

## **Igor Kravchuk (Petropavlovsk – Kamchatskiy)**

### **The Less Ships the More Admirals**

The “Express-Kamchatka” newspaper, February 10, 2005

#### **NAVY SUPREME COMMANDER PREDICTS REDUCTION OF THE FLEET**

Navy Supreme Commander predicts reduction of the fleet.

Last Saturday, February 5<sup>th</sup>, in Sankt-Petersburg, there was conducted the annual operational and mobilization training session of the high command of all the Russia’s fleets. It was presided over by Navy Supreme Commander, Admiral Vladimir Kuroedov. Everything would have been just fine, but for the remark made by Kuroedov at a ceremonial occasion. He said that, after 2010, the Russian Navy will be faced with a massive and irreplaceable retirement of ships built in the 1970-es. As the result, by 2020, Russia’s battle forces will comprise less than 50 ships, which would not be sufficient for the tasks of providing for national security, even within coastal waters.

However, Kuroedov was shy of saying that our naval forces, whether the North Fleet, or the forces based at Kamchatka Peninsula, or anywhere else for that matter, have long become a modern version of Peter’s the Great “fun fleet” incapable of performing serious tasks. To say it is to acknowledge that our crowd of stars-and-stripes admirals ought to resign. The thing is that, given the today’s state of repair, volume of repairs, and the rate of replacement, the Navy will not be able to preserve intact its current surface fleet beyond 2015. For example, Russia will lose all its submarine motherships, which would limit the ability to deploy submarines in battle situations. Though, there still will be about 6 to 8 strategic nuclear submarines and 8 to 10 multipurpose nuclear submarines left. Besides, Russia will no longer possess landing ships, reconnaissance ships, and survey vessels (in the Warsaw Pact times they were mainly built in East Germany and Poland).

On the positive side, according to Vladimir Kuroedov, the first Russian corvette will be launched in 2005; the Severodvinsk shipyard continues building nuclear subs, in the framework of the program designated as projects 955 and 855; the shipyard “Yantar” in Kaliningrad is building a training ship and a landing ship; and the “North Warf” in Sankt-Petersburg is building a reconnaissance ship and plans to commence construction of the first Russian long range frigate. But, at this rate of production, the problem of rebuilding the fleet can never be solved.

The Day of the Defender of the Motherland, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, is approaching. On this day, the military will expatiate on how, despite all the difficulties and in face of adversity, the Pacific Fleet, at its current numerical strength and state of readiness, represents an adequate naval force. They will be saying the same things when we are left not with 50, but with a dozen ships.

#### FLEXING FLABBY MUSCLES

Both national and local media present each discovery of an American submarine in Kamchanka waters as a unique military operation; each good will voyage of the Pacific Fleet to nearby Japan or Korea is portrayed to the public as an unprecedented achievement and a demonstration of Russia's military might.

Navy Supreme Commander, Admiral Vladimir Kuroedov, visited the Pacific Fleet in mid-December 2004 and has put before it a new task: to conduct, in July – August of 2005, in Indian Ocean, joint exercises of four fleets. Two fleets will represent Russia, the Pacific and the Black Sea fleets, and the other two will represent Indian and Chinese naval forces. The exercises will include mock battles of two Russian fleets with Indian and Chinese fleets. The latter two, unlike us, are modernizing their fleets, incidentally with the help provided by Russian shipyards.

Do we need this long voyage? This will be like flexing flabby muscles.

On February 16, 2000, a small grayish ship left the port of Sevastopol. It was a reconnaissance vessel of the Black Sea Fleet, "Kildin", and her mission was to spy on the mighty naval force of the US and NATO ships assembled at the shores of Iraq, where, under the pretext of a violation of embargo on export of Iraqi oil, Americans had detained a Russian tanker. "Kildin" resembled a fishing boat and looked comical as a challenge to the American carriers. Never mind the campaign of leaks to the press organized by the Chief Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff, which were trying to suggest that under "Kildin's" exterior of a corroded bathtub there were hidden the state-of-the-art means of electronic, optical, hydro acoustic, and radiation recognizance, as well as a modern computing center. "Kildin" sailors complained upon returning from this mission about the stress they have experienced floating side by side with the American fleet, with American sailors jokingly aiming artillery pieces at them and jeering at their impotence on radio. Nevertheless, as the result of the mission, the naval brass was showered with decorations and promotions, as if they have taken back Tsushima from the Japanese.

In 2005, budget of the Ministry of Defense and other "power ministries" was increased by a third, while the Ministry of Culture suffered a cut, and education and health got just a few crumbs to add to their budgets. But the military continue to drone on that they don't have enough, that maintenance of ships that have outlived their service life requires enormous

expenditures. In 2005, the sub “Varshavyanka” and two surface ships will be retired from the Pacific Fleet. At the same time, several “battle”, in quotation marks, ships that could be considered a military threat only by some banana republic are being overhauled.

Do we need to continue spending enormous amount of money to keep this junk afloat? Is there a politician who would just once tell the truth about the real conditions of the Russian fleet and the army? This would send to retirement admirals and generals, and redundant officers. It would be much better to rename the fleet “self defense forces”, after the Japan’s example, than to disgrace ourselves in the Indian Ocean, in full view of British and American armada. But we will never hear confessions of this sort from our silver headed Vice-Admiral Voronin, neither from Kuroedov, nor from Putin, not from anybody else. All of them will continue to dwell endlessly on our ability to launch rockets and repel the enemy. All we are capable of is a nuclear strike. People’s memory is short. Not many would recall that, after the “Kursk” submarine catastrophe, Vladimir Putin promised to reform Russia’s armed forces. The Western press wrote in 2000: “President Vladimir Putin has energetically taken on one of the most difficult problems, when he promised to reform the armed forces, the reform that is likely to decide the future of Russia’s nuclear arsenal...”. In the same year, it was reported that Russian forces in Chechnya are poorly equipped, that the military equipment breaks down too often, and that the troops are often deployed without having gone through battle training. Putin’s hard-line stand on Chechnya has become his trademark, but this costly military campaign has been dragging on for too long exposing weaknesses of the armed forces and exacerbating budgetary problems. According to Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, the war depleted army stocks by 85%, and there is no money to replenish them. Because of the military budget cut, the percentage allocated to the Navy has also decreased: from 15% five years ago to the current 11 – 12%. Investments in shipbuilding, armaments, battle training, and technical servicing have sharply decreased, and the fleet is struggling just to pay the sailors’ salaries. Instead of ploughing the seas, the majority of Russia’s ships are rusting at ports, slowly turning into scrap metal.

The report of the Naval General Staff published in 1999 said that in ten years the Russia’s Navy has been reduced by one thousand ships. Unless financing is increased, warned, in 2000, Supreme Navy Commander Vladimir Kuroedov, the number of ships will go down to 60, by 2016. Nuclear submarines are the chief priority of the Navy, but in the last 10 years their number shrunk by two thirds. The number of nuclear subs carrying strategic missiles has decreased in the same proportion: from 62 in 1990 to 18 in 2000. The surface fleet is even in worse shape. Very few ships are in combat ready conditions. The pride of the fleet, the carrier “Admiral Kuznetsov”, in the last years, has been out to sea so rarely that the crew lacks substantial experience with sea based aircraft operations.

On the Russia's Navy Day, July 30, 2000, Putin said: "The Navy always has been and remains a symbol of strong Russia and a mainstay of its military might". Putin and the Navy command planned to send "Admiral Kuznetsov" to the Mediterranean, after reconstruction of the Russian navy facilities in Syria, and to modernize the Russian naval base in Vietnam. However, for the Russians, the Russian fleet often brings to mind tales of disasters rather than of glory.

In 1998, Defense Minister Igor Rodionov visited Kamchatka. At the times when he was still in charge of the strategic missiles forces he used to receive birthday presents from Kamchatka: they had a testing grounds here, at Kluchi, and from there a military transport plane would fly to Moscow every year carrying caviar, smoked salmon, and other presents for the general and his staff.

This time, the minister met the Kamchatka governor, Vladimir Biryukov, and they, on the spot, hatched a plan to make Kamchatka an international resort. "What do we need the Canary Islands for, if we have Baikal and Kamchatka?", said the minister perusing the album of Kamchatka scenery presented to him by Governor Birukov. "There is nothing to do on the Canary Islands, there is nothing but sand", seconded the then Navy Supreme Commander, Felix Gromov. "We have no use for sand, we will vacation on Kamchatka", summarized the minister and promised to re-activate two military airports to receive international passenger flights and to help with repairing a landing strip at the Elizovo airport. Minister Rodionov also promised that the Vilyuchinsk ship repair facilities, the plant #49, specializing in nuclear submarines repair, will, from now on, get repair orders from the whole Pacific Fleet.

Where are now all these ministers and supreme commanders with their promises? That is how it always is in Russia: new ministers, supreme commanders, and presidents blame the old ones for everything. The President is yet to explain to the Russian public what are the goals of our internal and external policies, what do we want to achieve with our defense programs, etc..

A year before the Rodionov's visit, his predecessor, Pavel Grachev, nicknamed Pasha – Mercedes, also visited Kamchatka. His voyage was marked by all out drinking parties, by empty promises, by disbursement of medals, ranks, and promotions. Grachev also visited Chukotka, on the last leg of his voyage. There, his plane received a cargo of two dozens skins of polar bear, and several bags of walrus tusks: presents for his numerous, fat-faced entourage. This is where the real achievements of the stars – and – stripes crowd lie.

Materials used for this article included Internet sources, the “Daily News” newspaper, “The Los Angeles Times”, “Jane’s Defense Weekly”, and the author’s archives.

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