



Competitive Strategies in the European High North

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article studies Russian military strategy, concepts and capabilities as we find them today and as we are projected to find them in 10 to 15 years and explores potential weaknesses in Russian military power. In this light, it scrutinises defence efforts made by NATO and its key allies and makes an assessment of military strategies and concepts to deter and, if needed, to deal with Russian action in the High North of Europe. The article applies a net assessment and competitive strategies approach, entailing study of Russian, Norwegian and NATO ends and concepts. Within this framework, the study discusses Norwegian response options, arguing that Russia's layered defence in the European High North can be effectively deterred and defeated. This requires investment, firstly, in capabilities which both mitigate Norwegian and NATO weakness and offer the possibility of exploiting Russian weaknesses, and, secondly, in prudent and suitable strategies and operational concepts.

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In the event of a high-intensity war with Russia, parts of the European High North risk being isolated from the West behind Russia's layered defence.¹ Russian so-called Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities such as long-range missiles, submarines, and modern air-defence systems form the cornerstone of an integrated and layered defence. While much has been written about hybrid threats and wars, this study deals primarily with security and war in the more traditional sense. In a Royal United Services Institute publication, Professor Rolf Tamnes calls for "a competitive strategy, capitalising on [Western] strengths and Russia's weaknesses" (Tamnes, 2018, p. 22). Seeking to answer that call, this article analyses both the strategic challenges a high-intensity war with Russia in the High North would pose and how such a war can be deterred – or, if necessary, won. In order to do so, it will examine the key existing military balances in the High North, focusing on the triangular relationship between Russia, Norway and NATO allies. In order to limit the length of the article, the potential role of Sweden and Finland in such a conflict will not be discussed. I will analyse and discuss Russia's capabilities and concepts today and in a 10–15-year perspective, scrutinising Norway's and NATO's response options; as Norwegian deterrence and defence relies heavily on NATO, the allied dimension of such a conflict will play a key part. While the main focus here is on military strategy, I will address matters from the levels of national strategy to operations.

Apart from studying capabilities, plans and concepts, the article's key aim is to create a better understanding of potential solutions for the dilemmas that might arise from Western strategies. To achieve this, the study will use a methodology inspired by net assessment and competitive strategies thinking.² Strategic competition and warfare are relational and dynamic in their very nature. Actions taken or concepts and capabilities employed by one party in a conflict inevitably lead to reactions from the other. Strategic analysis should thus strive to analyse the interrelations between the players, not each player in isolation.

The study does not discuss the *likelihood* of an armed conflict between Russia and NATO. As such a conflict cannot be categorically ruled out, it is worthy of study. The study spans both the current situation and what is assumed to be a relevant scenario in a perspective of 10–15 years. One should expect a Russian hybrid and multi-domain operation, launched well before any conventional phase, which may include manipulation of the political and public debate, cyber disruption of infrastructure, and clandestine special operations. In case of a conventional military attack, there might be some strategic warning, but not necessarily evident tactical warning.

Were Russia to prepare or launch a conventional assault on NATO, it would ensure its strategic nuclear submarines were protected in the Arctic Ocean and the Sea of Okhotsk through the establishment of a layered defence, often termed a "bastion defence." While this would not necessarily include a direct invasion of Norway, it could seriously hamper Norwegian freedom of action. In particular, Russian air defence systems, coastal defence missiles and submarines could pose a threat to Norwegian troop movements on land, in the air, and at sea. They could also obstruct both the deployment of NATO reinforcements into Norway and movements from the United States across the Atlantic. A Russian deployment of forces onto Norwegian territories outside mainland Norway such as Svalbard cannot be ruled out, nor can pre-emptive strikes against Norwegian high-value targets such as ports and air bases.

In order to avoid "bean counting," or capability comparison only, this article adopts a more instrumental approach. The design is informed by Joe Strange's structural analysis of centre of gravity (Strange, 1996, p. 2). This framework will be used to analyse how different capabilities could underpin a military strategy in the given scenario. Based on a common understanding of Russia's bastion defence, it will identify which effects Russia would need to create in order to establish a layered defence in the High North. This brings us to the question of those capabilities Russia will require to generate these effects, and whether the capabilities might exist today or in 10 to 15 years from now.

¹ "The European High North" is meant in a functional manner, encompassing the European land and sea areas of the far north in line with Tamnes & Offerdal, 2014, p. 5.

² For a detailed account of net-assessment, see Bracken (2006) and Elefteriu (2018).

Compared to a traditional capability assessment, this approach has two major advantages. Firstly, it forces one to set finite resources into a strategic and operational framework, thus providing a more realistic and usable picture of military capabilities; secondly, it allows for a further analysis of how well NATO capabilities can defend against or deter a Russian layered defence; finally, it can identify capability gaps in both Russian and Western forces.

Overall, Russia has the military capabilities necessary to establish a full-spectrum local dominance in the High North for a limited period. They also have clear vulnerabilities that Norway and NATO can exploit, however, both as an effective deterrent and as an effective defence in case deterrence fails. This would not only require investments in new capabilities, but a more collective and integrated approach to the problem posed by a Russian layered defence.

RUSSIAN MILITARY POWER

Successful military operations rely heavily on a command structure fit for purpose. After years of disorder and discussion, Russia has made tremendous progress, particularly since 2010, in designing a slim and efficient structure that has demonstrated its qualities in a number of conflicts. At the top of this structure, the president and his key men have the power to plan and execute operations without much delay and interference. The General Staff are central in carrying any plan into the theatre, a function they perform in tandem with the Joint Strategic Commands (OSK); the Military Districts, meanwhile, execute force production and support combatant forces in the campaign. The establishment in 2014 of a separate OSK North, and a distinct Military District from 2021 with the Northern Fleet as its main striking force, demonstrates the importance of the north to Russian military strategy (Whisler, 2020).

Another factor of great importance is the manner in which Russia's armed forces have integrated their different effectors in their command and control systems. Less bound by a strict domain-oriented mode of organising military power, and not hampered by a need for multilateral agreements across an alliance, their command and control system has effectively integrated sensors and effectors. The system is founded on the twin concepts of the operational *reconnaissance fires complex* and its tactical equivalent, the *reconnaissance strike complex* (Grau & Bartles, 2018; Kofman, 2019), affording the ability to seamlessly and rapidly transfer targeting data from sensors to weapons. This technology is, in itself, not new and revolutionary. Most NATO members have Command, Control, Communications, and Computers Information Systems (C4IS) with similar capabilities. If there is a Russian advantage in this area, it rests on the fact that national encryption protocols across an alliance are less of a concern. While one should be careful to accept Russian claims of the efficiency of such systems at face value, on a tactical level the system has proven effective in both Ukraine and Syria (McDermott, 2018).

Russia's military powers have obvious strengths and weaknesses. They are bound to lose any protracted conventional armed conflict with NATO, should major NATO members stick together and act in unity. The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database confirms that the difference in GDP, production capacity, and potential military power is overwhelmingly in NATO's favour (SIPRI, n.d.). In the unlikely event of a military conflict, Russia's main hope for success is to rapidly achieve its military goals and to de-escalate before NATO can mobilise its superior resources. This logically dictates that Russia should pursue a high-risk, offensive strategy with the aim of expeditiously attaining its strategic goals. Such a strategy would rest on the ability to quickly establish a situation of local military dominance, the use of their robust A2/AD systems to isolate the area, and then the presentation of terms for a negotiated settlement as a *fait accompli* (Boston & Massicot, 2017, pp. 6–7). Russia has developed and honed an ability to quickly transit from peace to war (Tamnes, 2018, p. 11), successfully demonstrated through the performance of military exercises (Norberg, 2018, pp. 48–49), the most recent examples being the Zapad field exercise of 2017 and the naval exercise Ocean Shield of 2019. While the length of time Russian forces could maintain a high operational tempo with large forces remains uncertain, it would nevertheless give Russia a distinct strategic advantage in the early stages of an armed conflict.

In an armed conflict with NATO, or should such a conflict be seen as inevitable, Russian forces will establish a layered defence (Black et al., 2020, pp. 8–9). To this end, Russia realistically needs to achieve at least five overall operational effects:

- Lasting sea control in its inner bastion defence, east of the naval choke point known as the Bear gap and bounded by Franz Josef Land and the New Siberian Islands.
- Sea denial in outer bastion defence, south from the Bear gap to the GIUK–N gap.³
- Lasting air superiority in the inner bastion defence area.
- Territorial control over mainland Russia and outlying bases.
- Threats to/the disruption of NATO Atlantic sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

Air superiority is a prerequisite for lasting sea control. Guided missile frigates, such as the Gorchkov class, provide capabilities essential to the achievement of desired objectives. Its sensors, anti-ship missiles and air defence missiles contribute towards sea control and air superiority. Without the contribution of fighters and aerial sensors, however, its range would be very limited.

In the last decades, Russia has developed potent missile systems that pose a serious challenge to NATO. The new systems' inclusion of air defence, land attack, and anti-ship missiles fit well into an overall Russian strategy of flexible defence and increased strike capability. Weapons such as the Kalibr and Iskander missiles provide a significant offensive strike capability. Anti-ship missiles such as the much-discussed Tsirkon have been developed to reach hypersonic speeds in their terminal phase (Wright, 2020). The new versions of these missiles also have significantly longer maximum ranges than their predecessors. If the official metrics of the Tsirkon missile are correct, it could potentially pose serious challenges for allied missile defence systems.

These missiles are a key component of the improved strike capability in the maritime domain. Most new surface ships and submarines are equipped with standard launch pods which can carry either Kalibr, Oniks or Tsirkon for surface vessels, or Tsirkon and Kalibr for the submarines. This does not only represent an upgrade in the naval strike capability, it reduces the overall vulnerability of these systems, spreading them out to a relatively large number of platforms. This will only increase as the upgrade of the Northern Fleet progresses over the next decade.

Along with the introduction of new missile capabilities, we see major improvements in platforms in all domains. A key feature of the land-based parts of these so-called A2/AD systems are that they are relatively small and mobile. The Iskander tactical ballistic missiles, Bastion coastal defence missiles, S-300, 350, and 400 air defence systems, and so on, are all based on mobile platforms. This makes the systems flexible in use as they can be moved both strategically and tactically with relative ease. It would be fully possible, for example, to reinforce Arctic bases such as the Nagurskoye airbase at Franz Josef Land with coastal defence missiles if needed. Their mobility also increases their survivability as it makes them hard for an opponent to locate and target.

Submarines remain the most serious challenge to the security of Norway and NATO in the North Atlantic. Their key missions would include deployment to the Bear and GIUK–N gaps and the threatening of reinforcements further to the west. One should mention in particular the multi-purpose SSGN Oscar II-class submarine and the new and very silent Yasen-class submarine, to be armed with both Kalibr and Tsirkon, which would pose a serious threat to NATO's command of the seas (Navy Recognition, 2015). Their main vulnerability, as during the Cold War, comes from the need to navigate maritime choke points in transit to their operation areas. Both the Bear gap and, especially, the GIUK–N gap physically limit freedom to manoeuvre and increase the possibility of detection in transit. This also highlights why sea control in the Bear gap would be important for the Northern Fleet in a conventional war. Russian sea control in the Bear gap would force NATO anti-submarine warfare (ASW) groups and maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) further west, and thus mitigate risk to submarines during the early stages of a transit. It would also make it possible for Russian ASW groups to aggressively hunt any NATO submarines in the area to further enhance their own control.

³ The choke points defined by the coasts of Greenland, Iceland, the United Kingdom, and Norway.

One could argue that Russia does not need to threaten NATO SLOCs in the Atlantic as Russia's best strategic option in an armed conflict is to win quickly. Threatening your opponent's strategic SLOCs is normally more of a long-game gambit. In this case, however, it could serve an additional and more important purpose than actually sinking American and NATO reinforcements. If an initial Russian offensive were to succeed in gaining its initial goals, the mere presence of such a threat could affect American and NATO operations through the risk presented to vessels in the area. In a dynamic strategic situation, the purpose of such an action would be to influence an opponent's cost-benefit calculus through the mere presence of submarines in this area. Furthermore, Russia's maritime strategy is partly based on the "pre-emptive destruction of long range strike platforms" (Kofman, 2020b). Deploying submarines in areas where NATO or American cruise-missile carrying task-groups are supposed to operate would thus be in line with Russian maritime strategy. Any carrier task-group or reinforcements would need to consider a substantial submarine threat. It would also stretch NATO's already limited ASW capacity. With the arrival of more SSGN submarines to the Northern Fleet, it is not inconceivable that they are able to achieve a sea denial effect in the outer bastion, and threaten Atlantic SLOCs.

Russian military thought places great emphasis on the strategic destruction of enemy critical infrastructure ashore and at sea (D. Johnson, 2018, p. 52). The arsenal of different missiles developed by Russia in later years gives them "redundant, overlapping, long-range, dual-capable missile coverage of nearly all of Europe from within Russian territory, airspace, and home waters" (D. Johnson, 2018, p. 39). While the different systems' precise capabilities and range remain a source of much debate, they nevertheless pose a significant challenge if NATO wants to penetrate established denial bubbles or areas.⁴

RUSSIAN MILITARY WEAKNESSES AND VULNERABILITIES

In order to maintain a competitive outlook on strategic analysis, it is as important to identify an opponent's weaknesses and capability gaps as it is to identify strengths. This brings us to some key shortcomings and vulnerabilities in Russia's military capabilities. Its main military weaknesses rest in the maritime domain. Despite large investments into new classes of both surface ships, submarines and new missile systems, the Northern Fleet lacks both volume and central capabilities.

According to conventional wisdom, Russia's main weakness is its lack of the carrier capacity necessary to underpin a blue-water navy; Russia's only carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, has been non-operational for long periods of time (GDC, 2020).

Lack of carriers, and thus sea based fixed-wing support, hampers Russian maritime capabilities in several ways. Firstly, in a peer-opponent confrontation it would leave any surface group operating without the support of land-based fighters vulnerable to enemy air attacks. Even with modern air defence, once detected it would be vulnerable to attacks from enemy aircraft with anti-ship missiles. Secondly, the lack of carrier-based aviation seriously hampers any surface group's ability to locate and thus target enemy ships efficiently. Russian maritime patrol aircraft (MPAs) trying to operate in the Norwegian Sea would most likely be easy prey for fourth- or fifth-generation NATO fighters based in Norway, Iceland and Britain. Lack of carrier-based aviation would most likely force much of the surface based Northern Fleet to operate within range of land-based aviation and land-based anti-ship missiles.

The seemingly obvious solution to this weakness – the securing of at least one operational carrier – could be challenged. A single operational carrier does not necessarily improve the effect of an operation much, since significant resources must be tied to its protection, and even with such a concentration of resources, the carrier will be extremely vulnerable should it be deployed into the Norwegian Sea. One could argue that, being an enormous waste of resources, Russia's spending on the Admiral Kuznetsov and the rest of the Russian blue-water navy is in NATO's interests.

⁴ For an example of the debate concerning Russian area denial capabilities, see Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Berglund, "Bursting the Bubble? Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications" (FOI, March 2019); Michael Kofman, "It's Time to Talk About A2/AD: Rethinking the Russian Military Challenge," War on the Rocks, 5 September 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/its-time-to-talk-about-a2-ad-rethinking-the-russian-military-challenge/>.

More importantly, by investing heavily in long-range, precision-guided cruise missiles, and in the attack submarines and smaller and medium-sized surface ships capable of carrying them, Russia is moving forward along another track. These capabilities can play a crucial role in anti-access efforts and in the projection of power.

There are also questions regarding the technological maturity of these capabilities, however. The main doubts regarding their efficiency are largely based on their ability to “shoot over the horizon” using dynamic targeting processes. While it is conceivable that anti-ship missiles are able to accomplish this, it is more of an open question whether air defence systems are capable of this (Dalsjö et al., 2019, pp. 73–75). The lack of such a technology would seriously hamper the systems’ effective range, as the missiles would not be able to receive updated target information during flight. But Russia’s ability to strike stationary targets such as airports and ports should not be underestimated; in a 10-year perspective it would be prudent to assume that Russia will be able to overcome technological shortcomings with regards to targeting, especially concerning anti-ship missiles.

TRENDS IN RUSSIAN MILITARY POWER

In the light of the above discussions, what shape will Russian developments take in the course of the next 10 to 15 years?

Russian economic development, and hence Russian military spending, is difficult to predict for the next decade. Fluctuations in oil and gas prices, the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic sanctions are all variables which can severely affect the Russian economy. If Russia is able continue its military spending on approximately the same levels as today, however, we can estimate the progression of military capability in the course of the decade by referring to Russia’s state armament programme. The current programme, planned to be finished in 2027, describes the main projects of the Russian armament industry (Connolly & Boulègue, 2018, p. 11; Kofman, 2018).

In the maritime domain, Russia primarily aims to increase their capabilities in upgraded submarines and Kalibr missile-carrying corvettes and frigates for the surface fleet. The planned progress will reinforce the Northern Fleet with three Borei-class strategic submarines and three Yasen-class SSGN submarines. The new Lada-class and the upgraded Kilo-class conventional submarines seem less likely to be ready, as both programmes have suffered serious setbacks. For the surface fleet, the situation seems even more uncertain; the Gorshkov-class would represent the biggest reinforcement with their multi-role capability (Connolly & Boulègue, 2018, p. 21). Since the Baltic and Black Sea Fleets have been modernised with a substantial number of smaller vessels, it is likely that the Northern Fleet will receive at least five of the ten planned frigates. Having suffered several delays in recent years, however, it is unlikely that the Gorshkov programme will be able to deliver on schedule. While the current armament programme will significantly increase the operational capability of the Northern Fleet, even allowing for delays (Zysk, 2020, p. 15), the strategic reach of the surface fleet will most likely remain limited.

Not every important development in Russian military capability is disclosed in the state armament programme, however. Steps taken toward a more networked approach to military operations offer one notable example. By investing in C2 systems capable of swiftly sharing information across domains, they are developing a gradually improving recon-strike complex. If Russian forces can effectively integrate systems further across domains and branches into a resilient recon-strike system, they could, in a 10-year perspective, enjoy an advantage over NATO. The integration of sea-going drones capable of providing targeting information to anti-ship missiles in the manner of land-based systems for artillery fire, for example, could partly mitigate the lack of carrier capability. This would enable them to effectively generate operational dilemmas by subjecting NATO forces in the High North to potent multi-domain threats. It is unlikely such a system can be neutralised, merely degraded through attrition – probably with great risk and significant losses along the way.

As with all predictions, the above analysis entails a degree of uncertainty. Economic trends are at best uncertain, and a number of factors could seriously alter the Russian economy. Additionally, strategic competition is not static but relational and dynamic. Russian strategic behaviour over the next decade will be influenced by concurrent NATO actions and policies. The next part of this article will thus focus on the Western side of this strategic competition.

This part offers an examination and discussion of Western military power in the context of a potential high-intensity conflict with Russia in the High North. As key allies, the United States and the United Kingdom will receive special attention; this is not only due to the close bilateral bonds Norway shares with them, but to the military capabilities these countries bring to the table. As above, this section will establish the contemporary status quo and then consider competition in a 10–15-year perspective.

While NATO has taken major steps to rebuild collective defence, especially so since 2014, the organisation suffers certain shortcomings. Several analysts have pointed towards the challenges presented to NATO and individual Western states from Russian hybrid- or under-Article 5-threshold threats (Adamsky, 2015; R Johnson, 2018). NATO's shortcomings are not limited to dealing with hybrid threats, however; notwithstanding several improvements, there are still challenges concerning the organisation's capabilities and strategical theory in case of a high-intensity peer opponent conflict.

Parts of Western military capabilities are cutting edge. Fifth-generation fighters such as the F-35, nuclear submarines, carriers, and major battle tanks are all among the best pieces of military hardware ever developed. Nevertheless, 20 years of counterinsurgency campaigning has also left holes in the Western military arsenal. When viewed in light of Russian capabilities, concepts and potential strategies, some gaps appear to be more worrisome than others. The lack of integrated and layered air-defence systems is particularly problematic (Gourè, 2018, pp. 21–23).

Many nations deemed ground-based air defence surplus to requirement during the years of stabilisation operations. Norway disbanded the army air defence branch in the early 2000s; other nations simply did not prioritise, or re-invest in, new and updated systems. While active steps have been taken to remedy parts of this problem on NATO's eastern flank (Schroeder, 2019, p. 26), missile and air defence remains insufficient in the north. Norwegian/National Advanced Surface to Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) are too sparse to protect NATO's own airbases and lack range (Hagström Frisell & Pallin, 2021, p. 31). The air defence systems being acquired by the Norwegian Army are similarly few in number and short range. Considering Russian missile strike capabilities, this leaves bases, installations and command posts in northern areas vulnerable in case of a conflict.

Sea denial capabilities have similarly been neglected or phased out in recent decades. Norway's system of coastal fortresses was dissolved following the end of the Cold War and has never been properly replaced. While mobile coastal ranger teams can potentially fill this gap, they need volume and a more potent effector than Hellfire to represent a credible capability. Sea mines could also be a relatively cheap and efficient denial capability, taking the nature of Norway's coastline into account. Effective mining could, in the early stages of hostilities, obstruct free passage and pose a serious risk for an enemy amphibious task force.

Another main challenge at the outset of a conflict would arrive not from the relative quality or capability gaps but from a general asymmetry in available forces, especially so in the High North. NATO no longer has numerically significant fleets and armies at high readiness in Europe, while generating and moving larger land forces and maritime forces from Britain and the United States is time-consuming (Frisell et al., 2019).

Constructive steps have been taken to mitigate parts of this problem. NATO initiatives such as the NATO Response Force (NRF), Very High Readiness Taskforce (VJTF) and the NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI) have all increased the number of available forces and shortened reaction times (NATO, 2018). But, according to conventional wisdom, even if NATO managed to mobilise the number of forces within the timelines demanded by the NRI, the organisation's Russian counterparts would still seriously outnumber NATO forces in the early stages of a conflict (Frisell et al., 2019, pp. 38–41).

Even in the case of a locally escalating conflict in the High North, NATO would face a question of tough priorities. An armed conflict on such a scale is not likely to be contained in the north. It can be assumed that several more exposed areas, among them Poland and the Baltics, are likely to request NATO reinforcements. With RAND studies showing that in a high-intensity scenario Russian forces could potentially overrun the Baltic capitals within 60 hours, it is not

very likely that the NRF would be deployed into the High North (Shlapak & Johnson, 2016). Additionally, relatively few NATO forces are equipped and trained to fight in Arctic conditions, especially if conflict should occur in winter. In other words, in case of a sudden Article 5 conflict with Russia, substantial NATO reinforcements are unlikely to arrive quickly in Norway.

While the above considerations are all valid, the true picture is more complex and not so gloomy. In many cases, strategic warning, if not necessarily a tactical warning, would enable the Alliance to take steps to alleviate the asymmetry somewhat (Tamnes, 2018, p. 15). In the case of a more gradual build-up, NATO forces could be deployed to signal intent, to deter an attack, or to monitor the situation (Tamnes, 2017, p. 29). The United States and the United Kingdom in particular share national interests in the region and have military forces, outside the NATO roster, well capable of reinforcing it. The British led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), particularly, could play a role here, being the geographically closest military formation with relevant capabilities. It remains to be seen how the orientation and development of the JEF plays out over time (Saxi, 2018). It is also possible that the air component in Norway might be strengthened. Air power has high strategic mobility, and in a crisis could be moved to reinforce Norway at some speed; strategic air defence capabilities, in particular, could prove useful in a crisis situation. While they have no offensive potential in themselves, and would thus not contribute towards an escalation of the situation, they would fill a critical Norwegian capability gap, contributing by defending Norway's fleet of F-35s. An examination of the possibilities presented by the United States's pre-positioning programme for this purpose in a Norwegian context could be particularly interesting.

Some allied forces might also be in the region before war actually breaks out. Allied land forces regularly participate in bilateral or NATO exercises in Norway. While the USMC's rotational training is winding down, American and British land forces continue to be present for periodic training in Norway, particularly during the winter. At sea we must assume that the United States, Britain and France all maintain some sort of presence with attack submarines in the High North. While these would surely remain under national command in case of a crisis or war, and would thus be difficult to incorporate into an overall operational concept, they represent a serious capability for Russian forces to reckon with in their planning and conduct of operations.

Lastly, British and American forces are capable of affecting fighting in the High North without deploying forces into the area. The United States, in particular, has strategic and operational capabilities which can be fired from outside the opponent's denial areas, and some forces might be deployed forward, in close proximity to such areas; submarines, surface vessels and strategic bombers with cruise missiles, their use would require high enough priority against other areas of operation, and for forces "inside the bubble" to provide targeting information if used for dynamic targeting. Since most Russian key capabilities are low-signature and mobile, above all the land-based ones, this could prove challenging.

OPERATIONAL DILEMMAS AND CONCEPTS

In the event of a crisis or conflict with Russia in the High North, NATO will face several strategic and operational dilemmas. An important and classic question is the extent to which NATO or key allies should put pressure on Russia by moving substantial forces forward, into the northern parts of the Norwegian Sea and up to the Bear gap, or whether it would be better to plan for a more defensive campaign. It is pertinent to remember the discussion that arose in the last decade of the Cold War when a more defensive orientation was replaced by the forward maritime strategy around 1980 (Lehman, 2018, pp. 47–64). Both courses of action have advantages and disadvantages. The offensive option would be the most effective in penning Russian submarines and surface vessels east of the Bear gap, thus mitigating the threat posed to the Atlantic SLOCs and assisting the effort to reinforce Norway (Wills, 2020, p. 10). More specifically, it would improve sensor coverage and air defence in an area where Russian submarines are easier to locate, while both hindering Russia's entry into Norwegian territory and its capacity to sustain and defend any ensuing occupation.

A key strategic challenge associated with an offensive posture is its escalatory potential. Simulations and studies show that in the age of long-range sensors and missiles, the party that shoots first enjoys a distinct advantage in modern maritime combat (Hughes & Girrier, 2018, pp. 263–280; Krepinevich, 2014). Taking place within range of Russian land-based air defence

and anti-ship missile systems, it would play to Russian strengths instead of weaknesses, rendering NATO's limited maritime assets very vulnerable. While Western air forces were able to overpower enemy air defences in a matter of days in the course of the wars in Iraq and Libya, a fully established Russian air defence is another matter altogether (Kofman, 2020a); furthermore, it would potentially be difficult to maintain escalation control with an offensive operational posture. In order to gain sea control in the Bear gap area, NATO forces could be forced to target forward-deployed Russian denial capabilities such as air defence and coastal missile batteries. As these systems also protect the Russian nuclear second-strike capability, one runs the risk of costly misunderstandings. Actions taken by NATO to gain sea and air control could be interpreted as an attack on Russia's nuclear deterrent. It is thus imperative that NATO weighs the potential strategic gains against the potential losses and risk for escalation when choosing their approach to the early stages in the Bear gap area.

While this kind of reflection on weight and balancing were, similarly, key issues during the Cold War, the new great power rivalries and the new threats, technologies and concepts that have come into currency with their emergence add new dimensions to the debate about offence and defence. While re-orientation and new operational concepts are relevant to all service branches of the United States military, the U.S. Marine Corps and Air Force, in particular, will have the greatest impact in the High North.

NEW AND EMERGING U.S. CONCEPTS

The rapid rise of China and a resurgent Russia shape Western policy and strategy. Both are in the forefront of developing high-speed and long-range precision-guided weapons, making defence with traditional means a difficult task. The United States in particular is approaching a changing global environment by giving high priority to the introduction of technological and conceptual innovations, to maintain the competitive edge, in line with net assessment thinking. According to the U.S. Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC, 2018), multi-domain operations are the U.S. Army's new vision for dealing with peer-opponents with advanced A2/AD capabilities. The concept also seems to gain traction within other service branches and NATO. Although still developing, and raising more questions than it answers, it seems to represent a clear trend in the intellectual community associated with defence in the United States.

The concept seeks to problematise how U.S. forces can penetrate and defeat a peer opponent with mature A2/AD capabilities. A key tenet of multi-domain operations is convergence, requiring the "rapid and continuous integration of capabilities in all domains" (TRADOC, 2018, p. vii). The basic idea is to create an unsolvable operational dilemma for the opponent by striking in different domains simultaneously. The strike capability itself would not necessarily need to be deployed inside an opponent's denial areas; while medium to long-range missiles, cyber, and airpower could all operate from the outside, it would require forces able to identify and target enemy forces inside the denial areas.

In response to the same challenges, the U.S. Marine Corps is also in the process of changing its force design and operational concept. In an attempt to reorient the Marine Corps back to its traditional core task of "defending key maritime terrain that enables persistent sea control and denial operations forward," they are developing what is called expeditionary advanced base operations, or EABO (Berger, 2019, pp. 2, 9). In order to contribute towards sea control or denial from land bases, USMC forces must be able to operate in areas where an opponent's denial systems dominate the battlefield. In their new concept they refer to such forces as "stand-in forces" (Berger, 2019, p. 10; Department of the Navy, 2020, p. 3). In a situation where a Russian layered defence is established, the northernmost parts of Norway would be located well inside the Russian denial bubble. It would thus require forces with similar capabilities if these were to integrate their efforts with U.S. or NATO operations in the area.

The U.S. Navy and Air Force are also developing new concepts that aim at increasing their ability to perform against a peer opponent. The U.S. Navy's ideas concerning Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) envision a closer integration of effects from different domains to deny an opponent freedom of action (Jensen, 2015). How the U.S. Navy envisions the offensive part of the operations is not yet clearly articulated. The U.S. Air Force has also started to think seriously about how to succeed in a fight with a near-peer opponent. A RAND report published in 2019 points out that the tendency of the United States, and other Western nations, to run

air operations out of a few large air bases probably needs to change (Priebe et al., 2019). While this is efficient from the point of view of command and control and logistics, it leaves the air component too vulnerable to enemy strikes. In a highly contested environment, the air component will need to “trade efficiency for survivability in a high-end fight” (Priebe et al., 2019, p. 94).

NORWEGIAN RESPONSE OPTIONS

For the foreseeable future, the greatest challenge to Norwegian security will be presented by Russia. The likelihood of disagreements between Norway and Russia escalating into an all-out war seems negligible. If Russia were, however, to decide to protect its strategic submarines by expanding its bastion defence, this would influence Norway both directly and indirectly. Due to the asymmetry in military power, Norway would be completely reliant on allied support in such a situation. Hence, any Norwegian strategic concept must maximise the ability to stay in the fight and receive allied support.

The above holds several implications for Norway in the long and short term alike. On a strategic level, Norway should adopt a concept which prioritises the capacity to resist a fait accompli type attack, and protects the possibility of invoking and receiving allied support. This would require investments in robust C2 systems which could improve the ability to maintain situational awareness and command during an armed conflict. The ability to maintain effective communication both internally and with allies would be key in a crisis. Given the Russian emphasis on pre-emptive strikes on key capabilities and infrastructure, it is important to guarantee sufficient resilience in key systems. Ensuring that it is impossible for an opponent to destroy key strategic resources such as submarines and F-35 and P-8 aircraft at the outset of the conflict should be prioritised. The ability to maintain a credible conventional second-strike capability even after an initial Russian strike will not only be an effective deterrent – it is crucial in case deterrence fails. In a later phase of an armed conflict, when allied support is ensured, Norway could then use these capabilities in order to weaken Russian A2/AD systems from a position within the range of the enemy denial system. As these capabilities would still be vulnerable, this would need to be closely coordinated with the overall allied or NATO effort.

Furthermore, in the event of an armed conflict with Russia as described in this article, the main challenge for Norway is not to create a situation which ensures an Article 5 declaration (Diesen, 2020). It is to avoid a situation where NATO and our closest allies deem the risk too high to send reinforcements. In other words, Norway should adopt a concept that maximises the ability to receive allied support. Without this support, Norway would be de facto isolated and stand no chance of resisting Russian aggression or pressure.

There are several steps which can be taken to support such a strategy. On the operational level, Norway should adopt a defensive concept that primarily mitigates risks in the initial phases of a conflict. As mentioned above, resources such as P-8 and F-35 aircraft can be integrated as part of an overall campaign to either degrade Russian forward-deployed systems through attrition, or to enhance NATO sea and air control in the Norwegian Sea. In such a concept, Norwegian land forces could serve two primary purposes. Firstly, they would have to contest any territorial violation in the northernmost part of Norway. They could also, provided they have a high degree of interoperability with allied forces, hold any enemy forces in that area at risk, either through direct attacks or by locating and acquiring targets for other effectors. The main bulk of Norwegian land forces should secure the areas around Ofoten to ensure that any allied reinforcements can be deployed unhindered by enemy air assault or amphibious forces.

In a peer opponent conflict, it might be difficult to penetrate the opponent’s denial areas with substantial forces (Kofman, 2019; Lacey, 2020). One way to work around this without having to penetrate Russian defences with substantial allied forces is to ensure that Norwegian forces have a high degree of interoperability with American, British and NATO forces in all domains. If these Norwegian forces have the necessary training and equipment to integrate with allied forces, one could employ capabilities based well outside the main theatre of operations. Even given such a development, it would be unrealistic for Norwegian forces to possess all requisite capabilities. Strategic air defence and long-range conventional artillery such as HIMARS is expensive and slow to deploy in the field. More effective use of the pre-positioning programme is therefore necessary. Ensuring that Norwegian capability gaps, difficult to move in the initial

stages of conflict, had been pre-positioned would not only be effective in case of a conflict but could prove an effective deterrent and a tool in crisis management. It could also lessen the need for allied forces to deploy materiel into the theatre prematurely, thus avoiding an unwanted escalation.

Norwegian operational planning and concepts should also be well tuned in with NATO and our closest bilateral allies. In the case of an armed conflict with Russia, NATO and Norway must carefully weigh the need for directly contesting the establishment of a Russian layered defence against more indirect approaches to the challenge. While an early direct confrontation with Russian forces in the Bear gap has some tactical merit, it has the clear disadvantage of being fought within range of Russian land-based aircraft supported by forward-deployed land-based air defence systems. In such a situation NATO would be better served by establishing control in the GIUK-N gap, degrading forward-deployed Russian sensors through attrition, and focusing on winning the initial “scouting battle.” In this way, one could compel Russian forces to attack in areas more favourable for NATO by taking advantage of their lack of carrier capability.

The frontier areas between NATO and Russia, such as Finnmark, would in such a situation function more as an area of competition than a decisive battleground. When choosing between a strategy of annihilation or a strategy of exhaustion, the decision of “when to obey the law of ‘daring’ and when to obey that of ‘economy of forces’” is key (Craig, 1986, p. 342). In a situation where Russia has the most to gain with an early operational decision, and will most likely have a favourable force ratio, it could be prudent for Norway and NATO to consider a more measured response than a direct confrontation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis presented in this article, competitiveness between NATO and Russia resides, and will reside, in at least three partly related areas. Over the next decade, NATO and Norway should pay special attention to:

1. The development of complementary denial capabilities, especially in the maritime domain.
2. The further development of networked C2 systems across different domains.
3. The asymmetry in available forces at an early stage of a high-intensity conflict.

Firstly, Russia has developed capabilities that threaten areas where the United States and NATO have previously been dominant. Integrated air defence systems and long range hypersonic anti-ship missiles enable Russian denial strategies and challenge established Western operational concepts. While there is still uncertainty with regards to the actual performance of the Russian systems, it is prudent to assume that they will be fully operational in the next decade. NATO and the United States could strive to close this gap with technological advancements. While improved air-defence, jamming, signature control, and deceptive measures will all improve resilience against new Russian systems, technological advances alone are not likely to solve this challenge; NATO and Norway both need to adapt their operational concepts in order to counter these threats.

Russia also seems to have been able to develop C2 systems that effectively integrate sensors and long-range effectors. This network, or recon-strike complex, is in many ways a pre-condition for an efficient layered defence. In order to challenge this, if desired, NATO will need to integrate forces across several nations in the alliance. Especially considering that deployment of forces from outside and into areas threatened by enemy denial capabilities might be risky and challenging. While interoperability has improved in NATO over the last decade, there is still a lot of work to do in order to achieve a condition where Norwegian forces can seamlessly integrate with American or British forces across all domains. Investments in C2 systems for joint fires, integrating sensors and effectors from different domains and across different nations, are much needed. If NATO wants to effectively deter – and if needed, to challenge – Russian dominance in the High North, this is an area where they can ill afford to lag behind.

Lastly, in the early stages of an armed conflict with Russia, Norway and NATO will most likely find themselves at a numerical disadvantage in the High North. While it is possible to balance this by investing in quick reaction forces, the increased costs entailed make this an unlikely solution. Norway and NATO should thus pursue strategies which minimise the risk for a Russian fait accompli-style campaign to succeed. One possible approach draws on the more distributed

concepts developed in the United States. Combined with a robust presence in the High North to fight any violations of territorial integrity, this could ensure a credible conventional second strike capability; any Russian forces venturing too far out from their own control areas would be at risk. Another strategy worth discussing is a more containment-based approach oriented towards the High North as a whole. By penning Russian forces inside the Barents and northern parts of the Norwegian Sea, one can put pressure on Russia from other operational directions, so maintaining escalation control by minimizing the danger of Russia misinterpreting any reduction of A2/AD systems in the High North as an attack on their nuclear capacity in the area. From a Norwegian point of view, this might prove challenging as it could mean giving up control of the northernmost parts of the country for a time, even if it might ultimately prove effective from a strategic perspective.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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