

21 February 1986

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 23

# Will Canadian Waters Become the Next Maginot Line?

TORONTO—Anxious eyes in Washington and Ottawa are turning north to the Arctic littoral. Our northern frontier, once thought an impenetrable barrier, is fast becoming a concourse for Soviet military activity. Even more disturbing, in the high Arctic the Soviets may be well on the way to outflanking NATO's main line of defense of the vital North Atlantic sea lanes.

Not many North Americans could locate Baffin Bay or Ellesmere Islands on a map, though each alone is the size of Scandinavia. And no wonder: The distance from To-

## The Americas

by Eric Margolis

ronto to Canada's northernmost base on Ellesmere is about the same as from New York to Rio de Janeiro.

There is growing concern in the Arctic over a new generation of Soviet heavy, long-range bombers now being deployed. These aircraft must be intercepted far to the north, before they can launch their cruise missiles. Accordingly, the U.S. and Canada are upgrading the 1950s early-warning technology and planning some new, austere air bases on the bomber routes. Despite these efforts, budget restrictions will leave North American air defense porous; today, for example, low-flying Soviet bombers could likely reach Winnipeg before they were detected.

While Soviet long-range aviation skirts northern Canada, the Red Banner Northern Fleet is becoming increasingly active in Arctic waters. In March 1984, U.S. satellites for the first time observed Soviet nuclear submarines breaking through the Arctic Ocean ice sheet.

The Soviets are now estimated to have a considerable number of specially strengthened subs capable of breaching ice. This allows Soviet submarines to cross undetected under the Polar ice cap, breach an opening off northern Canada and fire their missiles southward. This gives them a relatively flat trajectory that allows the U.S. only a few minutes warning—or even none at all—for a Soviet attack, rather than the 30 minutes upon which a nuclear retaliatory strategy is based.

It is apparent that Soviet attack submarines are also busy in Canadian Arctic waters, but just how busy Ottawa will not say. Canada's decrepit navy cannot even protect its own main base at Halifax, Nova Scotia; what goes on 4,000 miles to the north remains something of a mystery.

While the Canadians and Americans watch with mounting unease, the Soviet navy appears to be quietly nosing out routes through the vast Arctic archipelago that lies north of the Canadian coast, an area larger than Western Europe. The purpose of this Soviet reconnaissance is to find a route by which to outflank NATO's defense barrier at the GIUK Gap (the constricted waters between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom). There, NATO has created a web of hydrophones, giant underwater "ears" that can pick up noisy Soviet submarines at great range and, thanks to powerful computer analysis, identify the vessels and direct aircraft and ships against these targets.

In the event of a war, one of the prime Soviet strategic goals would be to use its large attack submarine force based in the White and Barents seas to break out into the North Atlantic where a *guerre de course* could be conducted to sever NATO's critical sea lanes of communication with Europe. Severing the sea bridge from North America to Europe would mean the quick collapse of NATO. But to reach the North Atlantic, the Soviet fleet had, until recently, to fight its way across the perilous GIUK Gap.

Now the Soviets are discreetly probing an alternative route, just as the Germans scouted the Ardennes Forest in 1940 for a way around the Maginot Line. In both the Arctic and the Ardennes, conventional military wisdom held that the terrain in question was too inhospitable for movement. And like the German generals of World War II, the Soviet admirals seem to have found an undefended route.

Soviet attack submarines might sail due north from their bases on the Kola Peninsula, cross under the polar ice cap, and emerge off Ellesmere Island. From there, they could thread their way south, down the narrow channels of the archipelago, through the Jones or Lancaster Sound, and into Baffin Bay.

Continuing southward, the 500-mile-wide Davis Strait between Greenland and Baffin Island opens directly into the Labrador

Sea. Once reached, the Labrador Sea gives onto the North Atlantic, neatly and conveniently intersecting the main convoy route between Halifax and Britain.

This back door to the North Atlantic is now wide open. Aside from the U.S. air base at Thule, Greenland, there is no significant offensive NATO base able to cover the high Arctic. Nor, according to non-classified information, does the SOSUS system cover North America's Arctic approaches or the Baffin Island-Davis Strait choke point. If war broke out tomorrow, many Soviet attack subs could appear, without any warning, athwart NATO's most important single supply artery.

Some military planners in Canada and the U.S. are aware of this growing menace. But Ottawa has chosen for political reasons to remain mute, unwilling to highlight a problem about which it can do little. This year, Ottawa has not even managed to meet its NATO commitment of spending 3% of gross national product on defense. Gunned by years of official neglect under former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Canadian forces are little more than an ineffectual, overpaid gendarmerie. There are simply no ships or aircraft to defend the northern borders.

Instead, the Canadian government, humiliated by last year's transit of a U.S. ship through Arctic waters that it claimed, is talking about building an icebreaker to show the flag along its northern littoral. This little gesture will not make the Soviet submarines go away.

Washington is taking more realistic action by preparing its attack submarines to navigate and fight under the Arctic ice cap and in the turbulent waters of the northern archipelago. But countering the growing Soviet underwater threat also requires throwing a SOSUS barrier across the Davis Strait at Cape Dyer. It means blocking the Gulf of Boothia through which Soviet submarines have been slipping into Hudson's Bay. New air and naval bases, housing expanded anti-submarine forces, will be needed in the high Arctic. Building and operating such northern posts is extraordinarily expensive. Maintaining air and naval patrols in the Arctic night is dangerous, dreary and mind-numbing work.

Where funds will be found for Arctic air and naval defenses remains a question. But something must be done, and soon. Like the Turkish fleet in G.K. Chesterton's "Lepanto," which "dared the white republics on the capes of Italy," the Soviet fleet is today daring our own North American republics and must be checked before the high Arctic becomes a second Red Sea.



Mr. Margolis is foreign-affairs columnist for the Toronto Sun.