

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 4-AWASHINGTON TIMES
18 April 1985

Soviets' 9-ship show impressed most

By Walter Andrews
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A just-completed Soviet naval exercise was the largest ever held in the Pacific, and apparently was for the purpose of a mock attack against U.S. ships approaching nuclear submarine pens in the eastern Soviet Union, U.S. Navy sources said yesterday.

The nine-ship exercise led by the 37,000-ton aircraft carrier Novorossiysk was "the most extensive and realistic ever conducted by the Soviet Navy in the Pacific," said an official who commented on condition of anonymity.

U.S. naval intelligence has concluded that the purpose of the task force was to simulate a U.S. carrier battle group approaching the eastern Soviet Union, so Soviet sea and air forces could conduct mock attacks, the sources said.

The unusually large number of Soviet ships and the manner in which they maneuvered "indicate the exercise was a simulation of Soviet wartime missions, including protection of ballistic missile submarine operating areas in the Northwest Pacific and Sea of Okhotsk," the source said.

He said the Soviet exercise was "a marked departure" from the normal peacetime Soviet deployment pattern, in which warships travel in groups of twos and threes, and in which only 10 to 15 percent of the fleet is at sea at one time.

On Tuesday, the sources said the Soviet ships passed through La Perouse (or Soya) Strait into the northern Sea of Japan apparently on the way back to their home port of Vladivostok, which they left in late March.

Last Friday, the Soviets flew TU-95 reconnaissance aircraft over the simulated U.S. battle group, apparently in preparation for a mock attack Sunday by up to 20 long-range Backfire bombers, the sources said.

Soviet submarines also conducted mock attacks on the task force, the sources said.

Partly because of its unusual size, the U.S. Navy has been keeping track of the fleet ever since it left Vladivostok several weeks ago.

In addition to the Novorossiysk, the task force consists of three 9,700-ton Kara-class missile cruisers, a 6,000-ton Kresta-class missile cruiser, two Krivak-class destroyers and two oil-supply ships.

During the first part of April, the task force conducted maneuvers south of Okinawa in the Philippine Sea. These included anti-submarine warfare exercises and "maritime strike training," that is, simulated attacks by V/STOL fighters against ships.

About 10 days ago, the naval sources said, the task force surprised U.S. observers by heading east toward the Hawaiian Islands. In the middle of last week, when it was about 1,600 nautical miles northwest of Honolulu, the force turned northwest toward the Soviet Union.

The changes in direction as well as the size and make-up of the group immediately caused naval intelligence to suspect the Soviets were mimicking a U.S. carrier battle group.

The Novorossiysk is one of only three Soviet Kiev-class carriers capable of carrying vertical/short-takeoff and landing fighter aircraft. The V/STOL "jump jets" are considered less capable than regular jet fighters, which require the larger landing surface of the giant 80,000-ton U.S. carriers.

The Soviets are building a 65,000-ton carrier capable of launching and landing regular jets, but U.S. intelligence has not yet identified a new jet aircraft being developed for use on the new carrier.

The Pentagon's latest edition of Soviet Military Power, made public April 2, said the growth of the Soviet Navy over the last 20 years gives it an ability to support Soviet interests worldwide to an extent unmatched by the other military services.

It said all the Soviet nuclear missile submarines are assigned to the Pacific and Northern fleets, which would have a primary concern for protecting these valuable weapons.

Meanwhile, in Tokyo, press and diplomatic sources said it was the first time in five years that the Soviet Union had assembled such a large task force near Japan and the first time it had done so in the central Pacific.

The recent maneuvers came just as the Air Force deployed the first of what is scheduled to be two squadrons of F-16 fighter aircraft at Misawa Air Base in northern Japan.

A 1982 agreement between Washington and Tokyo stipulated the F-16 deployment would begin this year,

leading military analysts in Japan to speculate the recent Soviet maneuvers were at least partly intended as a countermeasure.

A commentary carried Monday by the Soviet Communist Party newspaper Pravda warned of "the threat from Misawa," and said Moscow would move to counter the new fighters.

The Soviet Union filed an official protest in 1982 over Japan's decision then to accept the U.S. deployment.

The 1982 agreement came as a result of Japanese and U.S. concern over what was seen as a substantial increase in Moscow's air and naval power in the Far East. U.S. and Japanese officials now say that capability has increased at a still greater pace since the agreement.

Following the F-16 deployment, Moscow also stepped up efforts to improve diplomatic relations with Japan.

Earlier this week Peter Abrasimov, the Kremlin's ambassador to Tokyo, told Japanese newsmen improvement in bilateral relations could be made if Japan is prepared to take the first step.

The ambassador suggested a visit by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko could occur as early as this year if Japan takes the initiative in finalizing a cultural agreement.

Japan over the last two years has repeatedly sought a visit by Mr. Gromyko.

Washington Times Foreign Service correspondent Timothy Elder contributed to this article from Tokyo.