

Russia: A Major Mediterranean Deployment

Contributed by STRATFOR
Monday, 17 December 2007

December 17, 2007 | 2231 GMT
Summary

A Russian battle group led by Moscow's sole aircraft carrier is heading for the Mediterranean Sea. The sailing represents a significant demonstration, both military and political, by the Kremlin.

The Admiral Kuznetsov, Russia's sole aircraft carrier, is leading a battle group to the Mediterranean Sea. The move represents a major deployment for Russia's Northern Fleet. Though the Russian navy suffers significant disadvantages in the sea, the deployment could ultimately prove to be the strongest naval showing in more than a decade for the Kremlin.

On Dec. 11, the Kuznetsov reportedly began conducting flight operations close enough to Norwegian oil platforms to spook the operators into suspending their own flights to and from the rigs. Whether this was intended to frighten the Norwegians or was more a symptom of Russian inexperience with the basic etiquette of carrier aviation is unclear. Either way, it almost certainly indicates how this deployment will play out: This is a battle group, the presence of which will be felt.

Once it rendezvous in the Mediterranean, the Russian battle group reportedly will be made up of four major warships, including the:

- Admiral Kuznetsov. The lead ship of its class, the Kuznetsov displaces nearly 60,000 tons fully loaded — making it the largest warship ever constructed by Russia. Moscow has claimed significantly larger aircraft capacity than has been demonstrated. It can accommodate Su-33 Flanker D and Su-25 Frogfoot navalized fighter aircraft as well as Ka-27/29 Helix helicopters. Bristling with anti-air systems, it also is armed with 10 SS-N-19 “Shipwreck” supersonic anti-ship missiles. China acquired its sister ship, the Varyag.
- Admiral Levchenko. A ship of the Udaloy (Project 1155) class, a mainstay of the Russian surface fleet, Levchenko possesses an extensive anti-submarine warfare suite, including the SS-N-14 “Silex” missile.
- Admiral Chabanenko. The sole ship of the Udaloy II (Project 1155.1) class, the Chabanenko is an improvement on the Levchenko's class. It incorporates aspects of two other late Soviet-era classes. It carries the SS-N-22 “Sunburn” supersonic anti-ship missile and is one of the most active ships in the Russian Northern Fleet.
- Moskva. The flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, the Moskva is the lead ship of the Slava (Project 1164) guided missile cruisers. Sixteen large SS-N-12 “Sandbox” anti-ship missiles are fitted in rows of two on the port and starboard sides, a distinctive feature.

A number of support vessels and almost certainly at least one nuclear-powered attack or cruise missile submarine accompany these ships. Despite the notable absence of the Pyotr Velikiy, this grouping of ships largely represents the best the Russian surface navy has to offer. On paper, it brings significant offensive anti-ship capability to bear. For the most part, however, Russian sailors are more likely to be honing rather than flaunting their skills on this deployment.

The greatest challenge for Russia in the Mediterranean is geographic. The sea route from Severodvinsk to the Strait of Gibraltar is actually longer than the transit from Norfolk, Va., — home of the U.S. 2nd Fleet — to the strait. And the entire Mediterranean Sea is within range of NATO aircraft. Despite the fact that several of these ships, especially the Kuznetsov, bristle with anti-air weaponry, they stand little chance against U.S. and NATO dominance of the Mediterranean.

This dynamic is not much altered by the presence of Moscow's Black Sea Fleet. That fleet is bottled up behind the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, the straits connecting the Black and Mediterranean seas, thus facing the Turkish navy at a disadvantage. Though even at the height of Soviet naval power Russia never has attained a particularly strong military position in the Mediterranean, this is a crucial political juncture for Moscow. Before the deployment concludes in February, calls at the Syrian ports of Tartus — where the Kuznetsov moored the last time it was in the Mediterranean in 1996 — or Latakia are likely.

This is potentially the strongest Russian naval move in more than a decade. While in a shooting war it would be a foolish play, Russia is making a strong political show of force at a time when its interests are on the line in both Kosovo and the Middle East. And people tend to notice when someone else's aircraft carrier parks off their coast.