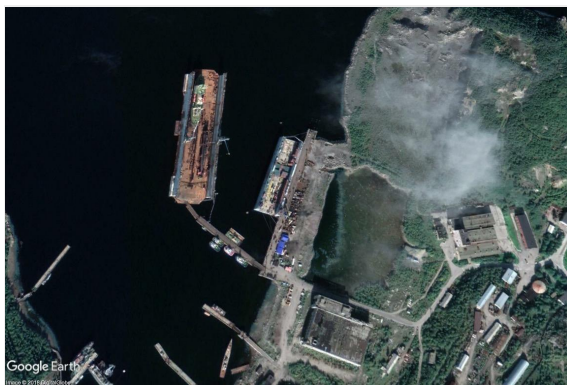


RUSSIA'S DRY DOCK ACCIDENT COULD HAVE FAR LARGER REPERCUSSIONS THAN A DAMAGED CARRIER

A day after Russia's massive [PD-50 drydock suddenly sank](#) underneath the country's [only aircraft carrier](#), the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, as it was receiving a [long-awaited overhaul](#) in frigid Murmansk, just how big a deal this may end up being for the Russian Navy is becoming clearer. The dry dock, which is the largest of its kind in Russian hands, appears to have sunk at first on a steep incline before it disappeared totally beneath the water's surface. Russian officials are now saying that it could be many months before it is raised from the seabed 160 feet below and that doing so would be a very tedious and delicate operation. That's *if* they decide to salvage it at all.

Regardless, PD-50 services all types of vessels that make up Russia's most powerful fleet, including its largest submarines. So leaving it out of action for years, or even losing it altogether, would be a major hit for the Northern Fleet and the Russian Navy's overall readiness.

The incident supposedly occurred as the result of an electrical interruption during a refloating operation for the *Admiral Kuznetsov*. The hulking floating apparatus' pumps were stuck on, rapidly filling its ballast tanks. Some 60 people had to escape from the sinking dry dock, many of which ended up in the water. In total, some 70 people were evacuated from the port facility. As it stands now, four people were injured in the process and one remains missing—a senior mechanic. It's worth noting that the near-freezing waters near Kola Bay would give someone just a matter of minutes to get to a dry place before succumbing to hypothermia.



GOOGLE EARTH

The 82nd Shipbuilding Plant and the PD-50 are situated between Murmansk and Severomorsk.

It seems that the accident may not have been a fluke and [a criminal investigation](#) into possible safety violations that at least contributed to the mishap is currently underway. A lawsuit also looks all but certain as well, *Barents Observer* [reports](#):

Although shipyard officials quickly claimed that the carrier was unharmed in the incident and that its refit schedule is left unchanged, other official sources have since said that the ship received a 15 foot by 12 foot gash in its hull near the waterline and that the crane that crashed on its deck potentially did significant damage to exposed mechanical systems. As we mentioned in [our previous piece](#), the fact

that there are conflicting reports, one of which seems ridiculously premature, isn't surprising as Russia has a [track record of downplaying](#) or not even admitting obvious naval shipyard accidents.

This image shows just one side of the heavily listing dry dock still above water:

The *Kuznetsov* is floating, albeit with a crane laying across its deck, and we really don't know exactly the extent of the damage. If there are flooded mechanical spaces, the ship could require extensive and *very* costly repairs. Maybe most concerning is the fact that there may be nowhere to even make those repairs as PD-50 was the only Russian dry dock that we know of that could handle the country's lone aircraft carrier.

This tweet shows the crane laying across the Kuznetsov's deck, also a side note, check out the late model Cadillac. Seems like an interesting vehicle to have up there in the Arctic Circle and in a naval shipyard of all places:

Speaking of accidents, PD-50 has been involved in a number of them in the past, including an especially harrowing incident back in 2011 when the *Yekaterinburg* (K-84), a nuclear ballistic missile submarine caught fire while drydocked in PD-50. The sub was loaded with nuclear-armed ballistic missiles and torpedoes. Crews flooded PD-50 twice to put out the inferno that went on for an entire day. You can read all about the incident and see remarkable pictures taken during it [on this Russian website](#).

Regardless of the *Kuznetsov's* current state, it's pretty clear that the fate of the ship is tied directly to the operability of the PD-50 dry dock and has been for many years. Some commenters have mentioned that the dry dock originally came from Sweden during the 1980s, and considering the poor state of Russian large shipbuilding capabilities and sanctions, it is unlikely one could be sourced from Sweden this time around or built indigenously. Regardless, even if it was possible, doing so would take years.

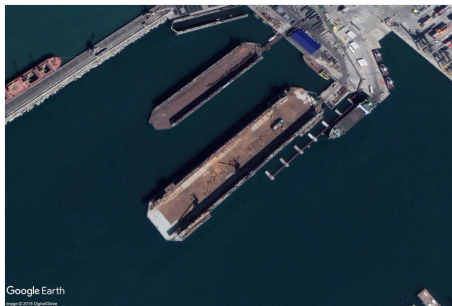
This video clip looks promising at first, that is until you realize you are looking at the smaller dry dock that works as a utility area at the port, with PD-50 now totally submerged deep below the surface of the water:

The fact is that many others ships also depend on PD-50 as well, including the Northern Fleet's potent submarine cadre, which includes everything from smaller diesel-electric attack submarines to [hulking ballistic missile carrying](#) 'boomers.' According to satellite images, Russia's submarines seem to have used the facility more than any other vessels. A cursory look of the sprawling constellation of naval installations in the region turns up no other dry

dock that seems adept at hosting the largest of Russia's submarines, with all being in the sub-450 foot size range. And even if there was one, the capacity loss of such an important asset, one that can be seen servicing multiple vessels at one time due to its huge size, is a major blow for the Russian Navy and its fledgling modernization efforts.

There *is* a large floating dry dock in Novorossiysk on the Black Sea that carries the designation PD-190. It measures about 75 feet shorter than PD-50 at around 1,000 feet and its internal bay is about 60 feet narrower, at roughly 175 feet wide. It isn't clear if this dry dock has the ability to accommodate *Kuznetsov*, the beam difference is quite large, especially considering *Kuznetsov's* big flight deck overhangs, but it would be able to accommodate Russia's largest submarines.

Actually doing so would mean a long towed journey through the Bosphorus Strait, across the Mediterranean, into the Atlantic Ocean, and up into the Barents Sea. It would also mean the loss of large ship dry dock capability on the Black Sea. Another smaller floating dry dock, measuring approximately 815 feet long with a bay width of about 125 feet, stays very busy servicing Russia's Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol, Crimea. Keep in mind that Russia has never built an aircraft carrier itself and doesn't have elaborate facilities to service them. Those ships were built in Soviet Ukraine.



While this dry dock may satisfy some of Russia's most pressing operational concerns that came as a result of the sinking of PD-50—like keeping their boomers maintained—if it can't accommodate *Kuznetsov*, the future of the carrier will have to be deeply in doubt. And even if Russia decides to transfer the dock to the Northern Fleet, it will take time to do so and it's not

clear where it would even go once it arrives. Any way you slice it, a gap in maintenance for the Northern Fleet's most power vessels is likely to occur for the months to come.

Finally, I think it's worth mentioning that there is a real possibility that Russia could at least insinuate that some sort of cyber attack or sabotage was partially to blame for this event. Doing so would deflect responsibility for yet another in a [long stream of embarrassing incidents](#) involving the *Admiral Kuznetsov*.

If high-up Russian officials [are willing to allege](#) a U.S. Navy P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol and surveillance aircraft took control of terrorist drones that attacked Moscow's airbase in Syria, then accusing the U.S. of cyber meddling seems like very low-hanging fruit. The potential fallout from the loss of this unique dry dock, and from the fact that the Russian Navy still

relies heavily on what clearly are weak points of potential failure, is a big pill to swallow for the Kremlin and the Ministry of Defense.

We will continue to keep you up to date as this story unfolds.

Contact the author: Tyler@thedrive.com

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By Tyler Rogoway

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RUSSIA'S CARRIER WAS DESIGNED TO BE HEAVILY ARMED EVEN WITHOUT ITS AIR WING

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