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BETWEEN NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

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Resume: *The analysis of the Russian Navy's involvement in the Syrian campaign suggests two conclusions. The first one is rather optimistic: the Russian Navy has begun to recover after a long period of decline. The second one is less comforting: the Navy is already facing a shortage of ships of almost all major classes.*

INTRODUCTION

The routine tasks of the Russian Navy at present can be classified into three main groups:

Firstly, the Navy, which includes ballistic missile submarines, participates in the maintenance of strategic stability between Russia and the United States. General purpose forces provide combat stability to ballistic missile submarines, while the latter are an instrument of nuclear deterrence against the U.S. and NATO.

Secondly, general purpose naval forces perform the function of non-nuclear deterrence against potential enemies. Reliance on nuclear missile submarines only would significantly limit the capabilities of the country's leadership in the event of a conflict with some major sea power. The presence of advanced non-nuclear deterrence forces helps to avoid an unnecessary escalation of a conflict and raises the nuclear threshold. This is especially important since in many scenarios of conflicts between great powers the parties have limited political goals. The use or threat of the use of nuclear weapons in such situations is impossible or unreasonable, and a party that does not have sufficient conventional deterrence forces has a losing position.

And thirdly, the Navy also has peacetime missions—humanitarian operations, assistance to diplomatic efforts, and struggle against terrorism and other non-traditional threats to national security. In addition, the third group of tasks includes participation in local and low-intensity conflicts. The Russian operation in Syria largely belongs to this category. But its implementation requires non-nuclear deterrence, as well.

As part of the Syrian operation, the Navy has been:

- Ensuring supplies of weapons, military equipment and other cargoes to the government of Syria ("Syria express"), and supplies to the Russian ground force by sea. These efforts involve landing and auxiliary ships, including civilian vessels that were recently purchased for this purpose and assigned to the Navy;
- Ensuring the sustainability of supplies to Syria, controlling the air and underwater situation, and protecting the Khmeimim airbase and the supply and maintenance base in Tartus from the sea. This is done by the Russian Navy's Mediterranean Task Force;
- Attacking targets with long-range sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM). According to official information from the Ministry of Defence, SLCMs were used three times: on October 7 and November 20, 2015 from surface ships of the Caspian Flotilla (44 missiles in total), and on December 8, 2015 from the **Rostov-on-Don** submarine, which was located in the eastern part of the Mediterranean (four missiles were reportedly fired).

The analysis of the Russian Navy's involvement in the Syrian campaign suggests the following two conclusions. The first one is rather optimistic: the Russian Navy has begun to recover after a long period of decline in the 1990s-early 2000s. The second conclusion is less comforting: the Navy is already facing a shortage of ships of almost all major classes. Overcoming this shortage requires the commissioning of new ships and at a faster pace than Soviet-built ships are decommissioned.

A SEA BRIDGE

As was mentioned above, the Russian Navy began to deliver various kinds of cargo to the Syrian government in 2012. The reason for that is clear—as distinct from the civilian fleet, the Navy enjoys the right of extraterritoriality, which, for example, makes the inspection of cargo legally impossible. Also, the Navy's weapons and marines serve as an additional insurance against various contingencies.

In the period from 2013 to September 2015, large landing ships of the Russian Navy made more than 100 voyages to Syria. The "Syria express" provided useful experience to sailors and shore-based personnel who ensured technical serviceability of the ships. For example, the **Novocherkassk** large landing ship carried out ten combat missions and covered 30,000 miles over 170 vessel-days. Another large landing ship, **Alexander Shabalin** of the Baltic Fleet, was

on continuous combat duty at sea for 392 days, from the end of 2012 to the beginning of 2014, and covered about 47,000 miles over 283 vessel-days.

Delivering supplies to Syria required using almost all large landing ships. Each year, nine to ten ships were used for that purpose. In all, 16 out of 19 large landing ships in service with the Russian Navy were involved, which put a great strain on the Navy. The average age of Russian large landing ships is 34 years. The oldest ship is 50 years old, and the youngest is 25 years old. Unfortunately, the Navy may receive only two new large landing ships (Project 11711) in 2016-2017. There is still no clarity about how the fleet of landing ships will be modernized after that.

The bulk of the missions (about 60 percent) were carried out by Black Sea Fleet ships. Captain Alexander Plokhotnyuk, Chief Navigator of the Black Sea Fleet, said in March 2016 that the time spent by the fleet's ships underway increased fast in 2013-2015 from 272,000 nautical miles in 2013 to 544,000 miles in 2014 and to 767,500 miles in 2015. According to available information, the increase was due to the ships' participation in the "Syria express" operation.

The intensity of traffic increased with the beginning of the Russian Aerospace Forces' operation in Syria. According to the commander of the Russian force in Syria, Colonel-General Alexander Dvornikov, Russian ships made more than 80 voyages from September 2015 to March 2016. The delivery of supplies for the Russian force and the Syrian army required the use of tankers and other auxiliary ships. The shortage of landing and specialized transport ships forced the government to purchase second-hand civilian ships.

Using civilian ships under a military flag and in military-political interests is reasonable and justified in terms of cost-effectiveness—especially in a scenario similar to the Syrian one, when a military flag neutralizes most of political and legal risks and where there is no real and immediate military threat. One could also mention a hypothetical threat from Turkey's powerful submarine fleet, but large landing ships of Projects 775 or 1171 are as vulnerable to submarines as civilian ships are.

The "Syria Express" experience is an argument in favour of creating a body within the Russian Navy that would be similar to the U.S. Military Sealift Command and which would control ships delivering cargo in the interests of the Ministry of Defence in times of peace and war. These ships include both newly built or second-hand ships, and ships on long-term lease. Crews are largely civilian, and the number of military personnel can be reduced significantly, down to a small group of marines per ship.

THE MEDITERRANEAN SQUADRON

The creation of a naval task force in the Mediterranean, subordinate to the Black Sea Fleet commander, began in the spring of 2013 when a squadron of Pacific Fleet ships set off for the region. The squadron's composition constantly changed and included, at different times, ships from all fleets and flotillas of the Russian Navy, among them the **Pyotr Velikiy** nuclear-powered heavy missile cruiser and the **Admiral Flota Sovetskogo Soyuza Kuznetsov** heavy aircraft carrier.

During the Aerospace Forces' operation in Syria, the composition of the task force was more or less the same: the **Moskva** missile cruiser and several other surface warships, plus "Syria Express" ships and various types of auxiliary vessels. In addition, the task force apparently included submarines, but this information is classified. Nevertheless, after submarine-launched cruise missiles had been fired, it became known that they were fired by the **Rostov-on-Don** submarine.

In January 2016, the **Moskva** cruiser in the "Syrian squadron" was replaced by its sister ship—the **Varyag** missile cruiser of the Pacific Fleet. According to Captain Plokhotnyuk, the **Moskva** covered 40,000 miles during its three combat missions in 2015. The **Moskva** and, later, the **Varyag** were the core of the task force, which provided support to the Aerospace Forces and landing ships. They ensured air, anti-submarine and anti-ship defence, and controlled airspace and the entire task force. It should be noted that support for the Aerospace Forces in Syria initially was not among the Russian Navy's tasks. However, after Turkish troops shot down a Russian bomber, the **Moskva** cruiser sailed to the coast of Latakia, and an S-400 anti-aircraft missile system was deployed on the ground.

The choice of the **Moskva** and the **Varyag** was not accidental. In fact, they were the only combat-ready ships capable of performing such missions. A third cruiser, **Marshal Ustinov** (Project 1164), and the **Pyotr Velikiy** are undergoing shipyard overhauls. The average age of these four ships is 27 years. In 2018, the Navy expects to receive the **Admiral Nakhimov** heavy missile cruiser, with the **Pyotr Velikiy** taking its place in the repair dock. Soviet-built large anti-submarine ships and destroyers now in service with the Russian Navy cannot serve as the flagship of the Mediterranean Task Force. Further modernization of the small fleet of large surface ships depends on the implementation of the program to build a new-generation destroyer. Project 22350 frigates can also perform air defence functions but can hardly serve as the flagship of a task force during a long period of time.

The situation with other ships in the task force is a little better. Near the Syrian coast, the **Moskva** was accompanied by various Soviet-built ships, including the **Smetlivy** destroyer (commissioned 47 years ago). In March 2016, the Black Sea Fleet received the **Admiral Grigorovich** frigate (Project 11356) and is expected to receive two more ships of this project in the near future. Due to Ukraine's decision not to supply gas turbines for these ships, Russia has given up plans to build three more frigates of this type. On the one hand, this may be for the better—Project 11356 ships have been a forced and temporary solution because these ships are obsolete.

On the other hand, this raises the issue of building a series of multipurpose surface warships. Russia is now building Project 22350 frigates but slowly due to their high cost and complexity. Things are much better with submarines. Six new Project 636.3 submarines, such as the **Rostov-on-Don**, can drastically reinforce the Black Sea submarine fleet. In addition, their construction can be continued in the interests of other regional fleets of Russia.

THE LONG ARM OF THE FLEET

The event that attracted particular attention from observers was the active use of new long-range sea-launched 3M14 Kalibr cruise missiles. The Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff, Andrei Kartapolov, said that the decision to fire the missiles was made after the Russian "intelligence detected several important objects of militants, which needed to be destroyed immediately." Nevertheless, the use of the cruise missiles was required not so much by military necessity as by the desire to test and demonstrate Russia's new capabilities.

These missiles were largely deployed on Project 21631 missile corvettes in service with the Caspian Flotilla. For a long time, some experts had questioned the advisability of building these ships armed with such powerful missiles and active rearmament of the flotilla in general, which in the early 2000s received the first four ships armed with Kalibr missiles. The Syrian campaign clearly showed the wisdom of this decision—now flotilla ships have 32 launchers for long-range cruise missiles with the operational range covering the entire Caucasus and large parts of Central Asia and the Middle East. It is in these areas that threats to Russia's national security are most likely to emerge, and particularly from international terrorist organizations.

The relatively cheap Project 21631 Buyan-M-class missile corvettes, which are not covered by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, have a major advantage—they can be easily redeployed using Russia's inland waterways. Instead of long voyages from one fleet to another, which is not safe in wartime, missile corvettes can move easily and relatively fast, for example, from the Caspian Sea to the Baltic or Black Sea or to the Northern Fleet's area of responsibility.

In December 2015, the Black Sea Fleet received two Project 21631 missile corvettes which should partly compensate for the curtailment of the Project 11356 frigate program. In all, the Navy expects to receive nine Buyan-M-class ships. In addition, Russia has begun to build Project 22800 missile corvettes, which will have better seaworthiness than Buyan-Ms and which will be capable of operating at sea. The first two of the planned 18 Project 22800 ships have already been laid down.

Thanks to missile corvettes, Russia will receive up to 27 new ships, capable of carrying over 200 cruise missiles, within a short period of time and at a reasonable price (compared to the construction of larger and technologically more sophisticated multipurpose ships). In addition, almost all newly built ships, including Project 11356 frigates and Project 636.3 submarines, will be armed with Kalibr missiles.

There is an important point here. The possibility of firing sea-launched cruise missiles from closed water areas, such as the Black or Caspian Sea, depends on the permission of third countries to use their airspace. In the case of the Caspian Sea, Russia had such permission, and the missiles flew through the airspace of Iran and Iraq. Using cruise missiles against targets in Syria from the Black Sea would have been impossible because of Turkey's position. Perhaps, this was why the **Zeleny Dol** missile corvette of the Black Sea Fleet was dispatched to the Mediterranean in February 2016. In early March, the ship was reported to have fired cruise missiles against targets in Syria, but this information was not officially confirmed.

ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF QUANTITY INTO QUALITY

In the 2010s, the bulk of funds allocated for the shipbuilding program were used to finance two major projects—the construction of Project 995/995A strategic missile submarines and Project 885/8851 nuclear-powered multipurpose attack submarines armed with cruise missiles. These submarines are to become the core of Russia's naval nuclear and conventional deterrence force in the future. However, the experience of the Syrian campaign suggests that Russia should speed up the construction of other types of ships, as well. Otherwise, in 15 years, the Russian Navy will be unable to carry out even one operation similar to the Syrian one. Shipbuilding priorities are as follows:

The construction of ocean-going multi-purpose surface warships (destroyers under the Leader program), capable of acting as the flagship of a naval task force in the oceans and providing active non-nuclear deterrence;

- The construction of a large number of relatively cheap sea-going patrol ships;
- The modernization of the fleet of Soviet-built landing ships;
- The creation within the Navy of a body that would be in charge of sealifts;
- and the formation of a fleet of transport vessels.

Special mention should be made of two more classes of ships, the need for which became evident during the Syrian campaign. These are multi-purpose landing ships and aircraft carriers. The Russian Navy needs at least two aircraft carriers. The current operation would hardly have been possible without access to the Khmeimim airbase. Another factor of major importance was that the airbase was located away from the area of hostilities, and that there were no immediate threats to it from the ground or air. The maintenance base in Tartus made it possible to supply the Russian force quickly and sufficiently.

Attacks from the air and the ground, interruptions in supplies to the airbase, or simply the absence of a suitable and available airfield would have made the Russian Aerospace Forces' operation much more difficult or even impossible. Strategic aircraft and sea-launched cruise missiles could not fully replace frontline aviation. An aircraft carrier could be the only alternative for the entire duration of the operation or until the required ground airbase was created. Russia's only aircraft carrier, **Admiral Flota Sovetskogo Soyuza Kuznetsov**, was not involved in the Syrian campaign, but the ship and its aircraft have rather modest capabilities to combat coastal targets.

The results of Russia's military involvement in Syria (more than 9,000 air sorties over 5.5 months) are comparable with the capabilities of one U.S. Nimitz-class aircraft carrier. For example, during the operation in Iraq in 2002, aircraft deployed aboard the **USS Theodore Roosevelt** aircraft carrier made more than 10,000 sorties over five months. While the force at the Khmeimim airbase is capable of continuing the operation indefinitely, an aircraft carrier can intensively participate in an air campaign for not more than four to six months.

Finally, Mistral-class amphibious assault ships would be useful in an operation like that in Syria. They could play an active role in transporting cargoes and troops and serve as command ships, hospital ships, or carriers of large helicopter groups. Combining a Mistral-class ship as a command ship and a Project 22350 frigate as an air defence ship can ensure effective actions by a naval task force in the absence of a full-fledged flagship. However, the Russian Navy has not received the **Sevastopol** and the **Vladivostok** amphibious assault ships.

In view of this, it would be expedient to develop and build a series of landing platform docks, similar to the **Rotterdam** LPD of the Royal Netherlands Navy. Compared to Mistral-class ships, they would have smaller displacement and reduced air capabilities and would be cheaper. Developing and building full-fledged amphibious assault ships with large displacement is hardly expedient in the short term, given the aforementioned needs of the Navy. **Source : The Minister Plenipotentiary, DIRCO, Moscow.**