

THE MISSILE CRUISER THAT SANK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

FILE PHOTO: FILE PHOTO: A sailor looks at the Russian missile cruiser Moskva moored in the Ukrainian Black Sea port of Sevastopol, Ukraine 10, 2013. REUTERS/Stringer/File Photo/File Photo

End of the week, the Russian Defence Ministry acknowledged that one sailor died and 27 were missing after the missile cruiser *Moskva* sank in the Black Sea on April 14.

The Ministry had earlier said fire broke out on the vessel as a result of an ammunition explosion which caused the ship to tilt over and it sank later as it was being towed away in rough weather. "The vessel is seriously damaged. The entire crew have been evacuated," the Defence Ministry had stated. "Given the choppy seas, the vessel sank."

However, Ukraine has said that it had successfully hit the cruiser with Neptune shore-based anti-ship missiles, a claim that was later supported by unnamed U.S. officials. While what actually happened to *Moskva* might remain unclear forever, the sinking of the 12,490-tonne cruiser is a significant loss for Russia in many ways. This was the biggest warship to be lost since 1982, when the 12,000-tonne Argentinian missile destroyer, General Belgrano, was sunk by a British submarine during the Falkland wars. Also, this was Russia's biggest wartime loss of a warship since the Second World War.

Heavy vessel

Moskva made headlines early in the war as it ordered a group of Ukrainian soldiers at an outpost on Snake Island to surrender, which they refused in a radio message. While it was initially believed that they were killed, it later came to light that they were taken captive and eventually released in a prisoner swap. Construction of *Moskva*, a Slava class Soviet-guided missile cruiser, began in 1976 and was commissioned in 1983. It is among a series of such heavy ocean going vessels built to counter NATO vessels and carried 16 Vulkan missiles that can hit targets 500 km away in addition to other weapons and defences. It has been upgraded several times over the years.

In the past, *Moskva* was deployed in the Syrian conflict and as the flagship of the Black Sea fleet, it was at the forefront of the Russian war on Ukraine. In addition to the huge symbolism associated with it, the loss also puts back Russia military, especially with its inability to move fresh naval assets into the region since Turkey closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits for warships. This also increases the risks for any Russian amphibious assault on the coastal city of Odesa.

Lessons for planners

As nations worldwide continue to build bigger surface vessels, including aircraft carriers and anti-ship missiles meant to counter them proliferating, Naval planners would be analysing the incident very closely to draw lessons to defend their own assets.

The Soviet Union built a series of missile boats to take on NATO ships and carriers during the Cold War. Since then, there has been a huge proliferation of anti-ship missiles, which are relatively cheap and offer asymmetric advantage. An example is the Indo-Russian joint

development, the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, which began as an anti-ship missile and has a land attack variant and can be fired from land, sea and air. It derives its name from Brahmaputra and Moskva rivers. In January, the Philippines signed a \$375-million deal with India for the supply of the shore-based anti-ship variant of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles.

There were recent examples of warships being hit by missiles. In the 2006 Lebanon war, Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia, had hit an Israeli warship while in Yemen, the Shia Houthi rebels had fired anti-ship missiles at a US Navy destroyer in 2016. Closer home, in December 1971, Indian Navy used its Soviet origin 'Osa' class missile boats, which unleashed a barrage of missiles on Karachi harbour under Operation Trident and Operation Python, sinking a destroyer, fleet tanker and minesweeper, enforcing a de facto naval blockade.

The sinking of *Moskva* has once again generated discussion on the relevance and vulnerability of large surface platforms like aircraft carriers, especially in the Indian context with China building ballistic missiles to target U.S. carriers in the Indian Ocean.

However, the development of technologies and counter-technologies is an ever-continuing game and validating that is the renewed impetus on fielding aircraft carriers by several countries. To shoot down incoming anti-ship missiles, warships have layered defence, consisting of missiles and air defence guns, which has also seen significant advancements.

The aspect of why *Moskva*'s defences did not shoot down the incoming missiles, if it indeed was hit by Ukrainian missiles, would be studied and analysed closely.

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