

“Cold War at Sea”

Conference at the US Naval War College, Newport, 7-8 May 2004

An important conference on “Cold War at Sea” met in Newport, Rhode Island, on May 7-8, 2004, at the Naval War College, the academically most distinguished US military school. The intriguing idea that the Cold War was mainly fought and eventually won at sea, introduced by former Chief of Naval Intelligence Adm. Sumner Shapiro, set the tone of the conference.

Although the proceedings did not quite bear out the idea they did show that sea power mattered much more than historians have thus far been inclined to presume. In most of the papers, the reasons for its importance and the resulting consequences were more implied than clearly spelled out. This was due to the tendency to dwelling less on political issues than on the professional qualities of both the US Navy and its Soviet counterpart. Such a tendency was all the more understandable in view of the presence in the room of former Soviet admirals and other high-ranking naval officers as honored guests.

The notion that it was the professionalism of the rivals’ naval personnel that saved them from getting into war was presented forcefully by most of the Russian guests and only rarely challenged by the other participants. This diverted attention from the question of how much professionalism devoid of political and other constraints may have created problems conducive to war in the first place or made other problems that had arisen more likely to lead to it.

Hardly a critical word was said amid paeans to Adm. Sergei Gorshkov, the “father” of the Soviet blue water navy, conceived and built mainly through his efforts as a nuclear force designed to challenge US global supremacy on the high seas—the Cold War era’s most radical, as well as the most irresponsible, expansion of the potential battlefield. From the two presentations by Russian naval historian Capt. Sergei Cherniavskii, based on extensive research in original Soviet sources, it was clear that Gorshkov was given a largely free hand by the political leaders he was adept at manipulating them in the pursuit of his vision of a nuclear-armed navy that would nullify the enemy’s naval supremacy by developing the capability of devastating the United States. Not surprisingly, it was the rise of such a navy, which paralleled and contradicted the East-West détente pursued by the Brezhnev leadership at the same time, that had a lion’s share in creating the Western apprehension that sealed the fate of détente. Our adversaries were nervous, Gorshkov’s former associate Adm. Lev Chernavin observed coyly, but “we felt proud.”

Major reasons for the support Gorshkov received for his project from his political superiors were the humiliation the Soviet Union had suffered during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and the subsequent ouster of Khrushchev, a staunch opponent of an offensive Navy. New evidence on the crisis presented at the conference by Svetlana Savranskaya, of the National Security Archive, lent support to her observation that the more we know about the 1962 confrontation in the Caribbean the more dangerous it looks. The details that have been coming out show the

disconcertingly casual manner in which highest-level decisions were made in Moscow, much more so than in Washington, and the exceedingly narrow margin by which common sense prevailed, again, more on the Soviet than on the American side.

It is still a puzzle—notwithstanding Savranskaya's meticulously researched presentation and the hair-raising narration by Capt. Riurik Ketov, who was the commander of one of the Soviet nuclear-armed submarines dispatched toward Cuba—why the Soviet command—whether at Khrushchev's initiative or because of his negligence—did something so risky as sending there not only strategic but also tactical nuclear weapons. Installed on both land and on board the approaching submarines and hidden from the Americans' eyes throughout the crisis, these were obviously not weapons of deterrence. Nor is it clear why Moscow decided to withdraw these weapons once the crisis was over and the Americans still did not know that they were in Cuba.

Nuclear cruise missiles and torpedoes had been installed on four diesel-powered submarines that were dispatched toward Cuba at a short notice, as if on an afterthought, despite Gorshkov having informed the party presidium that the US would probably detect them while they would be passing through the only channel they could take to get to their destination. The subs, though not their nuclear load, were detected well before they could reach it, having suffered breakdown of their machinery and complete failure of communication with the headquarters—incidents that cast some doubt on the professionalism of those responsible for the manufacture and maintenance of the equipment involved. As Capt. Ketov told the conference in his gripping testimony, the only clue on which he could decide about whether or not he might have had to fire off his nuclear torpedoes against the surrounding US ships had been Kennedy's address he was able to hear on the radio, in which the president had fortunately announced that he had ordered only the blockade but not an invasion of Cuba.

On both sides, as retired US Navy captain Joseph F. Bouchard of the US Navy pertinently described the gist of the danger, the top men in charge did not fully understand the position in which their commanders at sea had put them while the commanders on the spot were not sufficiently aware of their political superiors' intentions, thus generating ample potential for a catastrophic misunderstanding. After all that had been said, the conference did not dispel the queasy feeling that the avoidance of the catastrophe was a matter of chance and good luck than of professionalism, the lack of which may have been more conspicuous on the Soviet side, but was not as much present as it should have been on either side.

The building of the Soviet nuclear attack fleet under Gorshkov may be cited as a prime example of the perils of professionalism. Although several of the speakers praised the merits of the 1972 US-Soviet treaty on the prevention of accidents at sea it is the treaty's shortcomings rather than its accomplishment that stand out in retrospect. The agreement legitimized not only the dangerous practices of both navies but also the Soviet claim, repeated by all the Russian but questioned by many of the Western participants, that Russia has always been a maritime rather than merely land-based power. Whatever the practical meaning of the semantic distinction, the 1972 treaty failed notably to prevent what Lyle Goldsten and Yuri Zhukov, having utilized extensive Russian memoir literature, described as the Cold War's most dangerous

crisis next to the confrontation over Cuba. Their article is published in the 2004 issue of *Naval War College Review*.

That crisis took place in 1973 in the Mediterranean, NATO's back yard, as an outgrowth of the Yom Kippur War in the Middle East. Nuclear-tipped missiles were again aimed by Soviet submarines at US and other Western ships during maneuvers designed to demonstrate the ability to interdict the sea lanes patrolled by the US 6th Fleet. And, unlike before in the Caribbean, this time the Soviet Navy, despite its inferiority, emerged victorious in compelling the United States, by then in the throes of its defeat in Vietnam, to acquiesce in Soviet naval presence threatening America's vital supply lines to its European allies and tolerate the establishment of Moscow's own supply lines to its Arab allies through the air space of NATO member Turkey.

Just how the Soviet naval ambitions had been frustrated even before Gorshkov's died in 1983 a major topic of much more than merely historical interest, to which the conference paid relatively little attention. At issue is understanding the effect on Soviet strategic thinking and behavior of the of the Reagan administration's new "Maritime Strategy"—something from which US strategists today and in the future can draw lesson they may need. The strategy has been said as having had "many fathers" because of its apparent success. A key element in this "forward" strategy was using conventional naval power to threaten nuclear missile bases on Soviet territory as well as in Soviet coastal waters, to which the Soviet attack submarines were being increasingly relocated in the early 1980s.

An oral history survey of responses to the strategy as reported by high-ranking Soviet naval officers and civilian experts, summarized by armaments expert Stanley Weeks, produced mostly explanations consonant with the official Soviet line, but also evidence of strong psychological effect of the US Navy's projection of strength. Moscow also viewed NATO's European navies with much greater respect than did many officials and politicians in Washington. Significantly, the increased Soviet respect for the adversary stemmed from the projection of increased conventional rather than nuclear capability—the same kind of effect NATO's technological advances had on the Warsaw Pact and its gradual loss of faith.

Besides fearing that in a war the Soviet Navy would get "bottled up," its former officers also testified on spreading concern about supposed US capacity to stage amphibious Navy/Marine Corps landings in outlying Soviet territories, such as Kamchatka or the Kuriles. Whatever Moscow's real or exaggerated concerns may have been, they attested to the failure of Gorshkov's grand design. By the 1980s, the United States was well on its way to resolving the problem, defined in SAIS professor Jakub Grygiel's thoughtful paper, of how a land power, such as the Soviet Union, could be defeated by a sea power, namely, by giving the sea power a land component.

Whether the curtailment of the aggressive Soviet naval posture was the result of shock and awe at America's growing naval competence, of the economic strains resulting from the building Gorshkov's expensive navy, or any combination of these and other factors was not made clear at the conference. The necessary understanding of how the Maritime Strategy was made and why, however, can be gained from the excellent essay by NWC professor John Hattendorf, published in *The Evolution of the U.S. Navy's Maritime Strategy, 1977-1986* as no. 19 in the "Newport Papers" series.

Perhaps the most important conclusion that can be drawn from the conference is that during the Cold War the “grey” zone where the blue water navies were challenging each other was a particularly dangerous zone because of the particular mix in naval power of both conventional and nuclear power. The mix was dangerous because of the deceptively “neutral” character of those waters, distinct from well-defined zones of national sovereignty. Both superpowers shared the responsibility for creating the danger through the nuclearization of their navies. This was an unequivocally deplorable development but, given the prevailing illusions at the time about the workings of nuclear deterrence, more defensible for the United States than for the Soviet Union, whose security depended so much less on its navy than did American security.

The Soviet challenge to US naval supremacy during the Cold War echoed imperial Germany’s challenge to British naval supremacy that played such a fateful role in precipitating World War I. If the Cold War had ever turned into World War III, which was more likely to happen at sea than on land or in the air, Gorshkov would have been remembered by historians as another Alfred von Tirpitz, the architect of the misconceived German naval program—provided there had been anyone left alive to remember. In that sense, the Cold War was indeed won at sea.

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