Cold War Relations in the Barents Region

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by

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Introduction

Apart from some differences of opinion over the control of Finnmark in medieval times, historically Norway has always been at peace with, and more often than not allied with Russia. But mainly for geopolitical reasons, a consequence of its geographical location, after World War Two, Norway was forced to take sides in the ideological struggle between East and West in the Cold War, and as a result found itself to be an enemy of Russia, a most uncomfortable position for a small state, neighbour to a major power.

The Cold War was a period in the history of Norway and Russia when relations between our two countries were cooled down and old ties between our populations in the north were as good as severed. The cooling down of relations and the severing of ties did, however, not start with the Cold War. They went back to the Russian revolution in 1917 and the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922. As a consequence of the Bolshevik accession to power there was no longer room for such day to day contacts between ordinary people on both sides of the border that had been the rule under the tsarist regime in Russia.

The establishment of a strong Communist regime in Moscow was profoundly disquieting to bourgeois Europe. So disquieting that for a long time the West did not understand that the real threat came, not from the left, but from the right, from Nazi Germany. In Norway, primarily in Oslo and among the elite, I should say, the fear of Bolshevism confirmed and reinforced the fear of Russia that was created during our 91 year long union with Russia’s old arch enemy in the Baltic, Sweden, between 1814 and 1905. During the Crimean War in the 1850ies, Britain tried to persuade Sweden into opening up a northern front against Russia in order to take some of the pressure off the Crimean front. Sweden’s King Oscar 1 was tempted by this opportunity to get Finland back, but the government and the parliament would have none of it. Never the less, to Norway, this incident became the origin of an irrational fear of Russia that to some extent has lasted even to this day. In 1940, the few units of the Norwegian armed forces that had been mobilized, were thus mobilized against Russia. The attack, as we know, came from a completely different direction. Russia became Norway’s ally in World War Two, and Russian forces liberated Finnmark from German occupation. When the war was over, Russian forces left and closed the border behind them. Shortly thereafter relations between the former allies, the United States and Great Britain on one side, and the Soviet Union on the other, started to break down, and the two parties were soon locked in an uncompromising struggle. The Cold War had begun. Norway that, for both ideological and cultural reasons, belonged in the West, found herself as an enemy of the Soviet Union. We entered an era in our relationship dominated by mutual fear and suspicion.

When that is said, however: Due to our common land border, our adjoining sea areas and, our cohabitation at Svalbard, there were more points of contact and more cooperation between the Soviet Union and Norway during the Cold war, than between the Soviet Union and any other NATO-country.

My aim, this afternoon, is, from a Norwegian perspective, to describe the relationship between our two countries during the Cold War, the geostrategic and military strategic factors that dominated superpower confrontation in what we today call the Barents region, and which constituted the framework that circumscribed Soviet-Norwegian relations during the Cold War. I will discuss Norway's analysis of the threat from the Soviet Union, Norway's role in NATOs military strategy, and the consequences that had for the military build-up in North Norway and NATOs heavy investment in infrastructure in the region.

Political relations

In the years immediately following World War Two, the foreign policy of the Norwegian Government was aimed at forging a bridge between the East and the West in the belief that it was in the interest of both sides to maintain the relationship and cooperation that was developed during the war. But the hard-handed Soviet policies towards the countries of Eastern Europe that were under Soviet military control, and specifically the Soviet coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, undermined the basis for Norway's bridge-building politics and brought us into NATO in April 1949.

In the decades that followed, it was Norway's membership in NATO and the nuclear balance of terror between the two superpowers, which constituted the framework for Norway-Soviet relations. But there were also bilateral bones of contention, a result of the military operations on the northern front in World War Two: During the war many thousand Russian prisoners of war died in Norway and were buried at more than 200 different gravesites. In the early 1950-ies, when Norwegian authorities wanted to move all of them to one place at Tjøtta in Helgeland, south of Bodø, Moscow protested vehemently to what they called Norwegian desecration of Russian war graves. In several places the local Norwegian population supported the Russian view, and also the Norwegian parliament responded negatively to the plan. The dead, whether they were friend or foe, should be left alone. In North Norway the authorities had to leave some graves alone, but the majority was moved to Tjøtta. The reason was fear that Soviet agents would use visits to the many gravesites, some of them situated close to military installations, as a pretext for espionage. On their side, Norwegian authorities demanded that the Soviet government release Norwegians that, for various reasons, had become prisoners of war in the Soviet Union. Among these were persons who had made a heroic effort in the war against the Germans.

As a confidence building measure, and to prevent that Norway would become an arena for direct confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, Norway already in February 1949, a couple of months before entering NATO, established her so called ”Base Policy”, a unilateral, non binding, declaration that as long as she was not being attacked or threatened with attack, Norway would not enter into agreements with other states that obliged her to open bases to foreign military forces. For the rest of the Cold War, Soviet authorities monitored closely whether Norway followed up her declaration in practice, and never ceased to mention it in their encounters with Norwegian diplomats and politicians.

Stalin's death in 1953 marked the end of the tensest period in our relationship during the cold war, when there was very little contact indeed. When Norway's Prime Minister Gerhardsen visited the Soviet Union in November 1955, it was a sign that both countries wanted to start rebuilding our relationship from anew. In Norway it was noted that the two remaining Norwegian prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, Osvald Harjo and Emil Isaksen, were released and could come home.

In 1957 Gerhardsen, also as a confidence-building measure, proclaimed that Norway would not store nuclear weapons on Norwegian soil in peacetime and that Norwegian soldiers would not be trained in the use of nuclear weapons. The authorities also put restrictions on allied exercise activities in

Norway. Allied exercises in Finnmark, the county next to the Russian border, were forbidden, and there were restrictions with regard to how many soldiers, aircraft and ships that at any one time could exercise in Norway.

Never the less, there were repeated incidents between our two countries that regularly caused increased tension. On Mayday 1960 an American U-2 reconnaissance plane was shot down over Sverdlovsk, en route to Bodø. The incident caused considerable strain on the relationship between Norway and the U.S., as it constituted a flagrant violation of Norway's self imposed restrictions, and a serious breach of confidence from the American side. For the Soviets it was proof that Norway in fact did not live up to its own self-proclaimed restrictions with regard to allied activities on Norwegian soil.

Another bone of contention was the increasing volume and frequency of allied exercises in Norway and outside the Norwegian coast. In June 1968, as allied units arrived in Troms to take part in Exercise Polar Express/Polar Ice, a major part of the Soviet Kola-based 45th Infantry division suddenly appeared at the Norwegian border with its guns pointing toward Norway. Only after four days, the Soviet units started to withdraw from the border and return to base. Demonstrations of force like this were never repeated, but the Soviet Union continued their criticism of allied exercises in Norway and monitored them closely from the sea and in the air.

A special feature of the Cold War in the Barents region that led to many human tragedies was the Soviet Union's attempts to recruit Norwegians as Soviet agents. The practice had its origin in World War Two, when Norwegians were recruited and trained as covert agents by our Soviet allies in order to fight the Germans. After the war, people who had been in contact with the Soviets were automatically suspected as spies, sometimes on extremely doubtful evidence. One of the legacies of the Cold War is thus that the heroes of the Soviet trained resistance against German occupation in North Norway did not get the recognition in terms of medals and pensions that their British trained colleagues in South Norway got. On the contrary they were looked at with suspicion by Norwegian authorities and for years were under strict surveillance by the security police. There is no doubt that some of the Norwegians that were contacted by the Soviet Union after the Cold War had started actually did end up as Soviet agents. And some of them, who informed Norwegian authorities, were recruited as double agents.

The use of agents to acquire information was relatively common on both sides of the Norwegian Soviet border. Especially in the 1950ies, Norwegian intelligence services sent agents over to the Soviet side to try to create a picture of what one suspected was a Soviet military buildup. We know of 17 to 18 such operations between 1950 and 1959, where Norwegian agents, or Russian defectors under Norwegian control, entered the Soviet Union either from Norway or from Finland. Some of them led to loss of life on both sides, and the results in terms of intelligence were negligible. Technical intelligence, aerial photography etc. soon took over.

Norwegian merchant ships visiting Soviet harbors on legal business, on the contrary, were an invaluable source of intelligence. Norwegian sailors were encouraged to take note of everything they saw, and report it. From 1962 onwards selected sailors were issued with cameras and told to take photographs of harbors and of ships and submarines on the surface they might encounter. This activity was not restricted to the Barents region but encompassed all Soviet and East bloc harbors and coastal waters.

We suspected of course that the Soviet Union used their merchant ships in a similar fashion. Another point of contact was thus the steady stream of Soviet merchant ships that transited through Norway's inner leads underway from their ports of departure in northern Russia to their destinations further south, under strong and continuous surveillance from Norwegian authorities. As long as they were in Norwegian territorial waters they had to carry a Norwegian pilot whose task it was to make sure that they did not deviate from the obligatory route or take photographs of Norwegian defence installations along the coast and so on.

The cold war also had its comical sides. In 1966 Soviet authorities opened up for visa free admittance to Boris Gleb, a small Russian enclave on the western side of the Pasvik River, which forms the border between Norway and Russia. Norwegians, who lived under a very strict regime with regard to alcohol, suddenly had free access to cheap Russian vodka. The enclave teemed with Soviet recruitment agents and senselessly drunk Norwegians. The Norwegian security police quickly closed admission to Boris Gleb from the Norwegian side of the border, for security reasons.

As I mentioned initially, there were however several other points of contact than this: Bilateral cooperation in the fisheries sector was for instance institutionalized as early as in the 1950s in the field of marine research. In the late 1970s, management cooperation was institutionalized through the Joint Norwegian-Russian Fisheries Commission. This long-standing bilateral cooperation has had as a result that the major fish stocks in the Barents Sea are now being managed and harvested in a sustainable manner.

On Svalbard, subject to Norwegian sovereignty under the Paris treaty of 1920, both Norway and Russia had established large mining communities. But contacts between the communities were few and far between. Norway abided strictly by the provisions in the treaty that Svalbard may not be utilized for purposes of war, and conducted a policy based on equal treatment of all Signatory powers to the treaty, while recognizing that The Soviet Union, due to her mining communities on the islands, must be given special consideration. The Soviet Union on the other hand, tried to establish an exclusive Soviet-Norwegian consultation practice, something Norwegian authorities at all costs wanted to avoid. This caused considerable friction over the years, and found concrete expression in several episodes where the Soviets protested against or tried to circumvent Norwegian practices and regulations.

More often than not, however, increased tension between our two countries was not caused by bilateral issues, but was a reflection of the development in international politics. From the late 1970-ties the relationship between Norway and the Soviet Union was affected by the tension after NATOs so called double track decision in 1979 to deploy medium range nuclear missiles, Pershing and Cruise in Europe, in response to the Soviet deployment of the RT-21M, or SS-20, missile some years earlier. Other sources of tension were the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the state of emergency in Poland in December of 1981. The optimism of the first half of the 1970-ies was followed by new pessimism and fear, not unlike the situation in the 1950-ies. In Norway threat perceptions were increasingly influenced by the colossal buildup of the Soviet Northern Fleet and its associated air and marine units at the Kola Peninsula.

The geostrategic context

Twenty five years ago, in the mid 1980-ies, despite Norway's confidence building measures, what we today call the Barents region had become a key confrontation area in the Cold War. The Soviet Union had built up its powerful Northern Fleet with its strategic submarines that threatened Western Europe and North America, and with its tactical submarines, its powerful surface fleet and its Naval Air Arm that threatened the Sea Lines of Communications that held the Atlantic Alliance together. The United States and NATO had countered this massive build-up with their own no less massive naval expansion in the form of President Reagan's and his Navy minister John Lehman's Forward Maritime Strategy. Annually NATO conducted huge exercises in North Norway and the adjacent sea and airspace that were closely monitored by the Soviets. Frequent major Soviet exercises were equally closely monitored by NATO. This situation, and the relationship between our two countries in those years, cannot be understood unless it is put in a geopolitical context.

In military-strategic terms the importance of the Barents region is a function of its geographical location situated between the North American and the Eurasian continents. The shortest line between Russia and North America runs across the Arctic. From the northern point of Canada, the distance to Murmansk, Russia, is only a little over 2500 kilometres. With the development of long range bomber aircraft, and even more importantly, with the advent of intercontinental missiles during the Cold War, the direction of the treat of aerial attack, both in Russia and in North America, became *north*. And right underneath the flight path of these aircraft and missiles lay the Barents region. This is one reason why this region to both sides became such an important arena for surveillance and warning.

The Barents region is also militarily important because the Barents Sea constitutes Russia's only unrestricted access to the Atlantic Ocean. This is why Moscow after World War Two decided to make the Northern Fleet its priority one fleet and to develop its base areas on the Kola Peninsula, with the associated air- marine- and army units in support, into the perhaps largest military base area in the world. This is the other reason why the Barents region became an important region for surveillance and warning, and what would have become a major theatre of operations, had the Cold War gone warm.

NATOs counter to the Soviet build-up on the Kola Peninsula was the development of a massive infrastructure in North Norway, a build-up that lasted right up to the end of the Cold War in 1989. The build-up included fuel and ammunition storage sites, ports, communications and surveillance systems and headquarters. Airfields like Bodø, Evenes, Andøya, Bardufoss and Banak were upgraded, some with improved runways, others with hardened shelters, fuel depots and so on. Elaborate plans were made for the reinforcement of Norway, and allied units were earmarked, or had deployment to northern Norway as one of their deployment options. As the build-up progressed and the plans developed, NATO exercises, with increasing frequency and scope were held, to test out the plans and further modify them. The climax of this exercise activity came towards the end of the Cold War when U.S. Navy aircraft carriers deployed into North Norwegian fjords, within striking distance of the Soviet Union, as part of exercises Northern Wedding in 1982 and Ocean Safari in 1985.

Nuclear weapons played a central role throughout the cold War, as a deterrent against attack. An important part of the nuclear deterrent force on both sides, were submarine launched missiles on board so called strategic submarines. The major part of the Soviet strategic submarines was based at Zapadnaja Litsa, in the Litsa fjord just 45 kilometres from the Norwegian border. From the mid 1960-ies to the mid 1980-ies they had to transit south, through the passages between Greenland, Iceland and the Shetland Islands, to reach their targets in North America. From the mid 1980-ies they could reach their targets from the North Norwegian, the Barents and the Kara Sea.

First generation U.S. submarine-launched nuclear tipped ballistic missiles, like their Soviet counterparts, had limited range and must deploy into the Norwegian Sea in order to reach their targets in the Soviet Union. In that respect use of Norwegian navigational aids was important. Or they could simply sail into a deep Norwegian fjord. There they had an accurate position from where to launch their missiles, in waters where they were difficult to locate. Norway's nuclear policy made it politically impossible, and the need for secrecy made it impractical, to openly use Norwegian coastal waters for this purpose. They may have done it any way.

This brings me to the regular high number of unidentified foreign submarine contacts in Norwegian territorial waters, mainly in North Norway, that were reported throughout the cold war. At the time they were generally assumed to be Soviet submarines. We know that submarines were sometimes used by the Soviet Union to infiltrate or exfiltrate secret agents, spies, in and out of Norway. We also know that the Soviet Union in World War Two carried out extensive submarine operations in North-Norwegian waters against German shipping. Given the importance of being able to operate in Norwegian coastal waters in case of war, I personally believed then, and believe now, that Northern Fleet submarines regularly operated in our fjords and inner leads during the Cold War to maintain and further develop the competence they had acquired in World War Two. But with hindsight, we cannot exclude the possibility that there were unauthorized visits of submarines of other nationalities in Norwegian waters as well. Information regarding these activities is still highly classified.

Increased tensions between East and West from the mid 1970-ies and onwards had its impact also in the north. In 1978 there occurred a number of episodes that were seen as a reflection of the increased east-west tension but that contributed to embitter relations between Norway and the Soviet Union. It started in April 1978 when a DC-9 passenger liner from Korean Airlines was fired upon by Soviet fighter aircraft and forced to land on the Kola Peninsula. The episode caused increased Soviet readiness in the air, and Norwegian Orion maritime patrol aircraft operating over the Barents Sea were for the first time in many years intercepted and closely followed by Soviet fighters.

Between 18 June and 23 July 1978 there were a series of episodes where merchant vessels from Eastern bloc countries anchored illegally in Norwegian territorial waters off Finnmark. Maritime patrol aircraft, the frigate HNoMS Stavanger, where I was second in command at the time, and the 22nd Fast patrol boat squadron, were deployed to increase surveillance off the coast of Finnmark. For some time afterwards Norwegian military authorities stepped up its surveillance of Norwegian territorial waters.

On the 28th of August 1978 a Soviet photo reconnaissance aircraft, a Tu-16 “Badger”, as we called it in NATO, crashed on the island Hopen in the Svalbard archipelago. With the embittered east-west relations as a back carpet, the Hopen-accident caused an intense war of nerves between Norwegian and Soviet authorities. The Norwegians came to the crash site first, but the Soviets had naval forces in the area powerful enough to take the law into its own hands. Norway was put under pressure to admit the Soviets access to Hopen and to the wreck and the black box. But the Norwegians refused. And the risk associated with actually forcing their way onto Hopen in the face of Norwegian protest and resistance was probably considered too great, given the fact that it might provoke a response from NATO and conflict with the U.S. The Soviets grudgingly had to accept that the Norwegians were in charge of the investigations.

On the 30th of August 1978, the newspaper Nordlys published pictures that revealed that the Soviets had installed air traffic control radar and a satellite ground station at the Soviet helicopter base at Cape Heer, near the Soviet mining settlement Barentsburg at Svalbard. This made Norwegian authorities conduct an inspection of the helicopter base, but they found nothing to criticize. The base received an official Norwegian approval from 1980. But there are indications that Cape Heer was a military base partly manned by personnel from the Soviet military intelligence service the GRU, right up to the end of the Cold War.

The many incidents in 1978 were probably a reflection of the fact that the Soviet Union intensely disliked the increasing Allied, and especially U.S. presence in North Norway, even if it is difficult to document any direct connection between the incidents. Whatever their reason, Norwegian authorities found the situation unpleasant. It gave the impression of the Soviet Union as a closed and very different society that constituted a challenge to Norwegian security interests. This reinforced their belief in the justification of Norwegian membership in NATO and Norway’s military preparations.

The Soviet Union continued its determined and systematic force buildup through the 1980ies. Norway's Chief of Defence at the time, General Bull-Hansen assessed that the Soviet Union had sufficient military capacity available in Leningrad Military District to launch offensive operations against Norway, without warning, at any time. The forces based on the Kola Peninsula alone had the capacity to carry out a surprise attack against Finnmark as far west as Alta. The attack could include occupation of Norwegian Arctic settlements at Svalbard and Bear Island, and isolation or destruction of military air bases and ports in the North Norwegian counties of Troms and Nordland. Under the disguise of frequent exercises and a generally high level of military activity, General Bull-Hansen feared that the Soviets may be able to prepare for such an attack for a long time in advance, without Western intelligence being able to register it. The Norwegian Chief of Defence was not alone in harboring concerns like these. The opinion in NATO at this time was that a warning could come as late as 48 hours prior to the first Soviet units crossing the Norwegian border. It was this threat assessment that lay underneath Norwegian and Allied defense preparations and planning in the last phase of the Cold War.

North Norway's strategic location close to the Soviet base areas on the Kola Peninsula made it a perfect site for intelligence operations directed against the Soviet Union. I have already mentioned the humint operations in the 1950ies. With American support and money, Norwegian technical intelligence in the late 1950-ies onwards was built up to an impressive standard. In addition to listening stations on the ground in North Norway from Fauske south of Bodø to Vardø in Finnmark, a ship specialized for electronic surveillance, the Marjata, operated in international waters in and around the Northern Fleet exercise areas in the Barents Sea. This effort was supplemented with regular Navy and Air Force units taking part in the intelligence collection. Norwegian Orion maritime patrol aircraft regularly carried out flights, and Norwegian navy submarines and surface ships regularly carried out cruises into the Barents Sea. In my ten years in submarines, I spent more months submerged in the Barents Sea than I care to think about. As a result of this effort Norway was normally the first to be able to deliver to NATO pictures of new aircraft, ships and equipment in the Soviet armed forces. The main purpose of the intelligence effort was, however, strategic warning. The assumption was that prior to a Soviet attack on NATO, the Northern Fleet would leave its bases and head for open waters, and there would be a marked increase in communications activity on the Soviet side. An accurate statistics of levels and pattern of Soviet military activity was developed, and major deviations from the normal pattern would then constitute a warning of attack.

Throughout the Cold War the Barents Sea was thus primarily regarded as part of a Naval Theatre of Operations, and not – as it is today – as an area to be exploited commercially and protected environmentally.

All of this is now history. In the Barents region contacts between our two countries are steadily increasing and improving. And only last week a Russian and a Norwegian frigate conducted exercises together along the coast from Bergen, Norway, all the way up to Severomorsk in Russia. These are welcome signs that relations between our two countries are finally normalizing, after almost 100 years of isolation, and nothing could be better than that.

Thank you for your attention!