

## Commentary

# The Return of the Strategic Arctic

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During the Cold War, the Arctic was a significant arena for strategic competition and was an important factor in the nuclear rivalry between the superpowers. The Soviet Northern Fleet was based on the Kola Peninsula, in a basing infrastructure near Murmansk. This fleet, and particularly the Soviet Union's large number of nuclear-powered attack submarines, represented a worrisome threat to NATO sea lanes in the North Atlantic that would be crucial conduits of sea-borne reinforcements in any NATO-Warsaw Pact war in the center of Europe that did not end quickly. In addition, most of the Soviet Union's nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) were also based on the Kola Peninsula and used northern waters, including the Arctic Ocean, as operational staging areas when on deployment. Particularly as improvements in the accuracy and lethality of nuclear delivery systems made land-based forces increasingly vulnerable, Moscow's sea-based nuclear forces came to be regarded as its most survivable nuclear assets, the heart of its deterrent capability. Hence, ensuring and enhancing the survivability of its ballistic missile submarines was for Moscow a very high, even essential, priority.

These considerations pulled the Soviet-American and East-West competition northwards. For the Soviet conventional navy, the Norwegian Sea was a transit route and staging area for surging its forces into the North Atlantic. The USSR could not effectively contest NATO maritime power in the Atlantic if it could not operate effectively in the Norwegian Sea. Indeed, the strategic value of substantial Soviet investments in naval capability depended on the state of play in the Norwegian Sea. In addition, the Soviet Union sought to use the Norwegian Sea and waters further north as a protected bastion within which its nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines could operate with greater safety. This bastion strategy made northern waters one of the pivotal military theaters for Moscow, critical to its overall deterrent posture.

Washington had a parallel but inverse set of interests in the Arctic region. In the conventional context, the United States Navy (in league with NATO allies) aimed to keep the potential Soviet threat to NATO sea lanes bottled up north of what was universally known in those days as the

Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (or GIUK) gap – the Soviet Navy could not menace NATO sea lanes if it could not deploy its naval assets in force in the North Atlantic. In the NATO conception, Iceland was the cork in the bottle, a centrally located obstacle to free Soviet passage from the Norwegian Sea into the sea lanes of the North Atlantic and an unsinkable platform for NATO maritime air capabilities. Further, an array of sensors deployed across the GIUK gap gave NATO considerable capacity to monitor the movement and location of Soviet naval vessels, a critical advantage in naval warfare. Where Moscow needed the Norwegian Sea to be a highway into the Atlantic, NATO sought to make it a dead-end street, a catchment zone that would impose serious attrition on the Soviet Navy. Similarly, in the nuclear context, Moscow's hope of creating a protected bastion for its ballistic missile submarines came up against Washington's determination to break into the bastion and vigorously pursue the Soviet Union's nuclear-armed submarines. (See, for example, Daniel, 1986, Stefanick, 1987, and Cote, 2003). The United States has never been content to give Moscow's nuclear capabilities a free ride; the more important the SSBNs became to the Soviet deterrent posture, the greater the interest of the US Navy in hunting, tracking, and if necessary, destroying them – and there is some evidence that during the Cold War the United States had made significant advances in its ability to threaten Soviet submarines. (See Long & Green, 2015). There is no doubt that US attack submarines were operating in northern waters, including the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean, and by late in the Cold War there was growing attention to issues such as the conduct of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) in the under-ice environment in the Arctic (a distinctive problem because ice formations both impeded freedom of movement of submarines and affected the performance of sensors). “For some thirty years,” writes Jean-Louis Lozier, “the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea were the scene of intense underwater competition....” (Lozier, 2022, p. 28).

In combination, this set of considerations had enormous implications for security arrangements in the north – the Northern Flank, in NATO's parlance. (See, for example, Miller 1988 and Miller 1992). Obviously, the battle for the Norwegian Sea could be decisively important but it, in turn, would be hugely influenced by the battle for north Norway because whoever controlled north Norway would control its air bases and those air bases would provide the significant advantage of allowing land-based air cover over northern waters. Preventing the Soviet Union from successfully implementing what was called the “north Norway grab” became a preoccupation among those interested in the security of NATO's Northern Flank. NATO repositioned equipment and munitions in Norway to permit rapid reinforcement and planned to rapidly swing additional airpower into Norway early in a crisis or war. US carrier battle groups conducted exercises in the Norwegian Sea and even practiced operating in Norwegian fjords. The Reagan Administration adopted a new “Maritime Strategy” that combined a more assertive forward strategy in northern waters with plans (never fully realized) to substantially expand the US Navy. (For context, see Gray, 1986.) By the late Cold War, the north was highly armed, heavily nuclear, seriously contested, and strategically significant.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 produced an immediate and dramatic change in this picture. Some of these concerns – worries about North Atlantic sea lanes, for example – simply ceased to exist as Moscow's power retreated from the center of Europe and a major East-West war in Europe seemed highly unlikely. Even where there were continuities – almost certainly the US never lost interest in Russia's nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines – the political context was completely different, the sense of dangerous rivalry was gone, fears of nuclear escalation were

largely abated, and Russian submarines operated at a much-reduced rate. Over the subsequent couple of decades, these broad security issues in the Arctic retreated into the background, never entirely absent but very much less prominent and relevant than in the past. The Arctic agenda was full, but with other issues – environmental challenges, sovereignty claims, economic advancement, resource exploitation, indigenous rights, infrastructure development, and transportation opportunities in Arctic waters remained as ongoing substantive concerns but the Arctic as a significant strategic arena largely disappeared. Moreover, the Arctic came to be a zone marked by unusual levels of cooperation, facilitated by institutions that are preoccupied with issues outside the realm of security. For nearly three decades after the disintegration of the Soviet Union the strategic Arctic was, in traditional military security terms, largely a memory.

Now the world is changing again and the Arctic seems to be emerging once more as an important arena of strategic competition between the nuclear-armed rivals. The confluence of five considerations makes it likely that the strategic Arctic will reappear in a way that leads to the further securitization of the region.

The broadest and most obvious factor in changing the character of the Arctic is the dramatic deterioration of relations between Washington and Moscow and indeed between Russia and the West. This trend has been evident for some years, certainly since the Russian intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014. However, a dramatically new level of hostility emerged in the aftermath of Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russian analysts now speak openly of Cold War 2.0 and predict that it will persist for years or decades into the future. The US government, under both Trump and Biden, has abandoned hopeful visions of a largely cooperative relationship with Moscow and instead emphasizes the return to great power competition. In the Biden Administration's National Defense Strategy, released in October 2022, Russia is identified as the "acute danger" faced by the United States and, along with China, is described in Biden's Nuclear Posture Review as "strategic competitor and possible adversary." It will be difficult to preserve the Arctic as a relatively tame security environment in a world of intense Russian-American hostility.

Second, the Ukraine war has dramatically elevated concerns about nuclear deterrence and about possible use of nuclear weapons. Putin's recurrent nuclear threats and Western fears that he might employ nuclear weapons in an attempt to rescue his costly and increasingly frustrating war in Ukraine have restored the nuclear question to a central role in deliberations about international security. No longer are nuclear weapons a background factor in a benign international environment. Rather, nuclear scenarios loom large as analysts and policymakers worry about possible escalation of the war in Ukraine. The restoration of nuclear antagonism between Washington and Moscow has major implications for the Arctic because American naval policy will inevitably give higher priority to possible operations against Russian nuclear assets in northern waters.

Third, reinforcing the previous point, US nuclear doctrine has displayed a striking continuity in pursuing counterforce strategies that aim to give Washington ability to degrade Russian nuclear forces and thereby limit damage to the United States in the event of nuclear conflict. (Kaplan, 2020). Washington's ability to destroy vulnerable Russian ground-based nuclear capabilities will provide little advantage if Russia's submarine-based nuclear arsenal, capable of deploying more than 600 nuclear warheads, is survivable and remains intact. In recent years, eight of Russia's

eleven ballistic missile submarines – more than 70% of what is thought to be its most survivable capability – have been based on the Kola Peninsula and will have operated in the Arctic or adjacent northern waters. Inevitably, this is a factor that will keep the US Navy oriented northwards and in the context of mounting hostility with Russia will intensify the importance of Arctic naval operations.

Fourth, nuclear modernization is likely to exacerbate these trends. Both Russia and the United States are engaged in expensive, comprehensive, long-term modernization programs that will replenish and upgrade their nuclear capabilities. This modernization process is having and in the future will continue to have an impact on the strategic contours of the Arctic. Advances in surveillance, accuracy, and lethality, for example, are reinforcing the vulnerability of ground-based forces, which in turn will heighten the importance of sea-based nuclear assets as the bedrock of Russia's deterrent posture. (Lieber and Press, 2017). Russia is investing in new, more advanced ballistic missile submarines and in new submarine-launched ballistic missiles, which will make its sea-based nuclear forces more capable and hence more valuable as targets even as advances in anti-submarine warfare may make them more vulnerable. Barring an unforeseen breakthrough, anti-submarine warfare will remain a challenging mission but there can be little doubt that Arctic waters will witness an intense cat and mouse competition in which Russia seeks to hide and protect its ballistic missile submarines while the US Navy seeks to find them and render them vulnerable. This is, in effect, a replay of the Cold War dynamic in northern waters, but in modern technological conditions with more advanced capabilities.

Fifth, all of this is playing out in a strategic context in which arms control has largely collapsed. There are today fewer constraints in place to mitigate the intensity of the nuclear rivalry than at any point in several decades. The only remaining major strategic arms control agreement, the New START agreement of 2010, expires in 2026. Even now, however, New START is sputtering. In February 2023, after a period in which Russia was not fully compliant with the treaty's verification provisions, President Putin announced that Russia is suspending its participation in the agreement. (Sanger, 2023). While it remains possible that the agreement could eventually be extended or replaced with a follow-on agreement, there is presently no negotiation underway (worrisome because it usually takes years to negotiate nuclear arms agreements) and the severe breakdown of US-Russian relations caused by the Ukraine war makes a resumption of diplomacy seem unlikely anytime soon. There is a real possibility that there will be no strategic arms control in place after New START's expiration in 2026, meaning a return to the unconstrained nuclear competition of the early Cold War years. History suggests that in such an environment, intense arms racing may ensue. Antagonism will motivate vigorous competition, fears will intensify, vulnerability scares will multiply, defense budgets will expand, forces will grow, modernization will accelerate, and nuclear concerns and risks might again occupy center stage. Because the Arctic will play a critical role in the strategic nuclear balance as the arena in which the heart of Russia's nuclear deterrent force is deployed, operated, and defended, it is unlikely to be exempt from the effect of intense and unregulated strategic competition. Further, arms control did little to restrain the naval competition in the northern waters during the Cold War and is unlikely to do so in the future even if some arms control measures remain in place.

Russia is not the Soviet Union and the current hostile environment is not a mere replication of the Cold War. Nevertheless, some familiar maritime nuclear dynamics are emerging in the Arctic,

suggesting that the strategic importance it once held in the nuclear balance may be returning. However, it will be a different Arctic in at least two respects. First, climate change is altering the political dynamics and the strategic geography of the region. (See Hamilton, 2022 and Cropper, 2020). Most broadly, the Arctic ecosystem is being strongly affected by climate change, raising a range of human security challenges for populations in the region, elevating the urgency of climate mitigation as an Arctic priority, highlighting the need for cooperation in the region even as growing great power rivalry threatens to undermine or disrupt cooperative mechanisms that are required to address climate challenges. (See Heininen, 2022). The imperative to deal effectively with the potentially catastrophic effects of climate change and related environmental concerns will coexist with increasingly militarized competition between the increasingly antagonistic big powers. It is argued by some experts that the importance of dealing with the climate and environmental crisis in the Arctic should preserve room for needed cooperation. (Nicol and Heininen, 2022). From a human security perspective, incorporating climate and environmental considerations into the politics of security policy is a desirable and even necessary response to the climate pressures that are now being dramatically felt in the Arctic. (Heininen and Exner-Pirot, 2020). However, the erosion of Arctic cooperation as a consequence of the Ukraine war suggests that it is far from clear whether this broader conception of Arctic security will be embraced and influential in a world marked by high levels of great power hostility.

What does seem clear is that climate change affects narrower strategic military calculations that will loom large in the Arctic. The dramatic retreat of Arctic ice cover will deprive Russian ballistic missile submarines of protective ice cover. It will open up shipping lanes that will draw in other interested powers (above all China, which stands benefit from shortened sea routes to Europe). It will allow greater exploitation of resources found in the Arctic. It will affect the security concerns and requirements of Arctic basin states (above all Russia, whose vast and difficult to protect Arctic coastline will be exposed). A range of other consequences – thawing permafrost, coastal erosion, rising sea levels – will affect military and civilian infrastructure and the operational context for military forces in the region. As a security arena, the Arctic is not what it once was. When the US Department of Defense unveiled its new Arctic strategy in 2019, for example, it noted that one “key dynamic” in the region is that “the Arctic’s physical environment continues to change.” (US Department of Defense, 2019, p. 3).

Second, the Ukraine war has remade the geostrategic map of northern Europe. The impending membership of Sweden and Finland in NATO means that NATO’s longest and most direct border with Russia lies in the Nordic region, along the Russo-Finnish border – a line some 1400 kilometers long. (Alander and Alburque, 2022.) Northern Europe is now entirely a NATO region – a development that is due to the belligerence and aggression of an increasingly unfriendly Russia led by an increasingly assertive and autocratic leader. As Kendall-Taylor and Kofman have written, “Finland’s and Sweden’s entry into NATO – a direct result of Russia’s attack on Ukraine – will increase security tensions with Russia in the Baltic and Arctic regions...Their membership also brings new borders for NATO to defend and contingency plans to develop.” (Kendall-Taylor & Kofman, 2022). Indeed, the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO will complete the picture of the Arctic as a region marked by a divide between NATO members (the United States, Canada, Denmark Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland), on the one hand, and Russia on the other. Given the importance of the Arctic to Russia and the fractured relationship between NATO and Moscow, this fault line could increasingly important and potentially contentious in the future.

The effect of the evolving strategic realities in the Arctic can already be seen in the military policies and investments of key regional actors. The United States now feels challenged by the growth of Russian capability in the Arctic, a region described by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in 2019 as “an arena of global power and competition.” (Conley and Melino, 2020, p. 2; Baker 2022). Indeed, fears that Russia has achieved military superiority in the region and has a head start measured in years now animate discussions of US and western policy in the Arctic. (Gronholt-Pedersen and Fouche, 2022). Accordingly, Washington is investing in enhanced reconnaissance and command and control capabilities in the Arctic, intends to put more emphasis on cold weather assets and to train and exercise more frequently in the north, and has plans to develop additional infrastructure in the Arctic, including a strategic port. (US Department of Defense, 2019; Madeira, 2019). It is also bringing decommissioned facilities back into military service, including restoration of activities based in Iceland, formerly the lynchpin of NATO maritime power in the North Atlantic. (Sterkeby and Hole, 2022; McLeary 2017). Operationally, as one report noted, the US Navy “continues to prioritize re-learning how to operate in the Arctic.” (Eckstein, 2019). Similarly, in its new 2022 naval doctrine, announced in Decree No. 512 on July 31, 2022, Russia emphasizes defense of the Arctic as an important national interest. As one account of the new doctrine explained, “The transformation of the Arctic into a region of ‘global competition not only from an economic, but also from a military point of view’ is especially stressed.” (Tebin, 2022) Consistent with this strategic priority, in recent years Russia has put emphasis on “rebuilding” its Arctic military capabilities. (For a concise overview of Moscow’s military improvements in the Arctic, see Lozier, 2022, pp. 19-21). It has created a new Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command and an Arctic Land Forces Brigade. It is upgrading its military infrastructure in the region. In military terms, the Arctic is above all a maritime theater, so it is particularly important that Russia has embarked on an ambitious, comprehensive naval modernization program involving all classes of naval vessels – and as in the past, the bulk of the Russian Navy is based on the Kola Peninsula and inevitably must operate in northern waters. (*Naval Technology*, 2022). It conducts air and naval exercises in the northern region. (See, for example, Episkopos, 2021). In general, the Russian government is committed to strengthening its military capabilities in the Arctic. (Staalesen, 2021). It is hardly surprising, then, that a survey of Arctic experts found “concerns that the Arctic may be torn apart as a result of geopolitical forces.” (Thomasen, 2022, p. 6).

It appears, in short, that we are witnessing the return of the strategic Arctic. The severe deterioration of relations with Russia, the revival of nuclear rivalry, the changing character of the Arctic, and the growth of Arctic-oriented military capability seem destined to combine in ways that restore the Arctic as an important arena of strategic competition. This transformation, already underway and certain to be accelerated by the impact of the Ukraine war, will be one of the decisive factors in the Arctic in the period ahead. The rest of the Arctic agenda will remain, but it will be accompanied by the unavoidable militarization of the region.

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