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Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley

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The Influence of the Northern Flank upon the Mastery of the Seas

by

General Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley

Let us begin at the beginning. In the beginning there was no Nato, only a world recovering from the second world war within the first half of the twentieth century. With the defeat of the Axis alliance in 1945, the two nations of North America, together with those of their wartime allies in northwestern Europe, almost at once began rapid demobilization of their armed forces. The United States embarked upon an imaginative and generous program of economic assistance to former allies and foes. Almost everywhere, the mood of peoples and governments were in consonance for regeneration towards prosperity in a world at peace.

Almost everywhere, yet not in the government of the Soviet Union dominated by J.V. Stalin. No doubt regeneration was a policy of that government but it was undertaken simultaneously with an extension of Russian power underwritten by the Red army. All capacity for democracy or independence was removed from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Rumania. It was not for want of trying that Austria, Yugoslavia, Greece and, in part, Iran were lost to control by the USSR. American, British, and French resolve were tested by the blockade of Berlin.

It is necessary to lay out this baseline from which the North Atlantic Alliance developed because it seems to have been forgotten by the middle-aged unilateralists of the disarmament movements as they trudge to demonstrations, and perhaps never known by their younger colleagues. Occasionally, others in the western world not so intellectually or emotionally biased may benefit from a reminder of the renewed threat of war in the late 1940s and early fifties. It was precisely the fear of war, while land and sea still reeked of its terrors and destruction, that drove so many nations together to defend themselves in case Stalin decided to attack any one of them. Hence nations which had preserved neutrality as a canon of policy—Holland, for example, and Denmark and Norway—were ready to abandon it and to join in peace an alliance. The will to unite for peace was intensified when it became known that Russia had successfully manufactured its own first atomic weapon system.

So the alliance formed. It developed an organization which included major military commands for the seas and lands uniting the membership. This is where we began, let us remember: not with the master plan of a rapacious United States, as Russian propaganda has brought some gullible souls to believe, or even a cunning France or devious Britain, one or another power seeking to exploit other nations. We

began with the congress of like-minded nations to which others came in time in their own interests. There was not, then, an acquisition of territories aiming to encircle the USSR. The first grouping was the European Defense Community, a handful of neighboring nations. Then came the expansion through the alliance of the Atlantic community. No precise strategy was possible until the tally of member states was substantiated. The first of the supreme allied commanders appointed were then instructed, in effect: "This is the geographical form and shape of the alliance; now produce a strategic plan for its defence."

The range of continuously adjoining territories in Europe ran from the Norwegian-Russian border inside the Arctic Circle to Italy. Fifty divisions were to be raised and disposed to the Allied Command in Europe for the defense of these territories.* A number of fleets were to be gathered for the defense of the North Atlantic and contiguous waters such as the North and Norwegian seas, and another naval force for the control of the Channel. Numerous ideas and permutations of ideas were floated for the responsibilities and concomitant boundaries of major commands and the regions within them. One such was that the defense of Norway with Iceland should be the responsibility of the Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic, on the basis that the airfields in both these territories and, to an extent, the ports of the former would be essential to SacLant's operations in his eastern waters. On balance, it was decided that there was greater advantage in disposing Norwegian defense to SacEur so as to avoid fragmentation of the land and air command, and that it would be fundamentally unsound to create a division of responsibility in the water gap of the Baltic Approaches—the Skagerrak and Kattegat. Briefly, a second and subsequent concept was that the defense of both Norway and Denmark should fall to SacLant but this was rejected out of hand by SacLant himself as drawing him into responsibilities distracting from his principal tasks.

This debate was, of course, conducted relative to the technology and forces of the times; no less, to the experiences of the war so recently ended. Those seeking to defend Norway most effectively were not concerned by a Russian naval threat; the existence of Soviet battleships and cruisers notwithstanding, the Russian navy was still overwhelmingly an extension and a subordinate of the Red army. It was the Red army which menaced Norway together with its organic air components. Their target was deemed to be the airfields of northern Norway from which, a few years previously, a group of Hitler's squadrons had dominated the Norwegian Sea. A good deal of bitter experience in these and other waters had dispelled the notion held by some naval officers in the 1930s and even until 1941 that warships could defend themselves successfully without friendly air cover against air attack.

To the south, it was apprehended that a Russian offensive would have as its aim the capture of Denmark and the West German states of Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein to provide a means of attacking the left flank of the allied armies south of the Elbe, at the same time gaining control of the Baltic Approaches.

Of the five regional planning groups formed in 1949 to consider such matters, the two in London, the Northern European Regional and the Western European groups, were involved in estimating the defense resources required, and in devising an economic and effective means of controlling these in war.

*This number has never been realized.

From their labors, in the summer of 1951, the Northern Europe Command—NEC—was born. The naval, army, and air resources allocated to it were to be styled Allied Forces Northern Europe, in abbreviation, AFNorth. The region comprised Norway, Denmark—the islands and the mainland, Jutland—and the West German states of Schleswig-Holstein and Hamburg.*

Still, all that was thirty years ago. Within the Alliance and Nato the NEC continues its task of securing the northern flank of the Allied Command in Europe. What are the changes in its circumstances?

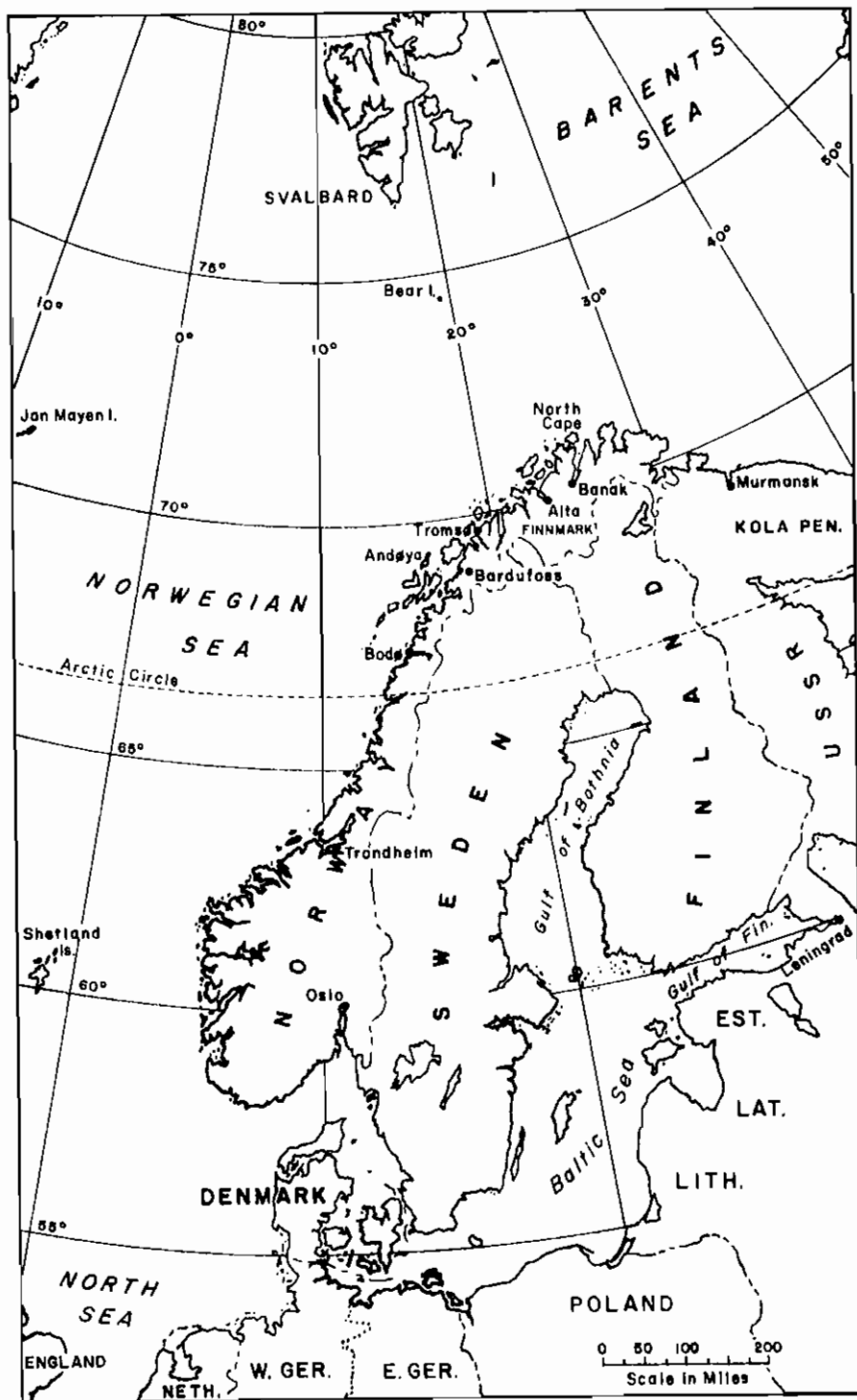
Geographically, the command has still the same enormous span of territory. The Norwegian coastline is roughly the same length as the Atlantic seaboard of the United States. Very narrow in the center, it swells at either end; yet within this sizable territory—almost 150,000 square miles of mainland and many islands—there are only four million people, far too few to watch comprehensively, let alone to defend simultaneously the whole kingdom. Denmark is much smaller, physically, 16,629 square miles, but has a populace of over five million without counting the distant Faeroe islands or the scant numbers on the autonomous land mass of Greenland. Schleswig-Holstein and Hamburg are crowded by comparison: over four million are contained in 6,344 square miles.

Politically, Norway and Denmark have remained true to their original obligation to Nato and the arrangements they negotiated at the time of accession to the treaty. These included the reservations that in peace foreign forces shall not be stationed in their countries, though contingents from allied forces likely to reinforce them in war may come to train there from time to time; and that no nuclear weapons shall be stored in or pass in transit through their territories in present circumstances. Neither of these constraints applies to the German area of the Northern European Command. Storage of allied conventional war material is permitted in the depots of all three nations.

To the east, Sweden remains neutral; so, too, does Finland. Finnish neutrality, however, is mitigated in favor of the USSR, a consequence of Finland's defeat in the second world war. While not permitted to enter into any alliance with other nations, the government in Helsinki is obliged to maintain a neutral defense pact with Russia by which, essentially, Finland will not permit the passage across its territory of German forces or those in alliance with Germany seeking to attack the USSR. Thirty seven years after the end of the second world war this obligation appears anachronistic. It is manifest that there is neither intention nor capability of such an attack by German forces with or without allies. The same cannot be said for the reverse option.

Since the formation of Nato, more particularly in the last twenty years, the armed forces of the USSR have built up a potential for offensive action on a grand scale, not least in northern Europe. In the far north, for example, it is not so much that the standing and reserve land forces in the Kola peninsula outnumber by four to one those of the Norwegians—though they do; rather, it is that they have developed the infrastructure for intensive air attack on Norway and, even more remarkable, that there has been an extraordinary growth in naval power.

*At this time the Federal Republic of Germany was established as a sovereign state which was, inter alia, to negotiate peace treaties with the occupation powers. The component states of the federation were also established. However the FRG was not permitted to join Nato until 1955.



The rise of the Soviet Navy is well documented: its Red Banner Northern Fleet is in peace a modern, active force of exceptional power in numbers of modern hulls and advanced weapon systems. Its major base at Murmansk has been modernized and enlarged appropriately. The whole force, one hundred surface combatants and two hundred submarines, organic air squadrons, an amphibious warfare group including specialized landing troops, support vessels, and bases, is in structure and size offensive in character.

The Northern Fleet is entirely Russian in composition. In the Baltic Sea, the fleet, land and air forces are a conglomerate of Russian, Polish, and East German elements; not necessarily the stronger on that account. The army and naval air forces pose the greatest threat along the Baltic shores to the Baltic Approaches. There is immediate land access to Schleswig-Holstein for six standing divisions of the Warsaw Pact. On the sea flank, the Baltic Fleet has developed the appearance—and certainly the capability—of being an amphibious warfare force: 6 cruisers, 10 destroyers, 30 frigates, 80 LSTs, LSAs, LCTs and LCVs, 17 hovercraft, 200 fast patrol craft, 250 ocean, coastal and onshore minesweepers, and a range of support vessels. There are about 60 submarines in the fleet. In the air the Baltic Naval Aviation includes 140 strike aircraft together with reconnaissance, electronic warfare, and tanker squadrons. It is the largest of the fleet air forces and it may be that some of these aircraft are available also to the Northern Fleet.

With such an investment, it is not unreasonable for the members of the alliance in this region to ask, to what end has this offensive capability been disposed?

In the Arctic Circle, the Northern Fleet is evidently an oceangoing force. Except for submarines capable of long passages below the arctic ice and the specially constructed icebreakers, the route out of the Barents Sea lies through the Norwegian Sea, thence most probably westward to the Atlantic, across which in the onset of war and after, allied reinforcements and supplies will travel. The necessity for this traffic and the threat to it from the Northern Fleet may seem so self-evident as to make these statements redundant.

As a matter of fact, however, there are a number of options open to the USSR in their use of this force. But whatever option they adopt, whether all or a substantial part put to sea before the outbreak of hostilities, one factor is common to all plans. Their movement will be observed from north Norway. For while in these latitudes the Soviet Navy is free of the narrows inhibiting exits from the Baltic, Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Sea of Japan, the freedom is relative. Accepting the modest variations in latitude between summer and winter, there is a permanent icefield north of Svalbard, the group of Norwegian islands lying 400 miles above the North Cape. In war, given adequate strength, all surface vessels passing through this end of the Barents Sea, and all those in the Norwegian Sea, would be at risk to whomsoever possessed the airfields of north Norway. Submarine hunting would also be enhanced by aircraft based in north or west Norway. Clearly, these airbases are of the highest strategic importance. They are, principally, Bardufoss, Andøya and Bodø.

Numerous airfields were developed in north Norway by Germany during the second world war. Since 1949/50, Nato has helped in the development of these three and other sites. Banak and Alta in the far north are often mentioned in articles as being of tactical importance, too, but both are too exposed, too far forward for a nation dedicated to a defensive strategy. Tromsø is a little less exposed, but the

runways are too short for a modern airbase and the cost of lengthening them would be too high. Some or all of the bases have been described in Warsaw Pact propaganda as threatening the USSR but it may be asked, with what? Norway has only a small number of air defense aircraft in the north, together with a few maritime patrol aircraft, reconnaissance planes, and helicopters. There is no air defense missile protection, though this will soon now be provided. The numbers of the Norwegian populace in the north are fractional; the standing naval and land forces necessarily reflect this fact.

It is not difficult for an intelligence agent who reads the local papers or watches the exercises to see what types of allied forces will come to strengthen this remote flank. The reinforcing air element will provide reconnaissance, air defense, and local support for army units. None of the reinforcing aircraft are capable of long-range interdiction. Allied land reinforcements will add upwards of a division, no more.

On the Russian side of the border, a chain of military airfields has been built northward from Leningrad into the Kola peninsula. Many are clearly mobilization sites, used intermittently for training, yet all are of high quality, involving no mean expense. The Leningrad military district can add several more to the two standing divisions it maintains close to the Norwegian border, together with an airborne division in its standing forces. It is such institutions and developments as these, in complement to the expansion of the Northern Fleet, that occasion national and Nato spokesmen on the northern flank to speak of a buildup of Russian forces in this zone.

The situation in Svalbard bears upon the potential for both defense and offense in the Norwegian and Barents Seas. The Svalbard group of islands, of which Spitzbergen is overwhelmingly the largest, passed by treaty to Norway in 1925.* The protocol provides also for access by all external signatories to the exploitation of the minerals believed to be in the territory, but only Russia has persisted in this option; coal mining being its principal activity. A consequence is that of the total population of 3,640 in the islands, a majority—2,451—are Russians. There are no troops in the settlements. Norway retains full governmental authority, though there have been intermittent attempts by the Russian visitors to encroach upon it. There is a small airfield capable of handling light fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. VTOL combat aircraft could operate from this and a number of other localities. The islands are not, however, within the Naro aegis: allied troops do not train there; war supplies are not stocked there. In the event of an offensive opened by the USSR, the capture of Svalbard by coup de main would be of value for its use as an airbase, even if only for VTOL types, particularly in summer when the ice line recedes to the northwest and southeast of Spitzbergen.

The seasons are important to warfare on the northern flank. In mid-summer, there is no night. In Troms and Finnmark, Norway's northernmost counties, the snow finally melts, exposing water-logged moss and boulder-strewn uplands among the mountains. There, only one road runs westward from the Russian-Norwegian border. But from Finland four others enter Norway—though one is but a switch to a main road; and there is a further switch available through northern Sweden.

*Following conferment of sovereignty in 1919. Signatories to the treaty were the United Kingdom and Dominions, France, Italy, the United States, Japan, Holland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The Soviet Union adhered subsequently.

The autumn probably offers the most advantageous season for an offensive, when the ground is driest, the daylight still long. In mid-winter, when there is no daylight, sea, land, and air warfare would favor the defense, though there is a period from late January to, say, April, when daylight would be extending and the snow, packed down, would assist the movement of tracked vehicles. The following short weeks of thaw would slow movement extensively. For example, tanks and deploying artillery would be confined largely to roads.

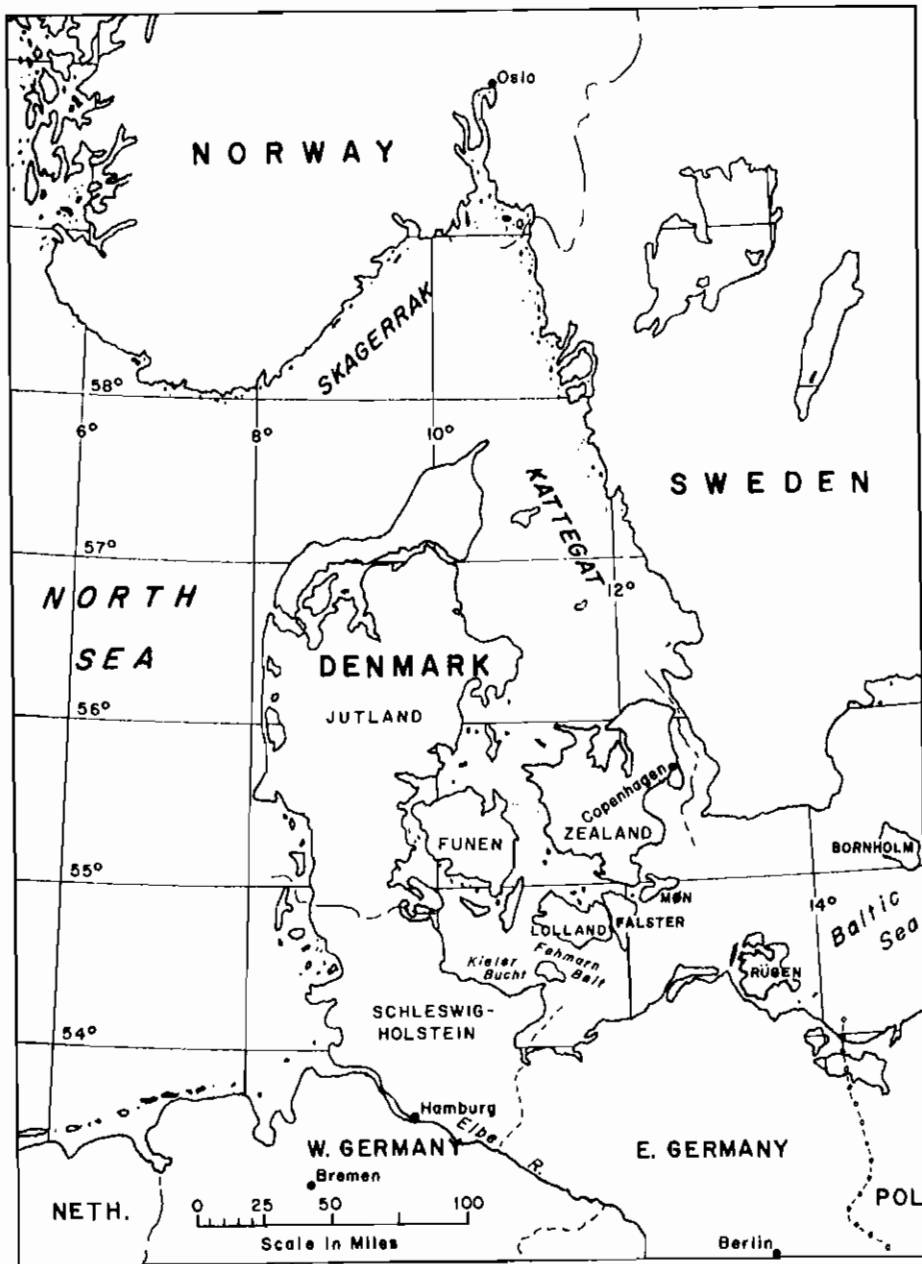
Still, in any season, north Norway is not easy to attack except from the air. Accepting the ability of the Soviets to land their specialized amphibious assault forces within the girdle of small islands and among the deep fjords of the broken and mountainous shore line, to force part of the Red army across the several land routes, and to launch one or more airborne assaults on critical localities, the vital element in the struggle for north Norway, essentially possession of the airbases, is the air arm of either side. The recent introduction of the F-16 into the Royal Norwegian Air Force and the incipient procurement of air defense missiles is therefore to be welcomed as a means of preserving peace in the area. With its endurance in the air, the F-16 also extends Norway's ability to cover from a distance any northern airfields temporarily out of use as a result of one or another form of attack. With this airplane in service the Trondheim airfields in central Norway can now be brought into use for this purpose.

At the southern end of the Command, in the years since 1949/50, the Baltic war objective of the USSR has increasingly been spoken of as the opening or forcing of the western narrows and thereafter control of the Baltic Approaches. No doubt this is a valid objective but it is more likely that the original concept of a land and air objective for the Red army persists. Such a course would not deny or inhibit the maritime objective; rather it would enhance its realization.

In central Europe, the USSR disposes of high numbers of tank and motor rifle divisions together with numbers of those of its westernmost allies in the Warsaw Pact. Integrated with these are tactical air armies; together they form a land/air mass superior in weapons and supplies and capable of taking the offensive against the necessarily widespread Nato defenses. Yet the movement forward of these forces from the Elbe southward to the Czech-Austrian-Federal German Republic border would be endangered if the Länder north of the Elbe, with mainland and island Denmark, should be ignored. Here there are a dozen or so airfields capable of launching attacks against the flank of the Warsaw Pact as it strikes into Germany and towards the Low Countries and the Channel ports of northeastern France. If the advancing Red armies were to mask this sector but otherwise leave it unassailed, allied land and air reinforcements might readily be diverted there by SacEur to strike into the Warsaw Pact's open right flank.

Masking would be a dangerous option for the Russian theater commander. In every way it would be better for him to attack the Baltic Approaches sector in the same hour as he attacked the central front. His objectives would include airfields in Schleswig-Holstein and Jutland from which to strike across the sea at north Germany, Holland, and Belgium, and thus from behind their air defenses; similar strikes aimed at the United Kingdom from these bases would also bypass the hostile air defenses. The Baltic Fleet could engage its resources fully in the operation and the Baltic narrows would pass to its possession.

The Baltic Approaches will be obliged, as defenders, to cover all areas open to land



incursion—directly across the inter-German border, by amphibious assault in the Fehmarn Bucht, on the beaches of Lolland, Falster, Møn, and Zealand, and by airborne assault into the Kieler Bucht and Langeland or Funen. The attackers can choose at will where to thrust, where to feint. The Warsaw Pact airfields of the Baltic littoral are covered by dense defenses of aircraft and missiles to cover the sorties of both naval aviation and the tactical air armies. Attacking these will be costly to the air forces of Allied Forces in Central and Northern Europe. Allied maritime sorties—sea and air—against Warsaw Pact amphibious forces at sea offer an effective way to snatch the initiative from the offense, but the area for engagement is likely to be limited chiefly to the western end of the Baltic. If the defenders thrust in a counterattack eastward and southeastward, they would move into the area of greatest Warsaw Pact air strength.

Fortunately, the allied air defense of the narrows is not simply confined to Schleswig-Holstein and Jutland. The allied Baltic Approaches Tactical Air Force works in complement with the 2nd Allied Tactical Air Force in Central Europe and the South Norway Tactical Air Force. The Danish government's intention to acquire further improved Hawk batteries to extend the missile belt to Copenhagen, and the introduction of the F-16 into Danish squadron service in the air defense role, strengthen allied ability to hold the airfields of Schleswig-Holstein and Jutland and to maintain sufficient of them in operation to sustain an effective defense. The West Germans' naval air capability is an important weapon against ships in open water or in harbor, the more valuable as submarine operations in the shallows of the western Baltic are difficult, in some areas altogether impracticable. German and Danish submarines will thus conduct operations in the central Baltic.

Taken as a total, the naval forces of the Baltic Approaches Command are not negligible, comprising the whole of the maritime strength of Denmark and the Federal Republic of Germany. The widespread commitments of the force do not however, permit concentration: escort and counterpenetration tasks in the North Sea in cooperation with the Royal Norwegian Navy absorb much of the modest number of Danish and West German destroyers and frigates. Moreover, due to the air strength mentioned, sorties of such vessels into the central Baltic would clearly be unprofitable.

Still, the fast patrol boat of today carries the punch of the battle cruiser of the recent past. The eastern approaches to the Baltic narrows afford squadron commanders and individual captains a chance to capitalize on the skills of their ships' crews and their own enterprise. In such operations the devolution of command so much more readily given—and taken—in the Nato forces in contradistinction to those of the Warsaw Pact will reap a harvest. Behind the FPBs must lie heavier vessels, within their air cover, capable of dealing with elements of the Baltic Fleet for example brought into the Kattegat or Skagerrak immediately prior to the opening of hostilities.

Once war begins, to bar entrance to the international waterways—the Great Belt, the Little Belt and the Sound—the mine remains a cost-effective weapon. No doubt it can be lifted or exploded but only by a long, deliberate operation. It is strange that the mine warfare divisions of so many navies are judged to be of peripheral importance.

Although the structure of the Soviet Baltic fleet evidently takes account of the need for mine clearance within its overall capability for amphibious assault, the fleet

complement, not least that of its submarines, would make it highly dangerous to the West if the Warsaw Pact should gain control of the Baltic narrows. With air cover, it would then have the means to venture into the North Sea, there perhaps to cooperate with an element of the Northern Fleet. Even if the Baltic fleet operated in these waters only with its conventional submarines, the naval resources of CinCEastLant and CinCNorth would be severely strained. A concerted counter-operation would be necessary in which, inter alia, the South Norway Command would play an important part.

Southern Norway, whose airfields can deepen the air defense of the Baltic Approaches, is the heartland of the northern flank, at once operating directly against enemy encroachment by air and sea while providing reinforcement, replenishment, and repair bases for all of Allied Forces Northern Europe. One of its strengths is a relative inaccessibility to attack from Russia or other Warsaw Pact territory. At least, this is true so long as the USSR does not decide to attack across Sweden to reach south Norway.

Sweden has doubtless assessed the most likely direction from which its neutrality may be challenged. Government spokesmen, civil and military, have warned that the armed forces of any nation crossing its boundaries will be resisted by force and whereas, for example, reference is often made to reductions in Swedish air defense capability and to the problem of replacing the Viggen fighter, it would be as well to watch what Sweden does in its 1982-7 budget and to remember that the later models of the Viggen will still be effective for their role as they continue to emerge from the factory at the end of this decade. If Sweden's warnings are only what the Chinese call "wind past the ear," central and south Norway will be in dreadful danger in war from air attack. Assuming that they are not simply rhetoric—and there is every indication that they are not—Warsaw Pact attacks across Sweden are likely to be self-defeating. Maintenance of Swedish neutrality is thus important, possibly vital, to successful defense of Northern Europe.

Collapse of northern Germany and Denmark will, then, admit the Warsaw Pact to air mastery of much of the North Sea and the power implicit in the Baltic Fleet's conventional submarines, cruisers, and destroyers. Loss of the airfields of north Norway will pass the mastery of the Barents and Norwegian seas to the Northern Fleet with the attendant consequences. Will either or both come about in war insofar as that is foreseeable?

Modern technology affords the Red Banner fleets an extraordinary capability to menace the Atlantic Alliance, so dependent on overseas supply and maintenance; the *Kirov*-class exemplifies this fact. Yet, the same technology has permitted the nations of the northern flank, Norway, Denmark, and the Federal Republic of Germany, to raise the level of their combined defenses, and the same is true of the principal reinforcing nations, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The F-15, F-16, F-18, and Tornado in the air with the support of the Nato Airborne Early Warning aircraft now entering service; the complementary advanced air-to-air missile systems; on the ground, the extension of air defense missile and gun mixes; at sea, the entry into service of new surface combatants and submarines, missiles, torpedoes, and mines, combine to raise doubts in the collective judgment of those calculating the prospect of winning a conventional war of aggression.

Unfortunately, it is not the Atlantic Alliance which is raising the ante in this

dangerous game but the USSR. The alliance membership must continue not only with the necessary patience but with the necessary determination to find the means to sustain those doubts. Primarily, this difficult task falls to politicians. The professional leadership of the divers armed forces of Nato have an important supporting role to play during the protracted contest of deterrence, however: one facet of this is to recognize that sea, land, and air forces each has a vital part to play individually—yet more in cooperation. The operating circumstances of the northern flank manifest this requirement. None should seek to advance to the detriment of another.

General Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley is Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces Northern Europe.

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