
Defense Report

AUSA



A Soviet Aircraft Carrier in the Pacific —A New Dimension in a Worldwide Confrontation

The Soviet Union now has the largest navy in the world. This is accepted as a fact of life, even by those who claim that the much smaller U.S. Navy is "more capable." And when we think about this burgeoning Russian fleet we tend to see it in a European context, being used to cut the supply line from the United States to Western Europe that would be so vital in defending against a Warsaw Pact attack on NATO. We see it, too, trying to cut our supply of oil from the Mid-East and Africa.

But we don't very often think about the Soviet Navy in terms of what it might do in the Pacific. There is little expectation that a war could be fought in Europe without any spillover into other parts of the world. U.S. trade with the Far East is of growing peacetime importance and that importance would grow in wartime. Many strategic planners are convinced that the Soviet Union's substantial military superiority would permit it to support a war in Europe and, at the same time, create a major diversion in Asia. The recent addition of the aircraft carrier **Minsk** to the Soviet Pacific Fleet adds credibility to that conviction.

The **Minsk** joins a fleet of 70 surface combatant vessels and 75 attack submarines that has been in place in the Pacific for some time. By way of comparison, the United States keeps two aircraft carriers deployed in the Pacific but only about 19 surface combatants other than the carriers. There are only 73 first line attack submarines in the entire U.S. Navy and their deployments to various operational areas are closely guarded.

The Soviet Pacific fleet has still another advantage over its U.S. counterpart—the use of a base in its own territory. The naval base at Vladivostok can be kept supplied from within the Soviet Union and access to it is not subject to the whim of any other government. The U.S. fleet, on the other hand, is dependent on access to major bases in Japan and the Philippines which could be denied if those governments found it expedient. The small U.S. naval base on Guam could not support the entire fleet.

By sending one of its three operational aircraft carriers to the Pacific (A fourth carrier is under construction), the Soviet Union has served notice of the importance it places on the Far East, even though it is not dependent on the sea lines of communication through the area. Its purpose, particularly when coupled with the large number of attack submarines in the Soviet Pacific Fleet, must be to deny the United States and its allies the use of those seas.

The time has passed when we could confine our interest in Soviet military and naval capabilities to the European area. We must now be able to counter major Soviet capabilities in the Pacific as well.