

1986

The Role of the Navy and Marines in the Norwegian Sea

H. C. Mustin
U.S. Navy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Mustin, H. C. (1986) "The Role of the Navy and Marines in the Norwegian Sea," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 39 : No. 2 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol39/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

The Role of the Navy and Marines in the Norwegian Sea

Vice Admiral H. C. Mustin, U.S. Navy

NATO's maritime strategy is a cohesive statement, incorporating collective inputs from all of the nations, for the employment of naval forces in support of the overall NATO strategy. The maritime strategy is based first on deterrence. Should deterrence fail, the NATO maritime strategy is designed to mount a defense far forward in order to protect the territory of its member nations. The U.S. Navy's Maritime Strategy is drawn both from the NATO and the U.S. national military strategy; it provides that the Navy and Marines will wage global, coalition warfare in conjunction with the U.S. Army, the U.S. Air Force and the military forces of our allies.

There are those who take issue with this forward strategy. This criticism ignores the real world: NATO is short of maritime forces to the extent that we cannot perform simultaneously all required maritime tasks to implement a basically defensive strategy in the high north. Therefore, if NATO is to keep the initiative at sea we must defend forward through offensive operations. This means that U.S. Marines and U.S. naval forces, operating in conjunction with NATO forces, must be in position for early and vigorous offensive action if the need arises. Maritime forces have a decisive role in defending and, in the event of invasion, restoring the integrity of the NATO islands in the high north and of Norway, all of which are separated from the rest of Europe either by water or non-NATO countries.

The U.S. Navy and U.S. Marines are part of NATO's Striking Fleet Atlantic. Support of the land battle by the Striking Fleet will be critical on the flanks; the loss of northern Norway would be a determining factor in the battle of the Atlantic as would the loss of Iceland; the loss of Greenland would be severe; losing control of the Baltic Straits would allow the Soviet Baltic Fleet access to the Norwegian Sea. Therefore, NATO has adopted at sea an offensive posture which seems superficially to contradict the premise of a defensive alliance, and some say that indeed it does. This is nonsense. NATO is a defensive alliance *politically*, but there is no logical, historical or legal reason to insist on a *military* strategy that is purely defensive. In fact, history has demonstrated that no purely defensive strategy has ever won a war. In

reality, the geographical spread of the high north is such that we would be self-imposing a very serious limitation on our forces if we were only going to react to events. The combination of large area and thinly spread forces has led NATO to the conclusion that reaction is not a prudent posture. The immediate defense of territory may require early augmentation of Norwegian forces by external NATO forces in the form of U.S. Marines, the U.K./N.L. Amphibious Force and/or Canadian forces.

The concern over our forward strategy is frequently couched in terms of questioning whether U.S. aircraft carriers, as the centerpiece of the Striking Fleet, can survive in the Norwegian Sea in a conflict with the Soviet Union. No one has ever said that war with the Soviet Union would be easy. In war, ships get sunk, aircraft get shot down and people get killed. The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact would be very formidable foes, and we who would have to fight them are very much aware of their capabilities. But they would not be invincible. The Striking Fleet can get early warning and assistance in beating down Soviet air attack through joint operations with NATO AWACS and Norwegian air defenses—including the U.S. Air Force—and we have demonstrated this capability in exercises.

The Striking Fleet can deal with Soviet surface forces with relative ease. Since our forward aircraft carriers provide defense for Iceland and the U.K., we anticipate a full court NATO press on Soviet submarines with antisubmarine forces from those nations, with forces organic to the Striking Fleet, and with U.S. and NATO submarines. The Soviets recognize the threat from our carriers to a much greater degree than do many in the free world; they also acknowledge that a moving target ranging over thousands of square miles of blue water is much more survivable than a fixed airfield ashore. No one suggests that we should abandon all airfields in Norway at the start of hostilities, and yet some quake at the notion of less vulnerable aircraft carriers operating hundreds of miles at sea.

Our strategy is not a hell-bent-for-leather dash northward to the Kola Peninsula; as John Lehman has said, "We're not going to lob A-6s into the men's room of the Kremlin." Admiral James D. Watkins, the U.S. Navy Chief of Naval Operations, has testified to the Congress and stated on numerous other occasions that we do not propose to race blindly into the jaws of waiting Soviet forces. We are going to choose the time and the place of naval engagements, because our forces have the balance and the strategic mobility to afford us the option of making such a choice. Our forward strategy contains elements of risk, of course, but the naval forces that NATO is building, manned by the outstanding professionals who drive the ships and fly the aircraft of the alliance, are eminently capable of carrying out our strategy successfully. It goes without saying that NATO's

Military Committee and Defense Planning Committee would never have

4 Naval War College Review

approved a strategy which they perceived to be a loser, nor would the U.S. Navy have concurred in the highly unlikely event that they had done so.

Another question concerns whether the successful execution of our strategy would exert a decisive influence on Soviet decisionmakers in a war between the NATO Alliance and the Warsaw Pact. In other words, what difference would successful naval operations make? There are those who believe that the ultimate outcome of a war in Europe will be decided in a matter of days or weeks on the ground in Central Europe. Without doubt, wars are decided on the land, but it is overly simplistic to construct a false dichotomy in which the alliance must choose between a war at sea or a war on land. All NATO commanders agree that naval power is indispensable for the defense of Europe; land forces are organic to success at sea. Maritime operations and continental operations complement each other. The real question that my senior NATO colleagues and I wrestle with is how to best employ maritime forces to achieve overall NATO strategic objectives.

It has become almost a cliché among serious strategic thinkers to observe that while one cannot win the land war in Europe at sea, one can just as surely lose it at sea. Senior NATO leaders openly acknowledge that NATO does not, in fact, have a strategy without the employment of maritime forces because NATO depends on the sea for direct support of the land battle, for military reinforcement and resupply, and for defense against seaborne attack and for sustenance.

Some also argue that we should reject a forward strategy and instead establish a maritime Maginot Line near the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom "gap" behind which we could protect the sea lines of communications to Europe. These arguments fail to acknowledge that the defense of NATO is much more than just the defense of West Germany. We cannot afford to forfeit the tactical initiative to the Soviets and concentrate on escorting convoys across the Atlantic. Such a posture would raise issues regarding the fate of Norway, Iceland, the Baltic approaches, and, indeed, the United Kingdom. These allies are of no less strategic importance than the allies on the Central Front; a strategy that amounted to a *de facto* writeoff of our northern allies would be unconscionable.

Nonetheless, there are those who apparently are willing to abandon the Norwegian Sea to the Soviets. I believe that if we allow the Warsaw Pact to turn the NATO flanks, the pact will eventually succeed in cutting off our allies in the center from resupply and reinforcement. The best means of protecting the sea lines of communications and bolstering the full alliance is by the conduct of offensive sea control operations far forward. The key to winning the battle of the Atlantic is winning the battle of the Norwegian Sea; it is no accident that the Soviets have constructed their navy to fight the critical battle in the high north. NATO's maritime objectives in the Norwegian Sea are to repel a Warsaw Pact amphibious assault on north

Norway, to support the defense of Norway against land threats, to prevent Soviet use of facilities in Norway, and to contain the Soviet Northern Fleet or destroy it at sea. In turn, these objectives provide for defense of Greenland and Iceland: if we control the Norwegian Sea, the Soviets would have severe problems in mounting sustained threat to the nations in the region. Should we concede this area in advance to the Soviets, we would be unilaterally granting them one of their dominant strategic objectives without requiring them to fire one shot to earn it.

The final issue involves the question of whether our forward strategy, which could include strikes against Soviet naval bases, would be unduly escalatory. War is not an idle exercise in intellectual polemics. There will always be risks and uncertainties, including the uncertainty of the actions of an adversary. We have learned the hard way that restraint on our part in military matters is by no means a guarantee of restraint on the part of the Soviets. The Striking Fleet is charged formally by NATO mission to conduct offensive operations to contain and neutralize the Soviet maritime threat, and these operations include destroying the threat at its source. Such operations will be a decisive feature of our campaign to defeat aggression from the Warsaw Pact.

One must consider the vital importance of conventional forces to deter below the nuclear threshold—and then acknowledge that a key element of that deterrence is a credible capability to strike the Soviet Union with *both* conventional and nuclear weapons. Put another way, deterrence with conventional forces must contain a credible threat of retaliation with nonnuclear means against targets that the Soviets value enough to give them pause. Without such a retaliatory capability—against both the Soviet homeland and the Soviet Fleet—NATO's maritime posture does not contribute to overall deterrence. If the Striking Fleet is to be an element of conventional deterrence, it must be in position to deliver convincing retaliation to Soviet adventurism. This retaliation by definition must include strikes into the Kola—the maritime equivalent of the "Deep Strike" concept for the land battle.

In summary, the alliance's basic strategic objective is the protection of the territory of its member nations. Our ability to meet this objective in the high north has been brought into question by the steady growth of Soviet maritime forces. Over the past 31 years we have continually reevaluated and evolved our strategy to account for the significant changes in the maritime balance of forces. In countering Warsaw Pact activities, our NATO forces are guided by three major principles: *containment*, including tying down Pact forces in defensive tasks by creating allied threats from the sea against the enemy's coastal areas; *defense in depth*, including striking enemy bases and facilities which support his forces at sea as well as amphibious landings as required in the high north; and most importantly, *keeping the initiative*, because distances

6 Naval War College Review

are too great in the region for maritime forces to be deployed in time to prevent critical damage being done by the Soviets were NATO solely to chase after events. (From such a posture, the alliance would be able to do little more than note each incident in turn and then decide shrewdly that each was a hopeless cause where no NATO reaction would likely be effective.)

NATO maritime commanders can no more decide to fight only in some areas than land commanders can propose defending only some parts of Europe. The forward commitment of maritime forces is essential to the success of NATO's overall strategy because of NATO's vital dependence upon the sea. All senior commanders agree—as demonstrated repeatedly throughout military history and as true today as it was in the campaigns of Alexander the Great—offense is the best form of defense.



“The technological judgment of military men, like any technological judgment, works well only within the framework of a general strategic theory that everybody understands and relies upon.”

Max Ways, *Beyond Survival* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 162.