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A TALE OF TWO FLEETS

A Russian Perspective on the 1973 Naval Standoff in the Mediterranean

Lyle J. Goldstein and Yuri M. Zhukov

Slightly more than three decades have passed since the United States and the Soviet Union confronted the most severe maritime crisis of the Cold War. Occurring when the strategic focus of the U.S. Navy had been on the Vietnam War for several years, this standoff witnessed the effective exploitation of American political, strategic, and tactical vulnerabilities by an adversary that ten years

prior had had virtually no Mediterranean naval presence whatsoever. Indeed, this substantial maritime challenge had emerged from a continental power that had traditionally focused its naval strategy exclusively on coastal defense.

In an age when the many battles of the global war on terror could distract the U.S. Navy from its core mission of sea control, this often forgotten episode of superpower brinkmanship is a timely reminder that naval threats can emerge rapidly. The Mediterranean crisis demonstrates that America's opponents could achieve local sea-denial capabilities in the face of severe constraints, even in a theater of traditional U.S. naval dominance.

In examining Soviet maritime strategy in the Mediterranean before and during the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, this study draws on new evidence from Russia made available through cooperation with

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the Central Naval Museum in St. Petersburg, interviews with ex-Soviet naval officers, and newly available Russian memoirs and military journals. These new sources—many of which have never before been exploited by Western analysts—include an unpublished personal journal of Captain First Rank Yevgenii V. Semenov, one-time chief of staff of the Soviet Fifth Eskadra (the Mediterranean squadron). It offers day-by-day accounts of ship movements and firsthand insight into Soviet strategic thinking.¹

This new evidence paints a picture of a Fifth Eskadra on the verge of direct intervention and much more willing to engage in hostilities than previously thought. This work stands in contrast to scholarly works on the topic that have tended to emphasize Soviet restraint and reluctance to exercise force in local conflicts.² In addition, this study has empirical value in that most previous unclassified sources have relied almost exclusively on an American viewpoint.³ Russian perspectives can help us understand the significant challenges faced by a land power in creating and employing an oceangoing fleet.

THE CARIBBEAN PARALLEL

The Mediterranean standoff naturally brings to mind its more famous predecessor, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Whereas, the earlier crisis demonstrated the importance of naval might in enabling both flexibility and political leverage, in the later episode described here the more balanced capabilities of the opposing fleets formed a major constraint on U.S. decision makers during the crisis, leading to a much more ambiguous outcome.

The U.S. maritime advantage during the Cuban missile crisis was overwhelming and incontestable. President John F. Kennedy chose the naval blockade option—as opposed to immediate ground invasion, surgical air strikes, further diplomatic pressure, or simple inaction—largely because the prospect of a naval confrontation with the Soviets was the opening scenario most favorable to Washington.⁴

Post-Stalin cutbacks in naval construction had left the Soviet fleet's blue-water ambitions effectively moribund. The Caribbean represented for Soviet captains an unfamiliar area of operation at a prohibitive distance from home ports. Moscow was unable to support or even effectively resupply or reinforce its land-based forces in Cuba from the sea.⁵ Soviet merchant ships heading to Havana were generally unescorted; usable naval forces in the region were virtually nonexistent.⁶

Four Soviet long-range diesel submarines (of a type known to NATO as the Foxtrot class and to the Soviet Navy as “project 641”) under the command of Captain First Rank Vitalii Agafonov—each carrying twenty-two conventional torpedoes and one nuclear-tipped weapon—left the Northern



Soviet sailors shake their fists at a U.S. P2V Neptune flying over a submerging Soviet submarine in the Mediterranean.

Fleet on 1 October for a new base in Havana.⁷ They faced the unenviable task of penetrating a U.S. blockade conducted by (on average) forty ships, 240 aircraft, and thirty thousand personnel.⁸ In addition to this overwhelming force, the Soviet submariners were tackling immense technical and mechanical difficulties. Since Soviet nuclear submarines were at that time relatively unsafe and untested,

older diesel boats were sent in their place.⁹ The diesel Foxtrots proved unsuitable for the operation. The boats, especially in that climate, were hot; temperatures inside reached 50°C (122°F), forcing the crew to cool off by sitting neck deep in water. The boats also lacked cooling systems for their batteries, which greatly complicated recharging. The Foxtrots furthermore had to surface often to receive instructions from Moscow and recharge batteries.¹⁰

The noisy engines and regular surfacing made the boats particularly vulnerable to U.S. antisubmarine warfare (ASW) forces. Land-based hydroacoustic installations discovered the submarines off the Azores, and American aircraft constantly trailed the boats for the rest of the voyage. To escape their shadows the Foxtrots were forced to dive to depths of over two hundred meters, out of communications with each other or with Moscow.¹¹

A fifth submarine, the long-range diesel boat *B-75* (Zulu class/pr. 611) carrying two nuclear torpedoes, was sent to the region at the end of September with orders to defend Soviet transport ships if they came under attack. However, it was recalled shortly after Kennedy announced the blockade. By 10 November, the boat had returned to the USSR.¹² The four Foxtrots never made it to Cuba. Three returned to base after being forced to surface by U.S. Navy warships; the last Foxtrot in the region (*B-4*) received orders to return to its home port of Polyarnyi on 20 November.¹³

Although an utter embarrassment for Moscow, the Cuban Crisis taught the Soviet Navy some important lessons with respect to long-range submarine operations. The battery-cooling problem on diesel submarines was fixed in fairly short order. More importantly, fresh emphasis was placed on the creation of a credible oceangoing fleet. Subsequent efforts increasingly focused on

expanding operations beyond the Soviet littoral.¹⁴ The rapidly growing permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean after 1964 was perhaps the most important consequence of this radical shift in Soviet naval policy.

THE OBSTACLE OF GEOGRAPHY

In clear contrast to the United Kingdom and the United States, Russia has always been a continental power. The “tyranny of geography” has historically been the greatest constraint on the deployment of Russian naval forces to distant waters; Russia has 37,653 kilometers of coastline (45,169 kilometers in Soviet times), the overwhelming majority of it in the arctic north.¹⁵

Russia was without a warm-water port until Catherine the Great annexed the Crimean Peninsula from the Ottoman Empire in 1783, but the Turkish Straits—consisting of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles—still stood between Russia and the Mediterranean. The great distances between Russia’s Black Sea, Baltic, Northern, and Pacific Fleets have also made it virtually impossible to achieve unity of mass in crisis situations.¹⁶ Before and after the Second World War the Soviet naval mission focused primarily on coastal defense rather than forward deployment.

A quick glance at a map immediately suggests that from the Russian perspective, the Mediterranean is not a convenient theater for naval operations. Access to the sea is limited by three narrow choke points—the Gibraltar Strait, the Turkish Straits, and the Suez Canal—each easy to monitor, guard, and, if necessary, block. Moreover, the Mediterranean is, and always has been, a place of vital strategic and economic interests for outside powers, especially the United Kingdom in the two centuries preceding World War II.

A Historical Prerogative

The Soviet justification for maintaining a permanent presence in the Mediterranean was rooted as much in perceived historical entitlement as in national security priorities. The Mediterranean and Black Seas were historically regarded by many Russian elites as constituting a single body of water. As the preeminent Black Sea power, then, the Soviet Union was compelled to extend its weight into the adjoining waters. Such notions were reinforced by a rich history of Russian naval operations in the Mediterranean. Admiral Ivan Kasatonov—commander of the Black Sea Fleet in the early 1990s—recalls a conversation with a submarine crew docked at Vlora, Albania, in 1959, during the Soviet Navy’s first extended deployment in the Mediterranean:

It seemed to me then, that the sailors understood the necessity of the presence of our naval forces in the Mediterranean Sea.

“Ships of the Russian Fleet have been here, on the Mediterranean Sea, since the times of mommy Catherine [II, the Great]—said the senior torpedo crew member.—We know how sailors under the command of Spiridov, Ushakov, Senyavin traversed and fought here.”¹⁷

In a similar vein, Admiral Ivan Kapitanets, the Fifth Eskadra’s chief of staff from 1970 to 1973, writes of the Mediterranean squadron’s development: “The Russian fleet was again affirming itself in the Mediterranean Sea, as in centuries past, making a stand for the interests of Russia.”¹⁸

The first-ever deployment of Russian naval forces to the eastern Mediterranean took place during the 1768–74 Russo-Turkish War, when Catherine II sent an expeditionary force of the Russian fleet from the Baltic to the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean Seas to support the land campaign against Turkey. Although outnumbered almost two to one, the Russian force achieved significant successes in battles off Chios and Chesme, devastating virtually the entire Turkish fleet; fifteen battleships, six frigates, and over forty smaller vessels were sunk in a matter of hours.¹⁹

The Russian Navy kept a permanent Mediterranean presence for several years, maintaining a blockade of the Dardanelles and exercising total sea control in the major Aegean choke points. The 1774 Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji gave Russia considerable territorial gains, as well as protectorship over the Ottoman Empire’s Greek-Orthodox subjects. It also allowed Russian ships to navigate the Black Sea and pass through the Turkish straits, although control of the straits would remain a point of contention for some time.

The Montreux Restrictions

A century and a half and six Russo-Turkish wars later, the Montreux Conference of 1936 turned control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus over to Turkey and greatly restricted the movement of warships through them.²⁰ Moscow was initially a supporter of the Montreux initiative—the conditions would protect the Soviet Union from superior hostile fleets and greatly strengthen the potential Soviet role in the Mediterranean, as long as Turkey remained friendly, or at least neutral.²¹ However, Turkey signed a mutual assistance treaty with France and the United Kingdom in 1939; after unsuccessful post-World War II Soviet attempts to obtain greater control over the straits, the Soviet Union found that the Montreux restrictions hindered its ambitions to become a Mediterranean naval power.

The provisions of the Montreux Convention most pertinent to the Soviets were the following: light surface vessels (smaller than ten thousand tons and with guns not exceeding 203 millimeters), minor war vessels, and naval auxiliaries could pass, with few restrictions; all warship transits had to be declared to Turkish authorities eight days prior; and foreign warships could pass only in

groups totaling fifteen thousand tons or less. Black Sea powers were granted special privileges not permitted to other foreign powers: capital ships (surface vessels of war, other than aircraft carriers, exceeding tonnage limits of light surface vessels) and submarines (if en route to or from repair facilities) could be sent singly through the straits. The above conditions could be suspended, however, in the event of a war involving Turkey or if Turkey was otherwise under threat; the Turkish government was permitted complete discretion in such circumstances.²²

The Soviets found ways to circumvent some of the treaty's restrictions. They skirted the eight-day waiting period on warships through the use of contingency declarations, which allowed Black Sea Fleet ships to augment rapidly the standing force in the Mediterranean during crisis situations.²³ For example, on 11 October 1973, during the Arab-Israeli conflict, a group of Soviet warships passed through the straits to make a port visit to Italy, its declared destination. Subsequently, however, the ships joined the other Soviet naval forces in the region.²⁴

On the foreign-policy front, the Soviets also effectively exploited tensions between Turkey and its NATO allies, particularly Greece and the United States. For example, after Turkey dropped an alleged 340 kilograms of bombs and napalm on Greek Cypriot strongholds in northwestern Cyprus in August 1964, the U.S. president, Lyndon Johnson, and much of the international community publicly condemned Turkish involvement in that local crisis. Ankara responded by relaxing restrictions on passage of Soviet ships through the straits; shortly afterward, the Soviets moved a cruiser and two destroyers into the Mediterranean from the Black Sea.²⁵ Later, the Soviets further exploited Turkey's easing of the regulations, in response to U.S. support for Israel. This situation helped facilitate Soviet operations during the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, specifically the airlift and sealift to Egypt and Syria, and the rapid reinforcement of the Fifth Eskadra by Black Sea Fleet forces.

THE BROADER CONTEXT

Although Moscow had initiated arms transfers to Egypt as early as 1955 (thereby extending Soviet influence into a vacuum left by Britain) and had established a brief naval presence in the Aegean Sea thanks to the use of Albanian ports in 1959, it was not until the American deployment of Polaris submarines in March 1963 that a forward naval presence in the Mediterranean became a central national security interest for Moscow.²⁶

Polaris

On 14 April 1963, the USS *Sam Houston* (SSBN 609) visited the Turkish port of Izmir, in the first Mediterranean patrol ever made by a ballistic missile

submarine. The submarine, armed with Polaris missiles, was capable of delivering an explosive yield greater than the combined bomb tonnage dropped in World War II by Allied and Axis powers (including the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki).²⁷ The missile's range (2,800 kilometers for A-2 missiles, four thousand for A-3), underwater launch capability, and mobility made Polaris a milestone in the Cold War nuclear deterrence calculus. A ballistic missile fired from the eastern Mediterranean could thus potentially hit Moscow or Leningrad.²⁸ Such a threat was not entirely new to Moscow—the first Polaris submarine, USS *George Washington* (SSBN 598), had completed three patrols off Russia's northern coastline by mid-1961.²⁹ However, Polaris submarines patrolling in those waters, home to the Northern Fleet, were considerably more vulnerable to Soviet ASW operations than were those in the Mediterranean. In light of its strategic weakness in the new area of U.S. ballistic missile deployment, the Kremlin prioritized the creation of a permanent counterforce in the Mediterranean. In the words of a former British defense intelligence officer,

The initial response was first to establish a 1500 nm [nautical mile] ASW defence zone . . . which covered the Norwegian Sea, Arctic and the Eastern [Mediterranean], followed, in due [course] by a 2,500 nm zone, a radius of threat that took in Arabian Sea (deployments started in 1967–68) and (not coincidentally) reflected the range of successive Polaris systems.³⁰

Moscow's singular focus on the emerging U.S. SSBN threat reflected the dominance of the Soviet ground forces in making overall strategy. It was likely these elements that initiated the deployment of often unprotected surface forces to serve as "forward observation posts," providing continuous target data on the location of U.S. and NATO nuclear strike forces.³¹

Soviet Support for Arab States

In its renewed quest for bases in the Mediterranean, Moscow turned to the Arab states. Egypt's aversion to European imperialism and to American support for Israel made it especially susceptible. After economic difficulties in the early 1960s, and especially after the devastation wrought by the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War, President Gamal Abdel Nasser had become increasingly open to Soviet aid, receptive to the urgings of leftist political forces in his own country, and permissive toward Soviet use of Egyptian ports, airfields, and shore support facilities.³² Egypt rapidly became Moscow's principal client in the Mediterranean.

In general, Soviet wartime assistance to Egypt, as well as to Syria and other Arab states, consisted of, variously: provision of military equipment and intelligence prior to hostilities; delivery of supplies during the conflict; the demonstrative use of military power in the vicinity of the war zone; transfer of military advisers and specialists to the warring countries; and finally, engagement of Soviet

personnel in combat operations. Moscow's willingness to provide one or another of these kinds of support in the Middle East and elsewhere in the third world had remained fairly consistent during the entire Cold War period, but it intensified in the 1970s, reflecting Moscow's more robust power-projection capabilities.³³

Détente

In the 1970s, Moscow's commitment to its client states was supplemented by a parallel interest in U.S.-Soviet concord. The growing presence of the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean lent much credence to Henry Kissinger's argument for détente—that is, since U.S. efforts to maintain regional hegemony would only provoke greater countermeasures by the Soviets, the interests of both sides would be better served by a policy of mutual restraint.³⁴ The new policy of détente began with the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (November 1969) and was affirmed when President Richard Nixon and General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev signed the “Basic Principles of Relations Between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R.” in May 1972. This document—which outlined the principles of détente—stipulated that bilateral relations were to be based on reciprocity, restraint, economic interdependence, and conflict mitigation. Further, it asserted that efforts of one state to gain unilateral advantage at the expense of the other would be inconsistent with such objectives.

The principles of détente, however, often proved incompatible with Moscow's foreign policy toward client states. Egypt, which had been able to exploit Cold War rivalries to meet its own agenda—both in the domestic realm and in its ambitions to reclaim territory occupied by Israel in 1967—now fretted that détente would take precedence over Soviet support for Cairo and other Arab regimes.³⁵ Therein lay the dilemma for Moscow—such support risked direct superpower confrontation, but failure to provide it risked the loss of local port access, which was of tremendous strategic value to the Soviet Navy.

A NATO “LAKE”

The U.S. Sixth Fleet and NATO had long enjoyed such strategic advantages over the Soviet Navy that the Mediterranean was described as a NATO “lake” during the early phases of the Cold War. Most notably, NATO members controlled the two primary choke points into the sea—the Gibraltar and Turkish straits.

U.S. Advantages

The Sixth Fleet benefited from an abundance of local naval bases and facilities—among others Rota (Spain), La Maddalena (Italy), Naples (Italy), and Souda Bay, Crete (Greece). Furthermore, due to well developed underway replenishment techniques, the Sixth Fleet had generally been capable of operating for prolonged periods without shore access.

The Western alliance could draw on its carrier air wings in addition to NATO air bases in Spain, Italy, Greece, and Turkey. Carrier-based aircraft were capable of dropping conventional or nuclear ordnance and had a range of more than a thousand miles, bringing Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and the southern USSR well within reach.³⁶ The deployment of even one extra carrier into the region (as had occurred during the October 1973 war) added an additional ninety aircraft.

One notable disadvantage encountered by the U.S. Navy in the Mediterranean, however, was the absence of a deep sound channel that could be exploited by the Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS), a network of seabed listening arrays deployed to detect submarines from great distances.³⁷ These arrays of hydrophones spaced along undersea cables had been installed in the Bahamas, along the U.S. Atlantic and Pacific coasts, and most significantly in the North Atlantic.³⁸ The lack of SOSUS capabilities in the Mediterranean was somewhat alleviated by the deployment of surface ships equipped with towed-array surveillance systems.³⁹

Soviet Disadvantages

The principal constraints on Soviet Mediterranean operations, aside from the Montreux Treaty, included periodic restrictions on shore access, burdensome deployment distances, and air inferiority. Such factors made the exploits the Soviet Navy was able to achieve in the Mediterranean all the more remarkable.

Bases and Anchorages. The Soviets had never had permanent bases in the Mediterranean, and their access to local port facilities had always been tightly regulated by often-erratic host governments. The brief, limited use of Albanian port facilities ended in the Soviet Navy's expulsion and confiscation of its military equipment by Tirana in 1961. Moscow's subsequent Arab hosts were no more reliable. Captain First Rank Yevgenii Semenov, chief of staff of the Fifth Eskadra on the eve of the October War, recalls an occasion when two Black Sea Fleet submarines, having waited for two days to enter Annaba, Algeria, were finally, on 13 June 1973, forced to leave.⁴⁰ In such an unpredictable atmosphere, the Fifth Eskadra was compelled to diversify its points of contact along the Mediterranean littoral, maintain a standing force of auxiliary vessels to reduce dependence on local bases, limit on-station times, and request augmentation of Black Sea Fleet elements by Northern and Baltic Fleet forces.⁴¹

As mentioned above, the USSR, as a relative newcomer to the region, benefited from anti-imperialist sentiments endemic in the Arab world.⁴² The Soviets were thus reluctant to undercut their propaganda by establishing permanent bases of their own in Arab lands. Instead, they relied on twelve offshore anchorages, which generally included floating dry docks and repair facilities.⁴³ Most of

these anchorages were in international waters; the main ones were located off the Greek island of Kithira and in the Gulf of Sidra, near the north-central coast of Libya. Relatively underdeveloped underway replenishment techniques forced Soviet vessels to detach periodically from their operating stations and return to these anchorages to refuel.⁴⁴

Despite the inherent drawbacks, however, these anchorages lent the Soviet forces a “mobile character,” facilitating regular active combat training. They also simplified resupply duties, though only limited repairs were possible.⁴⁵

Deployment Distances. The Montreux restrictions on submarine transits meant that submarines could be deployed to the region almost exclusively from the Northern and Baltic Fleets, through the Strait of Gibraltar. A former Soviet submarine officer recalls one method of passing through this NATO choke point:

Every ship had a special method for a forced crossing underwater. The diving depths, speeds, . . . and the course were all predetermined. . . . A submarine, having come abeam the Sao Vicente cape, went south, confirming its location via the depth of the sea. Coming up to Cape Spartel (Morocco), the sub came up to periscope depth, and in literally one or two minutes used its radio-location system to determine the distance to the shore, while the navigator took a visual bearing through the periscope on a Spartel lighthouse. . . . After determining the location, the submarine crossed the strait at a high speed, . . . since strong currents could impede a slow crossing. After one of the Soviet boats hit the bottom near the banks of Phoenix, we were required to cross the strait with the fathometer on, so as to have constant control over the depth under the keel. We understood that this compromised stealth, although it was understood that in peacetime safety was more important.⁴⁶

Sending submarines from the remote northern Soviet fleets both limited the strength of the local undersea force and slowed deployment or reinforcement in crisis situations.⁴⁷ Part of the Soviet solution was to extend the ships’ stays in the region.

After 1967, access to Egyptian ports extended the time diesel submarines could remain in the Mediterranean from two months to six.⁴⁸ Facilities in Alexandria were set up to repair diesel submarines (a floating dry dock was towed to Tartus, Syria, for the same purpose). Port Said was the most heavily used of the Egyptian ports. Groups of two to three ships docked there (to curb Israeli ambitions in the Suez region) for two or three-month shifts, always in a high state of operational readiness.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, submarines were relieved much more frequently than were surface ships—if not due to the condition of the submarines then for the sake of the worn-out crews. By 1973, however, Northern Fleet SSGNs (nuclear-powered cruise-missile submarines) were being deployed to the Mediterranean for up to thirteen months at a time. The only permanent deployments

in the Mediterranean were of the *eskadra's* commander and staff, embarked on one or another of the larger cruisers.⁵⁰

Air Cover. Soviet Air Force flights into the Mediterranean were effectively blocked by NATO air defenses in Turkey and Greece.⁵¹ Even in the period of short-lived access to Egyptian airfields at Aswan and Cairo-West—used by the Soviets to deter Israeli advances during the War of Attrition (1967–70) and to fly reconnaissance missions against the Sixth Fleet—the prospect of achieving air superiority was virtually nonexistent.

After 1967, the Mediterranean became the first theater for Soviet sea-based aviation, on a limited basis. Considerable investment was initiated after the 1963 deployment of Polaris submarines in the Mediterranean to put the USSR on the same footing as the West in antisubmarine warfare. The cruiser *Moskva* (pr. 1123) was the first large ship to emerge from the program, and it drew much attention from the United States upon its deployment to the Mediterranean in 1967. Although its design was unambiguously that of a helicopter carrier, the Soviets designated it a “large antisubmarine ship,” thereby evading the capital-ship clause of the Montreux Convention and enabling it to deploy from the Black Sea.⁵²

This experiment in naval aviation, however innovative, was never intended to offset U.S. air superiority. The Ka-25 helicopter, of which the *Moskva* and its sister ship *Leningrad* could accommodate a maximum of eighteen each, was slower and of shorter range and endurance than its U.S. counterparts, and an easy target for NATO fighters. One hypothesis is that the *Moskva* had been originally designed to extend the range of shore-based ASW helicopters engaged in anti-Polaris operations in the Barents Sea. In the Mediterranean, however, without proper support facilities, the ship proved ineffective, “far too small and vulnerable for operating . . . on the far side of the Straits.”⁵³ The many deficiencies in the *Moskva's* design—ranging from inadequate length and poor seakeeping characteristics in rough weather to an aircraft complement too small for its intended ASW purpose—accelerated the ship's replacement by the first full-size Soviet carrier, the *Kiev* (pr. 1143), which first operated in the Mediterranean in 1976.⁵⁴



A Juliett-class submarine being repaired at sea

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THE FIFTH ESKADRA, 1967–1973

The Fifth Eskadra's first Deputy Chief for the Southern Theater of Operations, Captain First Rank Georgii G. Kostev, notes that the Mediterranean squadron was "perhaps the most unusual formation of the Soviet Navy in the postwar period."⁵⁵ According to Kostev, it was created in 1967 to counter the United States in an area of vital American interests, specifically in response to an upsurge in U.S. and NATO maritime activity in the region after the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War.⁵⁶ The core elements of the squadron's mission were surveillance of the Sixth Fleet in the areas of its activity, constant shadowing of U.S. carriers, detection of American ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN) deployments, assessment of the threat posed to the continental USSR by American SSBNs, and the disruption of U.S. sea control.⁵⁷

Because of the operational organization of the opposing Sixth Fleet and the sheer size of the operating area, the Mediterranean Theater of Military Operations (TVDO) was divided into three zones—Eastern, Central, and Western. To serve the tactical objectives of the squadron, six task forces (OSs) were created within it. OS-50 consisted of the flagship and its escort vessels; it had no fixed operating area. OS-51 comprised submarines (an average daily strength of six to eight units) pursuing U.S. SSBNs, usually in the Western and Central zones. OS-52 was made up of surface ships armed with surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) tailing U.S. carriers from the points of entry to the Central and Eastern zones. OS-53 contained antisubmarine vessels, such as the *Moskva*, operating in the Western and Central zones with the support of aircraft and submarines. OS-54 was an amphibious task force, consisting of two or three landing ships and an escort ship, generally based in Port Said. OS-55 consisted of auxiliary vessels, tankers, floating repair facilities, and other support ships.⁵⁸

THE LIBYAN COUP D'ETAT, 1969

An episode in September 1969 offers a telling example of the Fifth Eskadra's expanding capabilities. Increased access to local port facilities after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War afforded the Soviets the option of conducting extensive exercises at sea, using a greater number and variety of forces than ever before. One set of such exercises, begun in mid-August 1969, saw the number of Soviet warships in the Mediterranean swell to over seventy;⁵⁹ this figure included twenty-seven surface combatants at the exercises' peak.⁶⁰ During the coup of 1 September of that year in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, in which King Idris's government was ousted by a group of young officers led by Muammar Qaddafi, the heavy local presence of Soviet warships may well have been a crucial, if serendipitous, deterrent to U.S. and British intervention.

Although on the eve of the coup Washington did not see the existence of Wheelus Air Base, just east of Tripoli, as creating a de facto commitment, to the Libyan state—the United States, unlike the United Kingdom, had no defense pact with the Libyan monarchy—a British intervention was a serious possibility.⁶¹ King Idris indeed appealed for U.S. and British assistance during the crisis, but any commitments notwithstanding, no Anglo-American intervention took place.⁶²

Semenov recalls that in July 1969 the SSM-equipped cruiser *Groznyi* (Kynnda class/pr. 58) and the surface-to-air missile (SAM) destroyer *Bedovyi* (Kildin class/pr. 56E) left Sevastopol for a port visit to Cuba. In early August the group was returning to the Mediterranean with the tanker *Lena*. Meanwhile, several groups of Black Sea Fleet ships from Sevastopol had entered the Mediterranean: the *Moskva*, the SAM light cruiser *Dzerzhinskii* (*Sverdlov* class/pr. 70E), four large submarine chasers, four destroyers, three escort vessels, three large amphibious ships, and three medium amphibious ships with naval infantry onboard.⁶³

On 13 August the *Dzerzhinskii*, flying the flag of Admiral V. S. Sysoev, led the SAM destroyers *Reshitel'nyi* (Kashin class/pr. 61) and *Nakhodchivyi* (Kotlin class/pr. 56) out of Varna, Bulgaria, where they had helped commemorate Bulgarian Navy Day. The group proceeded into the Mediterranean to participate in a training exercise code-named BRONYA.⁶⁴

In early September, a series of Soviet-Egyptian-Syrian naval exercises commenced, involving an amphibious landing on the Egyptian coast twenty miles southwest of Alexandria. During the mock assault over a hundred warships from the three states formed a 210-mile protective screen from the Gulf of Sollum (seventy miles east of British tank bases at Tobruk and Al Adem) to eastern Crete.⁶⁵ By the end of the month, over forty Soviet vessels had concentrated in the extreme southern part of the Ionian Sea off the coast of Libya; they included the group that had returned from the Caribbean.⁶⁶ Many of the units outside the screen were concentrated between Sicily and Tripoli.

The British bases at Tobruk (which was also the site of an airfield) and Al Adem were of most concern to the Libyan coup plotters, since the British kept the tanks in a state of operational readiness, needing only to fly in crews from Cyprus. It is plausible that the need to overfly Soviet SAM-equipped ships to reach Tobruk made any decisive move against Qaddafi's men unattractive to Britain. London announced on 5 September—after the old regime had collapsed—that the United Kingdom had no intention of intervening.⁶⁷

American freedom of action may also have been affected by the Soviet presence. After 1 September, Semenov asserts, the USS *John F. Kennedy* (CVA 67) carrier battle group left port at Cannes and began a passage through the Tyrrhenian Sea at high speed to the Straits of Messina. The Sixth Fleet flagship, the cruiser

USS *Little Rock* (CLG 4), and its escorts departed from the Italian port of Gaeta around the same time and on 5 September entered the Ionian Sea on a course to Tripoli.⁶⁸

The U.S. carrier groups were met by four cruisers (*Moskva*, *Dzerzhinskii*, *Groznyi*, the gun-armed light cruiser *Mikhail Kutuzov* [Sverdlov class/pr. 68-A]), three SAM destroyers (*Bravyi* [converted Kotlin class], *Bedovyi*, *Boikii* [Krupnyi class/pr. 57bis]), three SAM destroyers (*Reshitel'nyi*, *Soobrazitel'nyi*, and *Krasnyi Kavkaz* [all Kashin class]), four gun destroyers (*Nakhodchivyi*, *Blagorodnyi* [both Kotlin class], *Sereznyi*, and *Sovershennyi* [both Skoryi class/pr. 30bis]), six escort vessels, six SSGs (conventionally powered cruise-missile submarines of



A November-class submarine during Soviet naval exercises

the Juliett class/pr. 651), and one SSN (nuclear-powered attack submarine of the November class/pr. 627A). To the east of these forces was the amphibious force, which now included two large amphibious ships, five medium amphibious ships with naval infantry and their equipment on board, minesweepers, and support vessels.⁶⁹ According to a Center for Naval Analyses study, “The exercise schedule thus put the Soviets into a good position to counter . . . the Sixth Fleet coming from the west.”⁷⁰

This is not to suggest that the Soviets planned the exercises to coincide with the coup; the contrary is generally believed to have been the case. However, the episode revealed much about the developing operations of the Fifth Eskadra. In this case, the force may have effectively, though perhaps inadvertently, neutralized British and American options for intervention.⁷¹

THE JORDANIAN CRISIS, 1970

An equally significant, if less impressive, Soviet show of force occurred at the time of the 1970 Jordanian crisis. On 9 September 1970, after members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine flew two hijacked commercial aircraft to a dirt runway near Amman, Jordan, President Richard Nixon ordered the USS *Independence* (CVA 62) carrier task group to a position off Lebanon, to await further instructions. Meanwhile, as the Kremlin urged the White House to

exercise caution, Fifth Eskadra warships positioned themselves among the U.S. carrier task forces as well as between the American ships and the coast.⁷²

On 17 September, Jordan's King Hussein ordered his army to move against Palestinian terrorist camps throughout the country. Two more U.S. carrier groups were then ordered to the region to support the Jordanian army—USS *Saratoga* (CVA 60) headed east from Malta, and the *John F. Kennedy* set sail across the Atlantic—while the Sixth Fleet's amphibious element, Task Force 61 (consisting of a helicopter carrier and landing ships), left Crete for the Lebanese littoral.⁷³

Disregarding a direct warning from Nixon against such an action, Syria began moving forces into Jordan on 20 September in support of the Palestinians. As preparations for U.S. intervention appeared to be under way, the Soviets took a more aggressive approach to naval diplomacy. The Fifth Eskadra, increased from forty-seven to sixty ships, took up battle positions and ran missiles onto launcher rails in plain view of U.S. forces;⁷⁴ its fire-control radars began tracking American aircraft.⁷⁵ At one point, seven SSM-equipped Soviet ships were within striking range of the U.S. carriers.⁷⁶ In response, Sixth Fleet escorts armed with rapid-fire guns were given orders to trail the Soviet ships so as to, if need be, destroy most of the cruise missiles before they could be launched.⁷⁷ Fortunately, developments on the ground obviated the need for superpower intervention; in two days' time, the Syrians lost 120 tanks to Jordanian artillery and to mechanical malfunction and were forced to withdraw.⁷⁸

The ability of the Fifth Eskadra to maintain a deterrent capability during the Jordanian crisis was relatively modest, however, compared to the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War. There were several debilitating factors at play, from the Kremlin's point of view. The crisis coincided with the death, on 20 September, of Nasser, Moscow's main patron in the region. Although Egyptian-Soviet relations remained essentially unaffected at first, this event introduced a degree of uncertainty concerning the effect Soviet action could have on the region.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the Soviets were undoubtedly shocked at the rapid losses of Soviet-supplied tanks and at the failure of the Syrian army (trained by Soviet advisers) to mount a substantial challenge to Jordanian forces. Under such conditions, it is likely that Moscow simply preferred a quick, clean end to the conflict, without superpower entanglement.

Washington, for its part, had its own reasons for shock. U.S. forces had proved, in the later recollection of the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, "so far from [formidable] that the [Joint] Chiefs [of Staff (JCS)] and [Deputy] Secretary [of Defense David] Packard expressed repeated concern about the inadequacy of U.S. naval capability in the Eastern Mediterranean."⁸⁰ The chairman of the JCS, Admiral Thomas Moorer, had reported on 9 September that in their

current state of readiness, U.S. forces would have very little staying power in the Middle East. He argued that in view of the difficulty of reinforcing from Southeast Asia, where most American forces were then concentrated, “the United States should make every effort not to become involved in large-scale military action.”⁸¹ The Jordanian crisis thus afforded Moscow a key lesson—that the U.S. military was stretched thin in the Middle East.

EXERCISES BEFORE THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

The Fifth Eskadra’s activities before the October 1973 war centered largely on reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, and antiaircraft warfare (AAW) exercises. Because of their lack of carrier aviation and nearby airfields, the Soviets stood at a critical disadvantage with regard to air operations in the Mediterranean. With the expulsion of Soviet Air Force personnel from Egypt in July 1972 (a result of a row over Soviet foot-dragging on arms deliveries—an upshot of *détente*), the Fifth Eskadra lost much of its reconnaissance capability in the Mediterranean.

Largely due to unrivaled U.S. air superiority in the region, first-strike was given special importance in the 1973 exercises, reflecting the Soviet “battle of the first salvo” doctrine. In his 8 January 1973 journal entry, Semenov writes of an officers’ briefing on anticarrier warfare: “Ship attack groups need to use all weaponry for assaults on aerial attack groups: missiles, artillery, torpedoes, jet-propelled rockets—the whole lot! [—] since it is unlikely that anything will remain afloat after an air strike. We are kamikazes.”⁸² A retired Soviet submarine officer recalls the doctrine in similar terms: “Of course, it was assumed that we would be fighting for the ‘first salvo.’ This was very important, to be the first to deliver the blow, before the other side could send its aviation into the air. It’s difficult for me to judge whether we could have delivered the first blow or not, but we were ready for it.”⁸³

Semenov recalls debates on 26 February 1973 concerning antiaircraft and anticarrier tactics, especially over methods of surveillance by various ship-attack groups (surface ships and submarines) and the organization of strikes on U.S. forces. The *eskadra* was actively exploring ways to adapt to the Sixth Fleet’s tendency to use island regions, extend detachments out as far as fifteen miles, and constantly shift the composition of its contingents.⁸⁴

Problems with relaying intelligence to Soviet cruise missile-carrying and other submarines were also of great concern, largely prompted by embarrassing episodes on 11 January in which U.S. ships forced a Soviet diesel submarine south of Crete to the surface and aggressively pursued another in the Gulf of Sidra. According to Semenov, in both instances the crews had followed the General Staff’s commands precisely but in the end had cruised straight into the “mouth of the enemy.”⁸⁵ Other problems with communications had similarly embarrassing results;

discrepancies in the fleet's surveillance and intelligence communications frequently led to "blind" sorties. Semenov recalled that two medium-sized vessels had recently been sent to the Spanish coast for no apparent reason.⁸⁶

There were also significant tensions between Fifth Eskadra officers and the Black Sea Fleet command in Sevastopol. Fifth Eskadra commander Admiral Yevgenii Volobuyev was for some time unsure how to address a perceived shortage of ships in the Mediterranean. To appeal to Sevastopol for more would likely have led to a confrontation, since Black Sea Fleet commanders did not appreciate being corrected by subordinates.⁸⁷ Moscow's insistence on the use of diesel submarines was also a point of dispute; Fifth Eskadra commanders found them ineffective in areas where the enemy had control of the air.⁸⁸ The Sixth Fleet had proven highly proficient at spotting Soviet submarines, and the need of diesel boats to surface at regular intervals to recharge batteries made stealth difficult. Nevertheless, naval headquarters did not entertain assertions that the diesel submarines were obsolete and stood firm on the boats' continued utility.⁸⁹

Fifth Eskadra surveillance activities in this period were highly focused, as they would be during the war, on U.S. carrier task groups. Soviet destroyers shadowed the USS *Forrestal* (CVA 59) in mid-January 1973 in the area of Thessaloniki, Greece.⁹⁰ Fifth Eskadra warships conducted surveillance, and analysis of extensive NATO exercises (involving the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Turkey) that took place across the Mediterranean on 21 February.⁹¹ Semenov asserts that helicopters launched from the *Moskva*, with assistance from the ASW cruiser *Nikolayev* (Kara class/pr. 1134B) and the destroyer *Komsomolets Ukrainy* (Kashin class), surveilled and pursued American SSBNs in the Tyrrhenian Sea on 5–6 April.⁹² A massive search operation for U.S. forces was launched in the eastern Mediterranean on 9 May during clashes between Lebanese forces and Palestinian guerillas. The operation involved several cruisers, destroyers, large and medium amphibious ships, minesweepers, monitors, gunboats, and other ships; it stopped when the Soviets became convinced that the Sixth Fleet was not planning to intervene ashore.⁹³ According to Semenov, Operation NAKAT, also launched on 9 May, involved surveillance of U.S. ballistic missile-carrying submarines from their departure from their base at Rota, Spain.⁹⁴ Sea-based helicopters undertook another intensive ASW operation on 14 May, searching for the USS *George Marshall* (SSBN 654) in the area of Sicily.⁹⁵ The carrier *Independence* was also shadowed by a Fifth Eskadra battle group starting on 29 June, when it left Cadiz.⁹⁶

WAR

Egypt's decision to go to war with Israel was made by President Anwar Sadat and his Syrian counterpart Hafez al-Assad in the summer of 1973. The planned date of

attack was kept from the Kremlin until 4 October, two days before the outbreak of hostilities.⁹⁷ On that day Leonid Brezhnev sent a message to Sadat stating that the decision to fight must be the Arabs' alone, although Egypt could rely on Soviet support. Brezhnev's only request was that Soviet civilians be allowed to evacuate.⁹⁸

At this time, the Fifth Eskadra consisted of fifty-two ships, including eleven submarines (at least two of them equipped with nuclear-tipped cruise missiles), three cruisers (two with guided missiles), six guided-missile and conventional destroyers, five frigates, two minesweepers, and two amphibious ships.⁹⁹ The flagship *Volga* (an Ugra-class submarine tender, project 1886) was in the vicinity of the Balearic Islands east of Spain, when Admiral Volobuyev learned of the imminence of war. Around 0100 (1 AM local time) on 4 October, he ordered a mass redeployment to the Egyptian and Syrian coasts to evacuate Soviet families from the war zone to a point south of Crete, where they would be transferred to transport vessels. Although efficient, the evacuation effort was somewhat draining for the Fifth Eskadra; its captains were eager to be relieved of their passengers so as to concentrate on raising their level of battle readiness.¹⁰⁰

Other Soviet combatants were redirected to the war zone. A former submarine officer recalls the revision of his ship's orders:

In October 1973, when we were already preparing to leave our area of operations . . . in the Ionian Sea, we received a radio transmission, saying that the sub, in connection with the deteriorating situation in the Middle East, must extend its tour of duty in the Mediterranean by ten days. After this, our boat was redirected east, near the coast of Egypt. Of course, we were very disappointed, and no one hid this. To us, these "unplanned" ten days would last longer than all other active duty combined. However, no one lost their heart. We were all young.¹⁰¹

On the following day, 5 October, a guided missile destroyer, four submarines, and an auxiliary ship arrived in the Mediterranean, seemingly to relieve previously deployed Soviet forces. However, no detachment occurred; the six ships thus augmented the size of the Fifth Eskadra to fifty-eight vessels.¹⁰²

Phase 1

The first phase of the Yom Kippur War—spanning from the outbreak of hostilities on 6 October to the beginning of the U.S. airlift to Israel on 13 October—saw relatively little tension between the Sixth Fleet and the Fifth Eskadra. Despite their augmented numbers, Soviet forces mostly continued normal peacetime operations.¹⁰³ Liberty ashore was canceled for the Sixth Fleet, but the U.S. Navy announced that no American ships had been ordered to the conflict area.¹⁰⁴

On 6 October, there were forty-eight U.S. warships in the Mediterranean. The force consisted of its flagship USS *Mount Whitney* (LCC 20), at sea south of Crete, four SSNs on patrol in the Mediterranean, and Task Forces (TFs) 60 and

61.¹⁰⁵ Task Group (TG) 60.1 consisted of the *Independence* and its group, then in Athens; the USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVA 42) group, then in various Spanish ports, made up TG 60.2. TF 61, the amphibious force, at this point included the helicopter carrier USS *Guadalcanal* (LPH 7) and nine other amphibious ships, carrying a Marine battalion landing team (about three thousand men).¹⁰⁶

The Fifth Eskadra then included eleven submarines, one SSM cruiser (Kynda class/pr. 58), one gun cruiser (*Sverdlov* class), five SAM destroyers (three Kashin class and two converted Kotlin class), two gun destroyers (Kotlin class), nine frigates and corvettes (Petya class/pr. 159, Mirka class/pr. 35, and Riga class/pr. 50), two medium landing ships (Polnocny B class/pr. 771), two minesweepers, and several auxiliary vessels. Altogether, the Soviet forces were then capable of launching twenty SSMs in their first salvo.¹⁰⁷

The staff aboard the flagship *Volga* was already on edge. Many of its officers were standing watches “port and starboard”—even the chief of staff, Aleksandr Ushakov, who was relieved by Semenov at night. Semenov’s diary notes that the life of the staff became one of “wild, frantic work! Aleksandr Petrovich Ushakov turned out to be a very emotional person, like the commander [Volobuyev]. They go berserk in concert. What’s good for the ship (emotion), is not what suits the staff. . . . The mind of a staff officer works better under calm circumstances.”¹⁰⁸

Although the October war has been typically characterized as one initiated by a surprise attack by Egypt and Syria, Semenov contends that the element of surprise was in fact lacking. According to his account, Israeli forces in the Suez Canal area were placed on alert as early as 1 October, and a partial Israeli mobilization began on 4 October.¹⁰⁹ Full mobilization of Israeli forces took place at 1000 (10 AM) on 6 October in anticipation of imminent attack.¹¹⁰ Semenov argues that this apparent Israeli foreknowledge forced the Arabs to launch their attack earlier than intended.¹¹¹ Egyptian and Syrian forces began their respective advances over the Suez Canal and into the Golan Heights at 1430 (2:30 PM), after bombarding Israeli airfields and communications facilities.¹¹² The *Independence* group left Athens the following day for an area south of Crete, trailed by a Soviet destroyer.¹¹³

By 8 October Egyptian forces had captured two beachheads eight to ten kilometers deep on the east bank of the Suez Canal; the Syrians halted their advance after moving seven to ten kilometers forward on the Golan Heights.¹¹⁴ Subsequently, Israel counterattacked on both fronts. Meanwhile, *Independence* joined *Mount Whitney* south of Crete, while TF 61 was ordered to Souda Bay (on the northern coast of Crete), where it would remain at anchor until 25 October.¹¹⁵

On 9 October, thanks to extended deployments, the Fifth Eskadra’s submarine force numbered sixteen boats, including at least four SSNs (probably November class).¹¹⁶ By this date, the evacuation effort was all but complete.¹¹⁷ On 10

October, the Soviet surface combatant force strength in the region was twenty-one ships, including three cruisers and nine destroyers, many equipped with missiles, and two amphibious ships. The combatants were positioning themselves near Sixth Fleet ships in the eastern Mediterranean, where the Soviet Navy was already well on its way to achieving effective sea denial.¹¹⁸

Moscow began sending equipment and supplies to Syria and Egypt on 9 October.¹¹⁹ Soviet and Eastern European merchant ships and Soviet amphibious ships conducted the sealift, while the airlift—Turkey having granted Moscow permission to overfly its territory for resupply, in protest against U.S. support for Israel—was taken on by Soviet military transports and civilian aircraft.¹²⁰ The transports were loaded in Black Sea ports with up to ninety tanks each, as well as armored vehicles, and other heavy equipment. The need to guard these transports accounted for much of the Soviet naval buildup in the Mediterranean. For that mission a special group of up to ten destroyers was formed, under

Captain First Rank N. Ya. Yasakov (commander of the 70th Warship Brigade in the Black Sea Fleet). The magnitude of the escort forces was dictated by reports of recent attacks on Syrian ports by Israeli jets and missile boats.¹²¹

As resupply efforts began, the flagship *Volga*, the SSM cruiser *Groznyi*, and the SAM destroyers *Krasnyi Kavkaz*, *Provornyi*, and *Skoryi* (all Kashin class) began tailing the U.S. carrier groups south of Crete.¹²² In response, three more escort ships joined the *Independence* carrier task group.¹²³ Almost simultaneously, Soviet intelligence collection ships (AGIs) began monitoring the U.S. amphibious task group at Souda Bay, remaining there until the 25th.¹²⁴ In effect, Moscow was sending Washington a signal that interference with its resupply operations would be met with force.

October 1973	
6th	Egypt and Syria launch offensives in Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights, respectively. The Yom Kippur War begins.
8th	Egyptian forces capture two beachheads on east bank of Suez Canal. Syrian forces halt advance after having moved 10 km into Golan Heights. Israel counterattacks on both fronts.
9th	Soviet Union resupply effort to Egypt and Syria begins.
10th	Israel drives Syrian forces from Golan Heights but suffers defeat in Sinai.
11th	Israeli missile boats sink Soviet merchant vessel <i>Ilya Mechnikov</i> during raid on Syrian port of Tartus. Moscow responds by deploying pair of destroyers off Syrian coast.
13th	U.S. airlift to Israel begins.
17th	Israeli armored units cross Suez Canal.
22d	United Nations Security Council Resolution 388 passes, stipulating end to hostilities within 12 hours. Commander of encircled Egyptian 3d Army disobeys cease-fire and tries to break free. Israel advances on Suez City.
24th	Brezhnev sends direct message to Nixon, threatening unilateral intervention to enforce cease-fire. Washington moves to DefCon 3.
25th	Israel halts advance on Egyptian front, putting an end to ground hostilities.
26th	Soviet Union launches intense anticarrier exercises against Sixth Fleet carrier and amphibious task groups.
30th	Washington grants freedom of maneuver to Sixth Fleet task groups.
November 1973	
19th	Sixth Fleet taken off alert and returns to “normal training condition” status.

At this time, and until the very end of the episode, the American task groups were especially vulnerable to Soviet cruise-missile attack because Washington had denied them freedom of maneuver. The carriers were to stay in a defined area south of Crete, in order to signal U.S. concern and interdict a potential airlift of Soviet troops to Egypt. However, this strategy backfired to some extent, by greatly simplifying the targeting problem for the Fifth Eskadra.¹²⁵ “So far we’ve been in luck—good weather . . . and the Americans are maneuvering in one region at slow speeds,” writes Semenov in one journal entry.¹²⁶

Volobuyev very much wanted to keep the Sixth Fleet uneasy as the two forces became more tightly coupled. One of his methods was to convey an exaggerated impression of the Soviet submarine threat to the carriers. Semenov recalls an interesting ruse: “[U.S.] Airplanes and helicopters are flying nonstop, looking for our subs. We dropped a grenade, as if for communication with our sub, and again the intensity of the flights rose.”¹²⁷ “Let them be nervous,” said Volobuyev.¹²⁸

The Soviet submarine forces were, in part, actually deployed as follows. An Echo II SSGN (pr. 675) and a Juliett SSG were maneuvering west and south of the Sixth Fleet task groups near Crete, while a November SSN was to the east. More Soviet submarines were being sent to the region from the Atlantic and the western Mediterranean.¹²⁹ One Soviet submarine officer aboard a Charlie-class SSGN (pr. 670) in the October crisis, recalls:

During the events of 1973, our submarine carried out its service for some time in the vicinity of the Sidra Gulf, by the Libyan coast. Here, a group of U.S. Navy antisubmarine ships, evidently acting on some intelligence, or maybe simply presuming that there might be a Soviet submarine about, was vigorously carrying out a search operation for two days. However, we gathered the impression that the ships achieved no success. Nothing suggested that our boat had been discovered, even though we were thoroughly listening to their hydroacoustic transmissions and sometimes the hum of the ships’ propellers.¹³⁰

On 10 October, the Fifth Eskadra’s surface force was also augmented by a Black Sea Fleet group consisting of the gun cruiser *Admiral Ushakov* (Sverdlov class), flying the flag of Rear Admiral L. Ya. Basyukov, and the SAM destroyers *Soznatelny* (Kotlin) and *Otvazhnyi* (Kashin).¹³¹

The following day, the Fifth Eskadra was drawn more directly into the conflict. During an attack on the Syrian port of Tartus on the night of 11 October, Israel inadvertently sank the Soviet merchant ship *Ilya Mechnikov*, which had arrived before the resupply operations began.¹³² Israeli officials expressed regret, explaining that the merchant ship had not been the intended target, but rather two Syrian naval craft, which had been sunk as well. A similar incident had

happened the previous day at the Syrian port of Latakia, where Israeli antiship missiles sank a Japanese and a Greek freighter during a strike against Syrian missile ships maneuvering among civilian vessels.¹³³ Nevertheless, Moscow was reluctant to accept the Israeli apology. The Soviet ambassador to Washington, Anatolii Dobrynin, delivered a message from the Kremlin protesting the attack, as well as recent deployments of U.S. ships to the eastern Mediterranean. The latter complaint was likely a reference to the *John F. Kennedy* task group, which had been ordered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 11 October to leave Scotland, and which, as Henry Kissinger had hinted to the Israeli ambassador on the 12th, would shortly arrive in the Mediterranean.¹³⁴

For its part, on 11 October Moscow placed three Soviet airborne divisions on alert.¹³⁵ Two days later it also stationed a destroyer off the Syrian coast to guard supply transports.¹³⁶ By that time Israel had halted its counteroffensive on the Syrian front and had consolidated defensive positions.¹³⁷ On 14 October, the Soviet Navy authorized captains of individual warships in the Mediterranean to open fire as necessary on Israeli and other planes and naval combatants should they threaten Soviet convoys and transports.¹³⁸

Phase 2

The second phase of the conflict—which was to end with the cessation of major ground hostilities on 25 October—began on 13 October, when the U.S. Military Airlift Command initiated the delivery of high-priority munitions to Israel.¹³⁹ The resupply mission was not an easy one; virtually all NATO nations had refused to allow the jets to refuel at their bases, with the exception of Portugal, which permitted the United States to use the Azores.¹⁴⁰ The Sixth Fleet was ordered to support the C-5 and C-141 transports flying to Israel with navigation, surveillance, air defense, and search and rescue. The carrier groups south of Crete lost many of their escorts to that effort, leaving them even more vulnerable to Soviet antiship missiles.¹⁴¹ The *John F. Kennedy* group's passage into the Mediterranean was also delayed; the carrier was sent instead to a point west of Gibraltar to support the airlift.¹⁴² At the same time, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered the helicopter carrier *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2), carrying a two-thousand-man battalion landing team, to deploy to the Mediterranean.¹⁴³ This last decision was a precaution against a potential Soviet troop landing, which the growing Fifth Eskadra force—sixty-nine ships as of 14 October—seemed increasingly capable of supporting. Soviet submarines deployed to the Atlantic were ordered to the vicinity of the Gibraltar Strait to await the U.S. reinforcements.¹⁴⁴

On 15 October, Israel launched a full-scale counterattack in the Sinai, having on the previous day crushed an Egyptian offensive aimed at relieving Israeli pressure on Syria.¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Soviet involvement in the crisis had begun to

intensify, as a second destroyer was deployed just off the Syrian coast and Soviet submarines began to monitor activities near Israeli ports.¹⁴⁶

There were several recorded instances in which Soviet surface ships engaged in limited combat operations against Israeli forces. In one such case, the Black Sea Fleet minesweeper *Rulevoi* (Natya class/pr. 266), under Senior Lieutenant P. Kozitsyn, and the medium landing ship *SDK-137* (Polnocny B class/pr. 771), under Lieutenant Captain L. Lisitsyn, guarding Soviet civilian transport ships at Latakia, fired upon approaching Israeli jets on 16 October.¹⁴⁷

While the Israeli jets had certainly been fired upon in self-defense, Soviet commanders were undoubtedly aware of the risks involved. The restraint with which Soviets traditionally approached direct involvement in local conflicts in the détente era seems to have been at least partially suspended.¹⁴⁸ The root of the danger was that the tactical situation on the ground and at sea was beyond the control of the superpowers—the Soviets were responding to threats to their own ships posed by warring third parties, not by American forces. The imperative to avoid conflict with the United States, however keenly appreciated by Soviet strategists, may have been a remote concern to individual ship captains threatened by imminent strikes from Israeli missiles. The pace was intensifying, as Semenov's 19 October journal entry makes clear: "Over the last few days, the situation has become so complicated, that it seemed we were just on the verge of becoming engaged in war."¹⁴⁹

On 16 October, the cruiser *Murmansk* (Sverdlov class) and the destroyer *Naporistyi* (Kotlin class/pr. 56PLO), both armed with guns only, replaced the SSM-equipped cruiser *Groznyi* and a Kashin-class SAM destroyer trailing the *Independence* south of Crete.¹⁵⁰ Although the effect was to reduce the immediate threat to the carrier, the rotation was conducted more for logistical reasons than for diplomacy. Unable to replenish under way, the *Groznyi* and its escort had been forced to proceed to an anchorage at "Point 15" (east of Crete) to refuel from five support vessels.¹⁵¹ Semenov complained to his diary, "American ships are all supplied by the giant *Sacramento* [AOE 1, first of the world's largest class of combat logistics ship]. Our planning is the apex of inventiveness and an overload of communications. Our vessels are not fit for the transfer of cargo at sea—they are transporters of cargo from port to port! With envy I look upon the [Americans'] giant floating warehouse!"¹⁵²

As Israeli armored units crossed the Suez Canal on 17 October, preliminary plans for a limited "demonstration" landing of Soviet naval infantry on the west bank of the canal were drafted.¹⁵³ Such an operation would not have been entirely unprecedented—Captain First Rank V. I. Popov recalls that such a landing had occurred in January 1968, in response to an Israeli attempt to secure the entrance to the Suez Canal.¹⁵⁴

A landing operation now would have been the same kind of a muscle-flexing show of force as had occurred in the War of Attrition, but Moscow was probably not contemplating direct intervention in the Yom Kippur War at this particular point. Captain First Rank Vladimir Zaborskii, writing in 1999, notes that in 1973 logistics stood in the way of an amphibious landing. The bulk of the naval infantry force was still in Sevastopol preparing for deployment into the Mediterranean. One large and six medium landing ships were already in the region, but they were all being used for equipment transport.¹⁵⁵ Subsequently, the commander in chief of the Soviet Navy, Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, ordered the already deployed landing ships to be used for troop transport and a landing force to be assembled of “volunteers” from the crews of all combatant and auxiliary ships. According to Semenov, there was no shortage of volunteers; some thousand men signed up to fight Israeli forces on the ground.¹⁵⁶ However, this resort to volunteers is a sign that the *eskadra* was to some extent in over its head.

On 19 October, a semaphore message was sent from the commander of the Sixth Fleet, Admiral Daniel Murphy, to Admiral Volobuyev asking that the Soviet forces comply with the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement and not aim their guns and missiles at U.S. Navy ships.¹⁵⁷ The Fifth Eskadra staff was convinced that U.S. jets and helicopters were in equal breach of the accord, but the Soviet Foreign Ministry had received an official complaint from the U.S. State Department, and the Mediterranean squadron was given orders from the chief of the General Naval Staff to comply more closely with the agreement.¹⁵⁸ This readjustment in Soviet disposition and tactics was, however, short-lived.

By this time, Arab defeat was a foregone conclusion. On 19 October and again on the 21st, Sadat appealed to the USSR to take immediate measures to broker a cease-fire.¹⁵⁹ The UN Security Council passed Resolution 388 on 22 October, stipulating an end to all military action within twelve hours.¹⁶⁰ The cease-fire was welcomed by the warring parties, and on the Syrian front it held. However, fighting continued on the east bank of the Suez Canal, where the commander of the Egyptian Third Army—completely encircled by Israeli forces—ignored orders from Cairo and made repeated attempts to break free.¹⁶¹ Israel immediately took advantage of the broken cease-fire to continue its operations against the beleaguered units and advance on Suez City.¹⁶²

Phase 3

The third and perhaps the most dangerous phase of the war began during the final hours of combat ashore and persisted, largely out of the public eye, for another week. A second UN cease-fire went into effect on 24 October but also failed to stop fighting on the Egyptian front, where Israel continued its assault on the encircled Third Army.¹⁶³

Brezhnev now responded to continued Egyptian pleas for help by sending a direct message to Nixon, stressing Israel's violation of Security Council Resolution 388 and proposing a joint U.S. and Soviet peacekeeping effort to man the cease-fire lines (as had been requested by Cairo). If Washington rejected the proposal, Brezhnev continued, the Soviet Union would have to consider unilateral intervention.¹⁶⁴

The message was especially disquieting to Washington in light of increasing Soviet activity in the Mediterranean. The number of Soviet ships there was now eighty-eight, forty-seven of them combatants, including thirty-one surface ships and over twenty submarines (four or five armed with surface-to-surface missiles).¹⁶⁵ Altogether, the force was capable of launching at least forty SSMs in an opening salvo.¹⁶⁶

In an alarming development, on the day of Brezhnev's note to Nixon, a Soviet surface group was sent to Port Said.¹⁶⁷ It consisted of the *Admiral Ushakov*, the SAM destroyer *Otvazhnyi*, the SAM destroyers *Neulovimyi* (Kildin) and



View from the cruiser *Zhdanov*, being refuelled in the Mediterranean, 1973

Soznatelnyi (Kotlin), the frigate *Voron* (Riga class/pr. 50), the tank landing ship *Voronezhskii Komsomolets* (Alligator class/pr. 1171), and the medium landing ships *SDK-83* and *SDK-164* (Polnocny B class), the latter three possibly carrying the “volunteer” marine force ordered by Gorshkov. Semenov remarked in his journal, “Seems we’re going to save Port Said from Israel.”¹⁶⁸

Even more ominously, Soviet airborne troops were placed on alert—seven divisions consisting of fifty thousand frontline troops and a hundred thousand support troops, a force outnumbering the U.S. Marine contingent in the Mediterranean.¹⁶⁹ Soviet pilots were also reported to be flying Foxbat/MiG-25 aircraft from Egyptian airfields in reconnaissance missions over the battlefield.¹⁷⁰

Predicting that the Sixth Fleet might consider preemptive action to prevent a Soviet intervention, Volobuyev reinforced the Soviet anticarrier groups south of Crete with SSM-equipped ships. The *Groznyi*, escorted by the *Provornyi* and the gun destroyer *Plamennyi* (Kotlin) joined the gun-only ships already stalking the *Independence*—the *Volga*, *Naporistyi*, and *Murmansk*.¹⁷¹ This move would also

screen a potential Soviet airlift, as the *Independence* was then astride Soviet air routes to Egypt.¹⁷²

The Soviet force around Crete now included two gun cruisers (*Murmansk* and *Admiral Ushakov*), eight SAM Kashin and modified Kotlin destroyers (*Krasnyi Kavkaz*, *Krasnyi Krym*, *Provornyi*, *Reshitel'nyi*, *Smetlivyi*, *Obraztsovyi*, *Nakhodchivyi*, and *Soznatelnyi*), and two Kotlin gun destroyers (*Plamennyi* and *Speshnyi*). The amphibious forces maneuvering north of Port Said included four large Alligator-class landing ships, *Voronezhskii Komsomolets*, *Krymskii Komsomolets*, *Krasnaya Pesnya*, and *BDK-104*, five medium landing ships with naval infantry on board, the SAM destroyer *Otvazhnyi*, and several gun destroyers, including *Naporistyi*. The escort ships *Voron*, *Kunitsa*, and *SKR-77* (all Riga class) were in the same zone, as were two minesweepers.¹⁷³

More ships were on their way. A large cruiser—most likely *Moskva*—and six destroyers were declared through the Dardanelles.¹⁷⁴ The Soviet airlift to the Middle East had ceased, suggesting that the military transports (notably the An-22, the largest Soviet transport plane) were being relieved to ferry the airborne troops.¹⁷⁵ Two additional amphibious ships, together capable of carrying a thousand fully equipped Soviet naval infantry, were expected to be deployed from the Black Sea, and five additional Soviet submarines were en route to the Mediterranean, which would make the Fifth Eskadra's submarine force twenty-eight strong.¹⁷⁶

Early on 25 October, after a late-night cabinet meeting, the White House responded to Brezhnev's message with a worldwide alert, moving to Defense Condition 3.¹⁷⁷ The JCS ordered *John F. Kennedy*, still west of Gibraltar, and *Franklin D. Roosevelt* to join *Independence* in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁷⁸ Orders were then given to suspend Navy support for the airlift to Israel, allowing all but two escort groups to return to *Independence* and *Roosevelt*.¹⁷⁹

Informed by Washington of the Soviets' intentions and aggressively prodded by the Americans to halt its military operations, Israel now did so.¹⁸⁰ Plans for a Soviet landing on the Suez Canal were called off, reportedly at the last minute.¹⁸¹ During the afternoon of 25 October, the USSR agreed to a plan to man the cease-fire lines with a UN peacekeeping force that excluded both superpowers.¹⁸²

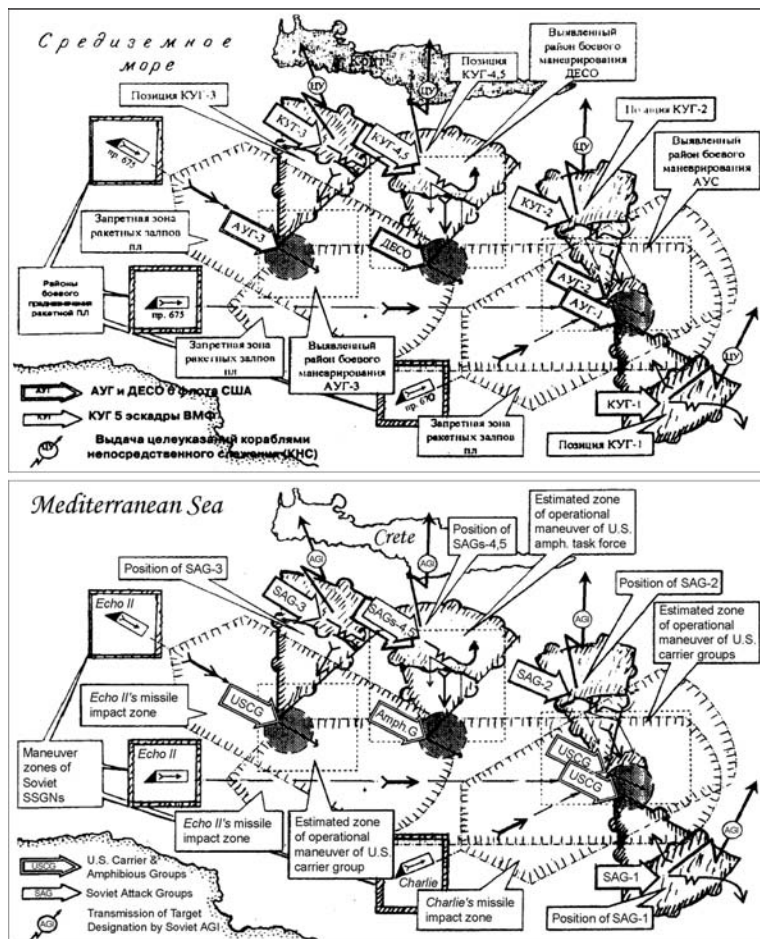
On the following day Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger announced that the United States had begun taking forces off of DefCon 3 status, but the Sixth Fleet remained on highest alert.¹⁸³ On that day, the Fifth Eskadra initiated intensive anticarrier exercises against the carrier and amphibious task groups in the eastern Mediterranean, using the actual U.S. ships as targets of simulated attacks. A group shadowed the *Independence*, while two more ships joined the anticarrier exercises and began trailing the *Roosevelt* task group. The anticarrier

group (KUG-1) following *Independence* consisted of the cruiser *Groznyi*, the SAM destroyer *Provornyi*, and the gun destroyer *Plamennyi*. KUG-2, stalking the *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, consisted of the cruiser *Murmansk* (Sverdlov class) and the gun destroyer *Smetlivyi*. The helicopter carrier *Guadalcanal* was targeted by a third group (KUG-3), consisting of the cruiser *Admiral Ushakov* and the SAM destroyers *Neulovimyi* and *Reshitel'nyi*.¹⁸⁴ Submarines armed with antiship cruise missiles also took part in the exercises, and more boats were coming through the Gibraltar strait from the Northern Fleet.¹⁸⁵

One significant addition to the surface force arriving through Gibraltar was a Kresta II ASW/AW cruiser (project 1134A); however, this ship remained in the western Mediterranean until its departure in November.¹⁸⁶ Yet another Soviet anticarrier group (KUG-4), built around a Kynda-class SSM cruiser, entered the Mediterranean on 29 October and began trailing the *Kennedy* group on the 31st.¹⁸⁷

A fifth strike group (KUG-5) began stalking the *Iwo Jima* near Crete (see maps). Two SSM-equipped patrol vessels (Nanuchka class/pr. 1234), escorted by a destroyer, also entered on 31 October, marking the first deployment of that class of surface combatants.¹⁸⁸

The Fifth Eskadra's force strength peaked on 31 October at ninety-six units, including thirty-four surface combatants (five armed with SSMs) and twenty-three submarines (at least seven with SSMs), constituting a force capable of launching eighty-eight SSMs in a first salvo.¹⁸⁹ The sixty U.S. ships then present, including three attack carriers, two amphibious assault



Tailing U.S. Sixth Fleet Carrier and Amphibious Groups, 6–16 October 1973 (scale not given)

Source: V. Zaboriskii, "Zapiski o neizvestnoi voine," *Morskoi sbornik* no. 3 (March 1999), p. 79. Translation by Yuri Zhukov.

helicopter carriers, and nine attack submarines, found themselves in an increasingly uncomfortable position, in which a preemptive strike seemed the most attractive option should combat seem inevitable. Around each carrier were three Soviet ships—two destroyers (one carrying surface-to-surface missiles, the other surface-to-air) and one “tattletale” AGI capable of providing midcourse guidance to SSMs fired from elsewhere.¹⁹⁰

If the situation ashore had been defused, the crisis at sea not only persisted but now reached its most dangerous stage. The four U.S. task groups were constantly targeted for a Soviet attack. The three anticarrier groups trailing the U.S. carrier groups could have launched first salvos of at least thirteen SSMs *each* against their respective targets.¹⁹¹ Four Soviet cruise-missile submarines were on submerged patrol nearby. The U.S. amphibious task force south of Crete was likewise shadowed by a group of five Soviet warships, some equipped with SSMs.¹⁹²

In his 30 October journal entry, Semenov described the standoff: “Our forces have very powerful cruise missiles and they are directed only at five objects—three aircraft carriers and two helicopter carriers. All others are secondary. Everybody’s waiting only for a signal. The pressure has risen to the breaking point.”¹⁹³ Had war been evaluated as imminent, the Sixth Fleet carrier groups would have needed to attack preemptively, by destroying the fire-control radar, missile launchers, and gun mounts, or sinking outright every Soviet SSM-armed combatant within range before the missiles could be released.

For its part, the Fifth Eskadra would have needed to incapacitate the Sixth Fleet carriers before their aircraft and escorts had time to respond.¹⁹⁴ The Soviet mission, then, was to survive just long enough to deliver a devastating blow to the enemy. The mood at the tactical level during the standoff echoed the Soviet “battle of the first salvo” doctrine and the “we are kamikazes” mindset expressed by Captain Semenov. With the exception of their submarines (which could probably have fought for days or weeks after the surface fleets had been annihilated), neither the Sixth Fleet nor the Fifth Eskadra had any alternative to a first strike.¹⁹⁵ An ex-Soviet submariner offers this assessment:

I think that [the Soviet submarine fleet] would have withstood [a U.S. first strike]. . . . There was no reason to believe that our submarine had been discovered by the probable foe . . . in October 1973. If so, then it is entirely possible that we could have been the first to deliver the blow. . . . As far as the “fighting spirit” is concerned, the sailors were entirely prepared to carry out any order. On a ship, especially on a submarine, the execution of orders for the use of weapons is perceived somewhat abstractly, and . . . to contemplate whether [the order] is good or bad—is the last thing on one’s mind.¹⁹⁶

On a similar note, Admiral Murphy, the Sixth Fleet commander, writes that the two fleets were “sitting in a pond in close proximity and the stage for the hitherto unlikely ‘war-at-sea’ scenario was set. . . . Both fleets were obviously in a high readiness posture for whatever might come next, although it appeared that neither fleet knew exactly what to expect.”¹⁹⁷

Once it became clear that there would be no commitment of Soviet ground troops to the war zone, and in accordance with a suggestion that Admiral Murphy had made to the JCS several days earlier, Washington authorized the Sixth Fleet carrier groups to leave their operating area south of Crete and move westward.¹⁹⁸ The movement was delayed until 1600 on 30 October by heavy weather, but once it began, tension rapidly eased. From a tactical standpoint, the decision gave the U.S. task groups room to maneuver and disrupted targeting for the Fifth Eskadra. On a strategic level, the White House was unquestionably sending the Kremlin a signal that its forces were returning to a more relaxed posture.¹⁹⁹ Fifth Eskadra forces began to disperse on 3 November.

Nonetheless, both fleets remained at high readiness for the following two weeks.²⁰⁰ The general belief in the Fifth Eskadra continued to be that war could break out at any moment and that the superpower standoff persisted, albeit in a more limited form.²⁰¹ On 6 November, a port visit by Volobuyev to Algeria was canceled, and anticarrier activities resumed against the *Kennedy*, *Roosevelt*, and *Iwo Jima* west of Crete.²⁰² On 9 November, the SSM anticarrier group trailing the *Kennedy* was relieved by gun ships and was sent for rest to Alexandria.²⁰³ Two more anticarrier groups were disbanded later in the day, leaving three. The *Groznyi* subsequently left for Sevastopol, and the *Murmansk* proceeded back through the Strait of Gibraltar, heading for the Northern Fleet base at Severomorsk.²⁰⁴ Despite constant requests to return the worn-out ships to base, however, Gorshkov did not permit a more significant reduction of forces until the *Kennedy*, *Independence*, and *Roosevelt* groups headed to port on 15 November.²⁰⁵ Thereafter, the Fifth Eskadra operations returned to combat training, repairs, and some much-needed time off for crews.²⁰⁶

“UPSTART” NAVAL POWERS

Several lessons can be drawn from this most ominous Cold War standoff at sea. First, naval threats can emerge quickly. The Soviet Union, like the Russian Empire before it, was a land power and had traditionally employed its navy in the role of coastal defense. Its disparate fleets universally suffered from burdensome geography—the Baltic Fleet from home waters that are completely frozen in the winter, the Black Sea Fleet from the forbidding Turkish Straits, the Northern Fleet from prohibitive distances and a frigid climate, and the Pacific Fleet from its sheer remoteness, lack of efficient supply routes, and consequent

underdevelopment. Nevertheless, only ten years after Nikita Khrushchev's humiliation during the Cuban missile crisis, when Soviet blue-water capabilities were embryonic at best, the Soviet Navy had established a permanent presence, and a very substantial threat to the U.S. Navy, in what had hitherto been a NATO "lake." Moreover, it accomplished this feat without permanent basing in the region and despite having to deploy all units to the theater through NATO-controlled choke points.

A second lesson is that tensions between the United States and its allies, and other U.S. political decision-making constraints, can be effectively exploited by adversaries to serve their strategic aims. Turkey, opposed to U.S. support for Israel during the war, eased the Montreux Treaty restrictions on the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to permit Soviet use of airspace. This concession greatly aided the air and sea lift to Syria and Egypt, and it allowed the Soviets to reinforce the Fifth Eskadra rapidly during the crisis. Furthermore, because Washington felt itself compelled to keep its forces in the eastern Mediterranean as a political signal of U.S. readiness to counter unilateral Soviet moves during and after the war, the Sixth Fleet's carrier task forces were confined to fixed operating areas. This greatly eased the Soviet anticarrier problem and forced the United States into a difficult dilemma—to move the forces west and risk sending the wrong message concerning U.S. resolve, or keep them on station in an unfavorable tactical environment. As Admiral Zumwalt said of the Jordanian crisis that had preceded, but was rather similar to, the 1973 crisis, "The terrible danger of that last state of affairs is . . . that in a major crisis . . . the alternatives [became] backing down (abandoning old principles and old friends) or escalation (risking a global war)."²⁰⁷

A third lesson is that a strategic focus on "strike" ashore versus "sea control" can result in doctrinal and tactical unpreparedness for interactions with "upstart" naval powers. One former U.S. naval aviator who served in the Sixth Fleet during the crisis explains that for the seven years before the Mediterranean crisis, the strategic focus of the U.S. Navy had been on supporting the bombing campaign in Vietnam. The priorities in that war, of course, had been carrier warfare and close air support for troops in combat. Antisurface ship tactics and surface-to-surface missiles, which were perhaps more appropriate for a close-proximity war-at-sea scenario than was naval aviation, were insufficiently developed at the time. It is apparent, then, that the mission of projecting force "from the sea" in Vietnam had a debilitating effect on the fundamental U.S. Navy task of sea control.²⁰⁸

Another lesson, which is especially resonant in today's age of unparalleled U.S. prowess in military technology, is that the technology gap felt by the Soviets

during the crisis seems not to have appeared crippling to them. In the words of one participant:

It's no secret that our ships had many flaws in their construction. Furthermore, we were behind in the development of computer technology, in fact very seriously so, in radio-location and in electronic warfare. The loudness of our nuclear submarines was also no secret. We knew about all these drawbacks, and tried to solve the problem. . . . [However,] by the assessment of our commanders, all ships in the Fifth Operational Eskadra performed with sufficient effectiveness during the Arab-Israeli War. All the while, a certain level of expertise was accumulated with regard to trailing and delivering blows onto aircraft carriers.²⁰⁹

Although the asymmetry in capabilities between the two fleets was unquestionably acute, as it was for the duration of the Cold War, the Soviet strategy was largely free of illusions to the contrary. In fact, it was oriented specifically to offsetting this lack of parity.

The Mediterranean standoff contrasts strikingly with its more famous predecessor, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Whereas the Soviets in 1962 lacked the leverage to use their navy as an effective instrument of diplomacy, this was not so in the Mediterranean in 1973. In the Caribbean, the United States benefited from superiority on all levels. The impressive display of U.S. deterrent power fully reflected these advantages. Due to its ability to mount a blockade, the United States was essentially able to control the direction and outcome of the crisis. The Kremlin, having tried to establish a new status quo in the region, was publicly forced to retreat from this gambit, with attendant humiliation. The 1973 crisis, however, saw a much greater degree of parity between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States had fewer options and failed to seize the initiative. This failure enabled Moscow, through bold naval diplomacy, to influence significantly the pace and outcome of the Mediterranean crisis, despite the obvious inadequacies of its client states.

This research may be most applicable today to considering the rise of China. The experience of confronting the Fifth Eskadra in 1973 might be reason for Washington to approach the question of China's maritime prospects with somewhat greater caution. Like Russia, China has historically been a continental power. If Soviet sailors had to reach back to the days of Peter I and Catherine II to find Russian naval heroes, the Chinese are forced to go still farther back into history—to the exploits of the early Ming. In the modern era, Chinese fleets have borne humiliations comparable to the Tsushima Straits debacle of the Russian Navy in the Russo-Japanese War. Like the Soviet Navy, the contemporary People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been widely overshadowed by ground forces. Despite an impressive collection of ex-Soviet carriers that are

now museums in various parts of China, the PLAN's prospects for developing carrier aviation remain bleak.²¹⁰ Finally, it is generally agreed that the PLAN has yet to find its own "Gorshkov."

It is not surprising, therefore, that Washington takes China to be a naval upstart and that few there take it seriously as a maritime power. That is a grave mistake. The Vietnam conflict distracted the U.S. Navy from its core competency of sea control, and the global war on terror could offer the PLAN a similar opportunity.

In some respects, China is a much more natural maritime power than the USSR ever proved to be. Aside from its lengthy coastline, with its numerous sheltered anchorages, Beijing does not confront the ubiquitous ice, immense distances, isolated geographical outposts, and the narrowly confined straits that always burdened Russian sea power. Chinese capitalism is full of vitality; Beijing's merchantmen increasingly dominate maritime commerce in a way to which the Soviets could never have aspired. Perhaps most importantly, Beijing has in the Taiwan question a maritime strategic issue that serves as a focal point for naval development. With the possible exception of Berlin, Moscow never had this kind of strategic focus—certainly not one that consistently encouraged its maritime aspirations. Moreover, Taiwan is less than a hundred miles off the Chinese coast—a much more amenable environment for operations than was the Mediterranean for the Fifth Eskadra.

As we consider Chinese maritime power, therefore, it is useful to reflect on the success that the Soviets achieved under much more adverse conditions. The 1973 episode, perhaps the most dangerous of all Cold War maritime crises, offers a lesson in humility for the world's supreme naval power.

NOTES

1. The relevant declassified American documents are currently being prepared by the U.S. State Department for publication in the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series (available at www.state.gov). Naturally, we recognize that further analysis of the crisis will be appropriate upon release of these documents. However, no such systematic effort is under way on the Russian side. This effort is an attempt to redress this unbalance in our understanding of this historical crisis, by placing special focus on the Russian sources.
2. See Robert O. Freedman, "Soviet Policy toward the Middle East from the Exodus of 1972 to the Yom Kippur War," *Naval War College Review* 27, no. 4 (January/February 1975), pp. 32–53; Galia Golan, "The Soviet Union and the Yom Kippur War," *Israel Affairs* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1999), pp. 127–53; William D. Wesselman, *U.S. Foreign Policy Decision-Making during the 1973 Arab-Israeli Conflict: Its Impact on Soviet-Egyptian Foreign Relations* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air War College, April 1995).
3. See Joseph F. Bouchard, *Command in Crisis* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991);

- John Chomeau, *Seapower as a Political Instrument: The Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1974); Karen Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy towards Egypt* (New York: St. Martin's, 1979); Jesse W. Lewis, *The Strategic Balance in the Mediterranean* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Public Policy Research, 1976); Milan N. Vego, "Soviet and Russian Strategy in the Mediterranean since 1945," in *Naval Strategy and Policy in the Mediterranean: Past, Present and Future*, ed. John B. Hattendorf (London: Frank Cass, 2000); David F. Winkler, *Cold War at Sea: High-Seas Confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2000).
4. Matthew J. Kohler, "Maneuver by the U.S. Navy in 20th Century Blue Water Operations: Selected Historical Examples" (master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1996), p. 75.
 5. G. G. Kostev, *Voenno-Morskoi Flot strany 1945–1995: Vzlety i padeniya* [The country's navy 1945–1995: Takeoffs and falls] (Saint Petersburg: Nauka, 1999), p. 144.
 6. Bruce Watson and Susan Watson, eds., *The Soviet Navy: Strengths and Liabilities* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986).
 7. Peter A. Huchthausen, *October Fury* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2002), p. 46.
 8. Kohler, p. 82.
 9. I. V. Kasatonov, *Flot vyhodit v okean* [The fleet is going to the ocean] (Saint Petersburg: Astra-Lyuks, 1995), p. 269.
 10. Kostev, pp. 146–49.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
 12. William Burr and Thomas S. Blanton, eds., *The Submarines of October: U.S. and Soviet Naval Encounters during the Cuban Missile Crisis*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 75, 31 October 2002, at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB75/.
 13. Huchthausen, p. 239.
 14. Kohler, p. 91.
 15. Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook 2002: Russia*, available at www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/print/rs.html.
 16. Vego, p. 164.
 17. Kasatonov, pp. 220–21.
 18. Ivan Kapitanets, *Na sluzhbe okeanskomu flotu* [On service to the oceangoing fleet] (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Andreevskii Flag, 2000), p. 259.
 19. Yevgenii V. Tarle, *Chesmenskii boi i pervaiia russkaia ekspeditsiia v arhipelag, 1769–1774* [The battle of Chesme and the first Russian expedition to the archipelago, 1769–1774] (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1945), p. 59.
 20. The six wars were those of 1787–91, 1806–12, 1828–29, 1853–56 (in the Crimean War), 1877–78, and World War I.
 21. Vego, p. 165.
 22. Stephen S. Roberts, *The Turkish Straits and the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean*, Professional Paper 331 (Alexandria, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, March 1982), pp. 3–4.
 23. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 25. Bruce W. Watson, *Red Navy at Sea: Soviet Naval Operations on the High Seas, 1956–1980* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1982), p. 87.
 26. For arms transfers to Egypt, Wesselman, pp. 7–8. Admiral Gorshkov drafted extensive long-term plans for the use of Albanian facilities in 1959, prior to that country's realignment with the People's Republic of China. See Kasatonov, pp. 225–26.
 27. Michael T. Isenberg, *Shield of the Republic* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), p. 678.
 28. Lewis, pp. 17–18.
 29. Isenberg, p. 679.
 30. Review of this manuscript by former head of the Soviet Naval section of British Defense Intelligence, 22 January 2004.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. Wesselman, p. 11.
 33. Although lesser forms of assistance were more common, instances of limited Soviet involvement in combat operations in third-world conflicts occurred regularly during the Cold War. See V. A. Yaremenko, A. N. Pochtarev, and A. V. Usikov, *Rossiia (SSSR) v lokalnykh voynakh i vooruzhennykh konfliktakh vtoroi poloviny xx veka* [Russia (USSR) in the local wars and armed conflicts

- of the second half of the 20th century] (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole; Poligrafresursy, 2000), pp. 169, 180–94.
34. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), p. 279.
 35. Dawisha, p. 124.
 36. Lewis, p. 34.
 37. Owen R. Cote, Jr., *The Third Battle: Innovation in the U.S. Navy's Silent Cold War Struggle with Soviet Submarines*, Newport Paper 16 (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2003), pp. 17, 62.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
 39. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
 40. Yevgenii V. Semenov, *Protivostoyaniye 5-y Eskadry VMF SSSR i 6-go Flota SShA v period kholodnoi Voyny: Zapiski svidetelya i aktivnogo uchastnika sobytii* [Standoff of the Fifth Eskadra of the USSR Navy and the Sixth Fleet of the USA during the period of the Cold War: Notes of a witness and active participant of the proceedings], chap. 2. Unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 75.
 41. Gordon H. McCormick, *The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, October 1987), pp. 2–3.
 42. Special State-Defense Study Group, *Near East, North Africa and the Horn of Africa: A Recommended American Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: 17 July 1967), Washington National Records Center, Record Group 330, OSD Files: FRC 72 A 2468, Middle East 319.2, 17 July 1967, p. 52, FRUS, 1964–1969, vol. 21, pp. 49–58.
 43. *Soviet Policies in the Middle East and Mediterranean Area*, National Intelligence Estimate 11-7-70 [hereafter NIE 11-7-70], 5 March 1970, declassified 11 March 1994, p. 6, Digital National Security Archives, item SE00445, available at nsarchive.chadwyck.com.
 44. Bouchard, p. 273n.
 45. Kostev, p. 450.
 46. Interview by author with retired Soviet submarine officer, St. Petersburg, Russia, September 2003.
 47. Roberts, *The Turkish Straits and the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean*, p. 14.
 48. NIE 11-7-70, p. 6.
 49. Kostev, p. 450.
 50. *Ibid.*
 51. Roberts, *The Turkish Straits and the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean*, p. 5.
 52. John Jordan, *Soviet Warships: The Soviet Surface Fleet 1960 to the Present* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1983), p. 46.
 53. Review of this manuscript by former head of Soviet Naval section of British Defense Intelligence, 22 January 2004.
 54. Nikolai Melnik, *Odisseya krasnoznamennogo avianostsa "Kiev"* [The odyssey of the red-banner aircraft carrier *Kiev*] (Moscow: Yakor', 2002), pp. 41–42.
 55. Kostev, p. 445. Kostev was later promoted to rear admiral.
 56. *Ibid.*, p. 449.
 57. *Ibid.*, pp. 448–49.
 58. Kapitanets, p. 270.
 59. Lewis, p. 73.
 60. Figures as of 30 August 1969. Stephen S. Roberts, "A Non-case: The Libyan Coup," in *Soviet Naval Diplomacy*, ed. Bradford Dismukes and James M. McConnell (New York: Pergamon, 1979), p. 140.
 61. A declassified July 1969 report to the U.S. Air Force Policy Planning Studies Office notes that "the U.S. role in Libya would probably be limited to assuring the U.K. of its support, thus discouraging Soviet moves to intimidate the U.K. . . . The British, under their treaty with Libya, will probably be prepared to extend such help as may be possible to prevent coups but this will not permit them to take any action once a coup succeeds." See Westinghouse Electric Corporation, *U.S. Strategic Alternatives and Access Problems Related to the Middle East and South Asia: U.S. Strategic Alternatives and Access Problems*, vol. 3: *Political and Strategic Alternatives*, Confidential [declassified] Report to U.S. Air Force, Office of Policy Planning Studies Program, H-37, July 1969, available at the Digital National Security Archives, item IR00719, nsarchive.chadwyck.com.
 62. Lewis, p. 76.
 63. Semenov, chap. 2, pp. 100–101.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
65. Lewis, p. 73.
66. Semenov, chap. 2, p. 101.
67. Lewis, p. 77.
68. Semenov, chap. 2, pp. 100–101.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
70. The study was prepared by the Center for Naval Analyses, cited in Roberts, “A Non-case,” p. 141.
71. Lewis, p. 73.
72. Winkler, p. 65; Chomeau, p. 120.
73. Winkler, p. 65.
74. Vego, p. 174.
75. Winkler, p. 66.
76. Vego, p. 174.
77. Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., *On Watch* (New York: Quadrangle, 1976), pp. 300–301.
78. Winkler, p. 66.
79. Kapitanets, p. 276.
80. Zumwalt, p. 300.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
82. Semenov, chap. 2, p. 13.
83. Interview by author with retired Soviet submarine officer, St. Petersburg, Russia, September 2003.
84. Semenov, chap. 2, p. 29.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
90. Orders were given to end the pursuit of USS *Forrestal* on 17 April, after which the commanding officer of the *Forrestal* invited the commander of *Krasnyi Krym*, which had conducted the pursuit, to lunch. The invitation was declined. Semenov, chap. 2, pp. 10, 15, 50.
91. Semenov, chap. 2, p. 28.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
94. *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.
95. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
96. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
97. Yaremenko, Pochtarev, and Usikov, p. 199.
98. Dawisha, p. 66.
99. Watson, p. 103.
100. Semenov, chap. 4, pp. 6–7.
101. Interview by author with retired Soviet submarine officer, St. Petersburg, Russia, September 2003.
102. Watson, p. 103.
103. Bouchard, p. 168.
104. Norman Polmar, *Chronology of the Cold War at Sea 1945–1991* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998), p. 150.
105. The Sixth Fleet commander, Admiral Daniel Murphy, transferred his flag from the *Little Rock* to the *Mount Whitney* for the duration of the conflict. Letter to the author by Captain James E. Wentz, USN (Ret.), 10 January 2004.
106. Bouchard, pp. 166–67.
107. *Ibid.*
108. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 7.
109. Semenov, chap. 2, p. 107. Other sources, notably Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 230, observe that the Israeli chief of staff, General David Elazar, obtained permission to place forces on Alert C (standing army at highest state of preparedness, beginning limited mobilization of reserves) only on 5 October.
110. Herzog, p. 230; Semenov, chap. 2, p. 107.
111. Semenov, chap. 2, p. 107.
112. *Ibid.*; Bouchard, p. 160.
113. Bouchard, p. 167.
114. Semenov, chap. 2, p. 107.
115. Bouchard, p. 168.
116. Watson, pp. 104–106.
117. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 7.
118. Watson, pp. 104–105.
119. Zumwalt, p. 441.
120. Watson, pp. 105–106.
121. Kostev, p. 451.
122. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 8.

123. Ibid., chap. 4, p. 10.
124. Bouchard, p. 169.
125. Robert G. Weinland, *Superpower Naval Diplomacy in the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War: A Case Study*, Washington Papers 6, no. 61 (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1979), pp. 74–75.
126. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 15.
127. Ibid., p. 10.
128. Ibid., p. 9.
129. Ibid., p. 10.
130. Interview by author with retired Soviet submarine officer, St. Petersburg, Russia, September 2003.
131. Semenov, chap. 4, pp. 8, 10.
132. For the attack, Kostev, p. 451. For the ship's prior arrival, Watson, p. 106.
133. Bouchard, p. 170.
134. Ibid.
135. Barry M. Blechman and Douglas M. Hart, "The Political Utility of Nuclear Weapons: The 1973 Middle East Crisis," in *Nuclear Diplomacy*, ed. Sean M. Lynn-Jones, Steven E. Miller, and Stephen Van Evera (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p. 327.
136. Bouchard, p. 170.
137. Ibid., p. 160.
138. Kostev, p. 451; Semenov, chap. 4, p. 13.
139. Polmar, p. 150.
140. Ibid.
141. Bouchard, p. 171.
142. Ibid., p. 170.
143. Ibid.
144. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 13.
145. Bouchard, p. 160.
146. For the second destroyer, *ibid.*, p. 170. For the submarines off of Israeli ports, V. Zaborskii, "Zapiski o neizvestnoi voine [Notes about an unknown war]," *Morskoi sbornik*, no. 3 (March 1999), p. 80, and Semenov, chap. 4, p. 14.
147. This was hardly the first time that Soviet vessels had come under Israeli fire. Port Said had withstood nearly daily bombardment during the War of Attrition of 1967–70. Throughout that period, Egyptian ships were docked side by side with those of the Fifth Eskadra, and the strikes resulted in a number of Soviet casualties. However, the Soviets claimed to have allowed the Egyptians to take all defensive actions at Port Said. Zaborskii, p. 80.
148. It must be noted that the nature of Soviet assistance to Egypt became markedly less extensive after 1972, due both to the expulsion of military advisers by Sadat and to the new U.S.-Soviet policy of détente (see section on détente, above). As mentioned earlier, Soviet assistance during the War of Attrition was considerably more active. As many as twelve thousand Soviet Air Defense Forces personnel rotated through Egypt between March 1969 and August 1970, and there were thirty-five Soviet combat fatalities. Yaremenko, p. 484.
149. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 14.
150. Ibid., p. 15; and Bouchard, p. 171.
151. Bouchard, p. 273n.
152. Semenov cites 19 October as the date for this rotation. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 15.
153. Zaborskii, pp. 80–81; Yaremenko, p. 201.
154. V. I. Popov, "Desantnye korabli osvvaivayut Sredizemnoye more [Landing ships are mastering the Mediterranean Sea]," *Taifun* (February 2002), p. 45.
155. Zaborskii, pp. 80–81.
156. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 33.
157. Admiral Gorshkov and John Warner, Secretary of the Navy, signed the Incidents at Sea Agreement (IncSea) in Moscow on 25 May 1972, seeking to reduce the number of accidents between the two navies by establishing a code of conduct for ships operating in close proximity. For the evolution of this agreement see Winkler, *Cold War at Sea*. Although it supported stability during the October 1973 crisis by defining mutually recognizable limits for peacetime maneuvers and tactics, IncSea could not defuse the larger political tensions or the tactical first-strike incentives that pervaded this maritime crisis.
158. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 16.
159. Dawisha, p. 67; Semenov, chap. 2, p. 108.
160. Semenov, chap. 2, p. 108.
161. Blechman and Hart, p. 326.
162. The orders to the Israeli side were to respect the cease-fire, except if the Egyptians were to

- break it. In that case, the Israeli forces were to deal with the attacks and continue with their mission. Herzog, p. 280; Zumwalt, p. 438.
163. Bouchard, p. 161.
164. Yaremenko, Pochtarev, and Usikov, p. 202; Zumwalt, p. 445.
165. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 21. U.S. figures have placed the overall Fifth Eskadra force strength on 24 October 1973 at eighty; see Bouchard, p. 171.
166. Bouchard, p. 171.
167. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 17; Dawisha, p. 69.
168. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 17.
169. Watson, pp. 111–12.
170. *Ibid.*; Zumwalt, p. 439.
171. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 17.
172. Bouchard, p. 172.
173. Semenov, chap. 4, pp. 20–21.
174. Zumwalt, p. 439.
175. *Ibid.*
176. Watson, pp. 111–12; Zumwalt, p. 439.
177. Watson, p. 109.
178. Bouchard, p. 172; Zumwalt, p. 447.
179. Bouchard, p. 172.
180. Abraham Rabinovich, *The Boats of Cherbourg* (New York: Seaver Books/Henry Holt, 1988), p. 302; Semenov, chap. 2, p. 108.
181. Zaborskii, p. 81.
182. Vego, p. 176.
183. Polmar, p. 150.
184. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 18.
185. *Ibid.*, chap. 4, pp. 18–19; Bouchard, p. 173.
186. Stephen S. Roberts, “The October 1973 Arab-Israeli War,” in *Soviet Naval Diplomacy*, ed. Dismukes and McConnell, p. 195.
187. Bouchard, p. 174.
188. Roberts, “The October 1973 Arab-Israeli War,” p. 194.
189. Zumwalt, p. 447.
190. Lewis, p. 83.
191. Bouchard, p. 186.
192. Lewis, p. 83.
193. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 21.
194. Lewis, pp. 84–85.
195. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
196. Interview by author with retired Soviet submarine officer, St. Petersburg, Russia, September 2003.
197. Zumwalt, p. 447.
198. *Ibid.*
199. Weinland, pp. 74–75; Semenov, chap. 4, p. 21.
200. Zumwalt, pp. 447–48.
201. Semenov, chap. 4, p. 26.
202. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
203. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
204. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
205. *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 33.
206. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
207. Zumwalt, p. 301.
208. Letter (15 August 2003) to author from a former naval aviator who flew in the USS *Independence* air wing during October 1973.
209. Interview by author with retired Soviet submarine officer, St. Petersburg, September 2003.
210. For a recent assessment of Chinese interest in aircraft carriers, see Ian Storey and You Ji, “China’s Aircraft Carrier Ambitions: Seeking Truth from Rumors,” *Naval War College Review* 57, no. 1 (Winter 2004), pp. 77–93.