



Background

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MOSCOW'S SOUTH PACIFIC FISHING FLEET IS MUCH MORE THAN IT SEEMS

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet fishing fleet long has served Moscow as a source of food, but just as important, it has been an instrument of Soviet foreign policy and an integral part of the Soviet navy's intelligence network. Numbering some 3,500 vessels, the Soviet fishing fleet is now the largest in the world with 6.7 million dead-weight tons, twice the combined tonnage of the members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).¹

Espionage Fleet. While the fleet earns valuable foreign exchange for the USSR, it has other, more valuable uses. Owned and operated by the Soviet government, the fishing fleet is an efficient and sophisticated base for the collection of intelligence on foreign governments and their military and naval capabilities. Since virtually all Soviet fishing vessels are outfitted with extremely sophisticated intelligence-gathering equipment, including Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) and Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) systems, they can spy electronically on Western naval and commercial fleets worldwide. Soviet fishing vessels also serve more direct military purposes such as the transport of spies, special operations forces, arms, and stolen technology.

1 Irwin M. Heine, "The Soviet Navy — A Two-Pronged Force," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, December 1984, p. 143. The OECD includes Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, West Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The fleet also is an instrument for extending Soviet influence throughout the world. It does this by offering countries economic incentives to allow the Soviets to fish within their territorial waters or economic zones.² Moscow then seeks to use its economic and political access to neutralize or weaken Western influence. The fleet also can act as a forerunner to obtaining the rights for Soviet military planes and ships to visit these countries and even, ultimately, to establish naval and air bases.

The Soviets have used their fishing fleets aggressively for strategic ends in the South Pacific for many years, most recently, in the Philippines and Australia.³ Soviet fishing ships that steam the South China Sea, the Philippine Sea, and the Indonesian straits, have gathered intelligence on the Indonesian and other navies using these waters. To enhance its influence in the South Pacific, Moscow negotiated a fishing agreement with the South Pacific island nation of Kiribati in 1985 and in 1987 with Vanuatu.

Moscow's Goals in the Pacific. Along with more sophisticated diplomacy and such organizations as pro-Soviet trade unions, fishing fleets are used to achieve Moscow's goal in the South Pacific of denying the United States alternate bases should U.S. military forces have to leave the Philippines. The Kremlin does this by portraying its involvement in the South Pacific as legitimate economic activity, while casting a negative light on the U.S. presence in the region. Moscow also has been aided by the political vacuum created by New Zealand's destruction of the ANZUS Alliance. To counter Soviet advances, the U.S. should:

- ◆◆ Mount an expanded public diplomacy campaign in the South Pacific that identifies Soviet proxies and describes the political and military uses of Soviet fishing fleets.

- ◆◆ Continue to deploy U.S. naval vessels in the South Pacific and increase the number of naval exercises with Australia.

- ◆◆ Stand firm on maintaining U.S. air and naval bases in the Philippines and Japan.

- ◆◆ In cooperation between Congress and the U.S. tuna industry, continue to provide the South Pacific island states with the \$60 million in technical and economic assistance over five years that the Reagan Administration committed to them in the 1986 South Pacific Fisheries Treaty.

- ◆◆ Impose greater restrictions on the transfer to the Soviet bloc of Western high technology that could be used in the Soviet fishing fleet.⁴

2 In most countries in East Asia, territorial waters extend twelve miles from shore, while exclusive economic zones extend 200 miles.

3 Colin Rubenstein, "The USSR and its Proxies in a Volatile South Pacific," *Heritage Lecture* No. 161, 1988.

4 Soviet sensitivities toward greater Western control over its technology flow can be found in V. N. Bunin, "Iaponiia, i soi (politicheskie, ekonomicheskie, naychno-tekhicheskie i voennye aspekty)," *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka* (Moscow), January 1988, especially pp. 111-114.

SOVIET FISHING FLEET: SIZE AND CAPABILITIES

The Soviet fishing fleet is the world's largest, with over 3,500 oceangoing fishing and support vessels. Each year this fleet catches ten million tons of fish, which is second only to Japan's annual catch.⁵ For many years the Soviets have constructed high-technology fishing ships, naval support vessels for the fishing fleets, and high-capacity processing ships. Today, there are approximately 700 large-stern, factory or freezer trawlers in the Soviet inventory.⁶ The Soviet fishing fleet also boasts several training and research ships engaged in hydrography and oceanography and land-based aircraft, such as IL-14 *Crate* and IL-18D *Coot* transports, used for fish tracking and radar-guidance for vessels fishing beyond 200 miles.⁷

Military Uses

All Soviet merchant and fishing ships are used by Soviet Naval Intelligence, which may have a status equal to the Committee on State Security (KGB) or Military Intelligence (GRU).⁸ Each Soviet fleet has an Intelligence Department with five divisions.⁹ Merchant and fishing ships report intelligence information to the First Division. States Vladil Lysenko, captain of the Soviet vessel *Ventspils*, who defected to the West in 1974:

Soviet merchant and fishing vessels are in effect semi-military vessels and their crews are obliged to acquire military knowledge. . . all Soviet civilian vessels, without exception, carry out intelligence tasks to some extent. . . . The monitoring and interception of foreign navies' radio communications is a duty placed on all Soviet captains. . . they receive regular briefings in the intelligence sections attached to shipping agencies and fishing industry directorates.¹⁰

In 1976, the Canadian Maritime Command maintained that Soviet fishing and merchant ships operating off Canada's coast were engaged in intelligence operations. Also in 1976, Spain accused Moscow of using its fishing ships for spying.¹¹ The Soviet fishing fleet also

5 Norman Polmar, *Guide to the Soviet Navy, Fourth Edition* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1986), p. 490.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Polmar, *op. cit.*, p. 426. However, depending on the type of fish, fish tracking and radar guidance also take place within coastal areas. Interview with Paul Nimeier, Director of Asia Division, Office of National Marine Fisheries, U.S. Department of Commerce.

8 C.F. Carnes, "Soviet Naval Intelligence Gathering Operations, Part 2," *Naval Forces*, January 1988, p. 72.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

10 Vladil Lysenko, "USSR Employment of Civil Shipping," *Posev*, 1978, p. 2, quoted in Carnes, *op. cit.*

11 Captain William H.S. Manthorpe (ret.), "The Soviet Navy in 1976," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, May 1977, p. 207.

performs a direct naval support role. In November 1983, for example, a Soviet intelligence collection vessel from a nearby fishing fleet guarded a disabled Soviet nuclear submarine 400 miles off the South Carolina coast.¹² In 1972, a Soviet nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine that had experienced engineering difficulties in the North Atlantic was assisted by fishing support vessels.¹³

Shadowing Western Warships. In wartime, it is anticipated that Soviet fishing and merchant ships will be used to place ashore special forces units or *Spetsnaz*.¹⁴ These units are tasked to destroy military targets, assassinate key military and civilian personnel, and prepare for naval amphibious landings. Fishing ships also are known to shadow Western naval units to provide Soviet naval forces with targeting data.

Moscow's civilian research fleet, numbering about 270 ships, also has potential military value.¹⁵ The majority of these ships are affiliated with the Soviet Academy of Sciences, but dozens are controlled by the Soviet navy and manned by navy crews. On some fish research vessels, navy personnel work side-by-side with scholars from the Academy of Sciences or the Ministry of Fishery. Among these ships are the 1,070-ton *Ikhtiandr* and *Odissey*, which carry research submersibles for ocean floor exploration, which can contribute to Soviet antisubmarine warfare capabilities.¹⁶

While not officially part of the fishing fleet, auxiliary general intelligence collector vessels (AGIs) under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense often accompany fishing flotillas of 200 to 300 ships. AGIs gather intelligence data of direct use to the Soviet Navy. As they are masked by the fishing fleet, the Soviet AGIs do not raise local suspicions.¹⁷

Areas of Operation

Initially confining their operations to Soviet coastal areas, by 1956 Soviet fishing ships were operating off Newfoundland, traditional waters for U.S. and Canadian fishermen.

12 Heine, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

13 Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), April 1985, p. 77.

14 Lieutenant Commander David R. Kohler, "Spetsnaz," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, August 1987, p. 53.

15 Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments*, p. 78.

16 Polmar, *op. cit.* p. 493.

17 John McBeth, "Big fish and small fry: Moscow antagonizes South Pacific states in a row over Soviet underwater research," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 26, 1983, p. 36.

Two years later, they were near Labrador, and a year later, in the Bering Sea.¹⁸ By 1964, Soviet fishermen were at work in all the North Atlantic's important fishing grounds. Fleets consisting of up to 30 vessels operated within sight of shore in the U.S. Pacific Northwest.¹⁹ Since 1967, "the Antarctic and Indian Oceans have become frequent operating areas for Soviet fishing fleets."²⁰

In the Pacific, Soviet fishing fleets have been a consistent source of tension with Japan. Moscow consistently has demanded the right for its fishing fleet to make "peaceful" port calls at the Japanese ports of Onahama and Yokohama in exchange for an expanded Japanese catch quota in the Russian zone near the waters off the Kamchatka Peninsula.²¹ During the last "peaceful" calls made by Soviet trawlers at Onahama port, the Japanese Defense Agency officials noted that these boats "were. . . not [observed] to have been fishing at all and many. . . carried an unusual array of antennae"²² fit for intelligence-gathering.

Agreements with Kiribati and Vanuatu. Since the mid-1970s, Moscow has tried to expand its fishing fleet in the South Pacific.²³ After years of being quietly outmaneuvered by Australian and New Zealand diplomatic pressure, Moscow met success when it negotiated a one-year fishing access agreement in 1985 with the island nation of Kiribati, and in 1987, with Vanuatu. Moscow is seeking to renew its fishing agreement with Kiribati, while the fishing agreement with Vanuatu lapsed without renewal. But Soviet-Vanuatu relations remain close. It is ironic that the fish caught by Soviet ships off Kiribati were not even consumed by Soviet citizens — the whole catch was sold in Bangkok, Thailand.

Soviet fishing fleets operate in or near such strategically sensitive areas as the Makassar Strait, a vital shipping route running through the Indonesian archipelago. For several years, Moscow has used facilities in Singapore to repair fishing and merchant ships.

Political Value

The Soviet Union has made its fleet into an effective instrument of foreign policy by coordinating its peacetime maritime policy with its naval strategy. In this sense, the Soviet fishing fleet is a component of a long-range plan to neutralize and weaken Western political influence.

18 Richard T. Ackley, "The Fishing Fleet and Soviet Strategy," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, July 1975, p. 34.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 Bruce Roscoe, "Diplomacy: Sprats and mackerel," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 28, 1985, pp. 38-41.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 41

23 Tracey Dahlby, "Fishing: Moscow lays down the law," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 18, 1979, p. 95; Hamish McDonald, "Pacific: Tangled fishing lines," *Ibid.*, June 13, 1985, pp. 30-31; "Japan and Russia: Fishing between the bear's paws," *The Economist* (London), March 12, 1977, p. 74; "Fish: In good odour," *Ibid.*, February 19, 1977, p. 58.

Fishing assistance programs give the Soviets an excuse to include administrators, advisors, technicians, propagandists, and others not directly associated with the assistance project.²⁴ This has often allowed the Soviets to enhance their political presence and expand the bilateral naval relationship.²⁵ It was certainly the case in Egypt, where the Soviets in 1964 built a port facility for fishing — and eventually naval — vessels. Their presence in Egypt allowed Moscow to expand its naval presence to the Indian Ocean.²⁶ Today the Soviet navy maintains facilities at Aden and Socotra Island, South Yemen, Ethiopia's Dalek Island, the Seychelles Islands, and it has an extensive naval cooperation relationship with India.

Denying Bases to the U.S. Following the establishment of a permanent naval base in Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay in 1979 to 1980, Moscow turned its attention to the South Pacific. Here Moscow hopes to deny South Pacific bases to U.S. naval forces should they have to leave Philippine bases. This goal of "base denial" to the U.S. is similar to Japan's during World War II.²⁷ In the early 1980s, Moscow was able to exploit a new generation of South Pacific island leaders' unfamiliarity with Soviet imperialism and their growing frustration with U.S. and other tuna fishing fleets, who were perceived to be using their economic exclusion zones without paying adequate fees.

After several years of trying to gain a fishing access agreement, in 1985, Moscow met with success with Kiribati, formerly called the Gilbert Islands, 2,700 miles southwest of Hawaii. The Soviet-Kiribati agreement allowed the Kremlin to control at least half of Kiribati's fish production and export.²⁸ The U.S. tuna fishing industry had been paying Kiribati only US\$200,000 in access fees compared to the Soviet's annual fee of US\$1.7 million. This is a considerable sum for tiny Kiribati, whose population is only 65,000.²⁹

Though the fishing agreement has not been renewed, Kiribati is strategically useful to the Soviets. Its position on the globe is nearly opposite Soviet space launch sites. Furthermore, Soviet satellites usually leave the atmosphere over the South Pacific. Thus, control of territory in the South Pacific is important for maintaining contact with military and civilian spacecraft.³⁰

Pro-Libyans in Vanuatu. Moscow also has had success in wooing Vanuatu, which is located 900 miles northeast of Australia. Vanuatu was the former Anglo-French condominium of the New Hebrides. It is the only Pacific island nation that is nonaligned

24 George K. Tanhem, "South Pacific: Is the West losing out?" *Pacific Defense Reporter*, June 1988, p. 36.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

27 Marc Liebman, "Soviet Naval Initiatives in the Pacific," *Armed Forces Journal International*, April 1987, p. 58.

28 See Elizabeth Young and Viktor Sebek, "Red Seas and Blue Seas: Soviet Uses of Ocean Law," *Survival* (London), November-December 1978, p. 261.

29 "Kiribati: One that got away," *The Economist*, February 22, 1984, p. 40.

30 Aadu Karemaa, "What Would Mahan Say About Space Power?" *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, April 1988, p. 48.

and openly anti-nuclear, and has diplomatic relations with Cuba and the Soviet Union, and close informal relations with Libya.³¹ In 1986, Vanuatu's Prime Minister Walter Lini negotiated a fishing agreement, which allowed Soviet access to Vanuatu's main port and held open the possibility that future agreements would allow the Soviet airline Aeroflot to bring relief crews to Vanuatu. The fishing agreement with Vanuatu has not been renewed, however.

Last May, Vanuatu experienced unprecedented political turmoil when a pro-Libyan challenger to Lini led violent street demonstrations. The situation caused Lini to request Australia and New Zealand to send police force assistance. The challenger, Barak Sope, might try again. In a situation where the Soviets had regular fishing, merchant, and airline access to Vanuatu, Soviet or Libyan operatives might be able to help Sope take power. And then Sope might grant expanded naval and air access to Soviet military forces.

Japan, as a key U.S. ally in Northeast Asia, also has been a target of Soviet "fishing" policies. The Soviets have tried to exploit economic and cultural ties with the politically powerful fishing constituency in Hokkaido to pressure Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party to edge away from its close ties to the U.S.

Soviet "Friendship Halls." In Hokkaido, the USSR has constructed "friendship halls" and has granted businessmen and fishermen special economic and fishing privileges in the Soviet Union, including the right to visit Japanese ancestral graves on Sakhalin, an island north of Hokkaido. Half of Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands were formerly Japanese territory.³² There continues to be a powerful constituency in Japan calling for the return to Japan of four islands at the end of the Kurile chain known as the Northern Territories. In one publicized case, Japanese fishermen permitted by Moscow to operate in disputed waters were asked to provide the names of the organizers of "Northern Territories Day," an annual event that condemns the Soviet occupation of the four islands, which are within sight of Hokkaido.³³

Moscow continues to probe for opportunities in the South Pacific. In 1979, the Soviets wanted to construct a commercial repair base in the Australian state of Tasmania.³⁴ The plans were scuttled following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Today, Moscow is pressing for a fishing agreement that would allow Soviet access to Australian ports. Moscow is reported to be offering to expand trade relations with Canberra.³⁵ The opposition Liberal Party opposes the move, and visiting British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher even

31 Tom Lausner, "Lingering Libyans: Lini asks Australia for proof of foreign subversion," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 2, 1987, p. 16-17.

32 Marian Leighton, "Soviet Strategy Towards Northern Europe and Japan," *Survey* (London), Autumn-Winter 1983, p. 147.

33 *Ibid.*

34 McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

35 Melbourne Overseas Service, "Hayden: USSR Responds 'Favorably' on Port Access," July 5, 1988, in *FBIS East Asia*, July 5, 1988, p. 71.

cautioned against such an agreement.³⁶ Moscow also would like to have its ships repaired in Philippines ports close to the U.S. navy facility at Subic Bay, and it would like to negotiate a fishing treaty with Manila.³⁷

HOW TO MEET THE SOVIET CHALLENGE

Soviet use of its civilian merchant and fishing fleets for political and military purposes is nothing new. Under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of so-called *glasnost*, there will be increased emphasis on diplomatic and economic relations, especially in the Pacific, to gain political and then military advantage over the West.

In the South Pacific, the Soviets will be aided by New Zealand's anti-nuclear policies that have effectively destroyed the ANZUS Alliance — which had deterred Soviet adventurism since 1951. Washington must seek to convince Wellington that its alliance-destroying policies have only aided Moscow and its allies, such as Libya, who are today promoting instability in the South Pacific.

Covert Allies. But Soviet advances are not dependent on their overt diplomatic and economic relations only. Covert allies in trade unions and the peace movements help create a political climate that allows for economic and diplomatic gains. For example, the Soviet trade union front, the World Federation of Trade Unions, has allies in the New Zealand and Australian trade unions, which in 1980 created the Pacific Trade Union Forum. This group promotes anti-Western policies in the developing South Pacific trade unions. Washington must address this challenge if it is to prevent Soviet gains in the South Pacific.

In 1986 Washington began to defuse some of the developing anti-Western sentiments in the South Pacific when it signed the South Pacific Fisheries Treaty with eleven South Pacific island states. This agreement calls for the U.S. to provide more than \$60 million in economic assistance over five years. Also as part of the agreement, the U.S. tuna fishing industry will provide some technical assistance. Congress must see that the specified amounts of U.S. assistance are provided. Furthermore, the U.S. should:

- ◆◆ Mount an expanded public diplomacy campaign in the Pacific to explain the role of such Soviet political fronts as the World Federation of Trade Unions as well as the dangers of allowing access to Soviet fishing fleets.
- ◆◆ Continue to deploy U.S. naval vessels in the South Pacific.
- ◆◆ Maintain U.S. military bases in the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan.
- ◆◆ Increase joint naval exercises with friends and allies in the region, including the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises, which include Australia, Japan, and Canada.

36 Melbourne Overseas Service, "Thatcher Cautions Against Treaty With USSR," August 3, 1988, in *FBIS-East Asia*, August 3, 1988, p. 71.

37 Jose de Vera, "USSR Seeks Shipping, Fishing Agreements," *Manila Bulletin*, March 20, 1987, p. 1; Tirso L. Rodriguez, "Soviet Union Offers Business to Shipyards," *Manila Bulletin*, April 23, 1987, p. 19.

Washington should invite friendly Southeast Asian countries to send observers to these exercises.

◆ ◆ Increase economic assistance to \$15 million a year and encourage U.S. private economic investment in the South Pacific to help deter Soviet economic advances in the South Pacific.

◆ ◆ Impose more effective restrictions on the transfer to the Soviet bloc of Western high technology that might be used in the Soviet fishing fleet.

CONCLUSION

Soviet fishing fleets are often the cat's paw for coordinated Soviet strategy to gain wider political influence in a country or a region. In the Pacific, they have been a useful tool to achieve the Soviet goals of weakening the Western alliance and wooing developing states away from the West. Washington must seek to prevent Moscow's fishing fleets from gaining further access in Asia. Soviet fishing ships already perform several important military functions. But their acceptance by developing countries in Asia could lead to access for Soviet naval vessels, which would seriously complicate Washington's job of deterring Soviet adventurism.

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