

RUSSIA'S NEW MARITIME DOCTRINE

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On 31 July 2022, Russian Navy Day, Russian president Vladimir Putin inspected a naval parade of historical and contemporary ships in the waters of St. Petersburg. At the conclusion of the parade, Putin gave a speech in which he hailed the city's founder, Peter the Great, for launching Russia's Navy and unleashing it against the West; threatened Russia's rivals with hypersonic missiles; and encouraged fresh cadets and wizened admirals to continue their defense of Russia's shores.¹ As part of the presentation, Putin decreed into force a new *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, replacing the previous iteration from 2015.²

Russia's *Maritime Doctrine* is a strategic planning document that complements the country's *National Security Strategy* (last released in 2021) and defines the aims, functions, and priority geographical areas of national civilian maritime and military naval policy.³ The 55-page doctrine envisions a violent and conflictual world that stems chiefly from attempts by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to impose their power across the maritime domain and assert their interests above all other states. In defining Russia's key maritime objective as preserving "the independence and self-sufficiency of the Russian Federation in the field of maritime activities," the doctrine refers to the United States and its allies as the chief adversaries challenging Russia's ability to preserve its status as a great maritime power that is responsible for "maintaining strategic stability in the World Ocean" (i.e., what Russian terms *blue-water open seas*) amid "the emerging polycentric world," the Russian formulation for great power, or strategic, competition.⁴

Although strategy documents often contain more grand ambition than clear deliverables, they provide value by identifying a country's worldview and assumptions that drive its military strategy. This article will first provide the evolutionary geopolitical context of Russia's *Maritime Doctrine*: in effect, how Russia interprets the origins and practices of contemporary strategic naval competition. It will then focus on the role that Russian civilian and military leadership believe that their southern vector—roughly speaking, the area covered by the Black Sea, Sea of Azov, Eastern Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, Caspian Sea, and Indian Ocean—will play in international politics. As Russia's Maritime Doctrine tacitly acknowledges NATO domination of the Atlantic Ocean and quietly demotes the Baltic Sea from its previous status as a priority area (likely in light of Finland and Sweden's impending admission to NATO, which will leave the northern European body of water almost totally dominated by NATO states), the southern vector joins the northern vector of the Arctic Ocean and Northern Sea Route and the eastern vector in the Pacific Ocean as Russia's main naval areas of concern and opportunity.

ISSN 2831-2899 (online)
ISSN 2831-2872 (print)



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Russia's Geopolitical Maritime Context

The geopolitical context that Putin may have wished for six months ago is not the one that exists today. At the outset of conflict with Ukraine in February 2022, Putin dominated world headlines with the specter of invasion and a 190,000-soldier force amassed on the border.⁵ It appeared that his larger goal of revising the international order, thereby returning Russia to a great power status that it had not enjoyed since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, was finally within reach. Across 15 years of active opposition to the United States and its allies, Putin was on the cusp of having the world listen to Russia on his terms. This had begun with a provocative speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference that directly challenged American global leadership and moved on to Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea and sponsorship of civil war in Ukraine in 2014, its intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015, its interference in U.S. and French presidential elections in 2016 and 2017, and numerous other poisonings of dissidents, Olympic doping scandals, and civilian airplane shoot-downs in between.⁶

In preparation for this anticipated era of international affairs, the Russian Ministry of Defence began to deliberate revisions to Russia's existing *Maritime Doctrine* to assert the country's (expected) bolstered great power status. The 2015 *Maritime Doctrine* reflected Russia's nascent attempts to articulate a global maritime strategy that balanced national security interests and commercial prerogatives considering the then-recent sanctions regime and diplomatic exclusion brought on by Russia's annexation of Crimea and civil war in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Its terminology and intent primarily stressed Russia's right to belong to the ranks of maritime powers. The 2015 *Maritime Doctrine* defined maritime activity as "activities for the study, development and use of the World Ocean in the interests of sustainable development and ensuring the national security of the Russian Federation" and Russia's national interests as "a set of needs of the state and society in the field of maritime activities, implemented on the basis of the maritime potential of the Russian Federation."⁷

The 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* updates those same interests in a more confrontational manner that stresses the seapower of the Russian state. Whereas the 2015 language was rooted in global cooperation, the 2022 language has dispensed with that pretense, broadening the scope of Russia's maritime activity to be "activities for the study, development, use and conservation of resources and spaces of the World Ocean in the interests of sustainable socio-economic development of the Russian Federation and ensuring its national

security" and the national interests of Russia as "objectively significant needs of the state and society in the field of maritime activities related to ensuring the national security of the Russian Federation and creating favorable conditions for its sustainable development."⁸ As noted by Russian military commentator Ilya Kravnik, the differences are important because the earlier definitions imply "the inclusion in the national interests of only those needs that can be realized on the basis of the existing potential [i.e., capabilities], while the second definition emphasizes the objective significance of these needs and the need to create conditions for their implementation. In addition, the new doctrine emphasizes the global nature of the national interests of Russia as a great maritime power, and their spread to the entire oceans."⁹

The expanded nature of Russia's interests and capabilities likely made more sense when its leaders anticipated a more successful invasion of Ukraine. Had Putin's invasion reached its military objective of overpowering Ukrainian armed forces, the political outcomes (e.g., forcing regime change in Kyiv, further annexation of Ukrainian territory to Russia, or the partitioning of Ukraine into several smaller states) would have demonstrated Russia's power on the international stage. From that position of strength, Putin would have more broadly advanced Russia's interests, which include, as described variously across the 2022 *Maritime Doctrine*, the following: affirming the independence of the Russian Federation; maintaining the state's political and territorial integrity; confirming the inviolability of the country's sovereignty over internal waters, the territorial sea, and their bottom, and the subsoil and airspace above them; ensuring rights and jurisdiction in the exclusive economic zone and on the continental shelf; maintaining the status of a great maritime power in conditions of a polycentric world; strengthening defense capabilities; developing maritime potential; and enjoying freedom of the high seas and freedom of access to global transport communications.¹⁰ The revision of the global maritime commons may be more difficult now for Russia, but under different circumstances these would have been Russia's opening bid.

If Europe Is Closed, Where Can Russia Go?

As this article is published in August 2022, it is not clear how long the Russo-Ukrainian War will last, who will prevail and under what conditions, and what the condition of Russian forces or the state of the Russian government thereafter will be. While Ukraine appears to be on the path toward European integration and close security cooperation with the United States and NATO, what is clearer is that NATO will likely expand across the entirety of Scandinavia and that all states in

and around Europe will increase defense spending and readiness for years to come. When this war is over, Russia will continue to harbor global naval ambitions, but it will have to do so farther toward the south and east, more or less alone. Russia failed to secure any significant military cooperation or assistance once its invasion of Ukraine commenced, and its equipment failed to impress while in use, thereby blunting its attractiveness as a security partner. The 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* addresses this reality in three ways. First, it ranks the importance of bodies of water to acknowledge the strengthening of NATO. Second, it identifies Russia's weaknesses in terms of existing port and coastal infrastructure. Finally, it articulates a theory of global naval presence based on creating a worldwide anti-American coalition that will allow it to create a global network of logistics bases in countries seeking to balance great power support.¹¹ Of course, it remains to be seen how attractive Russia will be in the coming years, during which a post-Putin Russia might be more appealing.

In the 2015 *Maritime Doctrine*, the Russian Federation divided the world's bodies of water in a relatively straightforward manner. It categorized bodies of water by their proximity to Russia, with, unsurprisingly, more emphasis given to those waterways and bodies more proximate than not. The world's oceans and vectors were then described and assessed in a clockwise fashion: Atlantic, Arctic, Pacific, Caspian, Indian, and Antarctic.¹² In the 2022 *Maritime Doctrine*, this proximity categorization remains. The highest category is called "vital" and includes Russia's territorial waters, its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the continental shelf beyond its limits in the Arctic Basin, the waters of the Northern Sea Route, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Russian sector of the Caspian Sea. The next category is "important" and includes the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea, the Baltic and Kuril straits, the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, and the sea transit areas (i.e., sea lines of communication) that are vital to maritime transportation. In terms of assessing the world's oceans by their importance, Russia changed its rankings in 2022 by placing the Arctic Ocean first, the Pacific Ocean second, and the Atlantic Ocean third, before resuming its 2015 rankings of the Caspian Sea and the Indian and Antarctic Oceans.¹³

While this article continues below to assess Russia's southward vector, the 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* mainly outlines the priority needs of the Arctic, where Russia clearly sees the combination of climate change, Chinese interest in the Northern Sea Route, and NATO expansion into the High North Sea as making its northern shores the most critical for defense and growth. Pursuant to this focus, the 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* names the main risks for Russian naval and maritime strategy as the country's "significant dependence"

on maritime transportation from the ships of other states and the operation of offshore pipeline systems that demonstrate the "incompatibility of the state and composition of the research fleet with modern requirements and the scale of tasks," a reference to the long-term sanctions regime against Russia's shipbuilding enterprises and oil and gas companies.¹⁴

In this context, Russia envisions to expand its maritime and naval reach in two ways to compensate for existing deficiencies and to remain competitive as a world power. First, Russia anticipates expanding its existing infrastructure in proximate waters, namely by strengthening the groupings of the Black Sea Fleet and developing its infrastructure in Crimea and off the coast of the city of Krasnodar. This strategy would permit Russia to strengthen its claims to the Black and Azov Seas for their aquatic biological resources, exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits, and laying and operation of underwater pipelines. Moreover, the 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* calls for the development of a ship repair complex in the territories of Crimea and Sevastopol, which are considered separate political units in Russia, stating that a priority need for Russia is the "development on the basis of shipbuilding and ship repair enterprises of the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, the shipbuilding complex, including large-tonnage shipbuilding (shipbuilding) and ship repair."¹⁵ Of course, just days after the 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* was released, Ukrainian forces began to destroy airfields, ammunition depots, and rail lines across Crimea, which created an exodus of Russian tourists and settlers.

Second, Russia is developing existing and new naval logistics facilities, usually referred to as PMTOs (from the Russian phrase *punkt material'no-tekhnicheskogo obespecheniya*).¹⁶ The 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* states very plainly that Russia's lack of bases worldwide inhibits the ability of its navy and commercial fleets to engage in long-distance and remote operations and commercial activities. The 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* accordingly calls for the construction of PMTOs roughly everywhere. In the Asia-Pacific region, the Russian government must provide for "the creation of conditions for a naval presence . . . which will allow monitoring the safety of the operation of maritime transport communications in this region." In the Mediterranean region, the PMTO in the Syrian city of Tartus will be strengthened in both a material sense and to deepen relations with Syria, thereby serving as a model for other such facilities and relationships "with the states of the Middle East and North Africa with adjacent seas and maritime spaces." The 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* also calls for PMTOs in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, stating that "preservation and maintenance of the naval presence of

the Russian Federation in the Persian Gulf area on the basis of PMTOs in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean” is a priority through new facilities and “the use of the [existing] infrastructure of the states of the region in the interests of the naval activities of the Russian Federation . . . [with particular attention to] development of strategic partnership and naval cooperation with India, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other states of the region.”¹⁷

Conclusion

As previously noted, strategy documents such as these Russian *Maritime Doctrines* contain far more grand ambition than clear deliverables, but they nevertheless provide value by identifying a country’s worldview and assumptions that drive its military strategy. Today, Russia’s war against Ukraine continues without a plausible theory of victory, meaning that its postwar political and financial capabilities can only be speculated on at best. The creation of new bases and supply points from North Africa to the Pacific Ocean, through the Indian Ocean, based on a broad anti-American alliance system alongside the modernization of the shipbuilding industry and expansion of the oceanic fleet do not seem within reach for Russia in the coming years, though they may perhaps be within China’s reach. Any future Russian leader, however, would certainly think that those are worthy pursuits. Russia’s 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* may have been planned to capitalize on the success of its “special military operation” in Ukraine, but its structural view of Russia’s growth in the north, south, and east will return to the desk of the next Russian president, because NATO is going nowhere anytime soon.

ENDNOTES

1. “On Navy Day, Putin Says United States Is Main Threat to Russia,” Reuters, 31 July 2022.
2. *Morskaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation] (Moscow: Kremlin, Russian Federation, 2022), hereafter *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2022).
3. *Strategiya natsionalnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation] (Moscow: Russian Security Council, Russian Federation, 2021).
4. Prokhor Tebin, “The New Naval Doctrine of Russia,” Valdai Discussion Club, 4 August 2022.
5. “Russia Has Massed Up to 190,000 Personnel in and Near Ukraine, U.S. Says,” Reuters, 18 February 2022.
6. See Angela E. Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Twelve, 2019).
7. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2015), trans. Anna Davis (Newport, RI: Russia Maritime Studies Institute, U.S. Naval War College, 2015), 10, 16, hereafter *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2015).
8. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2022), 2.
9. Ilya Kramnik, “The New Naval Doctrine of Russia: The Application of the Ideology of S. G. Gorshkov in the Twenty-First Century,” Institute of World Economy and International Relations, 1 August 2022. Translation from Russian by the author.
10. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2022), 2–9.
11. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2022), 2–13.
12. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2015), 19.
13. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2022), 21.
14. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2022), 20.
15. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2022), 29.
16. In Russian, this phrase reads as пункт материально-технического обеспечения.
17. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2022), 32.