

The New Cold War: Russia's "Stealth Capable" 955 Borei-class Submarines. US-NATO's Aegis Ashore Missile Defense

By [Padraig McGrath](#)

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On October 29th, the Norwegian news-outlet NRK broke the story that between 8 and 10 Russian submarines, including Sierra II class submarines, had begun naval exercises in the North Atlantic. This is one of the largest Russian naval exercises focused on submarine-warfare since the end of the cold war. It is likely that one of the core purposes of this exercise is to test the stealth-capability of the Russian subs, and of NATO forces' abilities to track them as they push through the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom gap (abbreviated "GIUK-gap"), a closely monitored strategic bottleneck. The Sierra II class sub has a titanium hull, enabling it to submerge to greater depths than steel-hulled submarines, and it is also much quieter than most other submarines.

In the event of a conflict, these submarines could be deployed to adopt a defensive posture, in order to protect Russian ports on the Barents Sea or Russia's strategic holdings in the Arctic, or to threaten the American eastern seaboard. Since activating its 2nd Fleet, the US Navy has significantly increased patrols in the North Atlantic and in the area of the GIUK gap. The United States Navy also operates a detachment of P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft out of the Keflavik base in Iceland.

The following day, October 30th, the Borei-A-class submarine Prince Vladimir test-fired the Bulava ballistic missile from the White Sea to a target in the Kura missile-range in Kamchatka. This is the first ever test of a Bulava missile. The Bulava has a range of about 8,000 kilometres, and each of its independently targeted warheads delivers a payload the equivalent of 150 kilotons of TNT.

Northern Fleet Commander Vice-Admiral Alexander Moiseyev stated that the submarine Prince Vladimir is completing its state trials this year, during which all its armaments will be tested, before it is scheduled to enter service in December. The submarine will be operational in the Northern Fleet.

So far, the Sevmash shipyard has delivered 3 Borei-class submarines to the Russian navy, serving in the Northern and Pacific Fleets, with 4 more Project 955 Borei-class submarines under construction. Project 955 Borei-class submarines are designed for improved acoustic stealth, and each of them will carry 16 RSM-56 Bulava missiles as standard, with each missile carrying between 4 and 6 nuclear warheads.

The day after that, October 31st, President Putin was in Kaliningrad, inspecting the Yantar naval shipyard and the corvette "Gremyashchy," launched in 2017.

In addition, 5 tests of the MIRV-equipped RS-28 Sarmat missile are planned for early 2020, with the Sarmat scheduled to enter service in 2021. This intercontinental ballistic missile is reportedly equipped with multiple hypersonic MIRV's (multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles), designed to evade missile defense systems. According to Russian government sources, the Sarmat can carry up to 15 warheads, has a range of 10,000 kilometres, and is capable of destroying an area the size of Texas.

All of this has been necessitated by the Aegis Ashore missile defence system, operated by the United States in Poland and Romania. However, let's set the intercontinental ballistic missile issue aside for the purpose of our discussion here, and focus on the submarine issue, which is an underemphasized aspect of very many geo-strategic bones of contention.

This hardly needs to be explained with regard to Crimea – losing the naval base in Sevastopol would have been detrimental to Russian geo-strategic interests. At present, there is still a standing agreement between Russia and the western alliance that no submarines carrying nuclear weapons are deployed in the Black Sea.

From Crimea, let's move on to Syria. Tartus is a small base, used by the Russian navy primarily for provisioning, but it would suddenly become a radically more valuable strategic asset in the Mediterranean if the Bosphorus were ever blockaded. The western alliance had many, many reasons for prosecuting its proxy-war in Syria, and Tartus is certainly not the first item in that long list, but it is nonetheless one reason among many. The question arises as to what responses might be provoked from the United States if the Russian Defence Ministry ever decided to expand the Tartus base's operational capabilities. Even if the defence ministry's military planners were imprudent enough to consider such a move, President Assad would be unlikely to consent, given the resulting risk of re-igniting the Syrian conflict.

One of the problems common to many of the Russian navy's most strategically important bases is the narrow sea-corridors to which they have access. Submarine-hunting is easier in small and easily monitored bodies of water such as the Baltic (Kaliningrad), the Black Sea (Sevastopol) and the Sea of Japan (Vladivostok). Even the Mediterranean is not expansive enough to allow Russian subs to disappear. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Russian Defence Ministry is commissioning considerable numbers of new generation, stealthier subs in response to the Aegis game-changer.

This also makes the Northern Fleet in Murmansk particularly key to the effectiveness of Russia's nuclear deterrent, with no American fleet in immediate proximity. Furthermore, the point cannot be over-emphasized that with 17 million square kilometres of resource-rich territory but a population-density of only 8 persons per square kilometre, maintaining the effectiveness of Russia's nuclear deterrent is an existential necessity.

In this regard, the strategic role of the Aegis Ashore missile defence system deployed by the United States in central Europe is essentially aggressive. There are many economic and geo-political factors feeding into the current lamentable state of Russia's relationship with its western partners. However, it is very highly arguable that the deployment of Aegis Ashore in central Europe is singularly the biggest driver of the current geo-political and geo-strategic impasse, and consequently also the most influential driver of new Russian weapons-development.

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Padraig McGrath is a political analyst.

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