



Document Title: The Strategic Significance of the Arctic after Arms Reductions

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Date(s): January 1990

Document Type/Physical Description : Type-written, 4pgs

Fonds/Collection Name: George Lindsey Fonds

Series: Arctic Defence

File/Box Number: 4/1

Original Archival Reference: N/A

Item Description: This document is a typed paper that Lindsey wrote concerning Canada's Arctic defence policy and arms control (nuclear and non-nuclear) during the Cold War.

Keywords: Cold War; strategic deterrence; conventional deterrence; NATO; USSR; North Atlantic; Norway; Iceland; sea-launched missiles; arms control

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THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ARCTIC
AFTER ARMS REDUCTIONS

All of the territory of the NATO nations lies north of the Tropic of Cancer, and nearly all of the Warsaw Pact north of latitude 45. But throughout the Cold War, comparatively little attention or military activity has been devoted to the coldest part of this area - the central polar cap north of the Arctic Circle.

Now that it seems that the Cold War is over, we expect the members of both Alliances to make significant reductions in both strategic and conventional weapons, and to take other steps in arms control and confidence building. What is this likely to signify for the Arctic ?

Strategic Deterrence

Assume that the United States and the USSR remain as Superpowers, with very different political and social beliefs and foreign policies, and with armed forces able to maintain mutual strategic nuclear deterrence.

Then the Arctic remains the central front, over which a potential exchange of strategic weapons would be directed, and therefore over which it will be necessary to provide early warning. Even if the international climate is peaceful, and the probability of imminent attack is considered to be negligible at any one time, the continued assurance of long-term confidence and stability in possible future crises makes it essential to maintain a completely reliable network of sensors, serving to prevent any possibility of surprise.

Although some of the key sensors that provide warning of the approach of ballistic missiles are mounted on orbiting satellites, and there are programmes to develop space-based systems capable of detecting aircraft in flight, other provisions for warning such as BMEWS and the North Warning System, as well as comparable installations in the Northern USSR, depend on ground radars situated in the Arctic. Removal of any of these systems would be detrimental to strategic deterrence.

In addition to warning of attack, preservation of stable nuclear deterrence requires that the nuclear weapons able to retaliate must be able to survive the worst conceivable surprise attack that could be directed against

them. Although the trajectories to the other Superpower cross the Arctic, ICBMs and most of the long-range bombers are based farther south. But the largest complement of the Soviet SSBN force has its home ports in the Kola Peninsula, and possesses SLBMs with sufficient range to be able to threaten the strategic targets in the United States without having to leave Arctic waters. To minimize their vulnerability to hostile antisubmarine forces they can patrol under ice cover, thus avoiding airborne or ship-based ASW, and in shallow water to hinder acoustic detection by prowling SSNs. Also, penetration by SSNs of defensive under-ice bastions could be prevented by detectors, minefields, and torpedoes controlled from installations mounted on the floating ice.

Reduction of strategic weapons in START will increase the importance of making those that remain as survivable as possible. This is likely to be difficult for bombers and missiles in fixed known locations, especially if other arms control agreements prevent the deployment of defenses against ballistic missiles. But SSBNs are the most survivable, and in the Soviet case they can be made even more so by operation in the extensive shallow ice-covered waters off the coast of the USSR. Although the geography of the Arctic waters puts the Soviet Navy at a disadvantage for the offensive use of its surface ships, bathymetry and climatology offers it important advantages for the defence of its strategic submarines.

Conventional Deterrence

Assume that all or at least most of the countries now in NATO remain members of that Alliance, and wish to retain a prudent capability to defend themselves against a potential conventional attack from the East. Reductions in conventional weapons, brought about by the CFE negotiations, may remove the danger of a surprise blitzkrieg. But a more protracted conventional conflict would develop into a race of reinforcement and resupply, which the European members of NATO would lose to the East unless supported by large tonnages crossing the Atlantic from North America. Reductions carried out in accordance with CFE would make the need correspondingly greater.

While men and urgently needed light equipment could be moved by airlift, the heavy tonnage can only come by sea. The routes would be well to the south of Arctic waters. But the main threat to the North Atlantic SLOC originates in the attack submarines, maritime strike aircraft, and surface ships of the Soviet Northern Fleet.

To reach the North Atlantic these units must traverse the Norwegian Sea and the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap. Once through the gap, and aided by satellite reconnaissance, they would be able to overwhelm convoy defences or hunt down independent merchant ships. NATO's best defence is to contest the passage of the attackers in and north of the GIUK gap. To do this they must not only defend the territory of Northern Norway and Iceland, but continue operations from their airfields. A subsidiary problem for NATO is the possibility that Soviet SSNs could make their way into the Atlantic by way of passages to the west of Greenland and through the Canadian Archipelago.

Those who would deride arguments in favour of preservation of security of the North Atlantic as "old-fashioned cold war thinking" should be reminded that the purpose of providing the capability to sustain a protracted conventional conflict is not with the intent of initiating such a war, or to prepare for an eventuality which is considered probable to arise. If nuclear deterrence succeeds in preventing nuclear war, and CFE reductions in preventing a short conventional war in Europe, then NATO needs to give corresponding attention to the deterrence of a protracted conventional war. Together with the provision of adequate reserve supplies and logistics, the key to this latter problem is preservation of the security of the North Atlantic SLOC, and this has an Arctic dimension based in the Norwegian Sea and the GIUK gap.

Sea-Launched Cruise Missiles

Cruise missiles form a major unknown in the current arms control negotiations. While nuclear-armed Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) have been barred from Europe by the INF Treaty, and strategic ALCMs will be subjected to some form of control in START, control of SLCMs poses extremely difficult problems, many of them related to verification and to the mobile and multi-role properties of naval forces. Meanwhile SLCMs are proliferating, on submarines and surface ships, for attack of targets on land and sea, and armed with nuclear and conventional warheads. Conventionally-armed submarine-launched land attack SLCMs are likely to be important new weapons in the Arctic, where vulnerable military installations are mostly in isolated locations on or near the sea coast. They could make the operation of aircraft from the fields of Northern Norway and Iceland, or of ground-based early warning radars extremely difficult.

Arms Control in the Arctic

Proponents of demilitarization and arms control as ends in themselves sometimes choose the Arctic, on the grounds that there is little military activity there now, so it should be easy to reduce what there is to zero.

This approach ignores geographical facts. While ballistic missiles and strategic bombers may not be based in the Arctic, if they ever launch an attack it will be across the Arctic. The equipment to provide warning of such an eventuality has to be in place in the Arctic. The Soviet Union, not blessed with seaports on the Atlantic or Mediterranean, must base a major portion of its naval and merchant fleets in Arctic ports. These surface fleets need to be able to enter the Atlantic in peacetime. And those of its strategic submarines which are equipped with long-range SLBMs and are based in the Arctic can minimize their vulnerability by making their patrols in the shallow ice-covered Barents, Kara, and other nearby northern seas.

What could be considered (apart from numerical reductions in SSNs and other ASW units, which could not be restricted to particular geographical areas) would be confidence-building measures, such as keep-out zones or sanctuaries. In the Arctic these would offer greater advantages to the USSR than to NATO, but could perhaps be balanced by corresponding arrangements benefitting NATO naval bases farther south.

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Ottawa, January 1990