

1985

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Recommended Citation

Garde, Hans (1985) "Alliance Navies and the Threat in the Northern Waters," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 38 : No. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol38/iss2/6>

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Alliance Navies and the Threat in the Northern Waters

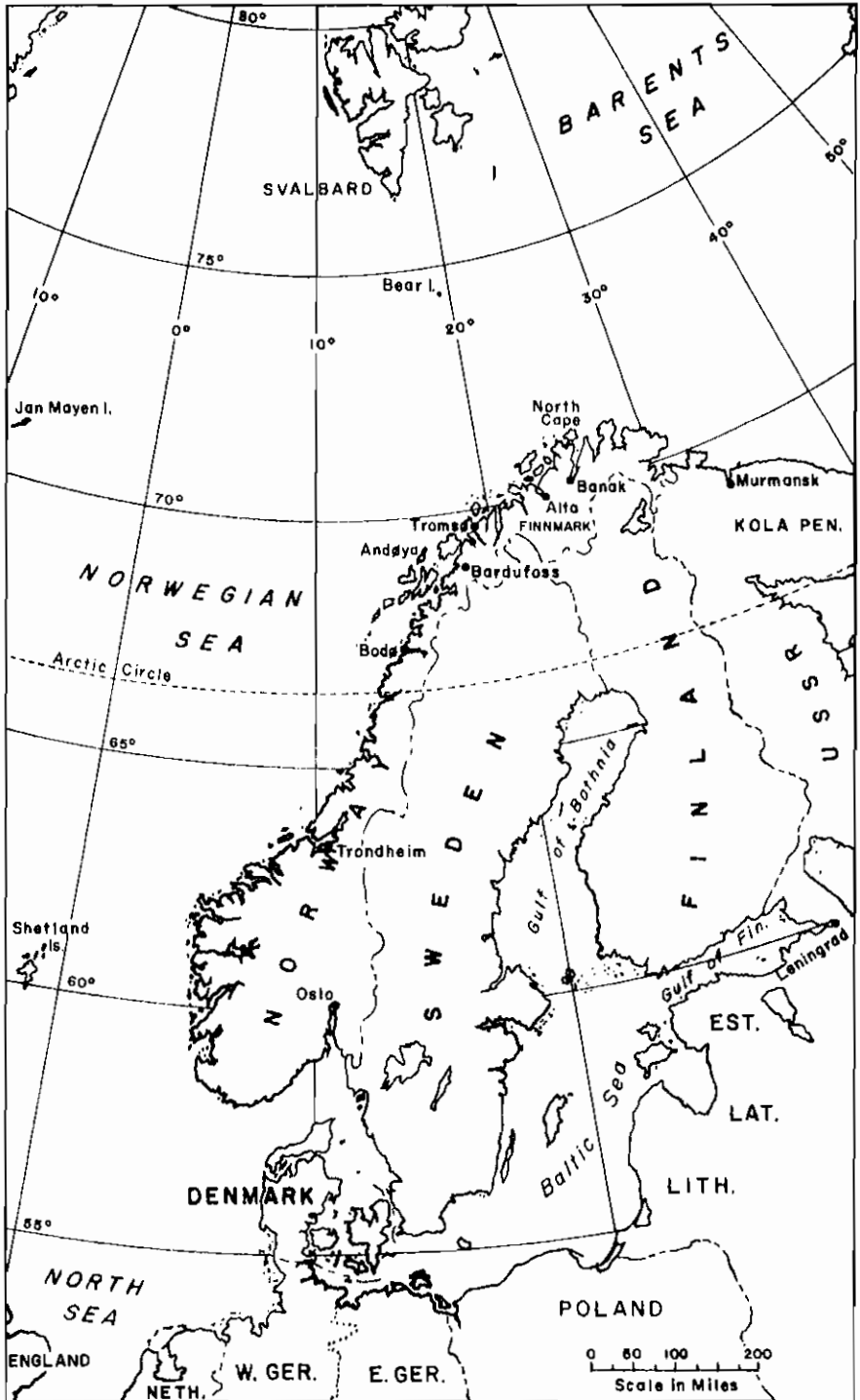
Commander Hans Garde, Royal Danish Navy

The northern European waters are an area of strategic change and innovation where the maritime security of the Western Alliance has long been recognized to be of decisive importance in any confrontation between East and West. During the Second World War, the Soviet Navy was pushed back on both northern maritime avenues. In the Baltic, it was tied up and destroyed in Leningrad where the sailors participated in its defense as infantry. In the far north, the convoys to Murmansk, which supplied the Soviet Union with 15 percent of the material necessary for the land battle, were run by the Western Allies alone.

As a victor of the war the Soviet Union extended its control over the Baltic coastlines from a mere 75 nautical miles in 1939 to more than 1,000 miles. Capitalizing on this, the Soviet Union has developed air and naval bases—including more than 50 percent of the Soviet shipbuilding capacity—training facilities and a balanced Baltic fleet capable of asserting sea control over what has today become a Soviet Mediterranean.

The Soviet Central Front forces are dependent upon the lines of communication from the industrial parts of the Soviet Union through Poland and across the Baltic to central Europe. The largest nonaviation warship built in any country since the Second World War, the *Kirov* was constructed and made operational in the Baltic before she left there in 1980. A year later, the Soviet antisubmarine carrier *Kiev* entered the Baltic in order to participate with more than 100 other ships, many aircraft, and troops from more than eight divisions in exercise Zapad 81, which reportedly tested new tactical concepts for amphibious operations.

Besides its value as a line of communication to the forward deployed troops in central Europe, the Baltic is important as the main base area for construction and training. The Soviet Union has developed land, air, and naval forces which, by themselves or in cooperation with the allies in the Warsaw Pact, have the mission to ensure Soviet sea control in the Baltic.



They far outnumber the only Nato forces in the area, those of Denmark and Germany, which are tailored to maintain sea control in the Baltic Approaches and, marginally, to exert sea denial in the Baltic proper.

At the northern approaches to the Barents Sea a similar development has taken place. The Soviet Northern Fleet has, since its creation in 1933, grown to become the most important among the four Soviet fleets. Behind this development was the clear recognition of the submarine's capacity to interdict the transatlantic sea lanes of communication.

At the beginning of the Second World War the Soviet submarine force was the largest in the world. The Soviets had a fleet of 165 submarines, compared to 57 in the German Navy, and 95 in the US Navy.¹ However, the value of the Russian submarine force in World War II did not compare with either the German or the American forces. But the Soviets learned their history well, particularly the lessons of Admiral Doenitz. Since the Second World War, the submarine has been the most important warship in the Soviet Navy. Its continuing role has been interdiction of the transatlantic sea lanes of communication, the glue of the Atlantic Alliance, and countering of Western forces for projection of power ashore. A more recent mission is as second strike strategic force.

"Truly, the Soviet Navy has been used for political purposes. Without firing a shot in anger, it has promoted an image of being capable of interposing itself between the United States and its northern allies."

The Soviets learned not only from German success but also from their mistakes. Admiral Gorshkov has repeatedly emphasized the importance of cooperation between submarines and other forces, primarily attack aircraft and sea control forces in defense of the base areas. The ice-free Kola Peninsula provides the Soviet Union with its best, although somewhat geographically restrained, access to the world's oceans. The Northern Fleet will form the bulk of the forces pitted against Nato strike force if war comes. Previously, the Nato force could operate from a position of strength. Now, however, the combined Soviet buildup and lack of a suitable Nato response have created doubt about the capacity of the Alliance to enter into the northern seas with reasonable assurance of gaining sea control of the Norwegian Sea, let alone the Barents or Baltic seas.

If sea control cannot be established in the Norwegian Sea, it follows that sea control will be in dispute in the North Sea. So, what has in fact happened in the Nordic area since the end of the Second World War? The correlation of forces, as the Soviets would say, has changed from the Alliance being able to assert sea control in all four Northern seas to a situation where it will be able to do so with less certainty and only after considerable time. Obviously, such

a change has political significance. Should the trend continue, the Soviet Navy will be able to create an impression of dominance in the north between the Nordic Nato members and their American allies.

Projection of Power Ashore

The military situation in the north may be characterized as follows:

- There has been a buildup of the Soviet Northern Fleet without a corresponding reduction in the Baltic Fleet.
- Primary Soviet naval forces tasks are to provide an assured second-strike capability, to counter Nato's sea-based nuclear strike forces, and to intercept allied naval forces and disrupt their sea lanes of communication across the Atlantic. These tasks would be made easier if the Soviets could gain control of the littoral around the Northeast Atlantic prior to or simultaneously with the outbreak of an armed conflict.
- Once hostilities start the increased Soviet naval and air capabilities in the area will make it more difficult to bring external reinforcements into the Nordic countries by ship and by air.

An added Soviet ability to threaten the Atlantic sea lanes would further aggravate the problem of getting timely reinforcements to the Nordic Nato countries in an emergency. A key assumption to a northern European strategy is an early reinforcement of the Nordic area. This is critical to the credibility of deterrence and to the stability in the region in general, and it is of decisive importance for the cohesion of the Alliance. As a result, Denmark, Norway and the United States have reached new agreements about rapid air reinforcements and prepositioning of heavy equipment.

Since its reorganization in the early 1960s, Soviet Naval Infantry has never been larger than ten percent of the US Marine Corps and its ability to project power ashore is limited in a global context. In a regional context, the situation is different, particularly in an attack without much warning. Along the shores of northern Europe, the Baltic Sea unites the Warsaw Pact countries, just as the Mediterranean does for the southern shores of Nato. In the Baltic area the Warsaw Pact has a Soviet naval infantry regiment, a Polish sea landing division, and elements of an East German motorized rifle division which are trained in amphibious warfare. These forces comprise more than 10,000 troops. The naval infantry units are extremely mobile; they are equipped with a considerable number of tanks; and they have the necessary combat support units to enable them to carry out independent operations during the initial phase of a major landing operation.

Particularly remarkable is the concentration in the Baltic of the Warsaw Pact's amphibious lift capability. The landing ships available in the area can simultaneously transport half of the forces with all their equipment—one third of the tonnage of the Polish Navy is made up by amphibious ships. But

Naval Infantry is only the spearhead. Follow-up forces will normally be army units using merchant ships and the Pact has sufficient lift capacity in the Baltic Sea to lift several motorized rifle divisions.

In the Barents Sea, the situation is similar except that the Soviet Union has no allied support. For operations along the Norwegian coast and in the Baltic, the introduction of roll-on/roll-off ships within the past few years has enhanced the amphibious lift capacity available for an attack into the northern area. Spearheaded by amphibious forces, protected by sea control forces, and supported by several hundred shore-based aircraft, the Soviet Union has a modern versatile air-ground-sea capability for the seizure of northern areas essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign in the Atlantic. Therefore, the Soviet Union has not only pushed its defense zones outward, it has also built up forces to project power ashore within the expanded Soviet defense zones.

While the Soviets have made progress, the Alliance forces have been on a different tack. Since the late 1960s there has been a considerable reduction of the number of ships and aircraft in the allied navies and air forces. New building has not kept up with retirement of older ships and aircraft. Furthermore, the diversion of US projection power to areas outside the Nato treaty area have tended to promote impressions of increased Soviet capabilities to project power into the Nordic area and relatively decreased US capabilities to reinforce and resupply the northern countries beyond the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. In other words, the Alliance's conventional deterrence has lost some of its credibility.

Deterrence

Alliance nuclear deterrence has also lost some credibility with the American acceptance of nuclear parity in order to stop, or at least control, the nuclear arms race. Developments in this field have brought and kept the Nordic area in the middle of East-West strategic issues. Soviet exercises and deployment patterns support the importance that the Soviets attach to the ballistic missile submarine. It is the capital ship in the Soviet Union and there exists a related emphasis by the remaining forces to act in defense of the base and operating areas for the ballistic missile submarines. The introduction of the ballistic missile submarine caused four developments in the Soviet Union.

First, it required that the Soviets direct considerable resources to antisubmarine warfare. To overcome a technological gap and defend against Western ballistic submarines, the Soviets launched a large antisubmarine warfare program.

Second, the Soviets deploy these units forward into the operating zones of Western ballistic submarines to supplement the defense of the inner Soviet

base areas. These zones became known as the outer and inner defense zones, and from the beginning they coincided roughly with the Norwegian and Barents seas.

Third, the Soviets have worked to increase the range of their ballistic missiles. Ranges in excess of 4,000 nautical miles allow the newest classes of Soviet ballistic missile submarines to remain in the north, in the vicinity of the Kola Peninsula. They need no longer pass into the Atlantic as they can fire their missiles against targets in the United States and Europe from the inner defense zone of the Barents Sea. Consequently, it appears that the Soviets intend to keep many if not most of their ballistic submarines north, to provide them with direct protection, and to devote a significant proportion of their general purpose forces to that task.² This means that Western antisubmarine assets, i.e., primarily attack submarines have "to penetrate deeply into hostile seas to conduct sustained independent operations" as Vice Admiral Nils Thunman, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Submarine Warfare says.³

Fourth, since 1976, the Soviet Union has begun to deploy older ballistic missile submarines in the inner defense zone of the Baltic Sea. This development has caused particular concern in the Nordic countries where it is seen as an obstruction to the idea of establishing a nuclear weapons free zone in the Nordic area—an idea first put forward in 1958 with a Soviet proposal to Denmark and Norway. In 1963, the Finnish President Kekkonen made his first proposal for a nuclear weapons free zone consisting of the Nordic countries. Again in May 1978, Finland proposed the Kekkonen Plan in an effort to preserve the Nordic countries as an area of low tension.

In Finland the Kekkonen Plan enjoys wide backing and, consequently, the accelerating debate in the other Nordic countries was followed with interest from Helsinki. But the other Nordic governments have expressed great reluctance since a nuclear free zone would be highly favorable to the Soviet Union. In essence it would transform northern Europe into a shield for the Baltic and Leningrad Military Districts, including the Kola Peninsula—a fact recognized by the Soviet Union.⁴ While the Soviets pursue a policy aimed at establishing a Nordic nuclear free zone,⁵ they simultaneously seek to turn their inner defense zones on both the northern and northeastern maritime avenues into sanctuaries or bastions for their ballistic missile submarines. Thus, Soviet ballistic submarine deployments require US attack submarines to patrol in the waters of the northern seas and US antisubmarine warfare aircraft to operate above them.

Presence

Governments employ naval forces in conjunction with other instruments of diplomacy in order to demonstrate an intent, to support political initiatives, or to deter action considered inimical to their own national interests. The

heavy burden on American defense resources has tended to give the Northern Flank of Nato a low priority for deployed US naval presence compared with such other areas as the Southern Flank, East Asia, and the Indian Ocean. In these areas, the United States is maintaining a naval presence with preventive deployments. This enables the Western world to show a presence in peacetime, which when measured in figures, such as ship days out-of-area, can be compared with corresponding figures for the Soviet Navy. While such figures are relative and do not necessarily illustrate combat strength in a given area, they tend to be used—and perhaps manipulated—in each country's interpretation of the credibility of an ally or the intentions of an opponent.* In the period 1965-79 in the Atlantic, for instance, the number of ship days out-of-area showed a Soviet increase by a factor of 12 from 1,100 to 13,500 while the US decreased from 36,200 to 10,080. On the other hand, the Soviet figures have been relatively constant since the forward deployment was completed in the early 1970s, while the US figures show an increasing trend over the same period.⁶

In the Northeast Atlantic, the United States has for many years relied on a minimal naval presence in the form of reactive deployments. Given fleet disposition, the US Navy might only be able to respond with surface ships to a crisis in the area after considerable transit time from the normal operating areas of the Second Fleet. General stability in the Nordic area, traditional command relationship within the Alliance, and allied presence in the north have caused successive US governments to rely on a reactive deployment of forces into the area, should need arise. When viewing the relative changes that have taken place in the sizes of the US and Soviet fleets, it would seem prudent that an increased presence, although not necessarily a permanent presence, would have a stabilizing and deterrent effect. Forward deployments give an unmistakable credibility as well as increased capability to the participation of the United States in the defense of allied territory.

The Soviets have managed to create the impression that they have a global navy. We in the Western world have often helped them by exaggerating the Soviet global naval capability. However, in the northern waters the Soviet naval capability is more formidable than elsewhere, partly because of the proximity to the base areas and partly because the Western naval presence is neither extensive nor persistent.

Before 1960 Soviet naval activity was limited to local exercises in the vicinity of the base areas and a few ships were interchanged between the Northern and the Baltic fleets. Gradually, the pattern has been extended. First exercises had Soviet ships covering the Baltic and the Barents seas. Then units were regularly used for deployments to the Mediterranean and beyond

*For a discussion on the political implications of naval presence, see Thomas H. Erzold, "The Soviet Union in the Mediterranean," *Naval War College Review*, May-June 1984, pp. 4-22.
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while exercises gradually increased in frequency and area coverage to include the North Sea, the Danish Straits and the entire Norwegian Sea. It is through such activities that the Soviet Union has managed to give an impression of dominance in the area, the perception of a legitimate forward defense area down to the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap, and raise the doubts within the Western Alliance of its capability to contest Soviet control beyond the gap. Truly, the Soviet Navy has been used for political purposes. Without firing a shot in anger it has promoted an image of being capable of interposing itself between the United States and its northern allies.

In peacetime the perceived Soviet naval strength could be used to try to exert political pressure on the littoral states. The political shadow of regional military superiority could represent, for the time being, a greater challenge to the countries of the Northern Flank and to the Alliance than the more distant danger of a shooting war with the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union does increasingly flex its military muscles in the area, and it does so with increasing self-confidence. In late April and early May 1983, the Norwegians hunted a submarine in their internal territorial waters in the Bergen area. That was one of the major hunts. According to Norwegian statistics, it has had 122 certain, probable or possible submarine incursions reported from 1969 up to and including 1982.⁷ In 1981, when a Soviet nuclear-armed submarine went aground in a military area well inside Swedish territorial waters, it was demonstrated that the Soviet Union would not hesitate to operate its submarines on neutral territory. With a reference to Nazi Germany, the Social-Democratic Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs characterized the intrusion as an act of the mentality of a master race.

But this was hardly the last Soviet submarine violation. In October 1982, four submarines were involved in the incident in the Swedish Haersfjorden, where two submarines simultaneously operated in the central archipelago of the capital Stockholm. The bipartisan Swedish Submarine Defense Commission concluded in its report in April 1983 that the number of submarine violations had increased considerably in 1982; and based on an analysis of conceivable motives, "the commission saw fit to point out the probability of motives of a military operational character."⁸ This is certainly not regarded as being in harmony with the efforts to maintain stability and promote détente in the Nordic area.

Since the founding of Nato in 1949, the Alliance's strategic requirements have remained remarkably consistent. They can be separated into several broad categories: the requirement to deter Soviet military initiative against Western Europe, and if not successful, to fight a large-scale war; and the requirement to guarantee sea lanes of communication between North America and Western Europe.⁹ Since Nato's military strategy rests on the certainty of timely US reinforcements, that certainty in turn must depend on confidence in the ability to use the Atlantic seaways in crisis and in war.

Nato's political and military health is directly related to the level of confidence the leaders in Europe have concerning those supposed certainties.¹⁰ And the value of increased US naval presence in the northern seas is to raise this level of confidence.

The Alliance has tried to take steps to improve the situation. All the littoral states have emphasized an increased presence. The German Navy has extended its area of operations into the Norwegian Sea—partly in response to the US requests of increased allied burden sharing within the treaty area of the Alliance, when the United States was covering outside contingencies. But no European allied effort can really substitute an American presence. The required message is a sustained US commitment, not a reduced one. The fear of escalation is most inhibiting for the Soviets, when faced with a US naval presence.

Fortunately, to an extent that has been the US response. Traditionally, the Second Fleet participates once a year in a major fleet exercise with US Marines reinforcing Denmark or Norway; and recently US naval units of frigate and destroyer size have commenced an annual exercise with the littoral Nato navies in the Baltic. It is such exercises and the deployment of the Standing Naval Force Atlantic into the Nordic area that support the Nordic Nato members and counterbalance the Soviet image of domination in the area. These forces have a very important symbolic and political value and, besides, they familiarize the US Navy with the special operating conditions in the area.

It is important to maintain a trend of increased US naval presence in the Nordic area. The need is not necessarily for a permanent presence as in the Mediterranean. It is more a question of being there and at getting accustomed to the environmental conditions in the north—where the Soviets operate and where the US Navy most likely will be called upon to reinforce and defend, together with the northern allies. US submarines have learned to operate in the high north. They are familiar with arctic operations. Increasingly the surface units are gaining similar experience. In 1983, a US destroyer visited Greenland for the first time in many years. Such a visit gives professional experience—all sailors know the importance of having been at a place before—and conveys the important political message of commitment. What is needed is presence of a character that gives reassurance of commitment to allies, that shows neutrals in the area that the Soviets need not dominate the Northern seas, and that the United States does not concede to any image of Soviet domination of the northern waters.

The Nordic area has been an area of strategic change and innovation concurrently with the developments in submarine and antisubmarine warfare. It is on this background, the Soviet Union has managed to create an impression of dominance in the north which has cast doubt on the ability of

Nato to get reinforcements to the general area. Simultaneously, the Soviets are working to turn the Nordic countries into a nuclear weapons free zone, as a shield for the Barents and Baltic bastions for Soviet ballistic missile submarines. The Soviet naval expansion into the northern seas has witnessed Soviet submarines intruding into sensitive and sovereign waters of the Nordic countries—neutrals as well as aligned—in a way hitherto unseen in peacetime. The United States has begun to increase its naval presence in the area. It is not a continuing presence, but one with a positive trend that signals US concern over developments. Further increases in the US naval presence would indicate to the Soviet Union that the United States is backing its northern allies and emphasizing its commitment to resupply and reinforce Europe, should the need arise. More than anything else, an increased US naval presence would counterbalance the impressions promoted by the Soviet Navy of dominance in the northern maritime avenues between the United States and its northern allies.

The world judges US priorities in part by where and how it deploys its forces in peacetime. In the Northeast Atlantic when considering the fundamental lessons from the Second World War, changing military technology, and the recent Soviet developments in submarine and antisubmarine warfare, the best US response to the regional Soviet preponderance and self-confidence is an increased visible presence of the growing US Navy.

Notes

1. Chief of Naval Operations, *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments* (Washington: Department of the Navy, 1981), p. 3.
2. Robert G. Weinland, *War and Peace in the North* (Alexandria: Center for Naval Analyses, Professional Paper 265, 1979), p. 7.
3. Orr Kelly, "Sub Duels Under Polar Ice: How Ready is U.S.?" *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 March 1984, p. 36.
4. Erling Bjoel, *Nordic Security* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1983), p. 43.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Chief of Naval Operations, p. 16.
7. Speech by Rear Admiral Roy Breivik, Royal Norwegian Navy, as quoted in Carl Bildt, "Sweden and the Soviet Submarines," *Survival*, July/August 1983, p. 168.
8. Betaenkande av ubaattskyddskommissionen, *All moeta ubaattshotet* (Stockholm: Statens offentlige utredningar, 1983:13, 1983), p. 80.
9. Thomas H. Fetzold, *Defense or Delusion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 199.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

