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INTRODUCTION

The Cold War at Sea: An International Appraisal Introduction

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The legacies of the Cold War at sea are both glorious and tragic. Whether pioneering advances in nuclear energy or in arctic research, the decades of struggle at sea harnessed the world's most advanced technologies. Together with the bravest men that each of the two military blocs could supply, the rival navies created triumphs that pushed the boundaries of human endeavor. The tragedies lie not only in the enormous national resources expended by each power to supplant their rivals, but also, most acutely, in those brave sailors and officers on both sides who never returned and remain on 'eternal patrol'. The ocean depths became an arena of constant struggle and nearly became the spark for hot war on several alarming occasions. Sovereign territory could not restrain their competition. Moreover, as each side steadily placed more and more nuclear armament in its vessels, the opportunities multiplied for a naval skirmish or even an accident that could lead to global conflict.

Fortunately, that anxious era has passed. The world is now confronted with novel and dangerous challenges. The new national

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security environment requires that all institutions of national power, including navies, consider how they can contribute to the fight against global terrorism. As part of this effort, the new strategic environment provides opportunities for improving our understanding. In particular, US-Russian security cooperation promises, among many other benefits, a candid appraisal of the hair-trigger rivalry that characterized the Cold War. Seeking to capitalize on this opportunity, not to mention the declining access to Cold War decision-makers as they leave the scene, the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, hosted a conference on 'The Cold War at Sea', on 7–8 May 2004. This conference served the navy in many ways: tapping into a burgeoning Russian literature on the subject that parallels Western insights, educating future naval leaders in the dynamics of maritime rivalry, and pairing with local institutions in Rhode Island, such as Brown University and the U.S.S. Saratoga Foundation.

There has been a proud tradition of maritime historical study for practical application in Newport for 120 years, since the era of Stephen Luce and Alfred Mahan in the late nineteenth century. In the post-Cold War era and the post 9/11 era there has been a tendency to focus on the crises of the moment – leading many to neglect the study of the Cold War at sea, which was after all one of the greatest maritime rivalries the world has ever witnessed. The naval histories that have emerged so far have tended to be largely anecdotal and personal in nature,¹ while more comprehensive studies of the Cold War have tended to ignore the naval dimension of the conflict.² Some recent efforts by the Naval War College are noteworthy,³ but what is lacking is a study of the naval rivalry that is both *comprehensive* – focusing on the evolution of the contending strategies – and *international* – drawing on the insights of outside observers, and especially former adversaries. It is by these two criteria that the May 2004 conference and, subsequently, this volume aim to make a distinct contribution.

The conference proceeded chronologically over the course of two days. During the first day, three panels examined the early Cold War and new revelations concerning the Cuban missile crisis. The final panels on the first day and several panels on the second day were dedicated to examining the nature, extent and implications of Soviet maritime expansion. The conference closed with a discussion of naval strategy during the 1980s. Participants were a mix of scholars and retired naval officers. The ranking American participant was former Chief of Naval Operations (1986–90), Admiral Carlisle Trost (US Navy, retd.), while the senior Russian representative was Vice-Admiral Yuri Sysuev, Chief of the Russian Navy's Kuznetsov Academy.

Mirroring the conference program, this volume purposefully begins and dwells on the early Cold War period. There are numerous reasons

why this period should interest current strategists. Most obviously, it presents a time of extraordinary geopolitical change, and the archival record for this era is relatively complete. Historians will find no shortage of historical revelations from Professor Natalia Yegorova's detailed study of Stalin's conception of maritime power. In addition, the work provides potent insights for strategists attempting to understand asymmetric warfare from the viewpoint of the side with lesser capabilities. Professor Jakub Grygiel's survey of US Navy dilemmas in the early Cold War also offers important lessons concerning the imperative for dramatic institutional adaptation to correspond to vastly altered strategic circumstances. This process of change represented an awesome intellectual and bureaucratic challenge that mirrors contemporary transformation efforts in many respects.

The historiography of the Cuban missile crisis has focused anew on the naval dimensions of the crisis in recent years. This volume contributes to this stimulating historical dialogue with a riveting narrative by one of the submarine commanders from the crisis, Captain Ryurik Ketov (Russian Navy, ret'd.), the only Soviet submarine commander (of the original four *Foxtrot*-class diesel submarines that were sortied) who was not forcibly surfaced by US forces. Ketov's narrative is an enthralling tale of human endurance that is also replete with fascinating operational details: for example, his use of fishing vessels to screen his submarine's crossing of NATO antisubmarine barriers. A broader perspective of the role of Russian submarines in the crisis is offered in the subsequent article by historian Professor Svetlana Savranskaya. Drawing on eyewitness interviews, archival materials and new Russian secondary literature, she reveals that tactical nuclear weapons formed an extremely precarious element of interaction between the two navies during the crisis.

A number of additional issues arose during conference discussions on the early Cold War. Participants debated, for example, the quality of Western intelligence assessments concerning Soviet naval expansion and concluded that these estimates tended to suffer 'mood swings'. This feature also appears to characterize the intelligence debate today. Additionally, there were differing Russian opinions regarding submarine command and control arrangements for the use of tactical nuclear weapons during the Cuban missile crisis, although conference participants appeared to agree that the apparent failure by US intelligence to advise American naval commanders of the risks posed by Soviet nuclear torpedoes was a significant oversight that could have resulted in a catastrophic escalation of the crisis.

A second part of the Naval War College conference focused on the impressive growth of the Soviet fleet, which occurred partly in reaction to Moscow's perception of having played a weak naval hand in the

Cuban missile crisis. Rear Admiral Ronald Kurth (USN, ret.), a former US defense and naval attaché in Moscow, offers an intensely personal portrait of the principal architect of this ambitious naval program, Admiral Sergei Gorshkov. Kurth's paper not only reveals a human dimension to this imposing figure, but offers an informed glimpse of some of his deeper reflections and even self-doubts, for example regarding the paucity of experience among his youthful crews. This American perspective of Gorshkov is balanced by a Russian perspective, written by Captain Sergei Chernyavskii (Russian Navy, ret.). While Chernyavskii lauds Gorshkov's broad efforts to build up the Soviet Navy, he makes numerous devastating critiques of the Soviet naval leadership, including its overemphasis on nuclear warfare, its neglect of power projection for limited war and, most importantly, its calamitous disregard for ship maintenance.

The following three papers fill in the broad outline of Soviet naval expansion sketched in the surveys of Gorshkov's leadership. Professor Geoffrey Till provides an analysis of the reactions of Washington's NATO allies to Soviet naval expansion. He traces the evolution of NATO's maritime policies during the course of the Cold War, discusses alliance frictions and vulnerabilities, but ultimately argues that NATO maritime cooperation made a profound contribution to deterrence during the Cold War at sea. Colonel Vadim Kolnogorov offers numerous insights into one of the most significant asymmetries of the Cold War at sea: the Kremlin's halting and rather indecisive efforts toward developing deck aviation. Kolnogorov was not the only Russian presenter at the conference to sharply criticize the Soviet leadership for failure in this critical dimension of naval power. However, these assertions prompted strong counter reactions from other conference participants, including Rear Admiral Bogdan Malyarchuk (Russian Navy, ret.) and Professor Sergei Khrushchev, who each argued that the lack of balance in the Soviet fleet was, in fact, a rational response to Soviet naval interests. Certainly, it seems that there is a major fissure between Russian maritime historians and strategists over this critical question.

Another major theme of the conference was the remarkable success the Soviet Navy achieved in developing and deploying lethal anti-ship cruise missiles, a sphere in which Moscow actually obtained superiority over Washington. Conference commentators Vice-Admiral Thomas Weschler (USN, ret.) and Rear Admiral Sumner Shapiro (USN, ret.) each highlighted this American vulnerability, with the latter citing US Navy focus on carrier operations for the long-time neglect of anti-ship missile technology. Participants discussed the impact of this successful Soviet technological development in the context of the grave super-power maritime showdown in the Mediterranean in 1973. An important restraint on the conduct of the two navies in this and

subsequent tense confrontations was the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement, which is described in a contribution to this volume by Dr David Winkler. This research forms an ideal case study for readers interested in confidence- building measures, especially as they pertain to maritime settings.

A final subject examined in this volume concerns the late Cold War, specifically the development and impact of Reagan's 'Maritime Strategy'. Dr David Rosenberg and Christopher Ford offer a broad overview of the 'Maritime Strategy', focusing on intelligence support. The fundamental role of intelligence in the formation of the strategy suggests this paper could be an essential case study for use by students and intelligence professionals. Dr Gary Weir's paper describes the challenging aspects of superpower competition under the ice, as it evolved in this period. The piece explains how Soviet maritime strategists attempted to turn their forbidding climate to their own advantage by using the polar ice cap to cloak Soviet strategic missile submarines, while describing the US Navy's response in adapting to this unforgiving combat environment. The final paper in this volume offers a glimpse of Russian thinking about US naval strategy in the 1980s. Captain Sergei Chernyavskii (Russian Navy, ret.), together with Captain Vladimir Kuzin (Russian Navy, ret.) ultimately agree that Moscow did move toward a 'bastion' strategy for the Soviet Navy, but highlight the primary threat posed by Tomahawk cruise missiles rather than purposefully aggressive operations by US submarines and carrier groups.

Overall, commentators were starkly divided concerning the significance of Reagan's 'Maritime Strategy', with some, such as former Director of Central Intelligence Admiral Stansfield Turner (USN, ret.), arguing that the strategy represented little more than an elaborate US Navy public relations campaign to support fleet construction. According to Turner, the notion of surging US aircraft carriers toward Soviet maritime flanks was a step no American leader would actually have executed, because of strong Soviet sea-denial capabilities. But others, including Dr Stanley Weeks, contended that there is discernible evidence contained in a series of oral histories that he conducted among former Russian naval officers that the 'forward' strategy affected Moscow's decision-making, simultaneously reinforcing deterrence and forcing the Kremlin to expend tremendous resources defending its maritime flanks.

These papers amply demonstrate the value of the current, close strategic cooperation between the US and Russia. From the standpoint of historical inputs for the study of naval strategy, the volume is substantially richer by presenting multiple perspectives and is genuinely revealing of important debates that continue to divide strategists and historians in both countries. Two themes flow through all of the papers

in this volume and reflect the tenor of discussions during the Newport conference.

First, the Kremlin was remarkably successful, despite the many constraints on the Soviet Union's full development as a sea power, in creating a fleet that could credibly challenge for global naval supremacy.

Second, the professionalism of officers and sailors on both sides proved absolutely essential to preventing a continual series of edgy confrontations from escalating to global conflict.

However, as Admiral William Studeman (USN, ret'd.) observed at the close of the conference, this forum and the resulting volume are only a start on this endeavor. The truly systematic and complete study of the Cold War at sea requires a series of bilateral conferences, addressing each of the vital pieces in turn: nuclear weapons, command and control, training and education, antisubmarine warfare, naval aviation, torpedo and mine warfare, logistics and basing, etc.

Of course, the basis for US-Russian strategic coordination in the war on terror goes far beyond learning from our dangerous rivalry of past decades. However, this conference on the Cold War at sea has already served as a catalyst for the creation of a special, new relationship between the US Naval War College and Russia's Kuznetsov Academy in St Petersburg. It is our sincere hope that a continuing strategic dialogue on issues of mutual interest, ranging from port security to missile defense, will serve the great naval traditions and wider national security interests of both nations.

Disclaimer

The views expressed here are the author's personal opinions, and should not be taken to reflect the official position of the Department of Defense or any U.S. government agency.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, John Pina Craven, *The Silent War: The Cold War Battle Beneath the Sea* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2001).
- 2 The most important of these broader studies is undoubtedly John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (London: Oxford University Press 1997).
- 3 See John B. Hattendorf, *The Evolution of the U.S. Navy's Maritime Strategy, 1977-1986*, Newport Paper No. 19 (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press 2004), which was published for this conference; and Robert H. Gile, *Global War Game: Second Series, 1984-88*, Newport Paper No. 20 (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press 2004). Both papers are available on request and online at < <http://www.nwc.navy.mil/press/npapers/newpaper.htm> > , accessed 21 Oct. 2004.