9 Soviet ASW and US SSBNs: Conclusions

As with Chapter 6, this Chapter looks at the intersection of Soviet ASW and US SSBN developments to judge whether the former pose a destabilising threat to the latter. Factors enhancing the USSR's anti-SSBN potential are outlined first, followed by a listing of factors degrading it. An assessment is then offered of the USSR's potential with some concluding observations on the issue of a Soviet breakthrough.

FACTORS ENHANCING THE USSR’S ANTI-SSBN POTENTIAL

1. The USSR has a variety of acoustic detection systems ranging from a purported bottom-mounted area search system in the vicinity of the Soviet homeland to different types of portable systems affixed to, lowered from, or delivered by air, surface, and sub-surface platforms.
2. The Soviet Union also has a vigorous, broad-based, and well-funded non-acoustic research programme which has been continuing for over twenty years.
3. The Soviet Navy has been providing itself with open-ocean ASW attack platforms since the mid-1960s. The most impressive developments may be in the nuclear-powered attack submarine fleet. There were seventy SSNs of various types in 1984, and the force should grow numerically in the foreseeable future. In recent qualitative comparisons of superpower ‘leading edge’...
deployed technologies, furthermore, the US DoD rated the superpowers 'equal' in the SSN category.

4. The Soviet practice of massing available ASW forces in a labour-intensive campaign may result in quantity making up for any shortfalls in quality. It heightens the prospects of mounting successful barrier or localisation and attack operations against known or suspected enemy submarines.

5. Weapons seems to be an area of strength. The Navy has torpedoes and depth charges, with nuclear warhead and rocket-assisted variants for both. If as powerful as some believe, they should certainly incapacitate any target encountered, including single-hulled US SSBNs. The inventory of mines is believed to be the world’s largest, and because the US Navy is poor at countering mines they could have significant effect if laid off American SSBN bases by whatever means.

6. To some extent, any drop in US SSBN numbers simplifies the USSR’s application of resources to the anti-SSBN task. As Ohio-class ships enter service through the early 1990s, they will make up for the retirement in the early 1980s of the George Washington and Ethan Allen classes of submarines. The long-term trend, however, is for the SSBN fleet to drop again, beginning in 1993, from over forty units to possibly twenty or less before the year 2000.

FACTORS DEGRADING THE USSR’s ANTI-SSBN POTENTIAL

1. America’s solutions for ensuring the security of its SSBN fleet are not wholly identical to those that the Soviet Union applies to the protection of its own ballistic missile-carrying fleet, but America’s dedication to this task is no less. The SSBN Security Programme closely monitors the USSR’s ASW developments and conducts experiments to test the feasibility of different ASW search