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Soviet Naval Presence Outside Home Waters In 1978

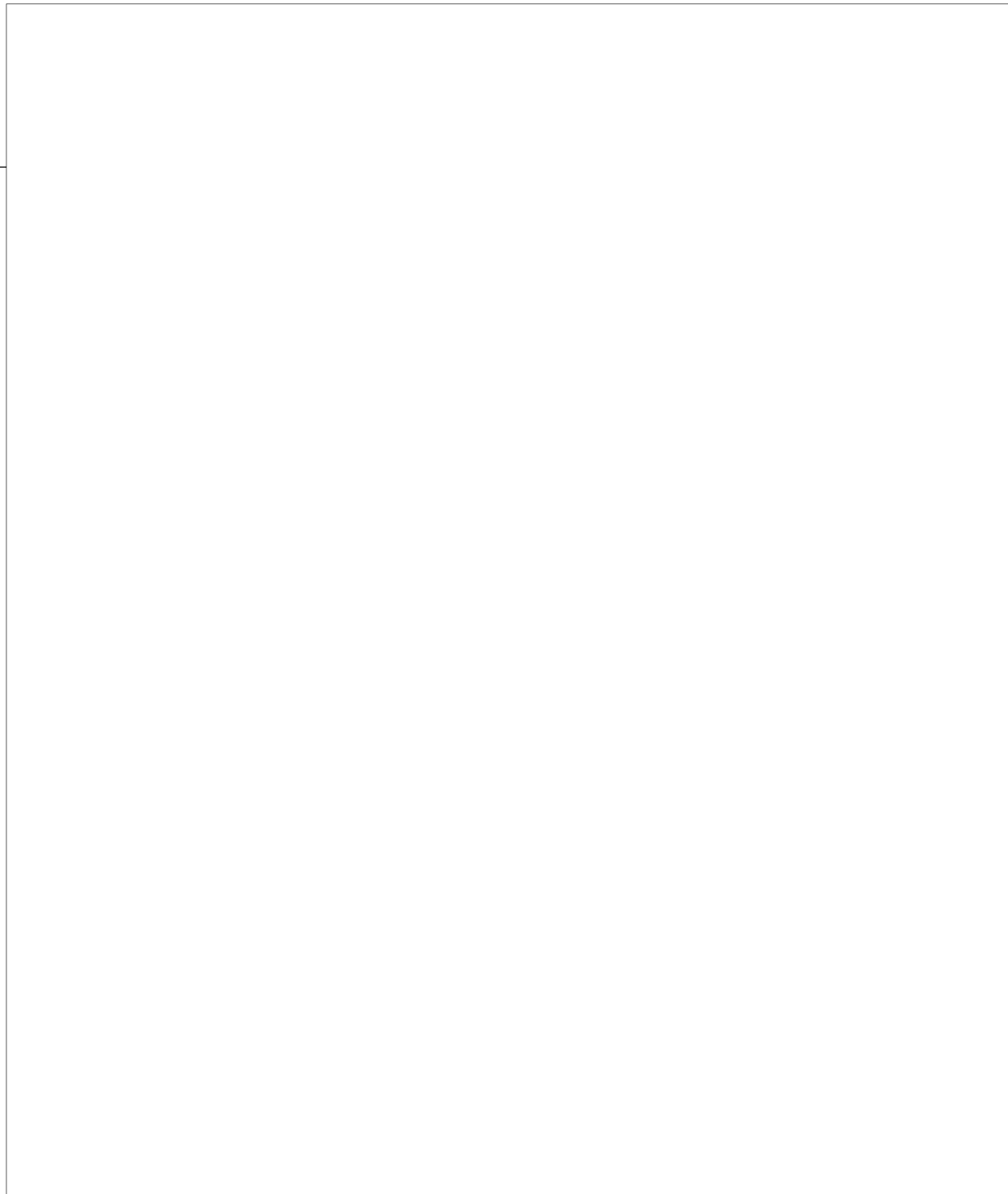
A Research Paper

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Soviet Naval Presence Outside Home Waters In 1978

A Research Paper

Information as of 1 May 1979 has been used in preparing this report.

[redacted] Strategic Forces Division, Office of Strategic Research, and coordinated with the Office of Political Analysis. The data on which the paper is based and assistance in interpreting them were provided by the Naval Ocean Surveillance Information Center, Suitland, Maryland. [redacted]

Comments and queries are welcome and should be directed to [redacted]

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Soviet Naval Presence Outside Home Waters In 1978

Summary

Soviet naval deployments to areas outside the USSR's home waters in 1978 were slightly higher than in 1977, but still well below the peak established in 1974, when Soviet ships were involved in mine-clearing and salvage operations in Bangladesh and the Suez Canal, and the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron had access to port facilities in Egypt.

Although the level of such deployments has remained relatively constant for the past four years, there have been significant fluctuations in the numbers of ships deployed to particular regions. For example, Soviet naval activity in the Indian Ocean increased substantially in 1978, primarily as a result of Soviet assistance to Ethiopia during the Ethiopia-Somalia conflict. There also was a shift in the composition of the Indian Ocean Squadron, with more amphibious ships and auxiliaries present than in the past. Soviet naval activity increased in the waters off West Africa in 1978, but elsewhere in the Atlantic and in the Pacific it was generally at a lower level than in 1977.

High levels of naval activity during the first three months of 1979, especially off the coast of Southeast Asia, almost guarantee that total Soviet ship-days in distant areas will increase slightly once again this year. More important, whatever the final ship-day level, the Soviet naval presence, when measured in terms of either operational capability or potential political impact, is likely to be more significant than in the past.

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Soviet Naval Presence Outside Home Waters In 1978

Introduction

During the past year, events in several widely scattered areas of the world—the Persian Gulf, Cuba, and Southeast Asia, for example—have focused interest on the operations of the Soviet Navy in areas distant from the USSR. Western newspapers and periodicals frequently carry articles reflecting a widespread concern about a perceived growth in Soviet naval capabilities for projecting power in areas such as the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and the waters off West Africa. This study examines the changes in the level of Soviet naval activity in these areas during the past five years and provides a factual background against which the significance of the Soviet naval presence might be assessed.

Soviet naval deployments to areas distant from the USSR's home waters rose in 1978 to about 49,400 ship-days, an increase of about 4 percent over the 1977 level. Nevertheless, the ship-days spent by Soviet warships, auxiliaries, and naval-associated civilian vessels in distant areas last year roughly approximated the levels of recent years. Beginning in 1975, after mine-clearing and salvage operations in Bangladesh and the Suez Canal ended, Soviet naval vessels have spent between 47,300 and 49,400 ship-days per year away from home waters. That relative stability, however, masks some significant fluctuations in the numbers and types of ships deployed to particular regions (see charts 1 and 2).

Indian Ocean

Soviet activity in the Indian Ocean rose sharply in 1978 to a level 26 percent higher than that of 1977. The number of ship-days that Soviet naval vessels spent in the Indian Ocean was, in fact, the highest since the Suez and Bangladesh operations of 1974. Special operations again were responsible for much of the increase. From January to April the Indian Ocean Squadron included abnormally high numbers of amphibious ships, which were used to ferry supplies

from depots in Aden, South Yemen, to Ethiopia, and from the Ethiopian port of Assab to the besieged port of Massawa. The amphibious ships landed supplies directly on the beaches near the contested area, bypassing Ethiopian ports clogged by Soviet and East European merchant ships involved in the large wartime supply effort. The second major factor contributing to the unusual size of the squadron during that period was the larger number of auxiliary ships—replenishment and repair ships, oilers, naval-associated merchant tankers, and intelligence collectors—which supported the Ethiopian supply effort (see chart 3).

Major surface combatants were not a principal factor in the increased presence in early 1978 (see table). Soviet naval combatants played no direct part in the conflict, either independently or in support of Ethiopian military actions. Soviet frigates did conduct barrier patrols in the Red Sea north and south of the area in which the Soviets were assisting the Ethiopians

By June 1978, the squadron had dropped to lower than normal levels.


















The Indian Ocean Squadron

	Typical Makeup 1975-77	January- April 1978
Submarines	1	1-3
Major surface combatants	4	4-6
Amphibious ships	1	4
Mine warfare vessels	2	1
Support ships	8-10	12-14
Hydrographic and special support vessels	2-3	2-3
Total	18-21	24-31


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Chart 1: Typical Soviet Combatant Presence*

	Mediterranean	Indian Ocean	West Africa
Guided Missile Submarines	 (2)		
Torpedo Attack Submarines	 (6)		
Combatants Over 10,000 Tons			
Combatants 3,100-10,000 Tons	 (3)		
Combatants Under 3,000 Tons	 (2)	 (2)	
Mine Warfare Vessels	 (2)	 (2)	
Amphibious Ships			

*These are typical rather than average compositions. The numbers vary constantly; the Mediterranean Squadron is generally smaller during the winter than the summer, for example, and the Indian Ocean Squadron includes a cruiser only about six months out of every twelve. During the remainder of the year, there might be two destroyers or frigates of 3,000-10,000 tons in the Indian Ocean.

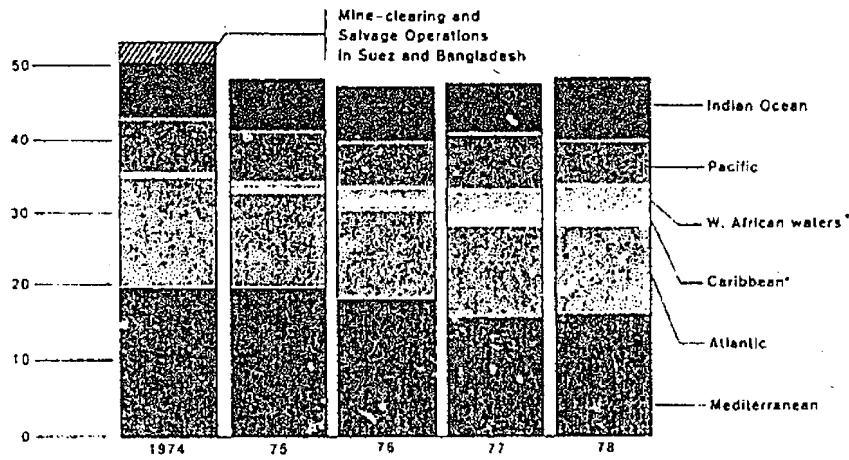

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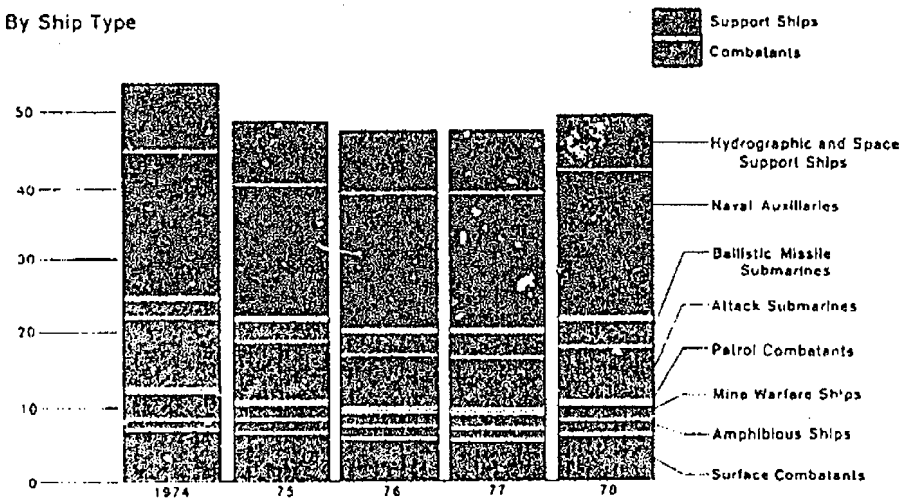
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Chart 2: Soviet Out-of-Area Ship-Days
Ship-days (thousands)

By Region



By Ship Type



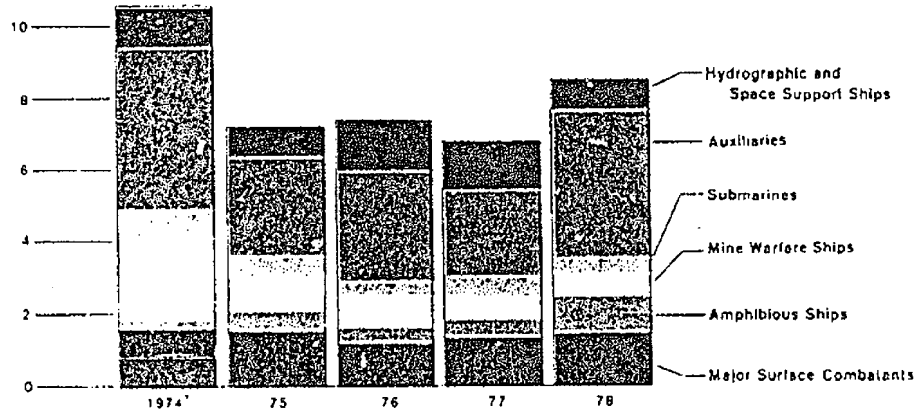
*The West African ship-days for 1974 and the Caribbean ship-days for 1974 and 1975 were not tallied separately but were included in the totals for the Atlantic.

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Chart 3: Indian Ocean Ship-Days
Ship-days (thousands)



1974 figures include 2,727 days devoted to mine clearing and salvage operations in Bangladesh and the Suez. These appear in the major surface combatant and mine warfare categories.

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Slightly higher than normal ship levels from September to December 1978 reflected, in part, an increase in the number of surface combatants. Throughout the fall the squadron included two amphibious and two mine warfare ships, and in December an overlap in the arrival of ships and the departure of those they were relieving temporarily raised the number of surface combatants to 11.

Over the whole year, however, much of the increase merely reflected the larger numbers of auxiliaries. It is likely that the larger numbers will be the norm in coming months. The Soviets have not yet arranged for

permanent facilities elsewhere to replace all those in Somalia, and, given the continuing instability in the region, they may not replace them for some time. Until they do, additional replenishment and material support vessels—naval or merchant fleet—will probably be required to support squadron operations.

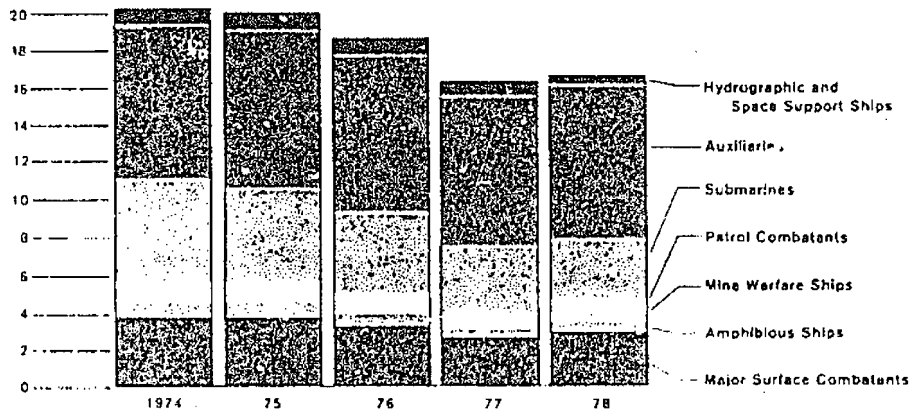
Mediterranean Sea

The Soviet presence in the Mediterranean remained about 18 percent below that of the period 1973-75, when the Soviets had access to the shipyard and other naval facilities at Alexandria, Egypt (see chart 4).

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Chart 4: Mediterranean Ship-Days
Ship-days (thousands)



Auxiliaries include both naval ships and naval-associated merchant ships. Hydrographic and space support ship-days were not tallied separately in 1974 but were included in the total for auxiliaries.

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Submarine operations continued to decline steadily from the peak level of 1974. The Soviets now maintain an average of eight or nine submarines in the Mediterranean, compared with 15 in 1974. This force usually consists of six or seven F-class diesel torpedo attack submarines, a J-class diesel cruise missile submarine, and one or two C- or E-class nuclear cruise missile submarines.

Surface combatants and auxiliaries, most of which come to the Mediterranean from the Black Sea Fleet, evidently were much less affected by the loss of Egyptian facilities than were the submarines, which almost always are detailed from the more distant Northern Fleet. For example, the number of surface combatants has dropped only slightly, from an average of 15 per day in 1974 to about 13 per day in 1978.

As in previous years, Soviet ships in the Mediterranean spent a substantial portion of their time in sheltered anchorages.

and monitoring of NATO and Sixth Fleet operations. Formal port calls around the Mediterranean littoral included visits by a cruiser and destroyer to Athens and Istanbul. It was the first time since World War II that Soviet combatants had visited either Greece or Turkey. The first operational out-of-area deployment of the USSR's first v/STOL aircraft carrier, the Kiev, also occurred in 1978. Twice during the year, the Kiev deployed from the Northern Fleet to the Mediterranean where it spent a total of 53 days.

² The Kiev passed through the Mediterranean in 1976 en route to its home fleet but did not linger during the passage.

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The Soviet naval presence in the Gulf of Guinea and off the coast of West Africa continued to grow last year, reaching a level about 14 percent higher than that of 1977. Throughout much of 1978, the West African contingent consisted of 9 to 11 ships—a diesel attack submarine, one or two destroyers, an amphibious ship, a minesweeper, three or four replenishment and support ships, an intelligence collector, and one or more hydrographic ships. The contingent diminished toward the end of the year, to 5 to 7 ships—a destroyer, an amphibious ship, a minesweeper, and a few auxiliaries.

These ships generally were inactive, spending most of their time in port, at Luanda, Angola, or Conakry, Guinea, and less often, at Cotonou, Benin. They periodically transited among these ports, and two port calls were made to Sao Tome.¹ The Soviet naval presence at Conakry had not decreased by the end of 1978 despite growing indications that the Guinean Government wanted to put some distance between Guinea and the USSR.

The West African contingent does not yet appear to have the status of a squadron in the Soviet naval organizational structure. It does have some of the characteristics of a squadron, but it is much smaller than either the Soviet Indian Ocean or Mediterranean Squadrons.

¹ A space support ship not directly associated with the West African contingent visited Dakar, Senegal, several times during 1978, and auxiliaries regularly call at the Canary Islands for provisions. (S)

Caribbean Sea

The Soviet naval presence in the Caribbean increased by 10 percent in 1978, primarily reflecting an unusually long fall deployment (91 days versus a normal 30 to 50 days). That deployment included a Northern Fleet F-class submarine and four surface vessels from the Black Sea Fleet—a Mod Kashin guided-missile destroyer, two Krivak guided-missile frigates, and an oiler. While in the Caribbean the task group visited Havana and Cienfuegos and conducted a variety of training exercises alone and with Cuban naval vessels. No Soviet combatants have been in the Caribbean since December 1978.

Except for a salvage and rescue ship stationed at Havana, the Soviet Navy does not permanently maintain ships in the Caribbean Sea; instead, since 1969, a task group has deployed to the area about twice a year. The makeup of the task group varies, but it usually comprises two or three surface combatants and an oiler, and sometimes a submarine.

Atlantic and Pacific Oceans

The number of Soviet naval ship-days in the Atlantic Ocean (excluding those in the southern Atlantic waters off West Africa) was about the same as in 1977, while the total for the Pacific Ocean was down by about 7 percent. The decrease in the Pacific was due to slightly lower levels of deployment in several categories of ships—strategic submarines, surface combatants, and hydrographic and space support ships.

In both oceans, the Soviet naval presence has for some years consisted primarily of ballistic missile submarine patrols, intelligence collection, hydrographic research, and transits by other naval vessels to and from operating areas. In the Atlantic, nuclear and diesel attack submarines also represent a substantial part—about 20 percent—of the total. Many of these submarine ship-days are spent transiting from the Northern Fleet to the Mediterranean and back.

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Higher ship-day totals for 1979 are likely to result from unusual levels of activity in widely separated areas of the world. The Soviet task groups in the South and East China Seas monitoring Sino-Vietnamese hostilities and participating in the resupply of Vietnam probably will boost Pacific Ocean totals substantially. The simultaneous deployment to the Mediterranean of the Kiev and the Minsk, with associated combatants and auxiliaries, produced an unusual flurry of activity there. In late March, the Kiev departed the Mediterranean to participate in annual spring exercises in the North Atlantic before returning to the Northern Fleet.

At the same time, the Minsk, two Kara-class cruisers, the Ivan Rogov, and a Boris Chilikin-class replenishment oiler moved down the coast of West Africa and into the Indian Ocean en route to the Pacific Fleet. The Minsk and some of its associated ships are paying a series of calls to ports along the coast of Africa and South Asia, and likely will spend several weeks with the Indian Ocean Squadron during the transit, temporarily increasing ship-day totals in each of the areas through which they pass.

Apart from this transient activity, the Soviet naval presence off West Africa may drop to levels slightly below those of 1978, particularly if worsening Soviet-Guinean relations deny the Soviets access to Conakry's port facilities. Similarly, Indian Ocean ship-days, which were inflated in 1978 by support to Ethiopia, may be somewhat lower in 1979 unless the Indian Ocean Squadron is permanently enlarged in response to an enlarged US presence there. Caribbean Sea ship-days may remain at or below the level of past years; the biannual Caribbean task force has not yet departed Soviet waters.

Outlook

High levels of naval activity during the first four months of 1979, especially off the coast of Southeast Asia, almost guarantee that total Soviet ship-days in distant areas will increase once again this year. As in 1978, the activity levels in individual areas are likely to fluctuate. Whatever the final level, when measured in operational capability or potential political impact, the Soviet naval presence in the first several months of the year seems significantly more important than in the past. It has included several of the newer, larger, and more capable Soviet ships—for example, the Kiev and the Minsk, Kara-class cruisers, and the Ivan Rogov, the first of a new class of amphibious ships (LPD). In future years, we expect to see such ships occasionally deployed to distant areas, especially to the Mediterranean but the Soviet Navy will be unable to maintain a continuous presence of ships such as Kiev-class carriers, for the foreseeable future.

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Appendix

A Word About Methodology

To measure the Soviet naval presence in distant areas, naval analysts developed the "ship-day" concept: one ship away from Soviet home waters for one day equals one ship-day. Soviet naval ship-days can be aggregated in a variety of ways to show levels of naval presence. Ship-day computations have provided a reasonably accurate basis for comparing the levels of Soviet naval activity from year to year or in the different areas. Until recently, the makeup of Soviet naval contingents deployed to distant areas changed little over time and the capabilities of ships within such categories as "major surface combatants" or "amphibious ships" were similar.

In the future, however, ship-day comparisons may mask important changes in out-of-area deployments. If larger and more capable ships deploy to distant areas, simple ship-day totals may obscure qualitative changes in the Soviet presence in areas like the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. For example, in ship-day comparisons, a 1,150-ton Petva-class light frigate is the statistical equivalent of a 43,000-ton Kiev-class V/SOL aircraft carrier inasmuch as both are listed as major surface combatants. Similarly, the 13,000-ton Ivan Rogov would count for only as much as an 800-ton Polnocny medium landing ship. Under these conditions, new techniques will be needed to represent accurately the changes taking place in Soviet naval deployments.

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