

A View from the West:
**Russia's Pacific Territories:
Isolated, Neglected and Strategically Valuable**

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Credit: Petty Officer 2nd Class Matthew White

Sailors aboard the destroyer USS Stethem observe Russian warships as their ship enters the Russian Far East port of Vladivostok for a port visit, 5 July 2008.

Russia's aspirations for global maritime power and its desire to counter US influence are dependent on its ability to deploy naval forces effectively throughout the Pacific Ocean. While the Russian Federation Navy's (RFN) Pacific Fleet operates sizable submarine forces and the formation has been prioritized for new vessels, Russia's overall strategic position in the Pacific faces a series of challenges that are likely to hinder the expansion of its regional presence.

Russia has an uneven record as a Pacific-facing country. The Russian Far East (RFE)¹ is often regarded as a strategic backwater, but this is more a result of Moscow's perception than the historic reality. Significant events have occurred in the region that continue to have profound impacts, including the Russo-Japanese War, the Second World War, the Sino-Russian border clashes of 1969, and the Cold War. Despite this, Moscow favoured economic and cultural ties to Europe, and has only devoted sustained attention eastward at times of isolation from the West. Since its 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia is now experiencing one of those periods. The difference is that its neighbours are more powerful than ever, and several have significant grievances with Moscow.

Russia's sporadic focus on the Far East has left those territories under-populated and under-developed. Despite Russia's expansion to the Pacific in the late 17th century, the region remains isolated and, despite representing 41% of Russia's total territory, contains just 5% of its population.² Harbin, a city in northeastern China with about 10

million people, outnumbers the eight million Russians spread across the entirety of the RFE. Moscow's efforts to entice or coerce more people to move to the region have been unsuccessful, as cities to the west offer better economic opportunities and access to government services and this, in turn, has reduced the incentive to develop the area.

This isolation – and the favourable economics of marine transport over long distances – means that the RFE is highly dependent on shipping. The region's resource exports mostly flow directly to foreign markets from purpose-built ports, and imports of finished goods generally flow through ports closer to Russia's centres of population and industry in the west. As a result, its Pacific ports are poorly connected to internal transport networks, which further isolates RFE communities and increases dependence on seaborne transport. Moscow is aware of the challenges and the country's latest maritime doctrine, released in 2022, ranks the Pacific as second only to the Arctic in terms of priority. While the Atlantic, which ranks third, is treated as a theatre for competition with NATO, challenges in the Pacific focus heavily on Russia's regional industrial and transport deficiencies.³ This does not mean that Moscow does not see a strategic threat to its Pacific interests, but rather that its primary challenge is not foreign but domestic, and involves under-development of infrastructure needed to support larger populations and more economic activity in the RFE.

During the Cold War, the Pacific Fleet's surface combatants at Vladivostok and its submarines at Petropavlovsk

on the Kamchatka Peninsula were, along with the Northern Fleet operating from the Barents Sea, the Soviet Navy's most important distant-waters formations. The post-Cold War era was not kind to the Pacific fleet or its infrastructure, however, and capabilities decayed considerably. Nonetheless, with the rise of tension with the West, Moscow has rolled out plans to restore its marine industries to support a modernized Pacific Fleet, which – along with the entirety of the RFN – has become Moscow's most viable means of challenging US global influence.

The Pacific Fleet currently consists of around 11 major surface combatants, including a Soviet-era cruiser and destroyers of sometimes unclear status. A few new frigates and corvettes round out the fleet's modest surface forces, which is typical of the RFN as a whole. Surface forces comprised of aging large vessels and newer cruise-missile-firing smaller vessels are accompanied by considerable numbers of modernized submarines which remain the backbone of the country's strategic arsenal, and are undergoing sustained modernization and recapitalization. The Pacific Fleet's two dozen submarines include five of the RFN's seven newest *Borei*-class ballistic-missile submarines (SSBN) and two brand new *Yasen*-class guided-missile submarines (SSGN). These are reinforced with Soviet-era platforms, including nine older SSGNs and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) of various states of repair, while roughly 10 *Kilo*-class diesel-electric attack submarines (SSK) of various vintages provide additional patrol and strike capacity.

The theoretical firepower of these forces is considerable, and would increase immeasurably if Pacific Fleet forces are equipped with the Status-6/Kanyon autonomous torpedoes carrying 100-megaton warheads, as has been reported in the Russian and Western media. US military officials warned in March 2023 that the RFN – even without those doomsday weapons – would likely be capable of mounting sustained submarine patrols off both US coasts within “a year or two” with their new SSGNs.⁴ Russia's embrace of conventional (and nuclear) deterrence suggests that these boats will be positioned to threaten major logistical hubs and military installations, including in Hawaii, San Diego, the Bay Area, Puget Sound and, potentially, Esquimalt. In summer 2023 there was a notable increase in the number of Russian deployments into the Pacific, and Moscow recognizes the strategic and political benefits of being able to threaten massive damage against the United States and the naval forces from which it derives the bulk of its global power.

Russia's ability to sustain such operations, however, will face significant complications arising from its vast geography and its likely need to transfer forces between theatres. There are plenty of historical examples showing that



A Russian Border Guard vessel is seen while escorting the US Coast Guard Cutter *Boutwell* into Petropavlovsk for the 2007 North Pacific Coast Guard Forum, 18 September 2007.

Credit: Petty Officer Jonathan R. Cilley, US Coast Guard

multi-ocean navies need to conduct such transfers during war, including when Russia dispatched its Baltic Fleet to face the Japanese at Tsushima in 1905. Until the 21st century, Russia's most viable options for these transits (at least for surface vessels) was the exceptionally long route around the Cape or through the potentially hostile Mediterranean and Suez. The development of the Northern Sea Route has altered this calculus, and it is clear that the drive to develop this route and the network of air bases throughout the Russian Arctic fulfills a range of ambitions in that region itself, while also vastly improving access to the wider Pacific for Russian naval forces.⁵

This is not, however, a cure-all to the problem of geography as the approaches to the Pacific through the Bering Strait are narrow and shallow and that area, and the passages through the Aleutian Islands, is a prime defensive barrier for Western air and naval forces. Comments made in privileged fora by senior Western naval officers calling the passages the “GIUK Gap of the Pacific” suggest the importance of those passages for future anti-submarine warfare patrols and this could be a prime operating area for the Royal Canadian Navy in the future. Western naval forces, in a callback to their Cold War objectives, are also likely to try to prevent the Russian Navy from exiting the Sea of Japan, which represents a further challenge to operations out of Vladivostok.

States aligned against Russia tend to overcome their own disadvantages by leveraging the capabilities of close foreign partners, but Russia has few options for foreign cooperation. Even though China and Russia are currently



A satellite view of the Bering Strait, 18 August 2000. Only 90 km across, it is a chokepoint through which Russian submarines would have to transit en route to and from the Pacific.

engaged in historically high levels of cooperation in their ‘no limits strategic partnership,’ the full extent of the relationship can be difficult to determine and, from the outside, seems governed by short-term self-interest on the part of both states which could lead China to take advantage of its growing power. Adding to this are China’s grievances based on Russia’s leading role in China’s ‘Century of Humiliation,’ during which Russia used various means to wrest huge expanses of territory – including Outer Manchuria, the area along the Sea of Japan – from the Qing Dynasty. Shared enmity towards the United States – which is likely sufficient to sustain at least a modicum of war-time cooperation – can obscure the extent of such mistrust, but the possibility of China retaking those territories has animated official and unofficial discussion in both countries for decades, and this is exacerbated by Russia’s under-development of the Far East. In 2024, leaked Russian nuclear war plans included provisions for an attack by China, while Chinese nationalists argue for their country’s claim to those territories amidst growing competition for influence across Central and East Asia.⁶

Russia was attempting to improve relations with Japan and South Korea in the 2000s, but its war in Ukraine upended these ties. Both states immediately condemned the invasion and have provided aid to Kyiv. They have also become unnerved by strategic ties between Russia and

North Korea (and China), and have sought closer ties with NATO. Japan has emerged as a forceful rival as a result of Russia’s behaviour in the Northern Territories Dispute over a series of islands immediately north of Hokkaido, which Soviet forces occupied in 1945. Russia reacted to Japan’s condemnation of the invasion of Ukraine by cutting off long-running negotiations, and claimed that the issue of sovereignty was settled by constitutional amendments Russia passed in 2020 that prevent Russian leaders from surrendering any territory claimed as part of Russia. While Tokyo held out for a negotiated resolution, the Russian military expanded its presence in the islands, which are as close as 30 km from Hokkaido, with permanent garrisons and air defence and anti-ship missile systems that are clearly intended to protect the southern flank of Russia’s naval bastion on the adjacent Sea of Okhotsk and its approaches to the Sea of Japan.⁷ Scrapping progress in the development of better relations with South Korea and Japan, which are powerful Asian neighbours, is a notable result of Moscow’s military aggression. And this will likely hamstring its further development of the region, as both countries had been significant investors in the Far East in resource extraction and port and shipyard improvement projects prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The Pacific represents Russia’s best chance to expand its naval operations in ways that could mount a significant challenge to the United States. The Russian Federation Navy may soon reach a state in which it can sustain regular long-range patrols off the west coast of the Americas in peace-time. However, in the midst of its war in Ukraine and the international sanctions, its ability to conduct such operations in war-time is debatable given Russia’s international isolation and the geographic isolation of the RFE itself. 🇺🇸

Notes

- * The views and opinions contained in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of DND/CAF or the Government of Canada.
- 1. Russia’s Pacific territories extend from the Bering Strait to Vladivostok, near its borders with North Korea and China. The term ‘Far East’ can refer to the Far Eastern Federal District, which comprises the eastern third of Russia – more than 1,700 km wide and 2,000 km from north to south.
- 2. Nivedita Kapoor, “The Long Road Ahead: Russia and its Ambitions in the Far East,” Raisana Debates, Observer Research Foundation. 11 September, 2019.
- 3. Anna Davis and Ryan Vest (trans.), *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, 31 July 2022, United States, Russia Maritime Studies Institute, US Naval War College, 2022, pp. 16, 18, 20.
- 4. “NORTHCOM: Russia Close to Persistent Nuclear Cruise Missile Attack Sub Presence off U.S. Coasts,” *USNI News*, 23 March 2023.
- 5. See “Dark Arctic: NATO Allies Wake Up to Russian Supremacy in the Region,” Reuters, 16 November 2022.
- 6. Jan Kallberg, “Goodbye Vladivostok, Hello Häishēnwāi!” Center for European Policy Analysis, 12 July 2022.
- 7. Ike Barrash, “Russia’s Militarization of the Kuril Islands,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 27 September 2022.

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