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## RUSSIAN NAVY TO FOCUS STRATEGY ON ARCTIC ZONE AND BLACK SEA

BY **DAMIEN SHARKOV** ON 12/9/14 AT 12:29 PM



Russian sailors stand in formation in front of their Russian navy frigate *Smolny* at the STX Les Chantiers de l'Atlantique shipyard site in Saint-Nazaire, western France, November 25, 2014.

STEPHANE MAHE/REUTERS

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The Russian navy has unveiled plans to strengthen its presence in the Black Sea and the Arctic zone, heavily focusing its military strategy on the two regions for the next 15 years according to the head officer of the Russian navy, admiral Victor Chirkov.

Speaking in front of the Russian government's Marine Board on Tuesday, Chirkov said the new naval doctrine, which is in place until 2030, will see Russia strengthen its presence around Crimea and the North Pole.

"The role of the Arctic in the period between now and 2030 will grow objectively," he explained. "This is a result of the need to strengthen Russian presence in region, to explore it, to defend national interests and promote national security around the Arctic."

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A crucial part of the new strategy, according to Chirkov, will be "modernising the facilities" on the North Sea route which is the shipping lane that connects Russia's northernmost waters with the North Pole, Scandinavia and Alaska.

Russia's territorial claim over the North Pole has seen Putin at odds with the governments of Canada, Norway, Denmark and the US, over the rights to access the oil rich region.

A military overhaul of Russia's northernmost perimeter is expected to be part of the new strategy with heavy militarisation plans for the Murmansk area, Franz Josef Land, Wrangel Island and at Cape Schmidt, which were all announced in October.

Most recently, the Russian navy successfully tested new underwater ballistic missiles in November, firing them from the Alexander Nevsky submarine in the Barents Sea, north of Scandinavia.

Chirkov added that the waters around Crimea will also assume the "highest priority" under the new naval plans.

"The Black Sea region is extraordinarily important and Crimea specifically," the admiral added. "We are facing a considerable amount of work in incorporating Crimea in accordance with Russia's maritime policy.

"In that regard the most difficult problem to resolve will be securing a legal framework that is welcoming of Russia in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait," Russia's top seaman said.

According to Chirkov, the construction of energy pipelines across sea will be another very important aspect of the navy's new strategy, with the cancellation of the South Stream project confirmed.

Although neither the US nor the EU have recognised Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine earlier this year as legitimate, Moscow has always had a strong naval presence in the region in the form of the Black Sea Fleet, once a strategic Soviet Naval stronghold.

Russian military presence in Crimea has been maintained since 1997 after Ukraine and Russia struck a deal to share facilities on the Black Sea and in the Sea of Azov. Russia currently has more than 10,000 servicemen stationed there and over 40 warships under the control of the Black Sea Fleet.

Russia's defence budget is expected to hit a record high in 2015 despite the country suffering from an economic slowdown. The Ministry of Defence projects some 3.3 trillion rubles (\$81 billion) will be spent on defence.

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