The battle that never was.
The Cold War in Northern Waters

Tor Ivar Strømmen

Commander

Royal Norwegian Naval Academy

A quick introduction to The Cold War in Northern Waters

Presented at RSIS-IFS Workshop on:

"Navies, Coast Guards, the Maritime Community and International Stability"

16th of November 2016.

The battle that never was.

The Cold War in the North was primarily a naval conflict, and thus governed by maritime strategy.[1] Maritime strategies are the principles which govern a war in which the sea is a substantial factor and determines what fleets do by what part the fleet must play in relation to the overall strategy.[2] Accordingly, if we are to understand the Cold War in the North, one must first understand how the opposing sides intended to use the sea to achieve their strategic aims and what these were.

The source of the conflict did not originate in the Arctic itself; but the main factors behind its strategic importance were geography and technology. The north was a key for strategically targeting the other superpower. It offered the shortest flight path for bombers and missiles between them.[3] As USSR was entirely a continental power, it had to be confronted on land to be defeated. Maritime power is not very useful against a state that does not rely on maritime communications unless the war is protracted in time. The key theatre was Western Europe, an area of immense strategic importance for both Superpowers, both as a US bridgehead in Europe, as an industrial powerhouse, and for ideological reasons. Maritime communications were certainly vital for NATO to maintain the logistical support of America's strategic beachhead in Europe, but control of the sea alone was not sufficient to defeat the Soviet Union.[4] Sea power, NATOs foremost military asset, could directly influence events ashore only by strikes launched from carriers and submarines. For the USSR, the sea was therefore predominantly a moat against her maritime opponents and later also a safe-haven for her retaliatory nuclear capability. As a continental power USSR used or planned to use the oceans to hide and protect her SSBNs, and for short-range logistic support and flank manoeuvres in her land campaigns.[5] To sum it up; the Arctic was the only area through which USSR naval assets could access the Atlantic and threaten NATOs SLOCs and likewise the Arctic region provided NATO's seaborne strike forces access to Soviet territory. This combination of strategic retaliation forces and naval power projection potential thus formed the strategic background for the Cold War in the North.

The Third Battle of the Atlantic is a commonly used name for the Cold War in the North but also a name that promotes misconceptions, i.e. it implies that maritime communications in the North

---

[1] Both *the North* and *the Arctic* does in this paper refer to the European Arctic region including the North-Atlantic Ocean north of Greenland-Island-Scotland but not the Baltic.

[2] Paraphrase of Corbett, Julian S., *Principles of Maritime Strategy*, (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1911:2004), p. 13.

[3] Tamnes, Rolf og Offerdal, Kristine, *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World*, (Routledge, 2014), p. 21-22.

[4] It is, however, commonly claimed that sea powers hold a critical advantage over land powers that eventually will make them prevail as it enables a maritime combatant to protract a war in time, extend it in geography, and assemble a coalition able to field a superior landward fighting instrument in the end. (Gray, Colin S., *War, Peace and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the next century.*, (Touchstone, 1991), p. 67-77.) During the Cold War this advantage was to a certain extent nullified by nuclear weapons as their tremendous destructiveness limited the political objectives of war as total victory would result in utter Armageddon for both parties. Hence, improving your strategic position in a short perspective became more relevant, while the more long-term effects of sea power lost much of its potential as war-winning tool.

[5] I.e. in Scandinavia, the Baltic, the Black Sea and in the Far East.

Atlantic were the key strategic objective. Although the Soviet fleet was a significant threat to NATO SLOCs, maritime interdiction was by no means its main mission, nor an important secondary mission.[6] USSR's war plans for the land campaign were basically offensive and aimed at securing Western Europe within weeks.[7] Such a rapid attainment of strategic objectives would render counter-SLOC operations nearly irrelevant.[8] Furthermore, USSR saw destruction of ports and infrastructure as more efficient than sinking ships.[9]

The overall Soviet naval missions obviously varied somewhat between 1945 and 1991, but their variations were, with one exemption, mostly reflections of technological developments. The overarching Soviet naval doctrine remained fundamentally defensive and territorial throughout.[10] The exemption was the introduction of SLBMs adding strategic strike capability to the Soviet fleet. But only in the 60's and early 70's did the Soviets depend on operating in the mid and western Atlantic to strike US mainland.[11] As SLBMs matured and achieved truly intercontinental range; USSR SSBNs withdrew into protected safe havens in USSR home waters off Kola. Thus, at the height of the Cold War Moscow's naval priorities were assessed to be, in order of importance:

- Providing "combat stability" for Soviet SSBNs, principally through safe havens or bastions.
- Defend the USSR and its allies from NATO sea-based strike forces, i.e., carriers, and submarines.
- Support ground forces against NATO in Europe or elsewhere.
- Interdict Western SLOCS.[12]

As western SSBNs were well-nigh immune to Soviet ASW efforts, the best defence against them was to secure her own SSBNs and thereby assure ability to retaliate if attacked.[13] During WW2 USA had clearly shown what carrier battle groups and amphibious forces could achieve if given access.[14] USSR recognised that naval power projection against their flanks constituted a major threat and

---

[6] Ford, Christopher A og Rosenberg, David A, "The Naval Intelligence Underpinnings of Reagan's Maritime Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 2 (2005), Ranft, Bryan og Till, Geoffrey, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 2nd ed., (Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1989), p. 206-211., Odom, William E., "Soviet Military Doctrine," *Foreign Affairs* 67, no. 2 (1988): p. 127., and Mccgwire, Michael, "Naval Power and Soviet Global Strategy," *International Security* 3, no. 4 (1979): p. 173-174.,

[7] Williamson, Corbin, "Factors Affecting the Feasibility of a Warsaw Pact Invasion of Western Europe," (2008): especially p. 29-30.

[8] Lebow, Richard Ned, "The Soviet Offensive in Europe: The Schlieffen Plan Revisited?," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985)

[9] With regards to their efforts to severe SLOCs by destroying ports see to an example Ranft og Till, p. 211.

[10] Williamson, p. 62-63., and Ford og Rosenberg, p. 385.

[11] USSR decided in 1963-64 to develop an SLBM system with sufficient range to be able to strike at North America from the comparative safety of the home fleet areas. Such missiles were however not deployed in numbers before approximately 1975. (Breemer, Jan S, "The Soviet navy's SSBN bastions: Evidence, inference, and alternative scenarios," *The RUSI Journal* 130, no. 1 (1985): p. 19.)

[12] Ford og Rosenberg, p. 38. An alternative view is found in Kuzin, Vladimir og Chernyavskii, Sergei, "Russian Reactions to Reagan's 'Maritime Strategy'," ibid. But also they claims that the Soviets main naval missions were related to protecting SSBNs and defend against NATO sea-based strike forces. They do however emphasise interdiction of NATO SLOCs somewhat more as they see this as an operational method to dilute NATOs concentration of force in the Arctic.

[13] Paraphrase of Chipman, Donald D., "Admiral Gorshkov and the Soviet Navy," *Air University Review* 33 (1982)

[14] Throughout the Second World War there were a total of 600 amphibious landings, or an average of one every 3 1/2 days. In addition, nearly all these landings were successful. (Sloan, Geoffrey, "Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland theory then and now," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2-3 (1999): p. 34.)

emphasised denying it. As technology evolved, NATO carrier-based strike ranges increased to 2000 km and their striking power increased manifold.[15] Therefore, to defend Soviet territory and SSBN bastions, efficient sea denial had to be established out to 2000 km from her shores.[16] Furthermore, sea control had to be maintained in her own waters to protect her SSBN bastions, logistic support to land operations, and in-theatre amphibious operations.

A fleet's structure has two main relationships with strategy. The fleet is the physical mean that can achieve strategic aims and support political purposes, i.e. it determines what can and cannot be done at a specific time. Additionally, as an expensive long-term investment a fleet's structure and development always reveals a lot about what it is intended for. Admiral Gorshkov promoted an assertive navy, one that would move out from the coastlines and into the oceans to challenge the West. The mission of these forward-deploying Soviet ships were to counter the West's sea-based strike force and partly to interdict sea lines of communication.[17] Looking at force development one straightforwardly sees that protection against power projection and later also SSBN security remained their foremost missions throughout the Cold War. The Soviet navy was never balanced nor capable of major maritime power projection beyond nuclear bombardment.[18]

A NORWEGIAN PERSPECTIVE

Control of Norway and Iceland was strategically vital for both parties as their geographic position astride key waterways and access routes allowed efficient intelligence gathering, air operations, and forward staging of strike forces both for NATO and USSR. This explains why NATO emphasised defence of these areas as an important task and allocated very substantial forces to it, forces one otherwise would assume would be better employed in Western Europe. It also explains why the Soviet Union aimed at gaining control of Norwegian territory if war should erupt. It does thus show how a small state could become involved and even a focus area for great-power conflicts even if it had no conflicting interest with either superpower. USSR's defensive maritime strategy was offensive at the operational level. Bastion defence and the requirement for operational depth in USSR coastal defences, both rendered Norway well within the geographic area USSR had to dominate if their maritime strategy was to succeed. The Cold War ended in 1989-91, but this geostrategic fact remains

---

[15] The Tomahawk land-attack missile T-LAM(N) BGM-109A had a range of 2500 km and carrier a 200-250 kt nuclear warhead. These started to be deployed in numbers from 1983. (Ball, Desmond, "Nuclear War at Sea," *International Security* 10, no. 3 (1985): p. 12.) The introduction of these weapons constituted a major increase in naval strike capability both with regards to range and penetration ability.
[16] This is discussed in some length in Kuzin og Chernyavskii, p. 432-437.
[17] Chipman,
[18] By balanced one means a fleet that can conduct every kind of operation wherever one decides, i.e. typically the fleet of a major sea power. If one, however, by balanced defines a fleet with a full range of capabilities within its specific mission portfolio, then the Soviet fleet might be considered balanced.

unchanged and is steadily becoming more acute yet again. This geostrategic fact is probably also directly transferable to the Eastern Asia sphere.

CONCLUSION

USSR's maritime strategy was essentially defensive and territorial, it did not challenge NATO's overall maritime supremacy but aimed at eliminating any real strategic advantage NATO could gain from their command of the seas. Furthermore, USSR depended on the sea for their ability to deter and ensure nuclear retaliation. USSR's maritime strategy can therefore be seen as a mean to ensure that any conflict would not escalate out of the political realm unless the Soviets themselves decided so, and to neutralise the sea as warfare domain that could significantly influence the overall strategic picture negatively for the Soviet Union.

REFERENCES

Ball, Desmond. "Nuclear War at Sea." *International Security* 10, nr. 3 (1985).

Breemer, Jan S. "The Soviet navy's SSBN bastions: Evidence, inference, and alternative scenarios." *The RUSI Journal* 130, nr. 1 (1985).

Chipman, Donald D. "Admiral Gorshkov and the Soviet Navy." *Air University Review* 33 (1982).

Corbett, Julian S. *Principles of Maritime Strategy.* New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1911:2004.

Ford, Christopher A og Rosenberg, David A. "The Naval Intelligence Underpinnings of Reagan's Maritime Strategy." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, nr. 2 (2005).

Gray, Colin S. *War, Peace and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the next century.*: Touchstone, 1991.

Kuzin, Vladimir og Chernyavskii, Sergei. "Russian Reactions to Reagan's 'Maritime Strategy'." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, nr. 2 (2005).

Lebow, Richard Ned. "The Soviet Offensive in Europe: The Schlieffen Plan Revisited?". *International Security* 9, nr. 4 (1985).

Mccgwire, Michael. "Naval Power and Soviet Global Strategy." *International Security* 3, nr. 4 (1979).

Odom, William E. "Soviet Military Doctrine." *Foreign Affairs* 67, nr. 2 (1988).

Ranft, Bryan og Till, Geoffrey. *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*. 2nd ed. Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1989.

Sloan, Geoffrey. "Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland theory then and now." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, nr. 2-3 (1999).

Tamnes, Rolf og Offerdal, Kristine. *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World*. Routledge, 2014.

Williamson, Corbin. "Factors Affecting the Feasibility of a Warsaw Pact Invasion of Western Europe." (2008).