

Soviet Navy moves to rule the Mediterranean

by Fiorella Operto

On Jan. 18, the Italian defense minister announced that two powerful Soviet naval units had entered the Mediterranean to reinforce the already considerable Soviet naval presence there, the deployment involved the first nuclear-powered Kirov-class cruiser armed with long-range SS-12 missiles and an Udaloj-class guided-missile destroyer.¹

According to Italian military sources, the two units were deployed to the central Mediterranean, into a position suitable to interrupt at any moment the supply lines of the U.S. Sixth Fleet stationed near Beirut. In question are special units which reportedly operate in combination with underwater units and long-range aerial divisions which would have as their primary task attacking NATO trade routes and countering the American nuclear task force.

Information in our possession reveals that the air cover for these two units is supplied by the air forces of Algeria and Libya, two countries which, although they are not part of the Warsaw Pact, have military accords with the Pact—which supplies them with quantities of planes—and have air forces which can be justified only as the cover for Soviet naval operations in the central or western Mediterranean.

An important facet of this strategic picture is the fact that the Mahgreb region of northern Africa, the region of Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco, is currently being hit by violent riots in which the economy-wrecking policies of the International Monetary Fund are playing right into the hands of Nazi-Communist Muslim Fundamentalist insurrectionary groups backed by the Soviet Union (article, p. 33).

Is a showdown being readied in the Mediterranean? There are many signs which indicate such, not the least of which is

the threat of Iranian kamikaze planes in Lebanon against the U.S. fleet and the ultimatum for the withdrawal of the Euro-missiles stationed at Comiso (Sicily), demanded of Italy by the Libyan government and reiterated by Libyan Prime Minister Jalloud in Damascus. Therefore the threats proffered by Gromyko in Stockholm (see p. 35) were not just words; the Soviets, emboldened by their strategic superiority, are seeking a show of force in coming weeks.

How they caught up to U.S. naval superiority

Until today, the air and naval superiority given by the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean could be considered unopposed; unlike what had occurred in the nuclear strategic field and in the field of conventional forces in Europe, where the U.S.S.R. accumulated about a 3 to 1 advantage, the superiority of the Sixth Fleet had not been called into question. Today, we can say that this superiority of the NATO allied forces in the Mediterranean is not only threatened, but has been overcome thanks to an intense development, accelerated particularly in the last decade, by the Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean, both in quality and quantity.

The Soviets have managed to get out of the impasse they faced after the decision of Egyptian President Sadat in July 1972 to close Egypt's ports to Soviet ships, ports that from 1968 had been the principal Soviet bases in the Mediterranean.

Through the creation of new ports in Libya and Algeria, the acquisition of a refueling capability and the ability to ride at anchor in deep waters throughout the Mediterranean (a capability only the Soviet navy has) that navy has overcome the disadvantage of being far away from its fleet's home

bases. Hence the Soviet military squad in the Mediterranean of the (Sovmedron) is endowed with a very high number of auxiliary ships (which carry fuel supplies, spare parts, etc.). It is certain that a large part of the Soviet merchant marine is actually made up of ships which have military tasks even though they are presented formally as being commercial. Therefore, we must observe attentively every Soviet port and commercial base, such as those in Greece and Malta, where there is no distinction between commercial ports and military resupply bases.

The Soviet naval buildup in the Mediterranean

The Soviet fleet has gone from 1,500 ship-days in 1964, with a daily average of units in the Mediterranean of 5 warships, to 17,000 ship-days in 1980, with an average presence of about 50 units, at least 12 being submarines armed with nuclear missiles.

The Soviet naval air force deploys, in addition to the old Tu-16s (Badgers), modern Tu-22-M bombers (Backfire bombers), armed with long-range air-to-surface missiles (AS-4, AS-6).²

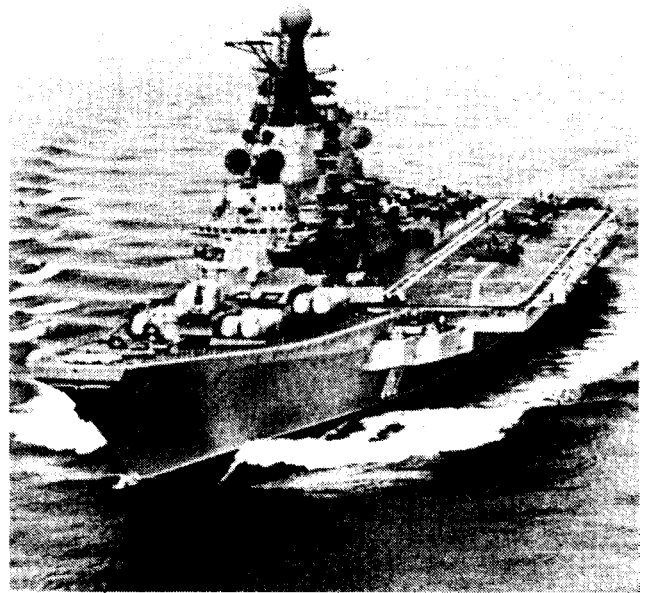
The Backfire bombers, which take off from the Black Sea fleet in the Crimea, can cover the entire Mediterranean basin and the totality of Italian territory, and could be used to hit land targets, as well as in support of naval battles.³

In the case of need, the Soviet naval units which are normally deployed in the Mediterranean can be reinforced by the units of the Black Sea fleet. In 1973, coinciding with the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Sovmedron reached almost 100 units, acquiring for the first time naval superiority in the Mediterranean.

Historically, the Soviet fleet has been building up at least since 1956, the year in which Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, who is still in command today, was named commander-in-chief of the navy. The Soviet navy was built up as a weapon able to sustain and win a war which would be nuclear and global from the first moment of combat.

The principal task of the Soviet navy was not that of battling the enemy fleet to acquire air-naval supremacy, according to the model of the Second World War; however, there are subsidiary tasks:

1) Carrying a missile offensive to the enemy territory by means of ballistic-missile submarines which, according to 1981 figures, number 155 worldwide, 85 armed with SLBMs, and 70 with cruise missiles. The majority of these are deployed in the Atlantic and the Pacific, whereas at least three to four are in the Mediterranean (cruise). At the same time, the Soviet navy is set up on a war footing against NATO nuclear missile-armed submarines. Admiral Gorshkov, in an article, "Navy in War and Peace," of 1972, sang hosannas to the quality of the airplanes used for antisubmarine warfare (ASW), both for reconnaissance and attack duties. The Soviet decision to give particular emphasis to ASW, in planning their first aircraft carrier for both fixed-wing and variable-



The aircraft carrier Kiev, part of the vast increase in Soviet military capability in the Mediterranean

wing aircraft, the *Kiev*, seems to sufficiently prove a general predisposition to that type of warfare.⁴

2) Projecting itself at the flanks and behind the lines of the enemy in linkage with the mass of the armored and mechanized forces which advance frontally, in atomic, biological, and chemical (ABC) warfare saturated environments, is a second important capability being acquired by the Soviet fleet beyond the above-cited primary task. An indication of this capability is the development of Soviet Special Forces (landing forces or VDV) which, in the words of Marshal Sokolovskii, have "the task of missions such as the capture and occupation or destruction of nuclear bases, air bases, naval bases and other important enemy targets in depth inside the theatres of military operations" in a nuclear environment.

The Soviet landing troops move in strict coordination with the advancing major units of the army, especially as far as aerial, missile and artillery support is concerned.

The latter development has raised the greatest perplexity among Western experts who, considering the lack of aircraft carriers in the Soviet navy, have raised the question that the Soviets might, before developing landing troops, supply themselves with similar aircraft carriers for countering the adversary threat. The fact that this argument is raised indicates, we think, a gap in understanding the buildup and the lines of growth of the Soviet navy by the Western strategists.

The Soviet navy, in confronting the threat of the NATO naval forces, can count on the Soviet deployment of nuclear land based SS-20 missiles, both in the U.S.S.R. and in satellite countries. A small part of those SS-20s has the capacity, in terms of precision targeting and power, of sweeping away

in a few minutes the principal units of the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, without the latter being able to stop it. In particular, the SS-20s can be utilized for anti-submarine warfare, thus aiding Soviet submarine units against U.S. submarines with nuclear missiles, not only in the Mediterranean, but also in the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf.

The use of Soviet land-based SS-20 missiles in the naval theatre was implicitly revealed in the September 1983 issue of *Armed Forces Journal International* by analysts Samuel Cohen and Joseph Douglass. They wrote that when the deployment is completed there will be between 2,000 and 5,000 nuclear warheads of 150 kilotons. Since there are not enough worthwhile targets per warhead of that type in Europe, before assuming that the warheads are directed against every single infantry battalion, one should consider more significant objectives, among them American submarines and the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. These are all targets within the radius of accuracy of the SS-20s, which is known to be about 100 meters.

In this context, it is more understandable why the Soviet navy in the Mediterranean developed aircraft-bearing cruisers and now amphibious assault forces before developing large aircraft carriers. According to 1982 data, such forces consisted of five brigades of naval infantry, for a total of 17,000 men, a fleet of amphibious units made up of 34 ships, of which 26 are also suited for ocean going operations, 35 LCU (landing craft utility) and 56 hovercraft. The lack of large aircraft carriers would be covered by the entry into service of large-capacity amphibious units and ships fitted for refueling on the high seas. Of the former, the leader is that of the Ivan Rogov class (14,000 tons, transport capacity of 700 men with all their weapons and combat vehicles). Besides, the entry into service of the first logistical units of the squad of the Berezin class (36,000 tons) notably improved the possibility of logistical support to maintain overseas operations of long duration.

Soviet experts suggest that, in wartime, limited landings in the framework of special operations could be included among the objectives of the naval infantry: the conquest of islands and limited areas, and critical coastal positions; functioning in general as an advanced point in a broader amphibious operation against an enemy port or naval base—operations in which a more or less rapid linkup with large units of the army would be foreseen.

Mare nostrum or mare russicum?

While the Soviet maneuvers in the Mediterranean are ominous enough in themselves, informed sources in the U.S. estimate that they are for Europe and the Middle East a diversion from more dangerous moves on the northern flank of NATO and in the Pacific. The Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean has represented the key test for its deployment beyond the coasts of the Soviet home-land and its neighbor-

ing seas. The Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean have been the touchstones for the buildup of capabilities and qualities of the Soviet navy as a whole, such as maintenance and resupply in the open sea, landing troops, and collateral activities, not only military but political-military. Let us recall in particular the growing control of countries like Syria, Libya, Algeria, and the island of Malta.

Specifically, as General Annoni⁵ points out, Libya has mainly been resupplied by the Soviet Union with 400 fighter planes—355 of them are fighter-bombers and interceptors, among which there are 123 MiG-23s and 50 MiG-25s. These warplanes easily reach the central Mediterranean and cover all of Southern Italy. In its imposing rearmament program—completely out of proportion to the needs of the population of only 4 million—Libya has already equipped 16 big air bases with protected and armored shelters for airplanes and repair shops. The presence of about 2,000 Soviet advisers has been counted, and the MiG crews are made up only of Soviets. Moreover, there are about 12 missile bases in Libya for Soviet SS-12s, with a range capable of covering all of Italy and with the capability of carrying nuclear warheads.

Another nation, Algeria, has about 300 fighter planes (slightly more than Italy) with a notable presence of MiG-23s and MiG-25s; here, too, there are numerous armored air bases, and the presence of Soviet advisers is estimated at around a thousand.

In particular, these Libyan and Algerian bases can be considered bases of refueling and rearmament for airplanes which take off from Eastern Europe, complete their missions in the Mediterranean, land and get refueled at these bases, and take off again for other missions or to return to their home base.

Hence the Mediterranean, far from being still the *mare nostrum*, is becoming more and more a base for unopposed global Soviet operations.

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Notes

1. *Interarma*, Agenzia, N. 1, 1984, p. 13.
2. Maurizio Cremasco, "Situazione internazionale nell'area del mediterraneo e problematica del modello del difesa italiano," *ISTRID*, 1982, Roma.
3. *Idem*.
4. R. Verna, "Le Forze Speciali Sovietiche," in *Rivista Militare*, July-August, 1983.
5. E. Annoni, *La difesa aerea*, ISTRID, 1982.