1986.¹ The long-term nature of naval procurement and construction means the legacy of this *Strategy* remains to the present day in the power-projection focussed US Navy.

Today's oceans are still patrolled by the results of the 1980s US naval build-up, ready for the next naval challenger – the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy. To uncover the analytical mistakes and warn against the mirroring fallacy in the 21st Century, this paper uses primary sources and contemporary accounts to trace the analysis which led to the strategic surprise of worldwide Soviet Navy deployments. The root-causes were initial dismissal of the Soviet Union as a maritime power, followed by an over-reliance on novel intelligence collection technology. The volumes of data from imagery satellites, communications intercepts and acoustics crowded out more nuanced assessment. Assessments became capability-driven whilst thorough analysis of Soviet maritime intent was marginalised.

This United States Navy, with its allies and partners, is now preparing to deter China from aggressive actions at sea against its neighbours. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) form part of China's strategic approach to its near-abroad, but are not yet a blue water power projection force. When analysing China's approach to sea power, analysts must take care not to over-emphasise capability assessment and repeat the mistakes of the past by committing the mirroring fallacy.²

This study contributes to our understanding of the intelligence struggle at the heart of the Cold War. It complements existing naval histories by showing the dependence of many Western naval developments on flawed threat analysis of the Soviet Navy. Covering a broad historical period and using elements of intelligence studies, history and international relations, this paper revitalises debates about maritime intent which remain relevant for today's navies.

Threat Assessment, Intent and Capability

In national security, threat assessment is fundamental. Security resources are finite – they must be carefully allocated to face the greatest threat. Intelligence analysts typically use a version of this formula:

$$(\text{capability} + \text{intent}) \times \text{opportunity} = \text{threat}^3$$

¹ Admiral James D. Watkins, 'The Maritime Strategy', *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 112, no. 1 (January 1986): 995.

² Douglas Robb and Andrew Ward, 'Are We Sure China Views Sea Power the Same Way the West Does?', *Defense News*, 13 June 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/2024/06/13/are-we-sure-china-views-sea-power-the-same-way-the-west-does/>.

³ This formula has come to prominence since 11th September, 2001 as a way to assess the threat posed by terrorist groups. The opportunity variable is less relevant for strategic analysis but is included here for completeness.

Capability is defined as an actor's material and cognitive assets, e.g. base locations, weapons, platforms, training and experience. Capability is assessed in the past and present tenses; capabilities are actual rather than potential. Capability assessment is also comparative – different actors can be compared like-for-like.

In contrast to capability, intent is assessed in the future tense: what are an adversary's intentions to attack/invoke/intervene? Warning against attack is what makes intent analysis important, but also difficult. Intent analysis is partly an art in contrast to the science of enumerating capabilities; the precision of counting capabilities is frustratingly absent.⁴ Technology can assist, especially translation services, but intent analysis remains an inherently human activity.⁵ Intelligence failures, most notably the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2003-4, have led to professionalisation and standardisation of analysis. A 'probability yardstick' for expressing degrees of uncertainty is now in common usage.⁶ Nevertheless, intent is rarely clear. If an adversary is trying to hide their intentions, or does not even have defined intentions, producing a usable assessment becomes even more challenging.

Herein lies the problem. If intent is difficult or obscured, analysts tend to revert to capability assessment. As a CIA-published guide, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, put it in 1999: 'no matter how much expertise an analyst applies to interpreting the value systems of foreign entities, when the hard evidence runs out the tendency to project the analyst's own mind-set takes over.'⁷ The tangibility of empirical data can be tempting; there is a simplicity to capability assessment compared to the uncertainties of intent analysis. Nevertheless, eschewing assessments of an adversary's intent can lead to an over-dependence on capability assessment and worse still, *capability-led assessment*. This is where adversary intent is inferred or extrapolated from capability assessment, filling an analytical gap left by inadequate consideration of intent. The threat assessment formula above still produces a threat, but the capability variable carries most of the weight.

If intent is inferred from capability assessments, a risk of mirroring one's own intent emerges. In the absence of assessment of intent, an adversary's capabilities 'speak for themselves', i.e. analysts assume capabilities are for the same purposes as one's own.⁸ This paper will explain how capability assessment dominated UK and US naval intelligence during the Cold War allowing mirroring to affect intent analysis.

Intent analysis in the Cold War

Sometimes disparagingly characterised as 'Kremlinology', intent analysis of the Soviet Union remained high-level; rarely did intent analysis extend to the maritime domain. Promotions to Admiral rank in the Soviet Navy were reported in the Admiralty's *Intelligence*

⁴ Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 287; Robert Dover and Michael S. Goodman, eds., *Learning From the Secret Past: Cases in British Intelligence History* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 266.

⁵ 'It is a phenomenon of intelligence that for the billions expended on it, governments are rarely accurately informed about the mindset of actual or prospective foes.' Max Hastings, 'Weekend Essay: Our Politicians Risk Sleepwalking into Another Global War', *The Times*, 3 August 2024.

⁶ UK Defence Intelligence starting publishing daily situation reports on the war between Russia and Ukraine, in which the probability yardstick is used prominently to express degrees of certainty: 'Defence Intelligence - Communicating Probability', gov.uk, 17 February 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-intelligence-communicating-probability>.

⁷ Richards J. Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999).

⁸ Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, 241; Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 5th ed (Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2012), 256–58.

Report, but Soviet naval strategy was extrapolated from observed capabilities in a series of annual reviews starting in 1957, e.g. 'The principal threat from the Soviet Navy still lies in the vast potential of the enormous submarine fleet and the effect which it could have on Allied shipping.' Also based on capability assessments, the potential for global Soviet naval deployments was downplayed. The 1959 review announced the end of the post-war Soviet naval recapitalisation and cuts to planned construction.⁹

With the US and Royal navies preponderant across the world's oceans after the Second World War (a position reinforced by deployment to Korea 1950-53), now centralised intelligence organisations did not appreciate a maritime security threat from the Soviet Union. The dominant intelligence question for the newly civilianised bodies such as the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee and the US Central Intelligence Agency was the existential risk of first-use of nuclear weapons. The focus on strategic intent and nuclear warfare meant capability-led assessment dominated conventional military intelligence, especially assembling accurate orders-of-battle for the Soviet armed forces. From the mid-1960s onwards, increased Soviet naval *capability* was interpreted as indicating aggressive *intent* leading to an overall assessment that the Soviet Navy was threatening.

Problematically, in many intelligence organisations the scientific work to accurately quantify capability was separated from holistic all-source strategic assessment of intent. Capability assessment often drew analysts from the scientific, technical and engineering communities, whereas assessing intent was and remains largely the preserve of area studies experts including those with local knowledge and language skills. Both these areas of expertise have potential blind spots and biases. In particular, focussing only on the material part of the formula (capability) risks missing the subtleties of intent.¹⁰

Some naval analysts, notably Robert Herrick and Michael MccGwire questioned the capability-dominated status quo and analysed Soviet maritime intent at face value. Herrick had been assistant naval attaché in Moscow before leaving the US Navy for academia in 1965. He correctly identified that Soviet naval strategy was fundamentally defensive by carefully reading the available source material in Russian. His Columbia University doctoral thesis was published by the Naval Institute Press as *Soviet Naval Strategy: Fifty Years of Theory and Practice* in 1968.¹¹ By 1988 Herrick recognised that mirroring was occurring in Western analysis of the Soviet Navy, writing in *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy*: 'the problem of mirror-imaging the Soviet Navy as basically like the US and other Free World navies is a severe one for officers of large Free World navies.'¹² Michael MccGwire, a former Royal Navy intelligence officer working as an academic in Canada, argued that Soviet naval development was straightforwardly a series of defensive reactions to Western navies, especially the threat of airstrikes from aircraft carriers and the development of submarine-launched ballistic missiles.¹³

However, warnings against mirroring and for a greater focus on intent found few willing listeners during the Cold War. Realists correctly pointed out that intent was variable, whereas capability, especially naval capability, changed only gradually. If the Soviets had

⁹ 'A Review of the Soviet Navy and Naval Air Force in 1957', *ADM 223/241 Quarterly Intelligence Report Q1 1958*, 10 April 1958, 5; 'A Review of the Soviet Navy and Naval Air Force', *ADM 223/441 Quarterly Intelligence Report Q1 1959*, 10 April 1959, 2-12.

¹⁰ Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, 240-51.

¹¹ Robert Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy: Fifty Years of Theory and Practice* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1968).

¹² Preface to Robert Herrick, *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy: Gorshkov's Inheritance* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1988) p.xi.

¹³ Michael MccGwire, 'The Background to Soviet Naval Developments', *World Today* (London, 1971); Michael MccGwire, 'Soviet Naval Programmes', in *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, ed. Paul J. Murphy, Studies in Communist Affairs ; v. 2. (Washington, D.C: United States Air Force, 1978), 100; Michael MccGwire, 'Soviet Sea Power - A New Kind of Navy', *Marine Policy* 4, no. 4 (1980); Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 180.

the naval capability to attack NATO convoys and intervene in conflicts worldwide, a defensive strategy was irrelevant – strategy could change overnight. John Mearsheimer termed this his ‘uncertainty principle’ and argued for a concentration on military hard power (i.e. capability) as the only solid indicator of threat available. This viewpoint was potentially destabilising and encouraged arms races of the kind which started to develop between the Soviet and US Navies in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, hard power capability-led analysis held strong sway for security-minded politicians during the Cold War.¹⁴

Downplaying the Soviet threat also undermined the political case for investment in Western navies, especially the most sensitive and capital-intensive weapons programme to date: nuclear-powered submarines. Furthermore, capability assessments depended on expensively acquired new intelligence collection systems such as imagery satellites and deep-ocean hydrophone arrays. The competitive and comparative nature of Cold War military intelligence bred a mirror-image mentality; both sides copied one other’s capabilities. Copying was encouraged by intelligence collection methods which focussed on capability rather than intent. Collecting intelligence inside adversary political or military decision-making circles was difficult. In contrast, collecting on capabilities could be passive (e.g. imagery) or achieved by targeting human sources working at lower levels of seniority. The Soviet submarine programme benefitted greatly from human intelligence purloined from the Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment at Portland in the 1950s by Harry Houghton and Ethel Gee and their Soviet handler Konon Molody. Advances in Soviet submarine quietening have been ascribed to intelligence provided by the Walker spy ring operating inside the US Navy between 1968 and 1985.¹⁵

Intent analysis inferred from capability assessment – the Mirroring Fallacy defined

Mirroring is ‘the tendency to underestimate the differences in the beliefs and objectives of foreign protagonists, which tends to lead to the belief that others will act in much the same way that we would.’¹⁶ Awareness of the human tendency to mirror is important for dispassionate assessment; it can be defended as natural human instinct. When facing something unfamiliar, we seek what we know amidst uncertainty.¹⁷ In intelligence analysis, mirroring or ‘mirror-imaging’ is a known source of bias which can skew assessments. Post-Iraq, professionalisation of analysis in the UK and US intelligence communities attempts to mitigate this bias problem through structured analytical techniques.

Sometimes mirroring is an analytical shortcut employed for want of time or to make up for a lack of subject matter expertise. In military intelligence, mirroring used as a shortcut becomes a problem when experienced field officers turn their attention from leading their own troops to analysing adversary manoeuvres. Recognising some of what they see, this type of analyst reverts to their own experience and interprets adversary activity as a mirror of their own practice. As capability analysis is based on known facts and experience,

¹⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 30–32; Jonathan Kirshner, ‘The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China’, *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 1 (March 2012): 53–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066110373949>; David Blagden, ‘When Does Competition Become Conflict? Technology, Geography, and the Offense–Defense Balance’, *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (11 August 2021): ogab007, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab007>.

¹⁵ Sherry Sontag and Christopher Drew, *Blind Man’s Bluff: The Untold Story of Cold War Submarine Espionage* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 248–51; Christopher M. Andrew, *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 685–86; Trevor Barnes, *Dead Doubles: The Portland Spy Ring*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020); Anthony R. Wells, *Between Five Eyes: 50 Years of Intelligence Sharing* (Oxford: Casemate, 2020), 74–77.

¹⁶ *Quick Wins for Busy Analysts* (Professional Head of Defence Intelligence Analysis, 2015), 5, https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/quick_wins_for_busy_analysts; Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 8; Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, 181.

¹⁷ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2012), 185. Mirroring is an example of ‘the operation of heuristics that often substitute an easy question for the harder one that was asked.’

analysis tainted by mirroring can have strong consensus-building potential in an intelligence organisation, increasing the potential for flawed analysis to perpetuate.¹⁸

Mirroring can also be characterised as belying a lack of analytical imagination or analytical conservatism – only considering courses of action one's own side would consider. At the strategic level, failing to appreciate that national interests are mutable, i.e. different between otherwise like-minded states, can lead to mirroring.¹⁹ Solutions to mirroring include investing in cultural and linguistic understanding of adversaries to diversify analysis, and 'red teaming'. A 'red team' is a group of analysts separated from the main group and charged with thinking like the adversary, with the goal of spoiling the 'blue' team's plans in scenarios and war games.²⁰

Capability-led Assessment and the Mirroring Fallacy in the Cold War

Perceptions of military symmetry between NATO and the Warsaw Pact made mirroring more likely. Both sides strove to keep up with each other in a series of arms races; balance meant stability. In the Soviet Union, this 'correlation of forces' was a vital measure of security, particularly the number of nuclear weapons and conventional forces stationed in Central Europe. Taken to its logical conclusion in nuclear strategy, symmetry resulted in the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Such comparisons emphasise quantity over quality, leaving little to no room for considerations of intent. Although the West subscribed to MAD, no intelligence was ever forthcoming that the Soviets subscribed to an analogous concept. Instead, mirror-image intent was inferred from Soviet capability.²¹

Capability-led assessment can occur in all strategic settings – *The Military Balance*, published annually by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, is an inherently quantitative rather than qualitative analysis – but naval analysis is particularly prone to mirroring. *Janes Fighting Ships* engenders a sense of equivalence between units of similar displacement and armament. *Janes* is organised first by country, then by warship classification, i.e. aircraft carrier, destroyer, frigate etc. These classifications reinforce the impression of similarity between different navies and encourage capability-led assessment. Naval analyst Ken Booth refers to this method of assessment as the 'Janes approach.'²²

Extrapolating adversary intent from capability causes mirroring of one's own intent. The expectations of adversary behaviour which follow from such mirroring can be erroneous. If such expectations inform strategic decisions, whole fleets can be constructed against threats which have been over-emphasised, under-emphasised, or misunderstood. The inherent flexibility of maritime power usually mitigates against complete strategic failure,

¹⁸ Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, 249–50; Milo Jones and Philippe Silberzahn, *Constructing Cassandra: Reframing Intelligence Failure at the CIA, 1947-2001* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 132.

¹⁹ Suzanne Raine, 'Failing to Understand Adversaries Creates a Vicious Circle of Tensions', *RUSI Commentary* (blog), 25 April 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/failing-understand-adversaries-creates-vicious-circle-tensions>; Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, 70; Robert S. Sinclair, *Thinking and Writing: Cognitive Science and Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 2010), 1–7; Shane Britten, 'Intelligence Failures Are Analytical Failures', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10, no. 7 (2018): 12–18.

²⁰ Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 256; *Quick Wins for Busy Analysts*, 22–25; Benjamin B. Fischer, 'A New Approach to Intelligence: Book Review of Milo Jones and Philippe Silberzahn: Constructing Cassandra: Reframing Intelligence Failure at the CIA, 1947–2001 (2013)', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence* 29, no. 3 (2 July 2016): 616, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2016.1148498>.

²¹ Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 257.

²² Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy*, 180–82. An active trade in second hand warships reinforces the concept of equivalence between navies, despite re-flagged ships belonging to different navies with different strategies from the building nation. See for example Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* commissioned in 2012, laid down as *Riga* in Ukraine in 1985 but renamed *Varyag* after the fall of the Soviet Union.

but misallocation of resources and unnecessary deployments of warships become more likely if mirroring affects strategic analysis.²³

Novel intelligence reinforcing capability assessment in Cold War naval analysis

In 1965's *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*, Sherman Kent divided intelligence assessment into 'current-reportorial', 'basic-descriptive' and 'speculative-evaluative'. Capability assessment falls into the second category: 'basic-descriptive' information of the enemy's dispositions – the order-of-battle. But all three types of assessment are necessary to fully understand an adversary, including 'speculative-evaluative' assessment of intent.²⁴ New intelligence collection technologies which came online during the Cold War made capability assessment particularly preponderant in the naval domain. For example, counting the number of Soviet submarines in commission was a simpler task than counting the number of land mines in the Soviet inventory or accurately assessing troop numbers in Red Army divisions in Central Europe.

'Current-reportorial' or operational intelligence (OPINT) consumed considerable intelligence resources. In the UK, tracking Soviet ships and submarines using all available intelligence sources continued the wartime work of the Operational Intelligence Centre (OIC) in the Admiralty Citadel on Horse Guards Parade. After the war, the US Office of Naval Intelligence set up a Current Intelligence Section inside the Pentagon building, modelled on the Admiralty's OIC. By the 1960s, naval intelligence on both sides of the Atlantic had 'basic-descriptive' and 'current-reportorial' intelligence well organised and approaching the level of coverage and sophistication achieved during the Second World War.²⁵

Data from new collection technologies allowing exhaustive analysis of Soviet naval capability. Subjective information on Soviet intent was either unavailable or dismissed as propaganda. Soviet intent was inferred in UK and US intelligence circles based on historical precedent and extrapolation. For example, growth in the Soviet submarine force was tracked, but the forces was assessed to be intended to fulfil a similar role to the German U-boat arm in the Second World War, i.e. attacking Allied merchant convoys. Soviet construction of landing ships in the late 1960s and 1970s and the re-establishment of the Naval Infantry in 1964 led to assessments that these capabilities would be used for expeditionary warfare akin to the US Marine Corps' Pacific campaigns in the Second World War. Late on in the Cold War, Soviet aircraft-carrying ships were assumed to be for the same power projection purposes as Western aircraft carriers.²⁶

²³ Adversaries can also deliberately encourage the propensity to mirror, from simple deceptions up to attempt to influence behaviour through 'reflexive control'. Maria W. R. De Goeij, 'Reflexive Control: Influencing Strategic Behavior', *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 53, no. 4 (20 November 2023), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3262>.

²⁴ Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1965), 8.

²⁵ Andrew Boyd, *British Naval Intelligence Through the Twentieth Century*. (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2020), 571; Patrick Beesley, *Very Special Intelligence: The Story of the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre 1939-45* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977); James L. George, ed., *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 4–5; Christopher A Ford, David Alan Rosenberg, and Randy Carol Balano, *The Admirals' Advantage: U.S. Navy Operational Intelligence in World War II and the Cold War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 33; 'Office of Naval Intelligence - Our History', n.d., <https://www.oni.navy.mil/About/Heritage/>.

²⁶ Maj John J. Carroll USMC, 'The Soviet Naval Infantry' (Master of Military Art and Science, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1977), 109, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA047604.pdf>; Bruce W. Watson, *Red Navy at Sea: Soviet Naval Operations on the High Seas, 1956-1980*, Westview Special Studies on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Boulder, Colorado: Westview / Arms and Armour Press, 1982), 111–12; Norman Polmar, 'The Soviet Navy: Landing Their Landing Force', *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 113, no. 1 (January 1987): 1007; Commander James John Tritten USN, 'Soviet Amphibious, Mine, and Coastal Patrol-Forces', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986).

During the Cold War, the quantity of capability information increased to such a degree that it probably crowded out more nuanced strategic assessments of Soviet intent.²⁷ Kent's 'speculative-evaluative' intelligence decreased in value when so much accurate data on capability was available. When providing all-source assessment to political decisionmakers, technical information began to outweigh more traditional assessment. This effect was emphasised by newer forms of collection being administered by the armed forces, as opposed to the traditional political-diplomatic preserve of assessments derived from human-to-human contact. Military analysts were more capability-minded than civilian analysts because of their roles as operators of Western equipment, including intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms.²⁸ Before the surveillance technology revolution, i.e. in the early Cold War, insights from Western representatives in Germany, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and Scandinavia all contributed to understanding the new adversary. As the confrontation settled into an uneasy equilibrium, the relative importance of these human intelligence reports decreased as the quantity of technical collection increased.²⁹

Naval assets such as ships and port infrastructure are an ideal target for air or space-based reconnaissance. As Michael MccGwire put it in 1973:

'Analysts of Soviet naval policy are unusually fortunate in having available a range of specialised and reasonably concrete data from which to derive, and against which to test, their hypotheses. By its very nature, the significant evidence comprises large, discrete items (warships) whose composition can only change gradually in number and characteristics. Such evidence is also available outside the country's closed land frontiers.'³⁰

The departure of a warship from a naval base can be observed by its empty berth, especially from space. The United States' Corona spy satellite programme made crewed reconnaissance missions obsolete – especially relevant following the shooting down of Gary Powers' U-2 aircraft over the Soviet Union on 1 May 1960. Had Powers completed his mission, he would have flown over and photographed Severodvinsk in the heavily militarised Russian high north for the first time. The advent of spy satellites regularised and normalised overhead imagery intelligence (IMINT) of these sensitive areas.³¹

Starting in the 1960s, the United States began to lay hydrophones in the North Atlantic to detect Soviet ships and submarines as they moved between ports in northern Russia and the Atlantic. These hydrophone arrays generated acoustic intelligence, abbreviated to ACINT. The Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS) relied on an accurate and up-to-date library of recordings of the underwater sounds made by Soviet and friendly units, so that one could be discriminated from the other. Some of the most sensitive submarine intelligence gathering missions by US and Royal Navy submarines during the Cold War collected the acoustic signatures of new Soviet ships exercising in the Barents Sea.³²

²⁷ Michael I. Handel, ed., *Leaders and Intelligence* (London: Frank Cass, 1989), 4.

²⁸ Michael Herman, *Intelligence Services in the Information Age: Theory and Practice* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 191–94.

²⁹ For example, the British naval attaché in Stockholm provided the Admiralty in London with information on the Soviet Baltic Fleet. See Andrew Ward, 'Has the Cold War Started yet? Evidence from the Royal Navy's *Monthly Intelligence Report* 1946–52', *Journal of Intelligence History*, 31 May 2022, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16161262.2022.2081771>; 'ADM 223/843 Correspondence with Naval Attaché, Moscow', 1951.

³⁰ Michael MccGwire, 'Soviet Naval Developments: Capability and Context. Seminar on Soviet Naval Developments (Dalhousie, Canada).', Praeger Special Studies in International Politics and Government (New York: Praeger, 1973), 176.

³¹ Paul Maddrell, 'Britain's Exploitation of Occupied Germany for Scientific and Technical Intelligence on the Soviet Union' (DPhil, Cambridge University, 1998), 324; Gary E. Weir and Walter J. Boyne, *Rising Tide: The Untold Story of the Russian Submarines That Fought the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 159.

³² Peter Hennessy and James Jinks, *The Silent Deep: The Royal Navy Submarine Service since 1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); Sontag and Drew, *Blind Man's Bluff*.

Once ships leave home ports, radio traffic between them and back to shore headquarters can be intercepted. Even if the content remains encoded, 'traffic analysis' provides an indication of activity levels. Building on the successes of 'Ultra' Enigma decrypts in the Second World War, the contribution of signals intelligence (SIGINT) steadily increased throughout the Cold War period.³³ Ahead of its time, in 1964 the US Navy set up a data processing department to investigate ways of using the information flowing in from new SIGINT sources for intelligence analysis. Whereas an analyst might previously have digested a limited amount of information then used their skill and judgement to make an assessment, as the Cold War wore on, keeping up with the 'fire hose' of incoming collection overtook subjective analysis. In such circumstances, detecting change became a day-by-day, hour-by-hour activity to track individual units, rather than broader analysis of intent and adversary strategy. In Kent's classification, 'current-reportorial' operational intelligence outshone 'speculative-evaluative' assessment. Retrospective *insight* was provided from observed Soviet movements, whereas prospective *foresight* was lacking.

The volume of imagery, signals and acoustic intelligence contributed to a steady increase in understanding of Soviet naval capability during the Cold War. Early records show the paucity of Western understanding of even basic information such as numbers of ships in the Soviet fleets.³⁴ By the 1970s, technology provided much greater coverage of the Soviet Navy; the 'out of the blue' appearance of the Soviet Navy around the world was well documented. However, this understanding was skewed towards Soviet capability rather than intent. Lost time needed to be made up from the early Cold War; prior to its emergence as a globally active fleet, the Soviet Navy had been largely ignored by Western analysts.

Downplaying the Soviet naval threat in the early Cold War

The legacy of the Second World War lingered long after 1945, distracting the postwar Royal and US Navies from addressing the Soviet threat. The transition from the actual threat of the Axis navies to the potential threat from the communist bloc was not instantaneous. Other priorities occupied navies in the late 1940s before the Cold War established itself as the dominant geopolitical feature in 1948 – the year of the Berlin blockade and airlift and communist takeover of Czechoslovakia.³⁵ Early post-war official documents are replete with re-examinations of battles fought against the Germans, Italians and Japanese. The Admiralty's *Monthly Intelligence Report* serialised interviews from captivity with German Admiral Dönitz, head of the German U-boat force and later Commander-in-Chief and Führer to shed light on wartime from an enemy perspective. The *Naval Review*, an independent Royal Navy journal, was still more than 50 per cent wartime coverage as late as 1948.³⁶

³³ Traffic analysis was pioneered in the Second World War at the Government Code and Cypher School, Bletchley Park to provide some measure of insight during periods in which British codebreakers were unable to break the German Enigma cypher. See Beesley, *Very Special Intelligence*; R. V. (Reginald Victor) Jones, *Most Secret War, Most Secret War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978); Richard J. Aldrich, *GCHQ: The Uncensored Story of Britain's Most Secret Intelligence Agency* (London: HarperPress, 2011); John Robert Ferris, *Behind the Enigma: The Authorized History of GCHQ, Britain's Secret Cyber-Intelligence Agency* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

³⁴ For example the Soviet Pacific Fleet based at Vladivostok. See 'Soviet Naval Strength in the Far East' in *Monthly Intelligence Report*, 'ADM 223/225 March 1947', 1947, 34–37.

³⁵ The Royal Navy's *Monthly Intelligence Report* moved in a stridently Cold War direction from March 1948 onwards with the publication of a map 'the March of Militant Communism' and articles on the Czech coup. 'ADM 223/227 March 1948', 1948.

³⁶ 'ADM 223/223 February 1946', 1946, 39. <https://www.naval-review.com/journal-editions/>

The return of deployed units and the demobilization of conscripted servicemen was the most pressing concern in 1945-47. The Royal Navy was nearly a million strong by the end of the war, yet by 1949 had contracted by 85 per cent to 144,500. A Royal Air Force mutiny in the Far East Air Force in January 1946 highlighted the importance of returning service people home and into civilian employment as soon as possible. In the United States, the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act (the 'G.I. Bill') aimed to ease this transition through government provision of higher education.³⁷

The elaborate naval intelligence structure which had grown up in wartime was rapidly dismantled as the armed forces shrank. The Admiralty's wartime *Weekly Intelligence Reports* for each theatre went global and became *Monthly* in January 1946 then *Quarterly* from the second half of 1954.³⁸ Intelligence rationalisation was not just inevitable retrenchment. In the UK, a concerted effort was made to regularise and partly civilianise the intelligence community to provide forewarning of future conflict. As the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee reported in the 'Post War Organisation of Intelligence' in September 1945: 'The less money we have to spend on preparations for war, the more important it is to have a first-class intelligence system in place.' US external intelligence services were amalgamated into a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in July 1947.³⁹

For naval analysts who remained at their posts facing a new geopolitical reality, an intelligence shortcut existed in the form of captured German material. Removal of military materiel from the occupied eastern portion of Germany influenced Soviet naval capabilities into the 1950s. In the absence of intelligence coverage of the Soviet Union itself, captured German material became valuable in the West once the Soviets had been identified as the principal adversary. In May 1945, 30 Assault Unit, the Naval Intelligence Division (NID) commando force, captured the complete German naval archive at Tambach Castle in Bavaria; a tranche of Abwehr (German military intelligence) and Luftwaffe intelligence material reached London in 1946; transcripts of German naval prisoner-of-war interrogations continued to be filed. These intelligence hauls allowed NID to assess the capabilities of U-boat prototypes and other technologies captured by the Soviets, and to interpret German had experience of fighting the Soviet Navy in the Baltic in 1944-45. These German insights were shared between NID and the Office of Naval Intelligence in Washington, DC.⁴⁰

Information from Germany, such as that captured by 30 Assault Unit, was overwhelmingly technical, i.e. capability assessment as details of German technological advances came to light. Information reaching the UK included reports from naval personnel remaining in occupied Germany, such as observers of the Soviet naval mission to Wilhelmshaven, attachés and even naval test pilots such as Eric 'Winkle' Brown.⁴¹ Rather than looking in detail at Soviet naval intent, assumptions were made based on these capabilities inherited or captured from Germany. In the process, the catharsis of discovering the details of wartime battles from the German side continued and were reported in publications such as

³⁷ David Childs, *Britain Since 1945: A Political History*, *Britain since 1945: A Political History*, 7th ed. (Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2012), 22; Eric J. Grove, *Vanguard to Trident: British Naval Policy Since World War II* (London: Bodley Head, 1987), 411; 'Servicemens' Readjustment Act (1944)', Pub. L. No. 346 (1944), <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/servicemens-readjustment-act#:~:text=Signed%20into%20law%20by%20President,WWII%20and%20later%20military%20conflicts>.

³⁸ 'ADM 223/223 January 1946', 1946; 'ADM 223/239 July 1954', 1954.

³⁹ Huw Dylan, *Defence Intelligence and the Cold War: Britain's Joint Intelligence Bureau 1945-1964* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

⁴⁰ Horst Boog, 'German Air Intelligence in the Second World War', *Intelligence and National Security* 5, no. 2 (April 1990): 350-424, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684529008432056>; Nicholas Rankin, *Ian Fleming's Commandos: The Story of 30 Assault Unit in WWII* (London: Faber, 2011); Ford, Rosenberg, and Balano, *The Admirals' Advantage*, 38; Richard J Aldrich, *Hidden Hand: Britain, America, and Cold War Secret Intelligence*. (London: John Murray, 2001), 253; 'ADM 223/475 Intelligence Collection Methods', 1947; Hennessy and Jinks, *The Silent Deep*, 52.

⁴¹ Eric 'Winkle' Brown, *Wings on My Sleeve* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), 159.

Monthly Intelligence Report and the *Naval Review*. For the NID, publishing review material covering the Second World War for the edification of a demobilising Fleet impeded fresh analysis of the Soviet Navy. Using dated German material in place of new analysis created a misleading dynamic. Western analysts downplayed the importance of the Soviet Navy by comparing it to the defeated Germans and dismissed early signs of expanded Soviet maritime intent.

New naval technology – effects on assessments of the Soviet Navy

The effects of the development of nuclear weapons, nuclear power, the guided missile and the jet aircraft, were felt in all navies. Before these new technologies could be analysed in the context of adversary navies, they needed to be assimilated by allied forces. Much of the UK's early Cold War benchmarking was against allied navies, particularly the United States and France, rather than the Soviets.⁴² Incorporating new technologies into allied navies was one side of a triangular analytical problem. Western navies also worked to understand the scientific advances made by the Axis in wartime, and the adoption of new technologies by the Soviet Union.⁴³ For example, air-independent propulsion used hydrogen peroxide to allow a submarine to remain underwater for longer than a traditional diesel engine-battery configuration. Experiments to launch captured V-2 rockets from floating platforms were considered.⁴⁴ Only once new technologies had been integrated into Western navies and the remarkable advances of the Germans fully understood did attention turn to the effect of new naval technologies on the Soviet Navy.

The Admiralty took until 1948 to fully address the Cold War as the new geopolitical reality. China became communist in 1949 then in 1950 global attention turned to the outbreak of the Korean War. In 1956 Britain, France and Israel colluded in the ill-fated Operation Musketeer, the seizure of the Suez Canal area. Supporting these operations was a priority for both intelligence collection and analysis at sea and ashore, at the expense of considering the potential of a Soviet naval challenge.⁴⁵

Analysis biases against the Soviet Union as a maritime power

Western naval analysis of the Soviet Union was further retarded by a series of biases. The primary sources bear out a lingering cultural bias against the Soviet Union as a credible sea power stretching back to the Royal Navy's experiences fighting the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War 1917-19.⁴⁶ The head of NID 16, the Naval Intelligence Division's Russia section in the Second World War, had visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s and recalled first-hand the horror of military purges and famine in Ukraine.⁴⁷ In the Second World War, the lesson inferred from the Eastern Front was of the Soviet Union as a land power rather than a 'natural' sea power like Great Britain. *Monthly Intelligence Report*

⁴² 'ADM 223/223 March 1946', 1946, 66; 'ADM 223/231 May 1950', 1950, 51; 'The Atom Bomb Versus Ships and People', *ADM 223/238 Monthly Intelligence Report for August 1953*, 10 September 1953, 34–38; Grove, *Vanguard to Trident*, 3–12; Fred W. Kacher and Douglas A. Robb, *Naval Officer's Guide to the Pentagon*, The U.S. Naval Institute Blue & Gold Professional Library (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 65.

⁴³ For example, *Monthly Intelligence Report* included the latest details of Soviet radar and infra-red equipment in 'ADM 223/239 April 1954', 1954, 3; 'USSR: Guided Weapons', *ADM 223/239 Monthly Intelligence Report for May 1954*, 10 June 1954, 24–26; Jones, *Most Secret War*.

⁴⁴ 'ADM 223/228 October 1948', 1948, 38–39; 'ADM 223/702 Soviet Exploitation of the German V2 Rocket', 1948; Hennessy and Jinks, *The Silent Deep*, 50; Boyd, *Naval Intelligence*, 524.

⁴⁵ 'ADM 223/238 July 1953', 1953.

⁴⁶ Steve R Dunn, *Battle in the Baltic: The Royal Navy and the Fight to Save Estonia and Latvia 1918-20*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2020).

⁴⁷ Aldrich, *Hidden Hand*, 21; 'ADM 223/257 Naval Intelligence Division: Staff and Duties', 1945.

declared in December 1946 that 'the continental nature of the country is responsible for a serious lack of seamanlike qualities in its personnel.'⁴⁸

The Soviets were aware of this bias against them – it may even have been a motivating factor for the recapitalisation of the Soviet Navy in the 1960s. Defending the Navy's role in the Second World War in 1976, the head of the Soviet Navy Admiral Gorshkov wrote: 'Hostile propaganda tirelessly affirmed that Russia was not a maritime but only a continental country and needed a fleet only for resolving the modest task of coastal defence.'⁴⁹ As the Royal Navy pored over the battles of the Second World War with the benefit of hindsight, the performance of the Red Fleet was dismissed as peripheral; for example submarine *K-21*'s failed torpedo attack on the German battleship *Tirpitz* in June 1942. Much was made of the subordination of the Soviet Navy to the Red Army. This arrangement was extrapolated into the postwar period, even as the Soviet Navy became an independent branch of the armed forces with theoretically equal status in February 1946.⁵⁰

Problematically, the performance of the Soviet Navy was compared with the defeated German Navy, particularly as German personnel and equipment were removed to the Soviet Union in the late 1940s. As agreed at Potsdam in August 1945, the Soviets received a share of the remnants of the defeated Axis navies. The former Italian battleship *Giulio Cesare*, renamed *Novorossiysk* under the Soviet ensign, sank in harbour at Sevastopol in the Black Sea in 1955, probably because of poor maintenance rather than the official reason of a leftover German limpet mine.⁵¹ Western naval equipment was retained by the Soviets beyond the originally agreed lend-lease deadlines, and when returned was reported as being in a poor state of repair. For example, HMS *Royal Sovereign* was returned to Britain in 1949 with seized gun mountings and had to be scrapped later that year.⁵²

Capability-led assessment takes hold

A bias against the Soviet Union as a credible naval adversary undermined assessments of Soviet naval intent. In the early Cold War, this capability-led assessment was reassuring for western naval analysts; with the exception of the submarine building programme. The Soviet Navy appeared to be the poor relation in the Soviet military system with only limited recapitalisation plans to make good wartime losses.⁵³ Bias against the Soviets as competent mariners continued up to the Cuban Missile Crisis, when Soviet submarines were outmatched by the US Navy in the latter's local waters. As late as 1964, the NID was reporting Soviet tactics and doctrine to still be in a 'generally formative state' when they and NATO exercised simultaneously in the Norwegian Sea.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ 'ADM 223/224 December 1946', 1946, 34.

⁴⁹ Sergei Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1976).

⁵⁰ V. P. Kuzin and V. I. Nikol'sky, *Voyenno-Morskoy Flot SSSR, 1945-1991* (St Petersburg: Historical Oceanic Society, 1996), https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/dcsppa/during_the_cold_war_did_the_ussr_make_any/; 'ADM 223/223 March 1946'; 'ADM 223/228 August 1948', 1948; 'C.C.H.H.', 'Book Review - The Red Fleet in the Second World War by Admiral Isakov', *The Naval Review* 35, no. 2 (May 1947): 181–82; Boyd, *Naval Intelligence*, 561.

⁵¹ Mark Carlson, 'The Explosion That Built the Soviet Navy: The Novorossiysk Disaster Ended the Age of the Russian Battleship and Ushered in the USSR's Nuclear-Powered Submarine Era', US Naval Institute, December 2023, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2023/december/explosion-built-soviet-navy>.

⁵² 'ADM 223/229 June 1949', 1949, 49; 'ADM 223/839 Procurement of Intelligence Whilst Negotiating Return of Lend-Lease Destroyers Lincoln and Georgetown', 1949; 'ADM 223/239 April 1954', 4; Donald W. Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1974), 473; Grove, *Vanguard to Trident*, 21.

⁵³ 'ADM 223/806 USSR and Satellites: Torpedo Development and Production', 1952.

⁵⁴ 'ADM 223/730 Q4 1964', 1964.

Submarines were the first and most enduring example of capability-led assessment. Scarred by German submarines interdicting the supply line from North America to Europe, the Royal Navy were anticipating a Third Battle of the Atlantic throughout the Cold War. In 1917 and again during 1941-42 German U-boats had sunk a dangerous proportion of merchant ships headed for the British Isles. Early Cold War indications of a growing Soviet submarine force fuelled the capability-led assessment that operations against vital sea lines of communication would be a main pillar of Soviet naval strategy. Probably influenced by their war service, US and Royal Navy officers assumed Soviet continuation and iteration of Dönitz' wartime strategy.⁵⁵

When fed into the threat assessment formula, these assumptions produced a threat which justified subsequent Western investments. These included anti-submarine warfare from the air, surface and underwater, early NATO anti-submarine exercises such as MARINER in 1953 and RUM TUB in 1957, a UK-US-Norway oceanographic data-sharing agreement in 1963, and construction of the SOSUS network for underwater detection.⁵⁶

Only a small number of analysts concentrated on Soviet naval intent. Outside government, few questioned the read-across from German strategy to assumed Soviet intent. At the strategic level, analytical expertise was concentrated on the risk of nuclear attack, with constant calls for more collection and analytical resource to forestall this cataclysm.⁵⁷ In traditional naval intelligence, operational intelligence and capability assessment dominated; Kent's 'current-reportorial' and 'basic-descriptive' categories, i.e. tracking Soviet ships and submarines and tabulating the Soviet order of battle (ORBATs). Mark Carlson at the US Naval Institute has summarised this period as follows:

'[The Soviet Navy] went largely unnoticed by Western powers, who were still riding high on their victory over the Axis. Focusing on atomic weapons, bombers, and the large fleet of aircraft carriers, the United States early on saw little threat from this mysterious nation. Added to this was Stalin's fanatical insistence on secrecy. Little solid information came from behind the Iron Curtain.'⁵⁸

The Soviet Navy as a hard target

In the 1950s, western navies began to lobby for intelligence collection on the Soviet Navy as the maritime arm of the recognised principal adversary. The activities in occupied Germany which brought naval officers from the two sides together had finished; intelligence from wartime or captured from the Germans had gone stale.⁵⁹ To forestall the outbreak of a Third World War, demand began to increase for intelligence collection over, in, and around the USSR, but collection was a challenge. Overhead (i.e. satellite) imagery was not yet available – photographic intelligence had to be collected by crewed aircraft. The vast geography of the Soviet Union made reconnaissance flights operationally

⁵⁵ 'ADM 223/230 August 1949', 1949, 34; 'ADM 223/235 March 1952', 1952, 26–27; Boyd, *Naval Intelligence*, 562; Edward Hampshire, *The Royal Navy in the Cold War Years, 1966-1990: Retreat and Revival* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2024), 12.

⁵⁶ Hennessy and Jinks, *The Silent Deep*; Malcolm Llewellyn-Jones, 'The Royal Navy on the Threshold of Modern Anti-Submarine Warfare, 1944-49' (PhD, King's College London, 2004); Grove, *Vanguard to Trident*, 42; Bryan Ranft, 'Sergei Gorshkov', in *Maritime Strategy and the Nuclear Age*, ed. Geoffrey Till, 2. ed (London: Macmillan, 1984), 196; Tom Wright, 'Aircraft Carriers and Submarines: Naval R&D in Britain in the Mid-Cold War', in *Cold War, Hot Science: Applied Research in Britain's Defence Laboratories, 1945-1990*, ed. Robert Bud and Phillip Gummert, Studies in the History of Science, Technology and Medicine, v. 7 (London: Science Museum, 2002), 149–50.

⁵⁷ Herrick, *Gorshkov's Inheritance*; Aldrich, *Hidden Hand*, 229.

⁵⁸ Carlson, 'The Explosion That Built the Soviet Navy'.

⁵⁹ Aldrich, *Hidden Hand*, 522.

challenging, even without the risk of interception by Soviet fighters. Dockyards in the strategically significant Russian high north were beyond the range of aircraft of the era.⁶⁰

Signals intelligence was initially plentiful until the Soviets changed from machine encoding to an unbreakable one-time pad method on 29 October 1948, a date known as 'Black Friday' in the US, UK and Australian agencies participating in Project VENONA, the successor to decrypting German Enigma at Bletchley Park.⁶¹ Human intelligence therefore remained important but was challenging in a closed society permeated by a paranoid security culture. The results of human intelligence (HUMINT) gathering were often so closely guarded that failure to disseminate probably occurred. Furthermore, collection requirements from naval analysts probably failed to filter through the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) or to CIA to agents in the field.⁶²

In this early stage of the nuclear age, the primary focus for national intelligence collection was on Soviet nuclear capability and intent. The new technologies of long-range ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons occupied much of the attention of the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) into the 1960s. Below the strategic level, readiness for a land invasion across the intra-German border was the primary *military* intelligence focus throughout the Cold War; naval intelligence collection was a lesser priority. As Boyd writes 'Neither SIS nor CIA ever acquired reliable intelligence from human sources on the Soviet nuclear submarine programme.' In the 1960s the British-run agent Oleg Penkovsky was vital in exploding the myth of the bomber and missile 'gaps' between the West and the Soviet Union and therefore restoring strategic balance.⁶³ By contrast, the Soviet Navy received much less attention until the deployment of ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) in the late 1960s. When the Soviet Navy surface fleet suddenly appeared with new ships across the world's oceans in the 1970s, there was no equivalent to Penkovsky's access and human intelligence reports to temper Western alarm.

Soviet naval intent and strategic theory

Despite capability shortcomings, its second-hand Axis equipment and the demands of postwar reconstruction, there was Soviet intent to become a sea power. Before his death in March 1953, Josef Stalin had authorised construction of a Western-style surface fleet of battleships, aircraft carriers and escort warships.⁶⁴ Although never realised, this plan represented one conception of Russian sea power stretching back to Tsarist times, evoking the glory of Peter the Great's fleets and the need to redeem the chastening defeat by the Japanese Navy at the Battle of Tsushima in 1905. This 'Old School' envisaged fleet-on-fleet engagements with NATO navies and the construction of battleships and aircraft carriers. The Old School can therefore be characterised in similar terms to the American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) with his emphasis on decisive battle.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Stephen Robert Twigge, Edward Hampshire, and Graham Macklin, *British Intelligence: Secrets, Spies and Sources* (Kew: The National Archives, 2008), 187–90; Aldrich, *Hidden Hand*, 523; Maddrell, 'Britain's Exploitation of Occupied Germany for Scientific and Technical Intelligence on the Soviet Union', 311–24.

⁶¹ Aldrich, *Hidden Hand*, 249; R. Gerald Hughes, Peter Jackson, and Leonard V. Scott, eds., *Exploring Intelligence Archives: Enquiries into the Secret State*, Studies in Intelligence Series (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 20; Andrew, *The Secret World*, 672.

⁶² Boyd, *Naval Intelligence*, 557.

⁶³ Reginald V. Jones, *Reflections on Intelligence* (London: Heinemann, 1989), 16; Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 23; Boyd, *Naval Intelligence*, 580.

⁶⁴ Jürgen Rohwer and Mikhail S. Monakov, *Stalin's Ocean-Going Fleet: Soviet Naval Strategy and Shipbuilding Programmes 1935-1953* (London: Frank Cass, 2001); Weir and Boyne, *Rising Tide*, 29–30; Herrick, *Gorshkov's Inheritance*, 269.

⁶⁵ Herrick, *Gorshkov's Inheritance*, 256; Alexander Hill, 'Book Review - Soviet Naval Doctrine and Policy 1956 – 1986 (3 Volumes) by Robert Waring Herrick', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 2007): 173–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390701210871>; Ben Power, 'Dichotomy of Strategy: Gorshkov and the Ascendancy of Soviet Sea Power', *The Naval Review* 105, no. 1 (2017): 22.

A vigorous debate ran in Soviet military circles before the Second World War over the role of the Navy, including by serving officers in the Russian naval review *Morskoy Sbornik*. Opposing the Old School was a 'Young School' advocating commerce interdiction – cruiser warfare against enemy sea lines of communication. The Soviet Young School consciously followed the intellectual lead of the 19th century French *jeune école* and the 1930s ideas of Admiral Raoul Castex. The goal was a usable strategy for a weak or small navy facing a stronger opponent. Soviet proponents of the Young School advocated for submarines and naval aircraft as the ultimate commerce raiders, immune to Western blockade and able to challenge battlefleets using asymmetric naval warfare. A third 'Soviet School' emerged in the 1930s, defined mainly by opposition to the expense of the Old School and limited, 'defeatist' ambition of the Young School. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Soviet Navy operated as 'faithful helper', supporting the flanks of the Red Army to provide sealift, riverine skirmishing and naval gunfire support. Wartime experience emphasised a concept later common in Western publications: 'jointery' between the armed forces under unified command.⁶⁶

The Soviet School most closely resembles what Admiral Sergei Gorshkov would propound as Commander in Chief of the Soviet Navy during the Cold War: a fleet large enough to constrain the freedom of action of the traditional Western navies with the longer-term goal of command of the sea in specific areas for a limited time. Adding an element of progression through time neatly aligned the Soviet School with Marxist-Leninist doctrine of the inevitable progress of history. Furthermore, unsightly comparisons to traditional Western naval theory were removed. Nevertheless, 'Soviet School' ideas had some similarities to British naval theorist Sir Julian Corbett's prescriptions for weaker navies facing stronger ones, including a 'fleet-in-being' i.e. the *potential* for the Soviet Navy to contest sea control without constant patrols and exercises. 'Force equalization' was the Soviet School's strategic objective, whether symmetrically, by building traditional warships, or asymmetrically with submarines, aircraft and, later, anti-ship missiles.⁶⁷

The extent to which conceptions of sea power permeated Soviet public consciousness is difficult to judge in a closed society in the pre-information age. A Soviet naval league, DOSFLOT, was founded in 1948 with publicised rallies, parades and a youth section, although it was merged into a combined armed forces league, DOSAAF, three years later. Most Soviet urban centres were far from the coast where 'the seagull never flies' and the shared memory of the Great Patriotic War was of fighting the Germans in European Russia rather than service at sea.⁶⁸ Therefore, internal propaganda in favour of the Soviet Navy was an important role for senior Soviet naval officers, especially the Commander-in-Chief. As the US Chief of Naval Operations put it in a 1981 report, Gorshkov was 'tutor to the Kremlin on maritime matters' throughout the Cold War.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Captain Roger W. Barnett USN and Edward J. Lacey, 'Their Professional Journal', *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 108, no. 10 (October 1982), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1982/october/their-professional-journal>; Bryan Ranft and Geoffrey Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 64–67; Kevin Rowlands, ed., *21st Century Gorshkov: The Challenge of Sea Power in the Modern Era*, 21st Century Foundations (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2017), 13; Geoffrey Till, 'Russia: A Sea Power of a Sort?', in *The Sea in Russian Strategy*, ed. Andrew Monaghan and Richard Connolly, Russian Strategy and Power (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), 68.

⁶⁷ Sir Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, ed. Eric J. Grove, Classics of Sea Power (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 231; Herrick, *Gorshkov's Inheritance*, 111; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 470; Power, 'Dichotomy of Strategy', 24.

⁶⁸ 'The Soviet Naval Mentality, Part II', *ADM 223/446 Quarterly Intelligence Review* Q2 1960, 11 July 1960, 32–37.

⁶⁹ 'Soviet Paramilitary Societies Merge into DOSAAF USSR' (CIA, 1951), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00809A000700010655-2.pdf>; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 476; Edward Wegener, *The Soviet Naval Offensive: An Examination of the Strategic Role of Soviet Naval Forces in the East-West Conflict*, trans. Henning Wegener (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 128; *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Dept. of the Navy, 1985), 12. Some authors have likened the postwar Soviet Union to pre-First World War Imperial Germany, reading across from the 1898 German Naval League to DOSFLOT and casting Gorshkov as a latter-day Tirpitz, i.e. an arch-navalist. Both Gorshkov and Tirpitz did enhance the position and reputation of the sea service in their respective states and challenged superpowers with sea power, but symmetry stretches the evidence. Gorshkov and the Soviet Navy were never as influential

Old School ideas were abandoned after Stalin's death, including emphasis in the five-year plans on the heavy industry needed to build battleships. Khrushchev was sceptical of large, expensive surface ships in the nuclear age, deriding them as 'metal eaters' and planning to scrap or place in reserve nine-tenths of the surface fleet. Soviet industry switched resources to missile and space engineering and some consumer goods to raise living standards. Except for steady development of submarines, including nuclear powered vessels and boats capable of firing long-range missiles, Khrushchev de-emphasised the Navy and narrowed its strategic scope to an echo of its wartime role: coastal defence and 'faithful helper' to the Red Army. He is said to have ridiculed his own Navy in front of foreign diplomats during a rowing demonstration on a Moscow park lake in 1958: 'See over there, that is our Fleet. That is all they can do.' During a visit to Britain with Premier Bulganin in April 1956, Khrushchev gave a speech at the Royal Naval College at Greenwich outlining a future missile and submarine-centric Soviet Navy. This was dismissed as propaganda in the 'materialistic' West. There was little capability to back-up Soviet aspirations; Gorshkov's early articles stating Soviet intent were dismissed as 'the usual bombast.'⁷⁰

Admiral Sergei Gorshkov



Fig. 2 – Sergei Gorshkov as Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union in the 1970s. (Michurin/SovFoto)⁷¹

domestically or internationally as Tirpitz in Germany. Gorshkov did not consciously ape nor challenge the Royal Navy or US Navy as Tirpitz had done with the British. Navalism likely never permeated the fabric of Soviet society in the same way as in Britain or Germany in the early twentieth century. See Paul Kennedy, 'Introduction to the 2017 Edition' in *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, London: Penguin, 2017 and Ronald H. Spector, 'The Hitherto Unlikely Scenario', in *At War at Sea: Naval Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 2002), 384; Alva Bowen, 'The Anglo-German and Soviet-American Naval Rivalries - Some Comparisons', in *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, ed. Paul J. Murphy, Studies in Communist Affairs; v. 2. (Washington, D.C: United States Air Force, 1978), 76; Jeremy Stocker, *Architects of Continental Seapower Comparing Tirpitz and Gorshkov* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

⁷⁰ 'ADM 223/240 Q2 1956', 1956, 4; MG Saunders, ed., *The Soviet Navy* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1958), 116; 'Review of the Soviet Navy, 1963', *ADM 223/727 Quarterly Intelligence Report Q1 1964*, 31 March 1964, 3–14; Siegfried Breyer and Norman Polmar, *Guide to the Soviet Navy*, 2d ed (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1977), 32; Admiral W. F. Bringle USN and A. B. Sainsbury, 'The Challenge Posed by the Soviet Navy', *The RUSI Journal* 118, no. 2 (1973): 11; Hennessy and Jinks, *The Silent Deep*, 153; Stephen Chumbley and Robert Gardiner, eds., *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1947 - 1995* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1995), 343. Bringle reports Khrushchev as boasting in 1959 that the Soviet Navy 'has enough submarines we could assign some of them to catch herring in the North Sea.'

⁷¹ 'Soviet Military, Naval, Air Force, KGB and Militia Uniforms and Insignia' (Central Intelligence Agency, 1 January 1961), 18, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-02646R000400360001-4.pdf>.

For most of the Cold War, the Soviet Navy had a single commander in chief. Sergei Georgyevich Gorshkov (1910 – 1988) joined the Frunze Naval Academy in Leningrad in 1927 and spent the pre-war years navigating and commanding destroyers in the Soviet Pacific Fleet based at Vladivostok. During the Second World War he served in the Black Sea area, working in combined arms operations with Red Army units fighting on the Eastern front. During these combined operations, the Red Navy was usually subordinate to the requirements of the land campaign as a ‘faithful helper.’ Gorshkov commanded naval elements of the recapture of Crimea in 1944 and ended the war as Rear Admiral of the Azov Sea and Danube flotillas at 35 years of age. Gorshkov was exposed to the Army commanders who would become politically important after the death of Stalin, including Commissars Khrushchev and Brezhnev and Marshals Zhukov and Grechko (future Ministers of Defence).⁷²

Key to Gorshkov’s success was his political adaptability. As a middle-ranking officer stationed in the Russian Far East before the war, he had survived Stalin’s 1930s military purges. After the war, he became an advocate of the new technologies changing navies across the world, especially the nuclear submarine, electronic warfare (radar and radio-detection) and guided missiles. The official inquiry into the 1955 *Novorossiysk* disaster at Sevastopol purged the upper ranks of the Black Sea Fleet and the Soviet Navy at large, clearing the way for Gorshkov to replace Nikolai Kuznetsov as Commander-in-Chief and Deputy Minister of Defence from January 1956.⁷³

Gorshkov’s reaching the top of the Soviet Navy represented a resolution of the ‘Old School’ – ‘Young School’ debate, a coalescence around ‘Soviet School’ ideas free from the trappings of imperialist thought. Gorshkov consistently advocated for a balanced fleet rather than a Navy solely configured to support land operations (the ‘faithful helper’), a pre-war style battleship navy (the ‘Old School’) or the contemporary version of the commerce raiding ‘Young School’ which advocated investment in submarines at the expense of all else. A balanced fleet would support Soviet foreign policy goals around the world while providing options to strategic planners in time of war. The balanced fleet theory fed through into Soviet naval construction of the ships which would deploy around the world from the late 1960s.⁷⁴

The Soviet Navy’s shortcomings exposed - the Cuban missile crisis, 1962

The need for a balanced fleet was demonstrated by Soviet foreign policy failure in Cuba. If Stalin’s premiership was the first postwar stage of Soviet naval development, and Khrushchev’s submarine emphasis the second stage, the third stage followed what Paul Kennedy calls a ‘humiliation’, Ranft and Till ‘chastening’ and Admiral James Eberle an ‘embarrassment as significant as defeat at Tsushima in 1905.’⁷⁵ Whereas the US Navy was able to mount a blockade (or ‘quarantine’ to avoid the legal interpretation of blockade

⁷² Norman Polmar, Thomas A. Brooks, and George (George E.) Fedoroff, *Admiral Gorshkov: The Man Who Challenged the US Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019); Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 78; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 518; Chumbley and Gardiner, *Conway’s All the World’s Fighting Ships, 1947 - 1995*, 345.

⁷³ Earlier in his career, Kuznetsov had been accused of sharing captured German torpedo technology with the British, demonstrating that use of German technology was important to the Soviets, even if their naval intent was different. ‘ADM 223/237 June 1953’, 1953, 4; Polmar, Brooks, and Fedoroff, *Admiral Gorshkov: The Man Who Challenged the US Navy*; Roman Kolkowicz, *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party*, RAND Corporation Research Study (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 135; Saunders, *The Soviet Navy*, 115; Breyer and Polmar, *Guide to the Soviet Navy*; Chumbley and Gardiner, *Conway’s All the World’s Fighting Ships, 1947 - 1995*, 342.

⁷⁴ Robert Waring Herrick, *Soviet Naval Doctrine and Policy 1956 - 1986. (3 Volumes)*, Studies in Russian History 8a (Lewiston, New York: Mellen, 2003); Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996*, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 63; Power, ‘Dichotomy of Strategy’, 25.

⁷⁵ Paul M Kennedy, ‘Introduction to the 2017 Edition’, in *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Penguin, 2017), 23; James Eberle, ‘Soviet Maritime Power 75 Years After Tsushima’, ed. B B. Schofield, *The RUSI Journal* 125, no. 4 (1980): 6; Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 165.

as an act of war) whilst preparing for an amphibious invasion of Cuba, the Soviet Navy could only send four submarines. These diesel-electric boats were sent to protect the merchant ships carrying cargo from the Soviet Union to Cuba, including materials needed to bring the SS-4 Sandal intermediate range ballistic missiles to operational readiness. The boats were hard-pressed dealing with the environmental conditions in the Sargasso Sea and Caribbean having been designed for cooler Baltic and Arctic waters. Political imperatives imposed unsustainable speeds on Soviet submarine captains, forcing them to spend more time on the surface. By 28 October 1962, the US Navy had located three of the four Soviet Foxtrot-class submarines and was tracking them using surface ships and maritime patrol aircraft.⁷⁶



Fig. 3 – Soviet Foxtrot-class submarine B-59 (Captain Valentin Savitsky) photographed on the surface by a US Navy helicopter on the sealanes leading to Cuba, 28 or 29 October 1962. (US National Security Archive).⁷⁷

In 1962 the Soviet Navy did not have suitable surface ships to send on long range deployments into the Atlantic. Challenging the US quarantine off Cuba would have required heavy surface warships of the types planned but cancelled after the death of Stalin.⁷⁸ The Soviet Navy did not yet have the refuelling capability necessary to sustain long-range operations, with neither underway replenishment capabilities nor port-access arrangements in friendly countries enroute. Without an aircraft carrier, air cover would need to have been covertly pre-positioned on Cuba itself. These capability shortfalls exposed off Cuba in 1962 were a significant influence on subsequent Soviet naval development, the instigator for the Soviet naval build-up which followed later in the decade.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ *Thirteen Days* (New Line Cinema, 2000); Svetlana V Savranskaya, 'New Sources on the Role of Soviet Submarines in the Cuban Missile Crisis', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 2 (April 2005): 233–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390500088312>; Weir and Boyne, *Rising Tide*.

⁷⁷ William Burr and Thomas S. Blanton, eds., *The Submarines of October: US and Soviet Naval Encounters during the Cuban Missile Crisis*, vol. 75, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book (George Washington University, 2002), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB75/>.

⁷⁸ James D. Hessman, 'The Soviet Fleet', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 93; James Daniel. Theberge, ed., *Russia in the Caribbean*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University. Special Report Series No. 13 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, 1973), 101.

⁷⁹ The Soviets did have Sverdlov-class cruisers in the order of battle. Although these well-armed modern ships had caused concern in the West when they first appeared in the 1950s, 'impressing observers even so critical and knowledgeable as the British' (Mitchell,

Gorshkov's writings, *The Sea Power of the State*, 1976 and Soviet naval intent

Leonid Brezhnev forced out Khrushchev as Soviet premier in 1964, partly as a consequence of the Cuban missile crisis. Khrushchev's over-emphasis on submarines had been shown-up by the Cuban misadventure, although investment in nuclear-powered submarines would come to fruition in the second half of the Cold War. In 1966 a new Soviet military doctrine was published, acknowledging the need for capable conventional forces for the possibility of generalised, but non-nuclear war beyond Europe. A balanced fleet was needed to support global Soviet foreign policy goals, and to supply the remotest outposts in the Soviet far east. Long-range surface ships would finally be able to challenge the predominant US Navy carrier battle groups patrolling the world ocean.⁸⁰

This need for a global navy reflected the changing nature of the Cold War. Whereas the 1940s and 1950s established the geography of the Cold War in Europe, symbolised by the completion of the 'iron curtain' – the building of the Berlin Wall in 1960, in the decades that followed, East-West geopolitical competition spread to the rest of the world. European colonial empires were waning, creating fresh zones of geopolitical competition beyond Europe, e.g. in SE Asia, the Middle East and Africa.⁸¹ Also in 1960, Khrushchev had literally embraced developing world leaders at the UN General Assembly while KGB chief Alexander Shelepin developed plans to support socialist factions in civil wars and independence movements around the world.⁸² To participate in this scramble for influence, the Soviet Union would need a global Navy. Bruce Watson, one of the key writers on the Soviet Navy during the Cold War, assessed that Gorshkov echoed Admiral Jackie Fisher's 1905 retort – 'the British Army is a projectile to be fired by the Navy':⁸³

'Gorshkov does not recognise any land theater other than Europe. Since the remainder of the world is composed of oceanic theaters, the implication is that the Soviet Navy should play the dominant role in all areas except Europe, with other service branches assisting as necessary.'⁸⁴

Gorshkov's conception of sea power was more comprehensive in scope than traditional western naval theory such as the battle fleet-centric Mahan. A balanced fleet should both support and be supported by the Soviet merchant marine, hydrographic and wider scientific fleets, and fishing and whaling ships.⁸⁵ Some in the West, for example *The Guardian* defence correspondent David Fairhall, recognised the centralised communist state in this approach, fearing that all ships under the Soviet flag were a threat as part of a menacing overall design. Soviet merchant ships and fishing trawlers were therefore monitored for suspicious activity by Western navies. For example, a deep-sea trawler

1974) the Sverdlov-class were in fact short-range warships intended mainly for training. *Sverdlov* was the Soviet Navy's delegate to the 1953 Coronation Review at Spithead. Commander Lionel Buster Crabb was likely killed while conducting covert dived reconnaissance of sister ship, the tenth of the class, *Ordzhonikidze* in Portsmouth Harbour in 1956. *Naval Instructional Film, Spithead Review*, 1953; 'ADM 223/237 April 1953', 1953, 18–23; 'ADM 223/237 June 1953'; Aldrich, *Hidden Hand*, 521; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 489; Christopher Moran, 'Never to Be Disclosed: Government Secrecy in Britain 1945-1975' (PhD, Warwick University, 2008), 135–57.

⁸⁰ Michael McGwire, 'Contingency Plans for World War', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 64; Wegener, *The Soviet Naval Offensive*, 90; Anthony R. Wells, 'Studies in British Naval Intelligence, 1880–1945' (PhD, University of London, 1972), 434–37.

⁸¹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 328; Norman Friedman, *Sea Power as Strategy: Navies and National Interests* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 193; Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?*, 13; Wegener, *The Soviet Naval Offensive*, 116–18; Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 2.

⁸² Calder Walton, *Spies: The Epic Intelligence War Between East and West* (London: Abacus, 2023), 280.

⁸³ Andrew Lambert, 'Russia and Some Principles of Maritime Strategy', in *The Sea in Russian Strategy*, ed. Andrew Monaghan and Richard Connolly, Russian Strategy and Power (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), 36.

⁸⁴ Bruce W. Watson, 'The Soviet Navy in the Third World', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 269.

⁸⁵ 'ADM 223/442 Q2 1959', 1959, 39; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 499–503; Rowlands, *21st Century Gorshkov*, 109; Ryan Tucker Jones, *Red Leviathan: The Secret History of Soviet Whaling* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

might be surreptitiously surveying the ocean floor to aid future Soviet submarine navigation. These fears were exacerbated by accusations of Soviet over-fishing in remote and lightly-patrolled South Atlantic and Antarctic waters, Soviet scientific voyages, and constant expansion of the communist bloc's merchant marines.⁸⁶

Setting out Soviet maritime intent, Admiral Gorshkov wrote extensively, reviewing naval history from a Russian/Soviet standpoint and setting out the theoretical framework behind a balanced fleet supported by civilian ships. He began in 1958 in *Morskoy Sbornik* with occasional pieces appearing in *Pravda*, the communist party daily newspaper. In 1974 the Naval Institute Press in the United States translated and collated Gorshkov's 1972-73 series of *Morskoy Sbornik* articles as *Red Star Rising at Sea*.⁸⁷ In 1976, Gorshkov synthesised his theoretical ideas into *The Sea Power of the State*, authorised by the Kremlin for translation into English. In this *magnum opus* Gorshkov set out the role for a balanced fleet in Soviet foreign policy:

"The Soviet Navy is used in foreign policy measure by our state. The aims of this use radically differ from those of the imperialist powers. The Soviet Navy is an instrument for a peace-loving foreign policy and friendship of the peoples, for a policy of cutting short the endeavours of imperialism, restraining military adventurism and decisively countering threats to the safety of the peoples from the imperialist powers. Soviet sailors consider themselves ambassadors for our country. Friendly visits by Soviet sailors offer the opportunity to the peoples of the countries visited to see for themselves the creativity of socialist principles in our country, the genuine parity of the diverse peoples of the Soviet Union and our high level of culture. In our ships they see the achievements of Soviet science, technology and industry."⁸⁸

Gorshkov's sometimes turgid dialectical-materialist prose and biased reading of naval history attracted some scorn in the West, particularly his exaggeration of the Soviet Union's role in the final defeat of Japan in 1945 where Soviet forces campaigned for 14 days using US-supplied landing craft. Nevertheless, Gorshkov does show some admiration for the mobility and flexibility provided by British and American sea power in the Second World War, an appreciation which continued through the US Marines deployment into Lebanon in 1958 and the deployment of US carrier air power to SE Asia. In *The Sea Power of the State* Gorshkov notes how 50 per cent of US combat air sorties flown over Vietnam originated from aircraft carriers.⁸⁹

In Britain, Gorshkov's writings received less attention than in the United States. The Royal Navy's *Quarterly Intelligence Review* decried *Pravda* as 'the most widely read and dullest newspaper on earth! All information is controlled by the Communist Party.' Khrushchev's championing of a future Soviet Navy equipped with modern guided missiles and submarines was dismissed as 'the usual bluster'.⁹⁰ In contrast, in the United States each of Gorshkov's chapters in *Red Star Rising at Sea* were accompanied by a commentary

⁸⁶ 'ADM 223/238 September 1953', 1953, 3; David Fairhall, *Russia Looks to the Sea: A Study of the Expansion of Soviet Maritime Power* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971); Elaine Holoboff, 'Russian Oil and Coercive Diplomacy', in *Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases*, ed. Lawrence Freedman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy*, 181; Captain John Moore RN, *Jane's Fighting Ships 1980-81* (London: Jane's, 1981), 127.

⁸⁷ Sergei Gorshkov, *Red Star Rising at Sea: Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Colonel Herbert Preston USMC, trans. Theodore Neely (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1974).

⁸⁸ Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State*, 251.

⁸⁹ Gorshkov, 237-41; Gorshkov, *Red Star Rising at Sea: Navies in War and Peace*; Robin J. Lee, 'A Brief Look at Russian Aircraft Carrier Development' (9 January 1996), <https://web.archive.org/web/20000229135456/http://www.webcom.com/~amraam/rcar.html>; Bruce W. Watson, 'Comments on Gorshkov's "Sea Power of the State"', *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 103, no. 4 (April 1977), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1977/april/comments-gorshkovs-sea-power-state#:~:text=Gorshkov%20defines%20the%20sea%20power,state%20for%20defending%20its%20interests.>; Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy*, 184; Bringle USN and Sainsbury, 'The Challenge Posed by the Soviet Navy', 12; Herrick, *Gorshkov's Inheritance*, 261; Magnus Nordenman and James Stavridis, *The New Battle for the Atlantic: Emerging Naval Competition with Russia in the Far North* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 44.

⁹⁰ 'ADM 223/441 Q1 1959', 1959; 'Review of the Soviet Navy, 1963', 13.

from an Admiral or naval historian. As the US Navy consciously took on the mantle of the world's pre-eminent fleet from the Royal Navy after the Second World War, so too did the principal adversary receive commensurate attention.

'Out of the Blue' – the apogee of Soviet naval power

Having largely ignored the Soviet Navy since the end of the Second World War, voyages across the oceans of the world were 'startling developments' for Western strategists in the 1960s.⁹¹ Although naval intelligence in the United States and Britain had been tracking Soviet warships and enumerating the fleets' orders of battle, this operational analysis did not predict Soviet intent to send the Navy on deployments across the world's oceans, particularly from 1968 onwards. Capability-led assessment had led naval intelligence in the West to underestimate and misunderstand Gorshkov's intent to use the Soviet Navy in support of the global foreign policy of the state. Set against the backdrop of defence cutbacks in Britain and the Vietnam War for the United States, the Soviet naval challenge was significant and worrisome. In the academic and popular literature, works appeared announcing the arrival of the Soviet Union as a maritime power, a narrative confirmed by the publication of Gorshkov's writings in English in the 1970s.⁹²

The features of this 'out of the blue' moment were improved Soviet naval capabilities, persistent deployments in areas traditionally patrolled by Western navies, and the naval dimensions of Soviet engagement with the formerly colonised world. The Soviet Navy's out-of-area sea days increased from 800 in 1956 to 57,800 in 1980 according to Bruce Watson, a US Navy intelligence officer-turned academic who published exhaustive data as *Red Navy at Sea* in 1982. Between 1971 and 1981 the Soviet fleet grew by 26 per cent measured by number of warships.⁹³ A crude but illustrative measure of this expansion is the number of pages dedicated to the Soviet Navy by *Jane's Fighting Ships*:

⁹¹ 'Review of the Soviet Navy, 1963'.

⁹² Fairhall, *Russia Looks to the Sea*; Ernest McNeill Eller, *The Soviet Sea Challenge*, *The Soviet Sea Challenge* (Chicago: Cowles Book Co, 1971); Wegener, *The Soviet Naval Offensive*; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*; Paul J. Murphy, ed., *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, Studies in Communist Affairs; v. 2. (Washington, D.C: United States Air Force, 1978).

⁹³ Admiral of the Fleet Sir John Fieldhouse, 'Soviet Maritime Power', ed. William Pillar, *The RUSI Journal* 129, no. 2 (1984): 3–6; Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 183.

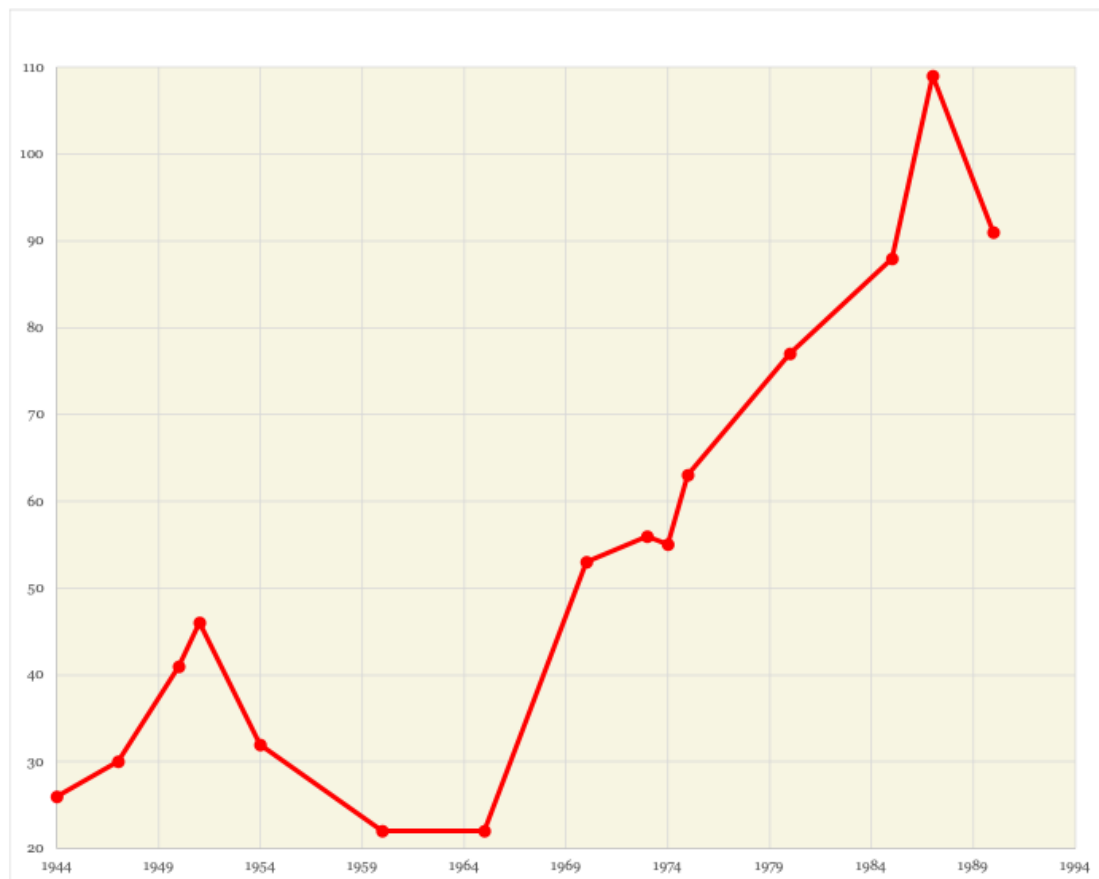


Fig. 4 – Number of pages in USSR section, Jane's Fighting Ships 1944-1990.⁹⁴

This Soviet naval expansion was a dynamic force in an otherwise largely static strategic outlook. The US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt admitted in an interview to the *New York Times* in 1972 that the US Navy had now lost control of some of the world's sealanes to the Soviets. In 1973, US Admiral Bringle observed:

'Clearly, a plan which uses the presence of naval forces to capitalise on third world peacetime instabilities and apply political leverage in limited war and crisis situations becomes more credible when those forces can demonstrate a potent tactical/operational capability in the open ocean. This the Soviet Navy has demonstrated.'⁹⁵

The expansion was, an 'unsettling surprise of recent history' according to Bradford Dismukes and James McConnell in an important book, *Soviet Naval Diplomacy* published by Pergamon at the same time as their English language edition of Gorshkov's *The Sea Power of the State* in 1979.⁹⁶ In 1983's *The Sea in Soviet Strategy* Bryan Ranft and Geoffrey Till referred to the mid-Cold War Soviet naval expansion as 'one of the most remarkable features of the post-war period.' In 1986, the First Sea Lord Admiral William Staveley wrote in the *RUSI Journal* that the worldwide deployment of the Soviet Navy was 'arguably the most significant new factor in the complex strategic balance between nations and power blocs of the last twenty years.'⁹⁷

⁹⁴ *Jane's Fighting Ships*, 1944, 1947, 1950, 1951, 1954, 1960, 1965, 1970, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1987, 1990

⁹⁵ Bringle USN and Sainsbury, 'The Challenge Posed by the Soviet Navy'.

⁹⁶ Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 1; Bradford Dismukes and James M. McConnell, eds., *Soviet Naval Diplomacy*, Pergamon Policy Studies on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe 37 (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979), 1.

⁹⁷ Admiral Sir William Staveley, 'Strategies, Concepts and Their Maritime Implications', ed. John Woodward, *The RUSI Journal* 131, no. 2 (1986): 11.

The Soviets were taking a longer-term view; Gorshkov was head of the Soviet Navy for 29 years. New naval capabilities and their use did not indicate a dramatic change of intent as suggested in the West. Rather, this was the fruition of Gorshkov's plans; the manifestation of Soviet naval intent. A perceived balancing of conventional land forces and nuclear weapons (the all-important 'correlation of forces') emboldened the Soviet Union to deepen engagement with decolonised states using the newly expanded Navy.⁹⁸ With the introduction into service of the Hotel, Echo and November-class nuclear powered missile submarines followed by the Yankee-class in 1967, the Soviet Navy was now able to offer the state a strategic deterrent capability. This development of a subsea nuclear deterrent went some way to redressing the balance with the other armed forces, particularly the Strategic Rocket Forces in the Soviet Ministry of Defence. Khrushchev had founded the Strategic Rocket Forces in 1959 as a separate branch of the armed forces, a reflection of the overwhelming importance of nuclear missiles in early Cold War militaries.⁹⁹ In Brezhnev's stagnating Soviet state, the fruition of Gorshkov's plans for a naval strategic deterrent and supporting Soviet foreign policy gave the Navy newfound importance. As the 1970s wore on, Gorshkov's vision became self-fulfilling, acquiring a 'bureaucratic and technological momentum all of its own' according to Ranft and Till.¹⁰⁰

Technological developments helped the Soviet Navy catch up with the naval preponderance of the Western allies.¹⁰¹ For example, anti-ship missiles could negate Western advantages in numbers of surface ships. Building on German development of radio-controlled anti-ship glider bombs and the V-2 ballistic missile, the Soviets had spearheaded anti-ship missile development in the 1950s.¹⁰² Without a naval aviation capability to attack enemy ships, the Soviets developed missiles which soon outranged traditional naval artillery and the propeller-driven aircraft which still operated from Western aircraft carriers into the 1970s.¹⁰³ The efficacy of these weapons was proven in the series of wars between the Arabs and Israelis. Following the October 1967 Six-Day War, Soviet-supplied Egyptian SS-N-2 Styx anti-ship missiles sank the Israeli frigate *Eilat* cruising off Port Said.¹⁰⁴ Soviet ships, submarines and aircraft were all designed to carry anti-ship missiles in quantity. From widely-exported patrol boats such as the Osa and Nanuchka-classes, up to 10,000 tonne cruisers, Soviet warships were distinctive for their banks of missile canisters on the upper decks.¹⁰⁵ Gorshkov boasted that the development of these missiles made large Western warships vulnerable. With its capacity for foreign intervention, the aircraft carrier was ideologically and technologically dismissed as a vulnerable 'tool of imperialism'. Here Gorshkov followed the Party line as befitted a political survivor. In 1956 the British Naval Attaché to Moscow had reported in *Quarterly Intelligence Report* that Khrushchev also thought aircraft carriers to be vulnerable to new underwater and aerial weapons.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁸ Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?*, 132; Roy Allison, *The Soviet Union and the Strategy of Non-Alignment in the Third World*, Ford/Southampton Studies in North/South Security Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 202; Walton, *Spies*, 367; Robin Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy: The Brezhnev Years*, Reprinted (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 7–8; Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 1; Wells, *Between Five Eyes*, 24–25.

⁹⁹ Rowlands, *21st Century Gorshkov*, 70; Hennessy and Jinks, *The Silent Deep*, 700–701; Weir and Boyne, *Rising Tide*, 289–93; John R. Hill, *Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 97; Ranft, 'Sergei Gorshkov', 69.

¹⁰⁰ Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 11.

¹⁰¹ Rowlands, *21st Century Gorshkov*, 67–69.

¹⁰² 'ADM 223/228 December 1948', 1948, 48–51; 'ADM 223/229 June 1949', 31; 'ADM 223/720 Q2 1962', 1962, 23; 'ADM 223/702 Soviet Exploitation of the German V2 Rocket'.

¹⁰³ Breyer and Polmar, *Guide to the Soviet Navy*, 34; Bowen, 'The Anglo-German and Soviet-American Naval Rivalries - Some Comparisons', 67.

¹⁰⁴ Spector, 'The Hitherto Unlikely Scenario', 384.

¹⁰⁵ 'ADM 223/719 Q1 1962', 1962, 8.

¹⁰⁶ 'ADM 223/240 Q2 1956', 44; Gorshkov, *Red Star Rising at Sea: Navies in War and Peace*; Watson, 'Comments on Gorshkov's "Sea Power of the State"'; Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy*, 246; Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 101.

Rather than build supercarriers to rival the US Navy, the Soviets invested in land-based maritime aviation. The Tu-22M Backfire was specifically designed to counter the US Navy's aircraft carrier battle groups. The aircraft was deployed first with Soviet Naval Aviation (AV-MF) in 1971, a manifestation of the increased importance of the Navy within the Soviet military system by this time.¹⁰⁷ Combined with the AS-4 Kitchen anti-ship cruise missile, Backfire caused grave concern in the West. Fear of AV-MF regiments of Backfires attacking NATO navies in the North Atlantic regularly featured in UK and US threat assessments, boosting the research and development effort behind the cancelled Royal Navy Type 43 destroyer, the Harrier 'jump jet' and the advanced US Aegis ship-based air defence radar system. In the 1986 US *Maritime Strategy*, Backfire with AS-4 Kitchen was specifically acknowledged as the main threat to USN warships.¹⁰⁸

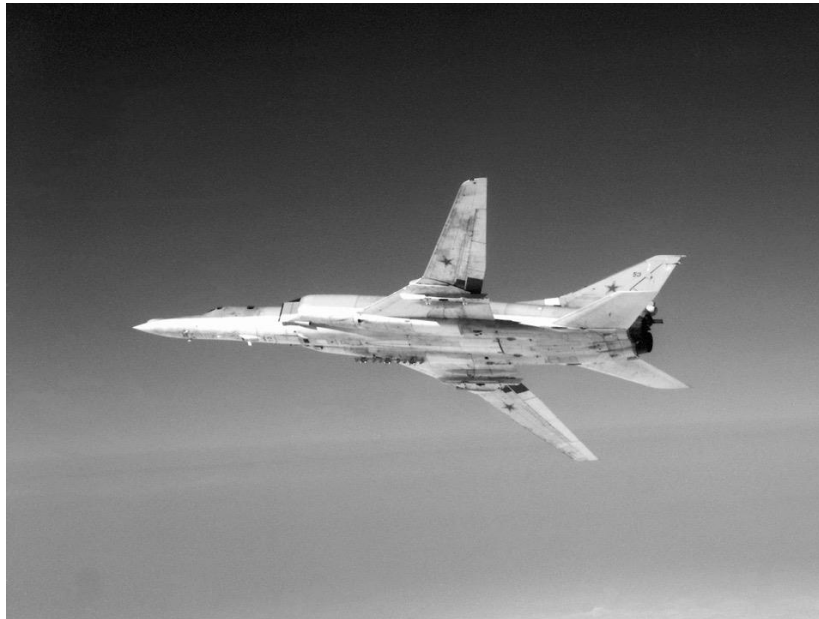


Fig. 5 – Tu22M Backfire B swing-wing naval strike aircraft. (US Dept. of Defense)

Ever-quieter and more numerous Soviet nuclear submarines incorporated technology stolen from the United States by spy John Walker and his associates. In the 1970s, Yankee and Delta-class nuclear-powered and nuclear missile-launching submarines (SSBNs) began periodic patrols in the Western Atlantic Ocean including off the eastern seaboard of North America. Reminiscent of British nineteenth century 'gunboat diplomacy' these patrols were used in times of tension to put pressure on the United States. The paramount requirement to track these submarines as an indicator of Soviet intent stimulated sustained allied investment in 'hunter-killer' submarines (SSNs) and the SOSUS system of acoustic arrays.¹⁰⁹

The Soviet Navy Deployed Worldwide

¹⁰⁷ Floyd D. Kennedy Jr., 'The Soviet Naval Air Forces Today', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 143.

¹⁰⁸ Watkins, 'The Maritime Strategy'; Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 514; Kennedy, 'Introduction to the 2017 Edition', 23; 'Tu22M Backfire (Tupolev)' (Federation of American Scientists, 8 August 2000), <https://nuke.fas.org/guide/russia/bomber/tu-22m.htm>; Adm Sylvester R. Foley Jr. USN, 'Commentary on Theaters of Operation', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 278; Capt W.C. Mabeoone RNLN and Cdr N.W.G. Buis RNLN, 'Maritime Strategic Aspects of the North Sea', *The RUSI Journal* 129, no. 3 (1984): 12–17; 'Soviet Naval Strategy and Programs through the 1990s', National Intelligence Estimate, National Intelligence Estimate (Central Intelligence Agency, 19 October 1982), 128, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000268225.pdf; Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 127–28. 'Backfire', 'Kitchen', 'Forger', 'Hormone', 'Scrubber' Styx 'Sandal' etc. are NATO reporting names for Warsaw Pact military equipment.

¹⁰⁹ Gjert Lage Dyndal, '50 Years Ago: The Origins of NATO Concerns about the Threat of Russian Strategic Nuclear Submarine', *NATO Review*, 24 March 2017, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2017/03/24/50-years-ago-the-origins-of-nato-concerns-about-the-threat-of-russian-strategic-nuclear-submarines/index.html>; Norman Polmar and Kenneth J. Moore, *Cold War Submarines: The Design and Construction of US and Soviet Submarines*, 1. ed (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 2005); Weir and Boyne, *Rising Tide*, 293.

The recapitalised Soviet Navy began to deploy worldwide on a regular basis from the late 1960s. As Gorshkov wrote in the *Sea Power of the State*: 'Our country has built a modern fleet and sent it out onto the ocean in order to support our own state interests and to reliably defend us from attack.' Contemporary sources and the secondary literature coalesce around the year 1968 as the turning point – the moment the Soviet Navy came 'out of the blue.' Gorshkov's speech at Soviet Navy Day on 21 July 1968 gave clear indication of this more ambitious Soviet intent: 'we have firm determination to defend the state interests of the USSR against the imperialists anywhere in the world – sooner or later they will have to understand that they no longer have mastery whatsoever of the seas.'¹¹⁰

The Soviet Navy demonstrated its worldwide capabilities with 'Okean' exercises in 1970 and 1975. The first was officially organised to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Lenin. Both exercised the majority of the Soviet Navy's submarines, ships and aircraft and attempted to overcome the Russian geographical problem by uniting all four Fleets (Northern, Baltic, Black Sea, Pacific) under central command and control from Moscow. Of significance to Western analysts were mock mass missiles strikes on a Soviet flotilla playing the role of a US Navy carrier battle group in the Norwegian Sea. Okean 70 included a simulated amphibious invasion of Norway.¹¹¹ These exercises were carefully monitored in the West in case, under the pretence of publicised exercise activity, Soviet units were pre-positioning for war. For Okean 75 the Royal Navy mounted a substantial surveillance operation, Operation Algy, involving six frigates and RAF Shackleton maritime patrol aircraft.¹¹²

In March 1968, ostensibly on a hydrographic survey mission codenamed Priliv-2 but with a cruiser and destroyer escort, the Soviet Navy Pacific Fleet entered the Indian Ocean for the first time. Previously unmolested Western warships now attracted a Soviet shadow or 'tattle-tale', especially when on exercise or in times of increased tension. Collisions occurred; for example in May 1967 the *USS Walker* and Soviet Kotlin-class destroyer *Bessledniy* collided twice in 48 hours in the Sea of Japan. Also in 1968, the UK Ministry of Defence issued guidance on high seas interactions with Soviet warships for 'dealing effectively with the greatly expanding Soviet maritime activity.' During the détente period, the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA) was signed to regulate now commonplace interactions between NATO and Warsaw Pact warships. Operating in close proximity bred, as Secretary of the Navy John Lehman put it, 'a grudging respect between the two sides' as Western forces acknowledged a degree of parity with their Soviet counterparts.¹¹³

Expanded Soviet naval operations were the realisation of Gorshkov's intent to use the totality of Soviet sea power for foreign policy advancement in peacetime. According to Andrew Bennett, between 1959 and 1975, Soviet sealift capacity using merchant ships

¹¹⁰ Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 517.

¹¹¹ Anti-carrier exercises were repeated by all four Soviet Fleets in 1983. Soviet ships playing the role of US Navy carrier strike groups were termed 'orange forces' in contemporary intelligence assessments. Soviet units attacking orange remained 'red forces.' Wayne A. Wright, 'Soviet Operations in the Mediterranean', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 220; Bringle USN and Sainsbury, 'The Challenge Posed by the Soviet Navy'; Donald C. Daniel, 'Trends and Patterns in Major Soviet Naval Exercises', in *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, ed. Paul J. Murphy, Studies in Communist Affairs; v. 2. (Washington, D.C: United States Air Force, 1978), 225; Chumbley and Gardiner, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1947 - 1995*, 339.

¹¹² Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 113; Spector, 'The Hitherto Unlikely Scenario', 376; Edward Hampshire, 'From Malin Head to "Okean 75": Shadowing and Intelligence Collection Operations by Royal Navy Surface Ships 1975-1985', *Intelligence and National Security* 33, no. 5 (2018): 659–74.

¹¹³ 'Agreement Between the Government of The United States of America and the Government of The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas (INCSEA)' (US Department of State, 25 May 1972); Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 41–42; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 523; Hampshire, 'From Malin Head to "Okean 75": Shadowing and Intelligence Collection Operations by Royal Navy Surface Ships 1975-1985'; John F. Lehman, *Oceans Ventured: Winning the Cold War at Sea* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 40.

and the Navy increased by 500 per cent, enabling greatly expanded engagement around the world.¹¹⁴ In 1965 the Soviet Navy made no port visits outside the Warsaw Pact; in 1975 the fleet visited 18 such ports.¹¹⁵ In the West, every Soviet naval move was interpreted as practice or shaping for war, but for Gorshkov the fleet was an advertisement for the achievements of communism overseas, a weapon in the ideological battle of ideas. Gorshkov saw a blue water Navy as a necessary feature of superpower status: 'the strength of the fleets is one of the factors helping states to move into the category of great powers' he wrote in *The Sea Power of the State*.¹¹⁶

Communist partners were the first to host the newly global Soviet Navy. Although chastened by the US reaction in 1962, a small Soviet squadron visited Cuba in 1964 then Defence Minister Marshal Grechko made a high-profile visit in November 1969. Warships and later submarines made use of the naval base at Cienfuegos on Cuba's southern shore as a replenishment station during Atlantic deployments. Indications of submarine support infrastructure in Cuba caused particular concern to US analysts after the trauma of the missile crisis and now that Soviet submarines could carry strategic nuclear weapons. By the 1980s long range maritime patrol Tu-142 Bear F aircraft were based in Cuba augmenting an annual seven-ship deployment to the Caribbean from the Northern Fleet. These Soviet incursions into the US near-abroad were interpreted as aggressive moves by the Soviets they challenged the venerable 1823 Monroe doctrine of US regional hegemony in the Americas.¹¹⁷

In Asia, Soviet merchant ships supplied the North Vietnamese through Haiphong harbour during the Vietnam War, complicating US aerial mining and bombing planning.¹¹⁸ After the war's conclusion, Soviet warships started to use Vietnam as a base for south-east Asian operations. Cam Ranh Bay became the largest Soviet naval base outside of the Warsaw Pact, hosting ten surface warships, eight submarines plus a tender, sixteen Tu-22M Backfire or Tu-16 Badger bombers, nine Tu-142 Bear F patrol aircraft and supporting shore personnel. It was from this base that a squadron of warships deployed to the Bay of Bengal during the 1973 East Pakistan War. This brought a capable Soviet squadron into close proximity with the *USS Enterprise* carrier battle group. After the war's conclusion, Soviet salvage ships helped newly independent Bangladesh to clear mines and wreckage in Chittagong harbour.¹¹⁹

The Soviet Mediterranean Challenge

¹¹⁴ Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?*, 44.

¹¹⁵ Watson, 'The Soviet Navy in the Third World', 253; Spector, 'The Hitherto Unlikely Scenario', 379; John J. Herzog, 'Perspectives on Soviet Naval Development: A Navy to Match National Purposes', in *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, ed. Paul J. Murphy, Studies in Communist Affairs; v. 2. (Washington, D.C: United States Air Force, 1978), 55; Wegener, *The Soviet Naval Offensive*, 82–83; Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 54; *Soviet Sea Power Today* (Screen Productions Inc., 1970), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMyQP_4Eul0&list=WL&index=65; Captain Roger W. Barnett USN, 'Commentary on The Soviet Fleet', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 180.

¹¹⁶ Perhaps echoing this sentiment, in 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping 2013 addressed his Politburo: 'historical experience tells us that countries that embrace the sea thrive, while states that spurn the sea decline.' Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State*, 59; Bruce D. Jones, *To Rule the Waves: How Control of the World's Oceans Shapes the Fate of the Superpowers* (New York: Scribner, 2022), 179.

¹¹⁷ Watson, 'The Soviet Navy in the Third World', 263; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 589; Lehman, *Oceans Ventured*, 135; Theberge, *Russia in the Caribbean*, 97. In June 2024 a Russian naval group including a nuclear-powered submarine SSN *Kazan* made a port stop in Havana, Cuba showing the enduring nature of Cuba – Russia relations.

¹¹⁸ Thomas McKelvey Cleaver, *The Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club: Naval Aviation in the Vietnam War* (Abingdon: Osprey Publishing, 2021); Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 547.

¹¹⁹ 'The Soviet Naval and Air Presence at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam' (Central Intelligence Agency, 1 April 1984), <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP91T01115R000100190002-3.pdf>; Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 158; Weir and Boyne, *Rising Tide*, 163; Allison, *The Soviet Union and the Strategy of Non-Alignment in the Third World*, 208; Alvin Bernstein, 'The Soviet Pacific Fleet', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 241; Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 195–96. Cam Ranh Bay remained in use by the Russian Navy until 2002.

Most significantly for East-West tensions was the establishment of the Soviet Fifth Squadron in the Mediterranean in 1967 – officially the 5th Eskadra of the Black Sea Fleet. The Mediterranean had been strategically significant for the West since the days of sail and contested in 1941-42 in vicious naval battles between the Royal and Italian Navies and the German Luftwaffe. The United States Sixth Fleet was established at Naples in 1950, a feature of the handover of naval primacy from Britain to the United States after the Second World War.¹²⁰ With the establishment of the 5th Eskadra, the Soviets challenged Western naval supremacy in the Mediterranean and the maritime lifeline from through via the Suez Canal and Strait of Gibraltar. John Lehman, President Reagan's Secretary of the Navy, claims in his memoirs that the establishment of the 5th Eskadra was the first enaction by Gorshkov of the lessons learned from the Cuban disaster five years previously.¹²¹

Initially the Soviets established a routine of anchoring in navigationally safe places around the Mediterranean, such as the Alboran Sea, on the Hurd Bank between Lampedusa and Sicily, off Kithira west of Crete and north-east of Cyprus.¹²² In the 1970s the Soviets brokered basing rights or built harbour facilities in Alexandria and Port Said in Egypt, Tartus in Syria (still in use by the Russian Navy), Benghazi and Tripoli in Libya, and in Tunisia and Algeria. The 5th Eskadra used these bases for refuelling and light repair but also for naval diplomacy, i.e. using the Navy to advertise and promote the Soviet Union as a political and economic partner. But in the West this naval diplomacy was interpreted as expansionist and preparing for war. For example, in 1981 the 5th Eskadra conducted extensive manoeuvres with Syrian naval forces themselves using gifted Soviet equipment, including anti-ship missiles firings.¹²³

The scale of the naval challenge in the Mediterranean was illustrated during the October 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and the Arab states. The 5th Eskadra and the US 6th Fleet sailed close to one another as the Soviets resupplied the Arab states by sea and air while the United States supported Israel. For three weeks, Soviet ships 'marked' American warships, trailing them and regularly illuminating them across the electromagnetic spectrum with both search, track and fire-control radars. Aircraft conducted low-level overflights of the opposing fleets and Soviet land-based naval aviation practiced missile strike runs on US aircraft carriers.¹²⁴

Although the 1973 confrontation did not have the nuclear dimension of Cuba in 1962, by 1973 the two navies were more evenly matched. The Soviets were determined not to be embarrassed as in 1962 and the US and NATO navies surged forces to the Mediterranean in response. At the peak of the crisis the 5th Eskadra outnumbered the 6th Fleet 95:65 in warship numbers.¹²⁵ During the 'out of the blue' phase of Cold War naval competition, quantitative and qualitative Soviet naval improvements evened out the naval balance between the Soviet and NATO navies. The Mediterranean in October 1973 showed this evening out in actuality, i.e. with ships on operational deployment.

¹²⁰ David Howarth and Margaret Rule, *A Brief History of British Sea Power*, Rev. ed (London: Robinson, 2003), 448.

¹²¹ 'ADM 223/734 Q4 1965', 1965; 'ADM 223/875 HMS ARK ROYAL: Sighting Reports of Soviet Bloc Warships and AGIs and Aircraft Intelligence Collection', 1978; Hill, *Maritime Strategy for Medium Powers*, 206; Lehman, *Oceans Ventured*, 31–32.

¹²² 'The Significance of Soviet Naval Deployments to the Mediterranean', *ADM 223/734 Quarterly Intelligence Report Q4 1965*, November 1965, 14–20.

¹²³ Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 93; Allison, *The Soviet Union and the Strategy of Non-Alignment in the Third World*, 203–33; Wright, 'Soviet Operations in the Mediterranean', 223.

¹²⁴ Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 233–35.

¹²⁵ Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 101–19; Wright, 'Soviet Operations in the Mediterranean', 215–20; Watson, 'The Soviet Navy in the Third World', 258.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War was the closest the US and Soviet navies came to a shooting contest during the Cold War and starkly illustrated the scale of the Soviet naval challenge. The US government moved to alert state DefCon 3. Admiral Zumwalt later described the episode as 'the [US Navy's] tensest situation since World War Two.' After the crisis, the Soviets and some in the West proposed adding naval disarmament in the Mediterranean to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) process. The Soviet, US and Royal Navies deconflicted mine clearance operations to reopen the Suez Canal in 1974. In the West, Brezhnev's conciliatory proposals were interpreted (probably correctly) as an attempt to keep NATO nuclear capable aircraft carriers and submarines away from the southern Soviet Union.¹²⁶

Soviet Naval influence in Africa

The Soviet Navy was most successful at supporting Moscow's foreign policies in Africa supporting socialist factions in the civil wars that followed decolonisation. The Soviets established a permanent presence in West Africa, supporting the independence of Guinea and Guinea-Bissau from France and Portugal respectively. Conakry, the Guinean capital and largest harbour, would be used by a three-ship Soviet task force for the remainder of the Cold War. In Angola, the Soviets supported the leftist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in the civil war. Probably motivated by the failure of the unsupported socialist faction in Chile in 1973, in 1975-76 the Soviets significantly expanding their support by transporting 12,000 Cuban troops and equipment by sea and air across the Atlantic. A hospital ship was deployed to treat wounded soldiers from the MPLA side.¹²⁷ Both Conakry, Guinea-Bissau and Luanda, Angola were used as airfields by long range Soviet naval aviation.¹²⁸

The West African deployments were significant as a rare example of the Soviet Navy patrolling an area of limited significance for Western navies. Indeed, Gorshkov claimed that a strong Soviet naval presence in and around Angola had deterred US intervention in that conflict. Whether or not there was significant US interest, South African forces' scope to attack the MPLA was limited by the Soviet presence. The Soviet-facilitated Cuban deployments to Africa so soon after the 1973 Mediterranean naval stand-off were worrying flexes of Soviet naval power for Western observers.¹²⁹

In East Africa the Soviets appeared to be trying to exert control over maritime chokepoints vital to the world economy. The Soviet presence in Alexandria, Egypt (a harbour used by the Royal Navy Mediterranean Fleet in the Second World War) covered the Suez Canal. The Soviets used Aden in the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen, vacated by the British in 1967 allowing the Soviets to renovate Royal Navy facilities. A direct air link

¹²⁶ Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy*; 'Soviet Naval Strategy and Programs through the 1990s', 112; Anne Kelly Calhoun and Charles Peterson, 'Changes in Soviet Naval Policy: Prospects for Arms Limitations in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean', in *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, ed. Paul J. Murphy, Studies in Communist Affairs; v. 2. (Washington, D.C: United States Air Force, 1978), 233-38; Lehman, *Oceans Ventured*, 44; Bruce W. Watson and Susan M. Watson, eds., *The Soviet Navy: Strengths and Liabilities*, Westview's Special Studies on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press / Arms and Armour Press, 1986), 220.

¹²⁷ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 236; Barnett USN, 'Commentary on The Soviet Fleet', 187; Cole Blasier, *The Giant's Rival: The USSR and Latin America*, Pitt Latin American Series (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), 85-110; Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, 171-78.

¹²⁸ Allison, *The Soviet Union and the Strategy of Non-Alignment in the Third World*, 209; Alexander Hill, 'The Cold War Soviet Navy in Sub-Saharan African Waters: From the Republic of Guinea to Angola and Mozambique', in *African Navies: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Timothy J. Stapleton, Naval Policy & History (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 122. Tu-95 Bear maritime patrol aircraft of the 392nd Regiment launched 14 reconnaissance sorties over the Royal Navy Operation Corporate task group as they sailed south to retake the Falkland Islands in April 1982.

¹²⁹ Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy*, 234; Dismukes and McConnell, *Soviet Naval Diplomacy*, 149; Adm Harry D. Train II USN, 'Commentary on Theaters of Operation', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 333; Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?*, 160; Watson, 'The Soviet Navy in the Third World', 264; Lawrence Whetten, 'The Soviet-Cuban Presence in the Horn of Africa', *The RUSI Journal* 123, no. 3 (1978): 41; Hill, 'Cold War Soviet Navy in Sub-Saharan African Waters', 111.

was established by Aeroflot from Moscow to the Yemeni port city of Al Hudaydah on the Red Sea. Brezhnev supported Siad Barre's regime in Somalia which granted access to Berbera where the Soviets built a harbour for a new Indian Ocean Squadron. The bases at Aden, Berbera and also access to Massawa in Ethiopia (now Eritrea) covered the southern entrance to the Red Sea, the Bab-al-Mandeb strait. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan on Christmas Day 1979, Western fears included a Soviet drive towards Gulf oilfields and a further vital chokepoint at the Strait of Hormuz.¹³⁰

A liberal international relations theory interpretation of this naval diplomacy could explain Soviet naval deployments as motivated by ideology, i.e. supporting like-minded revolutionaries. However, in the West these moves were interpreted in a more realist fashion, as aggressive expansionism as part of a worldwide Soviet takeover. As far as political intent was understood in the West, it remained rooted in the imperative to spread communist worldwide – a dated echo of Trotsky's communist international (COMINTERN). For example, in their 1983 analysis, Ranft and Till map the expansion of Soviet naval ambition onto Marxism-Leninism – the imperative to export revolution worldwide and support decolonization as an expression of anti-imperialism.¹³¹ Former British naval intelligence officer Anthony Wells summarised the situation at the Hudson Institute's 1985 Sea Power Forum:

'The Soviets have pursued an aggressive program of naval diplomacy in the Third World since the late 1960s. It was only by this time that they acquired the capability to operate out of area on a large scale or for long periods of time. The Cuban Missile Crisis had demonstrated their inability to respond with countervailing force. The Soviet commitment to operations in Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and the Arab-Israeli wars was significant and certainly by 1978 had to be taken seriously by Western planners.'¹³²

Mirroring Soviet Naval intent – Western misperception

In the West, the Soviet naval build up was interpreted as aggressive. As in the early Cold War in Europe, theories abounded as to where in the world the Soviets would strike next, for example in Latin America or southwards from Afghanistan.¹³³ The discipline exerted on Warsaw Pact members from Moscow and collaboration of the form seen in the Angolan episode caused grave concern at the strategic-political level. The Soviet Navy was assessed to be a tool of plans for worldwide communist domination.

However, in the absence of intent analysis on the Soviet Navy, i.e. a failure to take Gorshkov's published writings seriously, capability continued to lead assessment. For example, in the mid-1970s the Soviets began to deploy ships which could carry jet-powered fixed wing aircraft, the Kiev-class. These ships carried a small complement of twelve Yak-38 Forger 'jump jets' for self defence. They were described as 'heavy aviation cruisers' by the Soviets to circumvent the 1936 Montreux Convention preventing aircraft carriers from transiting the Turkish Straits in and out of the Black Sea where the ships

¹³⁰ Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy*, 197; Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 251–83; Allison, *The Soviet Union and the Strategy of Non-Alignment in the Third World*, 206; Foley Jr. USN, 'Commentary on Theaters of Operation', 273; Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 178; Fred Halliday, 'The Middle East, Afghanistan and the Gulf in Soviet Perception', ed. David Bolton, *The RUSI Journal* 129, no. 4 (1984): 18; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 545; Eller, *The Soviet Sea Challenge*, 267; Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 81.

¹³¹ Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 85.

¹³² Anthony R. Wells, 'The North Atlantic and Arctic Theaters of Operations', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 200–202.

¹³³ A Soviet push to the Persian Gulf is part of the scenario fictionalised in Tom Clancy, *Red Storm Rising* (New York: Putnam, 1986); Dennis Chaplin, 'Soviet Oil and the Security of the Gulf', *The RUSI Journal* 123, no. 4 (1978): 50–52; Caspar Weinberger, *Soviet Military Power*, 1984, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C: Department of Defense, 1984), <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88B00831R000100210053-2.pdf>.

were built in Soviet Ukraine.¹³⁴ The Kiev-class succeeded the 1960s Moskva-class helicopter carriers. The Moskvas' role was anti-submarine warfare to prosecute NATO submarines carrying Regulus and later Polaris submarine-launched nuclear missiles. The Moskvas' embarked squadrons of up to 18 Kamov Ka-25 'Hormone' helicopters operated dipping sonars to 'sanitise' large areas of ocean of NATO submarines.¹³⁵

In the West, the commissioning of these aircraft-carrying ships was a 'surprise', as recorded by German analyst Edward Wegener in a 1975 book translated by his brother as *The Soviet Naval Offensive*.¹³⁶ Surprise bred rushed assessment that shipborne aviation would be a power projection tool for the Soviet Navy, analogous to Western aircraft carrier power projection in Suez, Vietnam and elsewhere. Confirming their bias of assumed aggressive foreign policy goals, analysts and observers anticipated Soviet interventions in coastal states. David Fairhall in 1971 and David Mitchell in 1974 assessed that the Moskva-class would embark a battalion of 'black-bereted Naval Infantry.' Noting that the Soviet Naval Infantry was formally re-established in 1964, both writers then made the assessment that these ships represented a threat of amphibious intervention, despite their being anti-submarine units and amphibious landings playing a small part in Soviet naval exercises.¹³⁷ Only in 2004 could John B. Hattendorf review the capability versus intent assessment debate over the Moskva-class for the Naval War College in a dispassionate fashion.¹³⁸

The way the second and third ships of the follow-on Kiev-class, *Minsk* (commissioned 1978) and *Novorossiysk* (commissioned 1982) were assigned to the Soviet Pacific Fleet raised fears of Soviet interventionism in the Asia-Pacific region. *Minsk* visited Aden and Vietnam en route to the NW Pacific in May 1979, including demonstrations of Yak-38 operations while underway off Socotra Island and in the Gulf of Tonkin. *Novorossiysk* visited Luanda, Angola on her deployment voyage eastwards in 1983.¹³⁹ This was the peacetime role of Gorshkov's Navy in action, hard power credibility begetting soft power influence, as described by Admiral Bringle in 1973. The Yak-38s were short range, limited payload self-defence fighters, poor comparisons to the British Harrier and quite unlike the capable catapult-launched aircraft in the US Navy inventory. In the West however, *Minsk* and *Novorossiysk*'s deployments were interpreted as Soviet preparation for intervention across the Indo-Asia Pacific region in a mirror-imaging of Western naval strategy. These threat assessments probably influenced US Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral James D. Watkins, who later released the seminal *Maritime Strategy* as Chief of Naval Operations in 1986.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Watson and Watson, *The Soviet Navy*, 73; Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 313.

¹³⁵ Lee, 'A Brief Look at Russian Aircraft Carrier Development'; Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 511; Watson, 'Comments on Gorshkov's "Sea Power of the State"'; Chumbley and Gardiner, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1947 - 1995*, 344; Watson and Watson, *The Soviet Navy*, 72.

¹³⁶ Wegener, *The Soviet Naval Offensive*, 110–12.

¹³⁷ Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 526; Fairhall, *Russia Looks to the Sea*, 252.

¹³⁸ John B. Hattendorf, *The Evolution of the US Navy's Maritime Strategy, 1977-1986*, Newport Paper; No. 19 (Newport: Naval War College, 2004), 27.

¹³⁹ Bernstein, 'The Soviet Pacific Fleet', 237; Admiral Baybakov and Captain Arbatov, 'The Great Bear Hug', trans. JJ Oswald, *The RUSI Journal* 123, no. 2 (1978): 36; Hill, 'Cold War Soviet Navy in Sub-Saharan African Waters', 115.

¹⁴⁰ Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 162–64; Gerald Segal, *The Soviet Union and the Pacific* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1990), 79–80; Hattendorf, *The Evolution of the US Navy's Maritime Strategy, 1977-1986*, 17–18.



Fig. 6 – Kiev-class aircraft-carrying ship launching Yak-38 Forger vertical take-off and landing fighter. Note SS-N-12 Sandbox anti-ship missile canisters on the left of the picture. (Public domain).

Wartime versus peacetime Roles of the Soviet Navy

For the West, vital to ‘breaking the mirror’ was understanding the fundamentally different roles of the Soviet Navy in peace and war, yet only a few analysts realised this difference of approach between East and West. Western navies tended to collaborate in warlike exercises, for example NATO’s series of anti-submarine warfare exercises conducted under the control of CINCEASTLANT, a Royal Navy Admiral headquartered at Northwood in Middlesex. In contrast, for the Soviet Navy peacetime cruises were very different to wartime activity, with an emphasis on naval diplomacy to advertise the technological, economic, societal and military superiority of the Soviet system.¹⁴¹ Quoting a 1972 *Morskoy Sbornik* article, Bruce Watson even suggests these peacetime roles to have been *more* important to Gorshkov than war training because wartime would be unpredictable and likely lead to the destruction of much of his cherished fleet:

‘The role of the Navy is not limited to the execution of important missions in armed conflict. While representing a formidable force in war, it has always been an instrument of policy and an important support for diplomacy in peacetime owing to its inherent qualities which permit it to a greater degree than other branches of the armed forces to exert pressure on potential enemies without the direct employment of weaponry.’¹⁴²

Nevertheless, Soviet operations short of war were often disparaged in the West, for example by Rear Admiral George Miller in his 1974 commentary on the first batch of Gorshkov’s writings published in English:

‘The Soviets are using their Fleets as a weapon of state policy for peacetime penetration of less developed areas. However, they package their own operations with more internationally palatable phraseology such as trade missions, wars of national liberation, and People’s Democratic Republics.’

¹⁴¹ John G. Hibbits, ‘Admiral Gorshkov’s Writings: Twenty Years of Naval Thought’, in *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, ed. Paul J. Murphy, Studies in Communist Affairs ; v. 2. (Washington, D.C: United States Air Force, 1978), 15; *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments*, 13; Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, ‘Introduction’, in *Red Star Rising at Sea: Navies in War and Peace*, by Sergei Georgievich Gorshkov, ed. Colonel Herbert Preston USMC, trans. Theodore Neely (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1974).

¹⁴² Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 9; Power, ‘Dichotomy of Strategy’, 26.

In wartime, a fundamentally defensive strategy meant deployed units of the Soviet surface fleet would have likely engaged in an annihilation 'battle of the first salvo' against NATO. Soviet warships typically had higher top speeds but shorter ranges than their western counterparts. Relying on the number, accuracy and lethality of anti-ship missiles, Soviet warships would engage NATO ships in the North Atlantic and NW Pacific then return to port to refuel and rearm if they survived.¹⁴³ Soviet ships on distant patrol at the outbreak of war (e.g. those shadowing Western exercises) would be rapidly recalled or left to fend for themselves in an echo of German surface raiders experience in the early stages of both world wars. Despite the port access and basing arrangements discussed above, the Soviet Navy never established a sufficient permanent network of support bases worldwide to sustain persistent global operations like the US, French and Royal Navies.

Western assumptions of an expansionist Soviet policy with the Navy as a key tool were wide of the mark. Building on communist party paranoia about outside and insider threats, the priority for Soviet naval strategy was protection of the Soviet motherland, i.e. preventing NATO navies from approaching the coastline to launch missiles or carrier airstrikes onto Soviet territory. Power projection was not a priority, at most it was a secondary role for some Soviet warships. Soviet war plans *did not* include mounting a major Atlantic offensive against convoys of merchant ships, despite what the Royal Navy anticipated throughout the Cold War. Gorshkov himself downplayed commerce interdiction as a strategic role for the Soviet Navy in his writing. Even in the expanse of the Pacific, Soviet emphasis remained on land forces because of hostility between the Soviet Union and China since the early 1960s. As late as 1979, 52 Red Army divisions were stationed on the Chinese-Soviet border to face a perceived Chinese land threat.¹⁴⁴

As naval technology improved, Soviet defensive strategy extended from the coast to protecting the southern Arctic Ocean, especially the Barents Sea where Soviet SSBNs would patrol as Moscow's secure second-strike capability. The massive Typhoon-class submarines became operational in 1981. These were designed for patrols in the Arctic, including under the icecap with the capability to break through the ice to launch their nuclear missiles, or to fire from alongside base ports on the Kola peninsula.¹⁴⁵

This defensive strategy came to be known in the West as 'bastion defence'. The 'bastions', occasionally referred to as 'sanctuaries', were the SSBN patrol areas which had to be kept 'clean' of NATO submarines, warships and aircraft. Beyond the 'inner bastions', the rest of the Soviet Navy, including long-range aircraft, would deny NATO use of the sea approaches to the bastions in what the Soviets termed a broad 'blue belt of defence.' By the end of the Cold War, these outer sea areas extended up to 2500km into the Norwegian Sea and NW Pacific. In the West, this pushing out further from the Soviet coastline was interpreted as an offensive Soviet naval strategy as Soviet warships appeared more frequently in waters close to the United Kingdom and Japan. In actuality, the blue belt of defence strengthened and deepened a fundamentally defensive strategy.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 234; Ranft, 'Sergei Gorshkov', 71.

¹⁴⁴ Robert Herrick, 'Roles and Missions of the Soviet Navy: Historical Evolution, Current Priorities, and Future Prospects', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 25–33; Hibbits, 'Admiral Gorshkov's Writings: Twenty Years of Naval Thought', 8; William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1998); Segal, *The Soviet Union and the Pacific*, 81.

¹⁴⁵ Watson and Watson, *The Soviet Navy*, 188; Sontag and Drew, *Blind Man's Bluff*, 240–44.

¹⁴⁶ Weir and Boyne, *Rising Tide*, 295; Jan S. Breemer, 'The Soviet Navy's SSBN Bastions: Evidence, Inference, and Alternative Scenarios', *The RUSI Journal* 130, no. 1 (1985): 18–26; Lambert, 'Russia and Some Principles of Maritime Strategy', 38–39; Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy*, 206; Ranft, 'Sergei Gorshkov', 72; Robert Herrick, 'The USSR's "Blue Belt of Defense" Concept: A Unified Military Plan for Defense against Seaborne Nuclear Attack by Strike Carriers and POLARIS/POSEIDON SSBNs.', in *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, ed. Paul J. Murphy, Studies in Communist Affairs; v. 2. (Washington, D.C: United States Air Force, 1978); Herrick, 'Roles and Missions of the Soviet Navy: Historical Evolution, Current Priorities, and Future Prospects', 51; Herrick, *Gorshkov's Inheritance*,



Fig. 7 – Typhoon-class ballistic missile submarine (SSBN). (*The National Interest*).

The defensive bastion strategy dominated the late Cold War Soviet Navy because of its relevance to preserving a secure second strike by submarines hidden in the Arctic Ocean. The sheer cost of these submarines and their missiles, especially the Typhoon-class, established the bastions and their protection as the critical centre of gravity for the Soviet Navy, leaving little capacity for offensive operations. Today's legacy is a Russian Navy with a large and advanced submarine force, including ballistic missile submarines, but limited global power projection capabilities and dated systems as exposed by independent Ukraine since 2022. The once-feared Tu-22M Backfire strike aircraft were transferred to the Russian Air Force (VKS) in 2011 as land attack bombers and used extensively in Syria. The continuation of an Arctic-centric deterrence strategy by the modern Russian Navy validates the assessment of Soviet maritime defensiveness, as put forward by Herrick, McCwire and others of the Cold War minority view.¹⁴⁷

Perceptions of the Soviet Naval threat in the United States – the *Maritime Strategy*

However, during the Cold War the assessment of aggressive Soviet naval intent predominated into the 1980s, even as intelligence agencies began to consider the fundamental defensiveness of Soviet maritime strategy. Notably, the Central Intelligence Agency in the United States, probably with deeper linguistic and cultural understanding of the Soviet Union, began to critically interpret Soviet doctrine and Gorshkov's writings. In a 1978 assessment, the CIA's National Foreign Assessment Center assessed that the Soviets would not commit more than 10 per cent of their naval resources to commerce interdiction – there would be no Third Battle of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, exacerbated by competition and siloing between intelligence organisations in the United States, in military

275; 'Soviet Naval Strategy and Programs through the 1990s', 109; Nordenman and Stavridis, *The New Battle for the Atlantic: Emerging Naval Competition with Russia in the Far North*, 47; Lehman, *Oceans Ventured*, 136; Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 507.

¹⁴⁷ The 2016-17 deployment of the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* to the war in Syria showed the limited capabilities of the late Soviet bluewater naval capability. Two carrier-borne aircraft were lost in the Eastern Mediterranean to ship equipment failure. The *Kuznetsov* and its escorts had to be accompanied by an ocean-going tug throughout the deployment in case of breakdown. Michael Kofman, 'Evolution of Russian Naval Strategy', in *The Sea in Russian Strategy*, ed. Andrew Monaghan and Richard Connolly, Russian Strategy and Power (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), 98–99; Samuel Lagrone, 'Russia Pulling Carrier Admiral Kuznetsov from Mediterranean', USNI News, 6 January 2017, <https://news.usni.org/2017/01/06/russia-pulling-carrier-admiral-kuznetsov-mediterranean>; Dyndal, '50 Years Ago: The Origins of NATO Concerns about the Threat of Russian Strategic Nuclear Submarine'.

intelligence a capability-led, 'bean-counting' approach prevailed.¹⁴⁸ As NATO Secretary General Joseph Luns put it in December 1983:

'The expansion of the Soviet Navy has been a disturbing development as it not only threatens our capability to reinforce [Europe from North America in the face of Soviet commerce interdiction] but has allowed Soviet influence to be seen and felt in parts of the world hitherto beyond Soviet reach.'¹⁴⁹

The perceived Soviet naval threat became a powerful call to action in the West, particularly in the United States. The cooling of relations between East and West between the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to the Soviet premiership in 1985 represented an especially tense period, sometimes dubbed the 'Second Cold War'.¹⁵⁰ Ronald Reagan, his future Secretary of the Navy John Lehman and Texas Senator John Tower began an explicitly Mahanian campaign to recapitalise and expand the US Navy in the run-up to the 1980 US general election. The threat analysis to justify this expansion was an aggressive Soviet Navy supporting an expansionist foreign policy; the US Navy should be bolder in facing the threat. Furthermore, the Soviet Navy had been allowed to catch-up as a result of US laggardness after Vietnam.¹⁵¹ This threat analysis was fundamentally capability-led: Soviet aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines lurking in the Atlantic, new shipborne aviation capabilities and naval infantry poised to invade across the world. Soviet naval diplomacy in the developing world proved an overall expansionist Soviet plan and extrapolation from the Afghanistan invasion, especially in the Horn of Africa and its adjacent critical sealanes, showed a specific threat to global sea lines of communication.¹⁵² In 1982 even the measured and non-military CIA assessed that 'given the likelihood of continued instability in the Third World, the use of such naval diplomacy and power projection techniques probably will increase during the 1980s and 1990s.'¹⁵³

In office as Secretary of the Navy, Lehman would pursue his '600-ship' expansion programme in creative ways, including re-commissioning mothballed battleships *USS Iowa*, *New Jersey*, *Wisconsin* and *Missouri* specifically to counter the threat posed by new Soviet Kirov-class nuclear-powered battlecruisers.¹⁵⁴ This political imperative met with willing acolytes inside the US Navy itself, which had lobbied for a role following the lean decade of the 1970s. After Vietnam, during détente and the Carter presidency, reductions in US Defense spending hit the Navy hard. Modern, unfamiliar and barely used Soviet warships contrasted sharply with rusting US ships returning from hard service in SE Asia; for example in 1975, 90 percent of Soviet warships were less than twenty years old – the product of Gorshkov's naval expansion.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁸ 'The Role of Interdiction at Sea in Soviet Naval Strategy and Operations' (Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center, May 1978), https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005530564.pdf; 'Soviet Naval Strategy and Programs through the 1990s'; Hattendorf, *The Evolution of the US Navy's Maritime Strategy, 1977-1986*, 27–29; Wells, *Between Five Eyes*, 74; Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 265–68.

¹⁴⁹ Fieldhouse, 'Soviet Maritime Power'.

¹⁵⁰ Taylor Downing, 1983: *The World at the Brink* (London: Abacus, 2019); Walton, *Spies*, 16.

¹⁵¹ Christopher J. Bowie, 'Book Review: Red Navy at Sea: Soviet Naval Operations on the High Seas', *Political Science Quarterly* 98, no. 2 (1 June 1983): 355–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149457>; Breyer and Polmar, *Guide to the Soviet Navy*, 48; Lehman, *Oceans Ventured*, 63.

¹⁵² Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 283.

¹⁵³ 'Soviet Naval Strategy and Programs through the 1990s'.

¹⁵⁴ Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy*, 188; Kenneth Brower and James W. Kehoe, 'The Soviet Cruiser-Destroyer-Frigate Force', in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 97; Captain John Moore RN, ed., *Jane's Fighting Ships 1987-88* (London: Jane's, 1987), 730–31.

¹⁵⁵ Spector, 'The Hitherto Unlikely Scenario', 374–75; Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy*, 195; Brower and Kehoe, 'The Soviet Cruiser-Destroyer-Frigate Force', 116–17; Nordenman and Stavridis, *The New Battle for the Atlantic: Emerging Naval Competition with Russia in the Far North*, 52; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 535.

These arguments were presented in the seminal 1986 US *Maritime Strategy* published under the byline of Admiral James Watkins, by then Chief of Naval Operations. The Soviet Navy was a threat, therefore the US Navy must expand to meet it. The strategy went further, advocating forward deployment of carrier battle groups in the Norwegian Sea, Eastern Mediterranean and Sea of Okhotsk to threaten the Soviet homeland in times of tension or war:

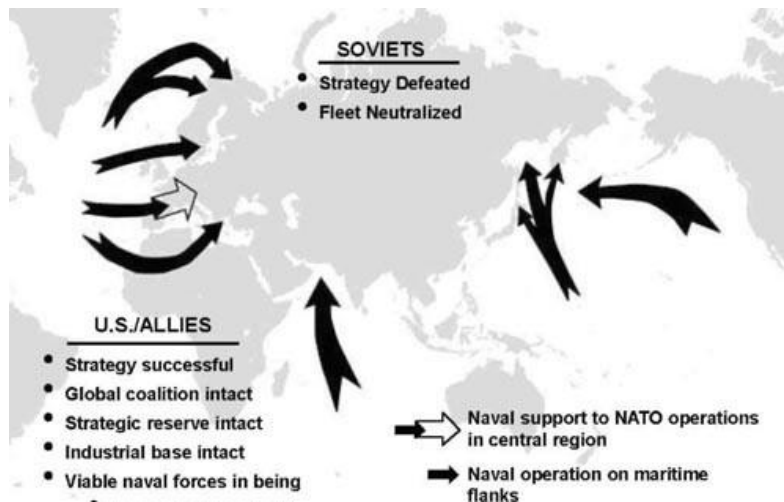


Fig. 8 – Diagram from US *Maritime Strategy* 1986 showing proposed forward deployment of carrier battle groups towards the Soviet Union. (US Naval Institute *Proceedings*, 1986)

For the Royal Navy, the threat posed by Soviet submarines remained paramount. The assumption was that the Soviets would fight another Battle of the Atlantic against merchant ships supplying the British Isles and Western Europe and that this would be a main pillar of their war strategy. This assumption had endured since the Admiralty first extrapolated actual wartime experience against the German U-boat arm into expectations the Soviets would adopt the same strategy. In a book otherwise full of praise for the British submarine service, in *The Silent Deep* Peter Hennessy charges the Cold War Royal Navy with ‘mirroring-imaging and refighting the Second World War’ in the Atlantic.¹⁵⁶

These British pre-occupations were accommodated into the overall strategic plan outlined by the US *Maritime Strategy*. During the carrier battle groups forward deployment scenario, the Royal Navy would provide anti-submarine escort in the Norwegian Sea. This portion of the *Strategy* was exercised, for example in the NATO series of Teamwork exercises throughout the 1980s. To secure the landward flank, the Royal Marines would use their Arctic warfare skills to secure north Norway and prevent the Soviets invading and setting up shore-based anti-ship missiles or capturing airfields. For the British this northern strategy was also partly preparing to refight the Second World War; German U-boats and the Luftwaffe had used Norwegian bases to attack the Arctic convoys supplying the then-allied Soviet Union.¹⁵⁷

Politics was also at work in the 1980s. Particularly in the United States, there was probably some overstating of Soviet naval capabilities to justify defence spending and the

¹⁵⁶ Hennessy and Jinks, *The Silent Deep*, 271–75; Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 561–64; Grove, *Vanguard to Trident*, 73; Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 196.

¹⁵⁷ John Kristen Skogan, Arne Olav Brundtland, and Geoffrey Till, ‘Soviet Naval Activity in the North: A British Response’, in *Soviet Seapower in Northern Waters: Facts, Motivation, Impact, and Responses* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990), 121–30; Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 505–30.

Navy's share of the pie. As British Rear Admiral Richard Hill put it in a 2006 collection of essays honouring Bryan Ranft: 'it was said, with some justification, that the naval staffs of the West should get down on their knees nightly to thank their Maker for the Soviet Navy.'¹⁵⁸ To prove the Soviet naval threat, examples were used of intent reductively inferred from capability developments. This was especially true of the Soviet aircraft carrier programme, which even in concept never approached parity with US capabilities yet was used in the *Strategy* to prove aggressive Soviet intent. Influenced by the Navy/Marine Corps experience of the Pacific War against the Japanese, John B. Hattendorf wrote in his review of the development of the 1986 *Maritime Strategy* in 2004: 'the Americans tended to view the new Soviet blue water naval capabilities in terms of mirror-imaging and refighting World War II.'¹⁵⁹ In the UK, Admiral Sir James Eberle interpreted the construction of the Kirov-class battlecruisers and enlarged shipyards at Nikolayev in Ukraine in the early 1980s as evidence the Soviets were moving from a defensive sea denial strategy to pursuing command of the sea.¹⁶⁰ Eberle's inference from incomplete intelligence of the newest and as yet unbuilt ships of the Soviet Navy is a clear example of capability-led assessment of adversary intent. Writing four years later in the *Royal United Services Institute Journal*, then First Sea Lord Admiral Fieldhouse correctly pointed out that 'capabilities bequeath options' rather than indicating intent. Hence his (and his Soviet counterparts) advocating for a balanced fleet to face all contingencies and political requirements.¹⁶¹

In his 2018 memoirs, John Lehman argues that the *Maritime Strategy* contributed significantly to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, an argument also propounded by scholars such as Sarah Paine at the US Naval War College.¹⁶² The radar and networking technology required to coordinate multiple carrier battle groups approaching the Soviet Union required microelectronics and computing power Soviet industry could not match. The *Maritime Strategy* process ran in parallel with the better-known Strategic Defence Initiative or 'Star Wars' programme of space-based ballistic missile defence. Both programmes and increased Western defence spending more generally forced ever-increasing proportions of shrinking Soviet economic output into defence.

The End of the Soviet Naval Challenge

By publishing the *Maritime Strategy*, the US Navy revealed its wartime strategy to its main adversary. This strategic intent, more than the associated technology, was the message received in Moscow. The lack of a Soviet response to the *Strategy*, for example expanded naval exercises and deployments or a similarly ambitious strategy document shows how limited and fundamentally defensive Soviet naval strategy really was. Gorshkov retired and was replaced by Vladimir Chernavin in 1985, leading to what Geoffrey Till terms a 'political retreat' by the Soviet Navy in the Gorbachev years.¹⁶³ Although Gorshkov's ideas were not denounced (as could happen in the Soviet Union) the Afghanistan war consumed

¹⁵⁸ Richard Hill, 'Naval Thinking in the Nuclear Age', in *The Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in Memory of Bryan McLaren Ranft*, ed. Geoffrey Till, Cass Series--Naval Policy and History 38 (London: Routledge, 2006), 166.

¹⁵⁹ Hattendorf, *The Evolution of the US Navy's Maritime Strategy, 1977-1986*, 23.

¹⁶⁰ Command of the sea is a traditional, Mahanian concept which underpins US blue water maritime strategy to this day. Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 12-13; Michael I. Handel, *War, Strategy, and Intelligence*, Cass Series on Politics and Military Affairs in the Twentieth Century (London: Frank Cass, 1989), 198-200; George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The US Navy, 1890-1990* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994), 441; Ranft, 'Sergei Gorshkov', 182; Eberle, 'Soviet Maritime Power 75 Years After Tsushima', 8.

¹⁶¹ Fieldhouse, 'Soviet Maritime Power', 5.

¹⁶² Sarah C. M. Paine, 'Why the Soviet Union Lost the Cold War', Horns of a Dilemma - War on the Rocks, accessed 26 March 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/why-russia-lost-the-cold-war/>; Weir and Boyne, *Rising Tide*, 5; Norman Friedman, 'The Fifty-Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War', *RUSI Journal* 146, no. 3 (2001): 22-23; Lehman, *Oceans Ventured*.

¹⁶³ Skogan, Brundtland, and Till, 'Soviet Naval Activity in the North: A British Response', 129.

ever-greater military resources, pushing the Soviet economy towards fundamental collapse and limiting the potential for sustained Soviet naval investment.¹⁶⁴

Gorshkov's naval expansion and adventurism of the 1970s gave way to exclusive focus on the defensive Arctic bastion strategy; there were no more four-fleet global naval exercises after Okean 75. For all the trumpeted successes, for example in West Africa, the Soviet Navy also *lost* access to once-friendly ports as political preferences changed, for example from the Pasha Liman submarine base in Albania in 1961, from Chinese ports after the Sino-Soviet split, from Egypt in 1972 and from Somalia in 1977. Subsequent caution in the Kremlin prevented direct naval confrontation with Western forces after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. In developing world conflicts, Afghanistan reduced Soviet appetites for intervention. The Soviet Navy never intervened in Latin America or in the Pacific, calling into question 1960s and 1970s Western strategic assessments of the Soviet Navy as an agent of a plan for communist world domination.¹⁶⁵ We now know that the Soviets took note of the 1986 *Maritime Strategy* not so much as a demonstration of naval might, but as a security threat. Whether on exercise or in wartime, the deployment of carrier battle groups into sea areas close to the Soviet Union bypassed the Eastern European land buffer zone assembled at such political cost in the 1940s.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

Naval procurement and warship service lives are measured in decades. The result of Reagan and Lehmann's 600 ship Navy is the carrier-centric US Navy still in service today; the 1980s and 1990s-vintage Nimitz-class nuclear-powered aircraft carriers remain the capital ships of the US Fleet. Whereas in 1986 the key unit was the carrier *battle* group, in the 2000s these groups of ships were renamed carrier *strike* groups. The new term codifies the power projection role the US Navy has played since the end of the Cold War, in Iraq, Afghanistan and against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.¹⁶⁷

The Soviet Union was different. Reviewing the collapse of the Soviet military from the vantage point of 1998, William Odom explained: 'because the Soviet armed forces were so unlike Western militaries, mirror-imaging simply will not suffice; such shortcuts both distort and omit key realities.'¹⁶⁸ The Soviet Navy never had a power projection strategy; naval intent was fundamentally defensive. As part of the Soviet armed forces, the Navy's primary role was to defend the Rodina, the motherland. As the Cold War progressed and technologies improved, this concept was extended to include the 'bastion' areas used by ballistic missile submarines in the Arctic and NW Pacific.¹⁶⁹

The US carrier strike group Navy of today was inspired by erroneous capability-led assessment caused by the mirroring fallacy. Western analysts saw Soviet naval capabilities and inferred intent from there, e.g. an aircraft carrier must be intended for power projection; naval infantry are for amphibious intervention. Inferring aggressive intent from capabilities artificially magnified the Soviet threat. Impressive-looking but

¹⁶⁴ By the mid-1980s the AV-MF (Soviet Naval Aviation) were supporting Long Range and Frontal Aviation in Afghanistan. MccGwire, 'Contingency Plans for World War', 74; Breyer and Polmar, *Guide to the Soviet Navy*, 15.

¹⁶⁵ 'Review of the Soviet Navy 1962', *ADM 223/723 Quarterly Intelligence Report Q1 1963*, 8 April 1963, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Nordenman and Stavridis, *The New Battle for the Atlantic: Emerging Naval Competition with Russia in the Far North*, 49–52; Lehman, *Oceans Ventured*, 134; Hampshire, *RN in the Cold War Years*, 615.

¹⁶⁷ Kacher and Robb, *Naval Officer's Guide to the Pentagon*, 68–69.

¹⁶⁸ Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 10; Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶⁹ Stephen Mettler, 'Return of the Bear: Learning from Intelligence Analysis of the USSR to Better Assess Modern Russia', *American Intelligence Journal* 35, no. 2 (2018): 33–41; Kofman, 'Evolution of Russian Naval Strategy'. The continued use of a 'bastion' strategy by the modern Russian does necessarily imply Russian naval strategy is a continuation of Soviet strategy.

untested naval units seemed more threatening when coupled with worst-case assessments of intent.

Few in the West realised the analytical misperceptions being made, or disingenuously ignored them to lobby for Western naval spending. Those who did understand the fallacy being committed carefully pored over Soviet naval output for contrary evidence, only arriving at a mirroring explanation in the 1980s. For example, Bruce and Susan Watson summarised the situation in 1986: 'Having jostled its way to the first rank of navies, the Soviet Navy is all too often judged by the standards of the company that it keeps, which can be a mistake.'¹⁷⁰

By understanding capabilities in Western terms, analysts mirrored their own expectations of intent onto the Soviet Union. Capability-led assessment occurred because of a focus on demobilisation and new technology in the early Cold War, the volume of new technical data flowing in from new intelligence collection technologies and an unwillingness to analyse and interpret Soviet naval intent at source. Today, there is the risk of similar misperceptions being made about a growing Chinese Navy. Misperceiving the Soviet Navy is not traditionally classed as an 'intelligence failure', but closer reading and understanding of Soviet naval intent could have prevented destabilising superpower competition in the developing world and may even have curtailed the capability for western interventionism in the 1990s and 2000s.

(15,306 words, excl. footnotes)

¹⁷⁰ Watson and Watson, *The Soviet Navy*, 3.

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