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Cold War Mentality

Countering the Threat Posed by the Northern Fleet

Michael Cabral | January 2025

Executive Summary

Housing both its second-strike capabilities and extensive non-nuclear long-range precision strike systems, the Northern Fleet plays a central role in Russia's concept of strategic deterrence. This article examines the Russian way of war and assesses the role the Russian Navy – particularly the submarine force – plays in Russian deterrence strategies. Drawing on lessons from the second phase of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it assesses the threat posed by the Northern Fleet to Canadian, continental, and allied security. It advocates for a greater allied naval presence, along and within Arctic access points, and highlights the role Canada that should play in this broader effort.

In 2023, responding to a Senate question about the growing presence of Chinese and Russian cruise missile submarines (SSGNs) near the United States (US), then–US NORTHCOM commander General Glen VanHerck warned that the threat was intensifying. He highlighted Russia's deployment of the *Yasen*-class submarine (NATO reporting name *Severodvinsk*) to the Pacific, alongside its ongoing operations in the Atlantic, as a growing concern. General VanHerck predicted that it was "just a matter of probably a year or two before that is a persistent threat, 24 hours a day potentially. [The] impact is reduced decision space for a nation's senior leader in a time of crisis."[1] Now, two years later and with Russian shipyards delivering a fifth *Severodvinsk* submarine to the Northern Fleet, understanding how these vessels will be used to threaten Canadian, continental, and allied security is imperative. Therefore, this article examines the threats posed by the *Severodvinsk* class by exploring its role in Russia's concept of strategic deterrence. Additionally, this article highlights the critical importance of strengthening allied anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities along and within Arctic access points and explores the role Canada should play in ensuring Arctic and international stability.

Strategic Deterrence and the Russian Way of War

Despite the defensive nature of Russia's military doctrine, in practice, the Russian way of war is offensive, relying on a strategy of active defence to neutralize *perceived* threats to state security. This doctrine prioritizes targeting an adversary's capacity and will to fight through pre-emptive strikes and offensive operations designed to inflict heavy losses, create disorganization, and

establish conditions favourable to Russian victory.[2] To that end, per Russian military doctrine, the Russian military may attack civilian targets, including a country's political leadership, critical infrastructure, and targets of high economic value.[3]

A cornerstone of the Russian way of war is the use of conventional (non-nuclear) weapons systems. The Russian military has incorporated long-range precision weapons systems into its deterrence framework and elevated their role to the same level as nuclear weapons. That is, their purpose is designed to impose prescribed or 'dosed' levels of damage deemed unacceptable to the adversary.[4] Importantly, Russian strategists emphasize that what constitutes 'unacceptable damage' is subjective and varies between adversarial nations. For some, it might involve a reduction in the quality of life; for others, it might mean millions of casualties.[5]

As Russia faces military, economic, and political decline, its reliance on conventional-based deterrence strategies will become increasingly critical. This development, in conjunction with the fact that firstly, Russia's views of unacceptable damage to an adversary are subjective, and secondly, Putin continues to surround himself with yes-men and sycophants, increases the risk of misperception and miscalculation by Russia. That is, Russian leaders could overestimate Western willingness to accommodate and underestimate allied resolve to respond. Therefore, understanding the importance of clear communication in the face of Russian political revanchism, and how Russia integrates long-range precision strikes into its broader strategy during the lead-up to and throughout potential conflicts, is essential to maintaining international stability. To do this, an assessment of the Russian Navy's role in the Russian deterrence framework is essential.

Assessing the Role of the Russian Navy

The Russian Navy plays *the* essential role in Russia's strategic deterrence framework. According to the Russian state policy on naval operations, the Navy's primary objective is to ensure deterrence by leveraging high-precision weapons to destroy an adversary's military and economic potential from the sea. Moreover, the document states that possessing a sufficient number of high-precision weapons, and showcasing the ability to use them in different ways, ensures the deterrence of large-scale military action against the Russian Federation.[6]

Consistent with Russia's military doctrine, the evidence would suggest that the Russian Navy's approach is offensive in nature. That is, Russia's long-range precision strike capabilities are designed to deter allied countries by 'holding at risk' allied fixed infrastructure and population centres, thereby impacting allied decision-makers.[7] Further evidence to support this notion is that in 2023, when Russia announced the deployment of the Tsirkon missile, it stated that its purpose is to strike 'decision-making centres' within minutes, even those guarded by advanced air defence and missile defence systems.[8]

In theory, during times of escalating conflict, Russian naval forces would be able to rapidly deploy across the world's oceans and seas, thereby holding at risk allied infrastructure and population centres and posing a significant test for decision-makers across the West. Such actions would serve as a challenge to both Western societal resilience and transatlantic cohesion.[9] However, in practice, Russia's capacity to operationalize the strategy has been severely depleted. Over a third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet now lies at the bottom of that same sea, the inclusion of Finland and Sweden into NATO has transformed the Baltic region into a greater zone of integrated defence, and the loss of

the Syrian Tartus base has severely weakened Russian naval capabilities in the Mediterranean.[10] Consequently, the already pivotal Northern Fleet – and, to a lesser extent, the Pacific Fleet – has gained even greater strategic importance in the eyes of the Kremlin.

While many analysts focus on the Arctic's economic importance to Russia, it is essential to highlight that the Arctic also serves a significant strategic role for the nation. The Northern Fleet – based in the Kola Peninsula – serves as the guarantor for the survival of the Russian regime through its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). While the protection of these assets is the primary role of the Northern Fleet, given that the Arctic serves as a gateway for Moscow to project power into the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the Northern Fleet is also a means of ensuring Russia's great power status through the ability to project maritime power globally.[11] The ability of Russia to project power from the Arctic is essential for operationalizing its deterrent strategies and threatening/coercing allied nations.

Recent developments in the Northern Fleet further the notion that Russian deterrence strategies have moved away from previous strategies of general anti–sea lines of communication (SLOC) toward that of threatening allied nations through conventional long-range precision strikes. The recent conversion of older naval vessels like those of the *Akula* class, and the introduction of the *Admiral Gorshkov*, *Lada*, and *Severodvinsk* classes, all with the ability to launch cruise missiles, supports this notion.[12]

The *Severodvinsk* class is especially dangerous, given its stealth and firepower capabilities. These submarines are equipped with eight UKSK vertical launch systems (VLS), capable of holding different missiles, including:

- **3M-14 Kalibr Cruise Missile (SS-N-30A):** A sea-launched land attack cruise missile (LACM) with a reported range of up to 1,500–2,500 km.[13]
- **P-800 Oniks Anti-Ship Cruise Missile (SS-N-26 Strobile):** An anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) with a reported range of up to 300 km.[14]
- **Tsirkon Anti-Ship Hypersonic Cruise Missile (SS-N-33):** A land-, air-, and submarine-mobile cruise missile estimated to be able to reach Mach 8–9 with a reported range of up to 1,000 km.[15]

The *Severodvinsk* class's firepower, coupled with the fact that in 2018, the lead boat was lost in the North Atlantic and evaded considerable US Navy efforts to find her for several weeks, highlights the significant threats posed by these ships in any potential conflict.[16] In coordination with the rest of Russia's Arctic capabilities, these ships pose serious threats to Canadian, continental, and allied security. These submarines appear to be specifically designed to operate in the world's oceans for extended periods of time and, if needed, hold at risk allied infrastructure. If these submarines were to be lost in the North Atlantic in times of escalating conflict, they could pose a severe political test for decision-makers in Washington and Ottawa.

Moreover, the rest of the Northern Fleet does not have to traverse the Arctic's choke points to cause considerable harm. From the Norwegian and Barents Seas, the Northern Fleet could hold at risk population centres and fixed infrastructure as far down as southern France and northern Italy.[17] Given that Russia's escalation decisions are driven by its subjective perception of unacceptable

costs for an adversary, proactive allied measures along and within Arctic access points are necessary to decrease the possibility of miscalculation and misperception.

The Impact of Russia's War on Ukraine

Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has showcased the weaknesses of the Russian military. Through an exemplary display of ingenuity by the Ukrainian Armed Forces and an impressive display of incompetence by the Russian Navy, Russia has managed to lose twenty-one corvette-sized or larger surface combatants to a country without a formal navy.[18] However, only one of these vessels, the aged cruiser *Moskva*, could be considered capable of distant maritime power projection. Therefore, while the success of the Ukrainian Armed Forces is impressive, it should not obscure the fact that Russia's global power projection capabilities remain undiminished.[19] That is, despite losses in Ukraine, the air and naval assets attached to the Northern Fleet remain relatively untouched by the conflict.[20]

Moreover, in 2023, Russian shipyards' deliveries to the Russian Navy increased from the previous year and included a *Borey-A* SSBN, a *Severodvinsk* SSGN, an *Admiral Gorshkov* frigate, and two *Steregushchiy*-class frigates.[21] Additionally, despite massive cost overruns and delays, the Russian naval leadership has made it clear that it will continue to prioritize its nuclear submarine force, which, if nothing else, provides further evidence of the essential part submarines play in Russian deterrence strategies.[22] That said, Russia's economy has always been its Achilles heel, and Western sanctions – put in place in 2014 following Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine – are having their effect. Russian surface fleet capabilities have continued to decline, and the evidence would suggest that force will continue to devolve away from a balanced fleet – comprising both power projection capabilities and a cruise missiles–equipped green-water force – into one based solely around the latter component.[23] Importantly, as previously mentioned, this does not detract from the damage these vessels can cause in Europe, even from Russian shores.

Beyond these developments, the war in Ukraine has also had important lessons regarding the role and impact of cruise missiles. Ukraine's ability to target vessels and infrastructure in Sevastopol, despite Russia's robust integrated air defence systems, demonstrated the persistent threat posed by these weapons, even under optimal conditions.[24] Furthermore, when launched from surface ships, Ukraine has been effective at intercepting Russian Kalibr missiles; however, when launched from submarines, their success rates are decreased. This is, in part, due to the fact that knowing their launch positions is important to knowing where they will land.[25] These developments highlight that Russian cruise missiles are not infallible, but they also illustrate the lethality of Russian submarines.

Moreover, while Russia's extensive use of sea-launched long-range precision strikes in the initial years of its war on Ukraine validated many important Russian assumptions about modern naval warfare, it has also come at a cost.[26] These systems, which Russia sees as critical for deterring NATO, rely on Western technology that is increasingly difficult for Russia to acquire due to sanctions.[27] Therefore, Russia has had to rely on covert operations to acquire this technology, which limits Russia's ability to replenish stockpiles that have reportedly been significantly depleted during the conflict. However, according to the Norwegian Intelligence Service, despite these constraints, Russia will prioritize funding and replenishing its precision strike weapons, which are estimated to be returned to pre-war levels within five to ten years.[28]

A final case to be mentioned is the Ukrainian landing ship (LST) *Yurif Olefirenko*. Early in the war, this Cold War–era vessel bombarded Russia's positions in Kherson from within sight of the coastline and then escaped without counterattack. Later, an aerial drone found the ship; however, Russia, lacking both aircraft and ships, resorted to an artillery bombardment, which the ship escaped without harm. Eventually, Russia would sink the boat, but only by attacking it when it was in port a year later, targeted by a cruise missile.[29] This highlights potential gaps in Russia's military capabilities: while long-range strike capabilities have been modernized, the organizational concepts, training, and coordination required to employ reconnaissance-strike systems against mobile targets appear underdeveloped.[30] This underdevelopment further suggests that Russia has prioritized striking fixed infrastructure in allied countries as part of its deterrence strategies, deemphasizing the training required to target complex, mobile forces like allied naval groups and reflecting a broader shift away from an anti-SLOC strategy.

Overall, while the war on Ukraine has severely weakened Russia, the threat posed by the Northern Fleet, particularly the submarine force attached to it, remains significant. Therefore, proactive efforts must be made to counter this threat in order to deter further Russian political revanchism.

Allied Efforts to Ensure Strategic Dilemmas for Russia

While it is not in Russia's interest to escalate a direct attack from the Arctic – an action that would put its second-strike capabilities, the Northern Sea Route, and hydrocarbon extraction infrastructure at risk – the most significant threat lies in the potential for the horizontal escalation of a conflict triggered in another region, likely NATO's eastern flank.[31] This risk, coupled with Russia's deterrence strategies, underscores the need for allied nations to focus on enhancing ASW capabilities and securing Arctic access points. These efforts would not only counter the threat posed by Russia's submarine force but also likely influence Russian calculus for testing NATO in other areas. That said, allied force posture must be carefully calibrated as, on the one hand, the presence of Russia's SSBNs in the Arctic requires a measured approach to avoid provoking a pre-emptive strike, but, on the other hand, excessive self-restraint may embolden Russia to escalate conflicts in other areas (most likely on NATO's eastern flank), confident in the security its second-strike capabilities provide.[32]

To navigate this balance, allied efforts should focus on imposing dilemmas for Russia, forcing difficult choices on resource allocation. By increasing allied naval presence and ASW capabilities in the North Sea, Norwegian Sea, and Bering Strait, as well as along the Barents Sea, allied nations can constrain Russia's ability to operate freely in the world's oceans. This denial, in turn, would impact Russia's calculus for testing NATO and put pressure on the nation to allocate further resources toward safeguarding its own assets. This approach would have the potential to impact several key areas, including:

- **Ukraine:** Given enough pressure from allies in other regions, Russia would be forced to decide between continuing the war – and expending critical assets, manpower, and money – or ending the war to prioritize resources toward deterring NATO.
- **NATO's eastern flank:** Putin sees the post–Cold War order as antithetical to Russia's long-term interests, and therefore, his challenges to the rules-based order do not stop at Ukraine.[33] Thus, Russia will have a calculus for challenging NATO in the future. By showcasing capabilities in the Arctic, particularly in the Barents Sea, NATO can alter that

calculus by holding Russia's SSBNs at risk. Overall, to deter Russia in the Arctic is to deter Russia globally.

- **The North Atlantic:** With limited naval assets, an increased allied presence in the Arctic would force Russia's Northern Fleet – particularly its *Severodvinsk* submarines – to prioritize the protection of Russia's second-strike capabilities, leaving fewer assets available to threaten Europe and North American infrastructure. In this case, similar to the Cold War, Russia would be dealt a dilemma of having to protect its SSBNs against NATO attack submarines or sacrifice these assets and break into the Atlantic to threaten allied infrastructure.[34]

Evidence already shows that enhanced allied attention to the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom-Norway (GIUK-N) Gap – demonstrated through exercises like Nordic Response and Dynamic Mongoose – is influencing Russia's decision-making. That is, since the second phase of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has been forced to dedicate its exercises toward protecting its SSBNs and denying allied access to the Barents Sea rather than projecting power into the Norwegian Sea.[35] Therefore, continuing and, in some cases, expanding the capabilities of allied countries to operate in the Arctic and to secure Arctic access points is essential to maintaining regional and international stability.

Canada's Role

As an Arctic, Atlantic, and Pacific nation, Canada is strategically placed to counter security threats emerging from the Arctic. Therefore, while Canadian policy has traditionally emphasized Arctic sovereignty, there is a growing need to integrate Arctic security into its strategic framework. While maintaining sovereignty is critical, acknowledging and addressing security threats from the Arctic is essential both to ensuring regional security and as part of Canada's broader contributions to international security.

Therefore, to deter Russia while maintaining the Government of Canada's objective of preventing the Arctic from becoming a theatre of military conflict, Canada should adapt its policies and actions in three key areas:

The GIUK-N Gap:

Just as it was during the Cold War, the GIUK-N Gap is a strategically important chokepoint. It represents the shortest route the Northern Fleet has to the Atlantic, and therefore, it is essential that allied nations can close this gap in the event of conflict. Thus, Canada should continue to participate in NATO exercises like Dynamic Mongoose and Nordic Response, which showcase NATO's resolve and capability to operate in these waters while bolstering Canadian naval personnel's capabilities.

That said, as previously mentioned, with its long-range precision strike capabilities, Russia can strike at NATO reinforcements and supply routes by attacking northern ports and maritime infrastructure in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, all from the relative safety of the Barents Sea.[36] Overall, there is a great need to show the capability to operate north of the GIUK-N Gap, into the Norwegian and Barents Seas. Therefore, Canada should support the expansion of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) to be able to respond to threats from and in the Arctic –

potentially including Russian grey-zone activities. The reason for this is threefold. First, the JEF would satisfy deterrent efforts by showcasing the allied capacity and ability to rapidly respond to threats from and in the Arctic without incurring the high cost of a permanent presence.[37] Second, the JEF has flexibility, as it would operate outside of NATO's force structure. Therefore, it would be seen as less provocative to Russia and would also be scalable and able to be integrated back into NATO in a force situation.[38] Finally, the JEF would satisfy the Government of Canada's goal of not allowing the Arctic to become a theatre of military conflict, while acknowledging that to deter Russia in the Arctic is to deter Russia globally.

The Northwest Passage

If Russia's access to the Atlantic is denied through the GIUK-N Gap during times of escalating conflict, Russian submarines may try to use the Canadian Archipelago to break into the Atlantic. According to Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee, the Royal Canadian Navy already has the capacity to deny Russian access through the Archipelago without the help of allies.[39] Vice-Admiral Topshee highlights that Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPVs) can be refitted with new weaponry as needed and that the Pacific Fleet's AOPVs are already focused on improving ASW capabilities, showcasing the ability to detect submarines from thousands of miles away using towed arrays.[40] Continuing to showcase Canadian capabilities to deny Russian submarines access to the Atlantic through the Northwest Passage will deter Russian adventurism and reassure allies that Canada is taking the threat seriously.

The future Canadian submarine fleet will also play a vital role in Arctic deterrence by patrolling the southern ice edge and increasing the risk for Russian submarines seeking to use the Northwest Passage as a transit route.[41] To improve this deterrent capability, Canada should continue to collaborate with the US, through NORAD, to improve maritime early warning and under-ice detection systems.[42] Beyond the US, Canada should also continue investigating the possibility of a trilateral conventional submarine pact with Norway and Germany to acquire submarines and enhance underwater allied integrated naval deterrence along and within the GIUK-N Gap and Northwest Passage.[43]

The Bering Strait

The Bering Strait serves as the final access point from the Arctic, making it strategically significant, especially given the growing cooperation between Russia and China. Following the decision of Xi Jinping's government not to join Western-led sanctions against Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, collaboration between the two countries has continued to grow, including the maintenance of a strong trade relationship, continued efforts to develop the Northern Sea Route, and joint military exercises in the North Pacific.[44] Additionally, in April 2023, Russia and China signed a maritime law agreement that would establish joint coast guard patrols in the Arctic.[45] Given the Chinese Coast Guard's reputation for deploying vessels resembling warships and intimidating neighbouring navies and fishing fleets in the South China Sea, this development is a potential obstacle to Canada's goals of avoiding turning the Arctic into a theatre of military conflict.[46]

As China's only realistic access point into the Arctic is through the North Pacific and the Bering Strait, a greater allied presence is necessary to ensure the Arctic remains an area of peace and

cooperation.[47] Additionally, a robust presence in the region could counterbalance Russia's potential role in mitigating one of China's strategic vulnerabilities: its reliance on overseas supplies.[48] That is, if the Northern Sea Route becomes fully operational, it could undermine the deterrent effect of an allied blockade of China, likely altering China's strategic calculus regarding aggressive actions in the South China Sea, like a blockade or invasion of Taiwan.[49]

To address these challenges, the Canadian Arctic Foreign Policy emphasized strengthening cooperation with key allies in the Pacific, including the US, Japan, and South Korea, on matters including maritime security.[50] Another potential solution is the creation of a multilateral Northern Pacific Task Group, which could involve incorporating a Canadian vessel with the US Third Fleet.[51] Overall, Canada should continue its role in addressing growing threats in the North Pacific, aligning its efforts with the goals of countering Russian and Chinese aggression and preserving Arctic stability. To do so, Canada's deterrent policies should be proactive and flexible to a shifting landscape; this is essential to ensuring Canadian and continental security, as well as to upholding the rules-based international order.

Conclusion

As Russia continues its descent from great power status, its reliance on the Northern Fleet, specifically the *Severodvinsk*-class submarine, will increase as a strategic deterrence tool. These submarines showcase Russia's growing dependence on long-range precision strikes for its strategic deterrence and demand that allied nations increase their deterrence efforts. If left unchecked, Russia may misperceive NATO inaction as NATO weakness, potentially leading to an unintentional war between the allies and Russia.

Therefore, allied countries require greater ASW capabilities, the capacity to secure Arctic access points, and the capability to project power into the Arctic with expeditionary forces. By prioritizing these areas, allied countries can reduce the threat posed by Russian submarines and reinforce allied deterrence efforts, thereby ensuring that the Arctic remains a region of stability.

Finally, Canada, as an Arctic, Atlantic, and Pacific nation, has a unique and indispensable role to play in this effort. By balancing its sovereignty goals with its security responsibilities, Canada can contribute meaningfully to allied efforts to counter Russian aggression. By doing so, Canada can ensure that Russia's desperate attempts to maintain its relevance do not compromise international peace and security.

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Notes

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