

Russia's naval doctrine

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On 31 July, President Vladimir Putin signed a new edition of the naval doctrine, which emphasises ensuring the security of Russia's interests in the 'world ocean', with a particular focus on the military aspects. The existing structure has been significantly reshaped – new elements have been introduced into the doctrine emphasising the primacy of security issues and the leading role of the Russian Navy, and there has been a change in regional priorities, with the Arctic moving to the top. The "strategic course of the US towards domination of the world ocean" was identified as the primary challenge and threat to Russia, including in terms of maritime transport and energy resources. This was followed by territorial claims to Russia, including some of its islands and coastal areas, and NATO's approach to its borders and its activation in adjacent waters.

The doctrine identifies the Azov Sea, Black Sea, Bering Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk, and the straits of the eastern Mediterranean, the Baltic, the Black Sea and the Kuril Straits as well as the main sea routes along the Asian and African coasts as strategically important zones for Russia's maritime security in the broadest sense. The main risks are the insufficient number of bases and supply points for Russian ships outside Russian territory (including the expansion of existing facilities and the creation of new ones on the Mediterranean and Red Seas, in the Indian Ocean and in the Asia-Pacific region) and the lack of an international legal delimitation of maritime areas in the Arctic, where Russia is expected to play a dominant role.

Priority in shipbuilding is to be given to large ocean-going warships, including aircraft carriers, the construction of which is to be enabled by the modernisation of the shipbuilding industry, although the strengthening of the Black Sea Fleet is planned to come before this. The expansion of the fleet and civilian infrastructure is to take into account issues related to mobilising them for military purposes. Commenting on the zones of maritime interests included in the document, Putin stressed that, "we will ensure their protection firmly and at all costs".

Commentary

- From the first edition in 2001, Russia's naval doctrine was one of the sectoral documents whose keystone was the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation. The changes that have now been made – shifting the centre of gravity to naval issues – de facto transform it into a document complementary to the Russian Federation's military doctrine. Most of the new provisions are chiefly a declaration of intent, and their implementation – in political terms (mainly the creation of new bases and supply points

outside Russia) and financial terms (the modernisation of the shipbuilding industry and expansion of the oceanic fleet) – should be considered unlikely in the coming years. Even if the assumptions are applied, the first effects are not expected before the end of this decade. This will require not only that Russia maintain an adequate level of funding, but also that it build a system of anti-American alliances based on selected African and Asian states (Beijing will be its main ally, but also potentially Moscow's main competitor in this regard). This does not mean that Russia cannot already invoke the provisions of the document in its actions, but its capabilities are limited to destructive activity in bodies of waters adjacent to the land (its manifestations are the blockade and destruction of Ukrainian ports).

- The main addressees of the doctrine are the United States and its most important allies with the capabilities to influence the situation in the world ocean (the provision on territorial claims points to Japan and its dispute with Russia over the ownership of the Kuril Islands). The absence of the Baltic Sea from the list of priorities is noteworthy – as the main area of Russia's maritime security it is listed indirectly, as a body of water for increased NATO activity and one of the main transport routes for Russian goods. However, the authors of the document have attempted to create the impression that the Atlantic area has become less important from the point of view of Russia's interests. It must be assumed that this represents a kind of acknowledgement by Russia that NATO is the dominant party in European and North Atlantic waters (especially in the context of Sweden and Finland's admission to the alliance), and that Russia is not likely to change this in the foreseeable future.