



Russia: Project 09851 Khabarovsk and the Poseidon Strategic Undersea System

Sea Trials, Force-Development Implications and Future Outlook

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GEOGRAPHIC AREA

Russia / Northern Fleet

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Executive Summary

Project 09851 Khabarovsk has entered factory sea trials after a prolonged fitting-out period at Severodvinsk. The milestone moves Russia closer to fielding a purpose-built carrier for the 2M39 Poseidon nuclear-powered, nuclear-capable unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV). It does not establish operational readiness: propulsion, manoeuvring, diving, onboard machinery and integrated systems must still be validated, followed by state acceptance and weapon-integration testing.

Khabarovsk is more consequential for long-term force structure than Belgorod, a heavily modified Project 09852 special-purpose submarine. Project 09851 appears to be a dedicated design organised around Poseidon carriage and may be repeatable. The programme therefore indicates intent to create an operational architecture, even if the eventual force remains small.

Poseidon is best assessed as a strategic penetration and deterrence system, not a conventional torpedo. Its proposed endurance, route flexibility and deep-water approach options could complicate warning and anti-submarine planning. The system supplements rather than replaces Russia's ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs). Industrial limits, test complexity, command requirements and specialised support make a small, centrally managed force more plausible than mass deployment.

The Situation

Recent reporting indicates that Khabarovsk left the Severodvinsk area in mid-August 2026 and entered the White Sea for its first factory sea trials. This followed roughly nine months of fitting-out, harbour tests and degaussing after the boat's rollout and launch sequence in late 2025. The sequence is consistent with a transition from dockside integration to initial propulsion and manoeuvring trials, although the programme remains unusually opaque.

Sea trials mark the start of a validation cycle. A successful factory phase would normally be followed by state trials, additional sensor and combat-system checks, and testing associated with the intended weapon. The timetable for full operational acceptance is uncertain. Open evidence is insufficient to assess Khabarovsk as a continuously deployable strategic platform; the defensible conclusion is that Russia has reduced, but not eliminated, technical risk by moving from construction and harbour integration to active sea validation.

Platform and Weapon Characteristics



The report's profile illustration is retained below as an analytical reconstruction, not an official shipyard plan.

Project 09851 is assessed as a nuclear-powered special-purpose submarine and strategic UUV carrier built by Sevmash to a Rubin Central Design Bureau design. Its keel was laid in July 2014; rollout occurred in November 2025, with the boat subsequently placed in the water during fitting-out. Estimated length is approximately 135–136 metres. Displacement is commonly assessed at about 10,000 tonnes surfaced, but the exact figure is unconfirmed. Propulsion is nuclear, probably a single-shaft arrangement with pump-jet propulsion, broadly drawing on Borei-family technology.

Poseidon 2M39: Assessed Characteristics

The primary payload is widely reported to be up to six 2M39 Poseidon UUVs; the arrangement has not been officially detailed. Conventional torpedo and self-defence armament, crew size, and final fleet assignment remain uncertain. A Pacific Fleet assignment is widely reported, but operational basing and readiness arrangements are not confirmed. The expected role is strategic deterrence and special-purpose undersea operations, including delivery of long-range autonomous nuclear-capable vehicles.

Poseidon is described as an intercontinental-range, nuclear-powered UUV. Dimensions are commonly estimated at around 24 metres long and 1.6 metres in diameter from disclosed imagery and technical reporting. The compact nuclear powerplant is intended to provide very long endurance. Russian claims and secondary reporting frequently cite operation to approximately 1,000 metres; independent validation is limited. Very high speed is claimed, often in the range of 70–100 knots, but sustainable performance is uncertain. Nuclear capability is central to the concept, while credible public confirmation of warhead yield is absent and reported figures vary widely. The operational concept is a long-range autonomous approach against coastal or maritime strategic targets along non-ballistic trajectories and deep-water routes.

System Assessment

Platform architecture. Project 09851 appears to draw on Borei-family technologies while omitting the ballistic-missile compartment and reorganising the hull around large forward weapon interfaces. This could preserve elements of reactor, propulsion and submarine-construction know-how while producing a more specialised carrier than the modified Belgorod. A purpose-built host suggests that Poseidon is not being treated solely as an experimental payload dependent on a unique platform. It indicates intent to develop a repeatable architecture, though not necessarily a large fleet.

Weapon-system maturity. Poseidon has advanced beyond a purely conceptual programme, but individual tests do not demonstrate operational maturity. Unknowns include propulsion and guidance performance, storage, maintenance cycles, launch reliability, communications doctrine, mission programming, safety, warhead integration and the command procedures required for a nuclear autonomous system. These system-of-systems requirements may prove more demanding than the ability to launch and propel the vehicle.

Survivability and detectability. Descriptions of Poseidon as ‘unstoppable’ overstate what is known. A long-endurance vehicle using deep water and non-ballistic routes could bypass fixed ballistic-missile-defence architectures and require broad ocean surveillance, seabed sensors, mobile anti-submarine warfare (ASW) forces and terminal-area protection. Detection and interception are technically conceivable; reliable wide-area coverage is the harder problem.

Strategic utility. Its most credible role is an assured retaliatory or coercive strategic capability, not routine warfighting. Employment would carry nuclear-escalation consequences comparable to other strategic nuclear systems. The programme can affect planning before operational deployment by adding uncertainty over possible attack axes and compelling adversaries to allocate resources to a new undersea threat vector.

Operational and Strategic Implications

For the Russian Navy, Khabarovsk adds a specialised strategic mission to a force already balancing SSBN deterrence, multi-purpose nuclear attack and cruise-missile submarine tasks, and special-mission operations. It will compete for skilled crews, secure basing, maintenance infrastructure, escorts and support assets. Political priority may improve access to resources, but availability will remain subject to the industrial and technical constraints affecting other complex nuclear-powered platforms.

For NATO ASW, the challenge has two stages: tracking or constraining the carrier before weapon release, then detecting and potentially intercepting a long-endurance autonomous vehicle. The latter could require a separate architecture, increasing the value of persistent undersea sensing, seabed arrays, autonomous surveillance vehicles, maritime patrol aircraft, attack submarines and data-fusion networks covering northern approaches and likely transit corridors.

For nuclear warning and arms control, Poseidon falls outside the classic operational model centred on intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Its strategic purpose may be comparable, but warning timelines, trajectories and verification requirements differ. This could complicate future accounting and encourage broader definitions of strategic nuclear delivery systems.

For crisis stability, a special-purpose submarine leaving port could be conducting trials, routine training, intelligence support or strategic-patrol preparation. An adversary that interprets its movement as preparation for nuclear employment may intensify tracking, shadowing or efforts to neutralise it. Such interaction could raise the risk of escalation at sea before a weapon is launched.

What to Watch Next

Key indicators are completion of factory sea trials followed by state trials and naval acceptance; launch-system testing from Khabarovsk itself rather than an experimental carrier; construction of additional Project 09851/09853 hulls and evidence of serial production; dedicated Poseidon storage, handling, maintenance and security infrastructure at likely Northern or Pacific Fleet facilities; escort patterns, support ships, range activity and restricted maritime areas consistent with weapon testing; and changes in Russian nuclear doctrine, exercises or command structures that clarify integration into strategic forces.

Future Outlook

The most likely development over the next several years is a gradual emergence of a small but operationally credible Poseidon force, rather than rapid mass deployment. If trials, state acceptance and weapon integration proceed without major setbacks, Khabarovsk could reach initial operational status after further testing and crew certification; the exact timeline remains uncertain and may extend beyond Russian public schedules.

A second purpose-built carrier would be more significant than Khabarovsk's commissioning alone. One boat can demonstrate the concept; two or more could support training cycles, maintenance rotation and the beginnings of persistent availability. Follow-on Project 09853 construction is therefore the clearest indicator of whether Moscow intends a durable force or a limited strategic niche.

Poseidon is very unlikely to replace SSBN-based deterrence. The more plausible model is complementary: Borei/Borei-A SSBNs remain the mature, routinely exercised backbone, while Poseidon carriers offer another penetration axis and a hedge against future missile-defence, space-based tracking and conventional counterforce capabilities. The limiting factor may shift from the vehicle to the support architecture: secure nuclear handling, specialised maintenance, trained crews, protected bases, mission planning and command arrangements suited to an autonomous weapon. These requirements favour a controlled force with few platforms but high strategic priority.

The source outlook judges completion of Khabarovsk's trials and entry into service likely barring major reactor, propulsion or integration problems. At least one additional purpose-built carrier is assessed as more likely than not, although industrial timing is uncertain. Routine high-volume Poseidon deployment is unlikely because of its strategic role, cost, complexity and support burden; replacement of SSBN deterrence is very unlikely. Expansion of NATO undersea surveillance focused on carriers and transit routes is assessed as highly likely because the system challenges existing warning and ASW architectures.

Western planning should treat Poseidon as a persistent threat without accepting every claimed parameter. Priorities are carrier detection, launch-window identification, sustained undersea surveillance and protection of selected coastal nodes through integrated ASW and seabed awareness.

Overall Assessment

Khabarovsk is a strategic force-development milestone with greater long-term than immediate combat significance. Sea trials move the programme into active validation but do not confirm readiness of the submarine or Poseidon. The purpose-built design points to a new strategic undersea delivery system, probably in limited numbers.

Successful weapon integration, follow-on hull construction and a sustainable operational cycle are decisive indicators. Until then, Poseidon's range, speed, depth, survivability and availability remain reported or assessed characteristics, not established performance.

Methodological Note

Information cut-off: 3 September 2026. Technical values remain reported or assessed. The profile is an analytical reconstruction; later developments are excluded.