

Politico-Military Assessments on the Northern Flank 1975–1990
Report from the IFS/PHP Bodø conference of 20-21 August 2007

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The Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies, as partner of the Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security, arranged the international conference *Politico-Military Assessments on the Northern Flank 1975–1990*. The conference was organized as an oral history workshop and took place on 20-21 August 2007 in the northern Norwegian town of Bodø, just north of the Arctic Circle. It was a follow-up of the Stockholm workshop organized in the spring of 2006 by the PHP and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in cooperation with the Swedish National Defense College (SNDC):

<http://anniversary.sipri.org/round-table-on-the-cold-war>

The previous PHP-conference arranged by the Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies was held in 2003 – on the Spitzbergen islands in the Norwegian Sea. It was organized as a research conference, and resulted in the book, *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War*, edited by Vojtech Mastny, Sven G. Holtsmark and Andreas Wenger (London: Routledge, 2006).

The oral history workshops differ from traditional research conferences by gathering *both* researchers and high-level decision-makers from the Cold War years. The combination of presentations from oral sources and by researchers, followed by joint discussion sessions, create new knowledge about the last years of the Cold War. Those important years formed a basis for the international development during the 1990's, and in many ways became a starting point for the challenges that dominate international relations today.

At the workshops, participants present papers, and all presentations and discussions are recorded for future use in research and education. Most of the material is transcribed and published at the PHP-website where it can be downloaded for free:

<http://www.php.isn.ethz.ch/>

The focus of the 2006 workshop in Stockholm was on the East-West Central Front in Europe during the two last decades of the Cold War—the decades overshadowed by plans to deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe. Another important topic during these years was the development of new concepts for high-impact conventional war fighting in Europe, in particular the U.S. Army’s AirLand Battle doctrine for maneuver warfare, including deep operations in the Eastern theater. Similar doctrines and concepts were developed in the Warsaw Pact countries, as both sides prepared for a large-scale conventional war on the Central Front.

War planning in the 1980s was the main topic at the Bodø workshop as well. However, the focal point was shifted from the Central Front to the Northern Flank. The latter was a thinly populated corner of the world that from the late sixties well into the nineties became heavily militarized. During these years the Northern Flank developed into a strategic frontier area between East and West, where in particular the maritime dimension became decisive in the politico-military assessments on both sides. Hence, the Bodø workshop emphasized naval thinking and maritime strategies, together with Nordic perspectives.

Day one at Bodø was devoted to defense plans for the Northern Flank developed by NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Moreover, Nordic perspectives on these plans were discussed. During the first part of this day, general defense plans on both sides were outlined. Lieutenant General (ret.) Norman Smith, Chief of Staff at NATO’s Regional Command North (AFNORTH) in the 80s, explained AFNORTH’s view on the northern defense challenge. He highlighted the defensive nature of the Northern Flank and the difficult challenges regarding reinforcements in this region. Geography had made the Nordic countries neighbors to the Soviet Union – a nation that had global military ambitions and wanted an ice free base with access to open water. Kola was the USSR’s only ice free port in Northern Europe, and it was expected that the USSR would try to gain unimpeded access to the North Sea for its naval and air forces, and at the same time take away from NATO control of the Danish straits using quick amphibious and airborne forces.

General Vladimir Dvorkin emphasized that the Soviet Army was capable of reaching the English Channel by conventional means, possibly within two or three weeks after launching an offensive. If the Soviets had reached, or were about to reach the Channel, NATO forces would probably have deployed tactical nuclear weapons, as Soviet military authorities

interpreted the situation. Use of nuclear weapons, even small tactical ones, would inevitably have led to an escalation with devastating consequences for Europe. General Dvorkin strongly underlined that the Soviets realized this risk of escalation and that this understanding caused a shift in Soviet operational thinking in the early 80s. The Soviet military gradually changed their plans for the use of tactical nuclear weapons. From seeing nuclear weapons as “just another big bomb”, they realized that even limited – tactical – use would destroy Europe, including most of the Warsaw Pact countries. According to Dvorkin, this understanding was shared by most the Soviet military in the early eighties. Hence, in the mid-eighties very few Soviet officers believed in combining conventional and nuclear forces at theater level, and the remaining option was deterrence and strategic use of nuclear weapons if deterrence failed.

General Dvorkin outlined different options for a conventional USSR attack against Norway in the 1980s. Some of the options bypassed Sweden and Finland, while other options implied violation of Swedish or Finnish territory. A Soviet attack could bypass Norway’s neighbors in the East by using amphibious attack forces towards North Norway, or by an attack from the South, directed through the Danish Straits and probably violating the northern parts of West Germany and Denmark. However, the main option was a massive, strategic assault conducted by joint Soviet land, naval and air forces, hence very similar to the German attack on Norway April 9th 1940. A strategic assault of this dimension would include seizing the Danish Straits in a massive amphibious attack against the Danish mainland and violating Swedish and Finnish territory by land forces. For a long period ten divisions were earmarked for this option.

The discussion following Smith’s and Dvorkin’s presentations was moderated by Lieutenant General William Odom, who is well known as one of America’s leading Soviet experts. He also held the position as director of the National Security Agency (NSA) for a period during the Reagan era.

The second part of day one was devoted to Nordic perspectives on defense planning during the second half of the Cold War. Finland was represented by a delegation of four, headed by Admiral (ret) Jan Klenberg, commander of the Finnish Defense Forces (Puolustusvoimat) 1990–94, and Major General Dr. Pertti Salminen, head of the *National Defense University* in Helsinki. The Swedish delegation had five members, headed by General (ret) Bengt Gustafsson, chief of defense 1986–1994. The Norwegian delegation was headed by General

(ret) Vagleik Eide, chief of defense 1987–1989, and had four members. The Nordic participants outlined their perspectives on U.S. and USSR planning. Among the Nordic countries, Norway was in a special position as NATO's-member since 1949 with close bilateral ties to the U.S. At the same time, General Eide pointed out the importance of Norwegian restraint and caution in the High North; seen from the small state of Norway it was of utmost importance to keep tensions in the north as low as possible. Hence, Norway's dilemma was how to balance its relations with the Soviet Union between deterrence and reassurance. Neutral Sweden had tight, informal relations to her neighbor in the West, Norway, as well as to the U.S. on the other side of the North Atlantic. Northern Finland had significant meaning to the Soviets and their defense of the Kola Peninsula. The Soviets wanted to expand their security zone around the naval bases at Kola, and Finland had to reject explicit Soviet proposals for USSR military presence on Finnish soil. Rejecting such proposals implied difficult political challenges for Finland's government, which also had to carefully balance its policy towards the Soviet Union.

Dr. Robert Ruiz-Palmer, head of the Planning Section in the new Operational Division of SHAPE, outlined the overall picture and the Alliance's plans for the Northern Flank, including Sweden and Finland. Seen from Mons, Belgium, both Sweden and Finland constituted important buffers against the East during the whole period, in particular because these two countries had the will and ability to maintain significant national defense organizations until the end of the Cold War – and further on into the 1990s.

Day two was devoted to U.S. Maritime Strategy in the 1980s and its implication for the Soviet Union, the Nordic countries, as well as the United Kingdom. Dr. John F. Lehman, U.S. Secretary of the Navy in the Reagan years and one of the architects behind the new naval strategy of the 80s, gave relevant and important perspectives on the Reagan administration's considerations and decision-making process. Dr. Lehman emphasized the line from his work in the lobby group of the *Committee on Present Danger* in the 70s to his involvement in developing a new naval strategy and a 600-ship navy. Moreover, he underlined the comprehensive approach of the Reagan administration: The new and offensive Maritime Strategy was part of a comprehensive strategy that also included economical, social and cultural components, as well as the offensive maneuver warfare concept for the Central European theater mentioned above.

Vice Admiral Richard Allen, who commanded the huge naval exercise Ocean Safari in 1985, followed up Lehman's presentation by giving accurate details from the planning and execution of Ocean Safari in the North Atlantic and Norwegian Sea. Admiral Allen explained how the new naval strategy was performed with carrier groups in forward positions. By conducting exercises like Ocean Safari, the American government was sending signals to the Soviet Union, saying that the United States was on the offensive. At the same time, these exercises were tests to confirm that the new naval strategy in fact could be carried out through huge, forward maritime operations. Such operations were extremely challenging even without combat engagement. Admiral Allen's experience from Ocean Safari and similar exercises was that the Maritime Strategy could be realized on both operational and tactical level. Admiral Allen's presentation gave unique insight into the conduct of naval operations at these levels.

Professor Vitaly Tsygichko, one of Moscow's leading defense analysts, discussed how the Soviet Union responded to the new U.S. strategy. In Moscow, the "Lehman strategy" was perceived as a serious offensive threat to the USSR. The Kremlin's view was that the U.S. Navy now challenged and directly threatened the Soviet Union's second-strike capability. At this time its capability to strike back in a massive nuclear showdown depended on its strategic submarines, and in the northern hemisphere the submarines at Kola played a very important role because of their ice-free access to the North Atlantic. The balance of terror was at risk if these submarines could be eliminated by the U.S. Navy in an early phase of the war. In this perspective the new American strategy left the Soviets with a strong feeling of being locked in. Countermeasures were initiated by the Soviets. As early as January 1985, the Soviet Navy launched Project 949, which was a program for developing defense systems against enemy carrier groups supported by enemy attack submarines. At the same time, the Soviet Navy designated its own attack submarines to defend the strategic ones (SSBNs) in the Barents Sea. Hence, Soviet air forces had to take care of wartime attack operations against allied sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

However, the Reagan administration's comprehensive strategy, including the Maritime Strategy, made the Soviet military realize the significant technological gap that was widening between the USSR and the U.S. Gradually the Soviet military acknowledged that there was no way to close it, an acknowledgement that had huge implications.

Admiral (ret) Sir James Eberle was Commander-in-Chief Fleet of the British Royal Navy in the 80s and, after his retirement, Director and Fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London. He outlined some British and Allied perspectives on the new Maritime Strategy. In Eberle's view, the Maritime Strategy was hardly implemented within an Allied context. Instead it remained an exclusively American strategy until the end of the Cold War. However, the new strategy contributed to increased focus on naval challenges, and indirectly led to higher priority of the British Fleet.

The discussion made it clear that, in the American perspective, the big challenge was the Soviet Union's conventional supremacy in Central Europe. Instead of countering this threat by falling back on nuclear weapons, like the U.S. and the Alliance had done in the early fifties, the Americans this time (1980s) initiated an offensive military strategy with two conventional components, both within the framework of NATO's 1967 strategic concept of flexible response. The first was the maneuver warfare concept for Central Europe. Hence, one of the fundamental principles of maneuver warfare was that a relatively small force could fight a larger force by speed and smart maneuvers. The other component was the Maritime Strategy, which would secure the offensive also in the maritime theaters on the flanks. Both components depended on the evolution of war at an operational level between the strategic and tactical levels as a matter of purely military decision-making and its execution.

The discussion left the impression that in the Allied perspective the new naval strategy was a relevant answer to the Soviet conventional supremacy: Together with the new high impact maneuver concepts for the Central Front, the new naval strategy contributed to a change in the balance of power in the last phase of the Cold War.

Among the Nordic countries, Norway noticed the most significant implications of the new Maritime Strategy. Commander (ret) Jacob Børresen worked as military advisor for the minister of defense and later foreign affairs Johan Jørgen Holst in the 80s. He shed light on the most important implications from a Norwegian perspective. The U.S.'s new forward Maritime Strategy put Norway on both Washington's and Brussels' strategic maps. The U.S. "rediscovery" of the Northern Flank resulted in extensive reinforcement plans, prepositioning of military material, fuel and ammunition and dramatically increased exercise activity in North Norway. In short, the Norwegian Armed Forces, in particular the Norwegian Navy,

went into a golden age during these final decades of the Cold War. Furthermore, the strategy contributed to increasing the credibility of U.S. and NATO deterrence of the Soviet Union.

However, the increased military activity challenged Norway's policy of low tension and caution in the High North, as pointed out by General Eide, above. It thus became the source of fierce internal debates over Norway's defense and security policy. The new Maritime Strategy made it difficult for the Norwegians to balance between on the one hand tying the U.S. firmly to the defense of Norway, while on the other hand trying to avoid too much internal debate and political discord over defense and security policy. Moreover, the increased military activity in the High North put pressure on Norway's policy of balancing between reassurance and deterrence towards the Soviet Union.

Sweden was in a different position than Norway. According to Vice Admiral (ret) Bengt Schuback, Chief of the Swedish Navy 1983–1990, the new Maritime Strategy had little impact on Sweden's defense and security policy. However, the overall increased focus on maritime matters and the Northern Flank contributed to a more active naval policy in Sweden. More emphasis was also put on the defense of Northern Sweden.

Regarding Finland, the U.S. Maritime Strategy had little impact on the Finnish Navy and defense and Finland's security policy. At the same time, the elevated tension of the 1980s represented a challenge for Finland's defense and security policy.

The discussion of the Nordic perspectives was moderated by Krister Wahlbäck, professor and ambassador, from Stockholm.

Professor Vojtech Mastny, coordinator of the PHP, concluded the workshop after the Nordic session. Mastny emphasized that the workshop had created new knowledge about several crucial issues during the two last decades of the Cold War. He underlined the novelty and creativity of the forward maritime strategy but questioned how much difference it really made in affecting the outcome of the Cold War. Mastny praised the openness of the Russian participants in explaining the Soviet Union's perception of the strategy, and Moscow's reaction to it, including some of the countermeasures that were taken but never fully implemented. Mastny said that all participants had shown a unique openness during the busy and exciting days in Bodø. He concluded by noting the relevance of the insights provided by

the conference for today's security challenges in view of the changed, but still sensitive relations between Russia and the West today, and the role the countries on the Nordic peninsula. Mastny called for a similar workshop on the Southern Flank, a region that today faces even more profound challenges than does the High North.

On day two the conference participants visited the Norwegian military headquarters, Regional Command North at Reitan, just outside of Bodø. Conference chair Bjerga, IFS, discussed the role of these headquarters during the Cold War. He emphasized the headquarters' central position as a point of intersection between SACLANT's and SACEUR's areas of responsibility. In addition the headquarters played an important role as Norway's signal post towards the U.S. and NATO, as well as the USSR: By having a huge military headquarters with high-ranking officers permanently located in the High North, Norway demonstrated the will and ability to secure its interests in the North and defend the whole country, including the long Norwegian coastline and huge sea areas north of the Arctic Circle. Rear Admiral Grytting, Commander-in-Chief at the headquarters today, outlined Norway's new and more complex security challenges in the High North, including economic, environmental and energy aspects. However, permanent military presence is still perceived as important from a Norwegian point of view.

The conference dinner was held at Landego lighthouse in the West Fjord. Dr. Lehman gave a keynote speech about the profoundly changed international situation since the end of the Cold War. He emphasized his experiences as member of the 9/11-commission and presented his view of the war on terror.

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