The most lightly defended stretch of NATO is also the key to Soviet maritime strategy.
In the long-ago years of World War II, as we came off targets near the Baltic Sea, we would sometimes see a crippled B-17 heading for Sweden. Internment in that nearby land was a pleasant alternative to internment in a German Stalag. Of the Nordic countries, Sweden alone managed to remain aloof, militarily at least, from the war. With its products sought by both sides, Sweden also prospered.

The Allies had arrived too late to save Norway. German forces, aided by the notorious Norwegian fascist, Vidkun Quisling, conquered that country, after a two-month battle, in June of 1940, when German military power was at its zenith. That is not to say all Norwegians were subdued. A sizable number fled to Britain, where they served with distinction alongside the British forces, and King Haakon led a government in exile. The Norwegian RAF contingent, in particular, had a glittering record, returning in triumph at war's end to put on a memorable air show over Oslo. Many other undefeated Norwegians remained at home to continue the fight in the underground. When the war was over, Quisling was tried and shot, but his name lives on, a synonym for traitor.

Denmark, a geographic extension of northern Germany, was more easily overrun by Hitler's armies in 1940. While there are many heroic tales of Danish resistance, Denmark was too close to Germany, and the Jutland Peninsula was too small and flat for even the kind of mischief the Norwegians were able to create in their fjords and northern mountains. Those Danes who joined the Frikorps Danmark and fought with Germany on the Eastern Front were treated as turncoats when they returned on home leave.

Finland had already had its war before 1940, in this case, a heroic struggle against the invading Russians. For a while, during the winter of 1939, the Finns seemed almost to have a chance, to the delight of much of the free world. But, vastly outnumbered, Finland at length surrendered to the USSR only to join Germany in 1941 when the Soviet-Nazi entente came to an end with Hitler's invasion of Russia. The final result was a loss of further territory to the USSR—about one-fifth of prewar Finland—and a requirement for neutrality and good relations with the Soviets. Finland has not only recovered from World War II's devastation but has become an economic showplace, the favorite shopping destination of privileged Communists from the drab land next door.

Iceland, the smallest of the Nordic countries, has, perhaps, the closest links to the Vikings. British and later, American forces preemptively occupied Iceland and defended it during World War II, although there were no serious challenges from Germany. During that period, in 1944, Iceland declared its independence from Denmark and became a republic.

A Shared History

The Nordic countries have a long and intertwined history. Over the centuries, Norway, like Iceland, has been a part of the Danish kingdom. Finland was once a Swedish possession, as was Norway, for a time. And while there are some differences in vocabulary and distinctly different accents, Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians understand one another well enough. Icelandic
NATO's Northern Flank stretches roughly from the Kola Peninsula in the east to Greenland and Iceland in the west and from Germany in the south up to the Arctic Circle in the north. The Kola Peninsula in the Soviet Union hosts one of the world's largest concentrations of military power. Complicating NATO's defense against those Soviet forces is Scandinavian unwillingness to host foreign troops and bases and nuclear weapons except in case of conflict.

appears a bit more difficult—much of its vocabulary is based on Old Norse. Only Finland goes its own way linguistically, with a language that is incomprehensible to other Scandinavians. Curiously, according to a learned Turkish acquaintance, Finnish and Turkish share a few similar words. In order to deal with foreigners, all the Nordic countries have an easy familiarity with English, and Finns use English as the bridging language in dealing with their neighbors.

With all this closeness, we could suppose these northern countries would consider a common defense. They did, in fact, shortly after World War II when the Soviet menace began to emerge, but there were too many obstacles. Iceland was too remote, Finland's position with respect to the USSR too delicate, and while Norway and Denmark desired a westward tilt to a defense arrangement, Sweden insisted on neutrality. The alternative was continued neutrality for Sweden, a guarded sort of neutrality for Finland, and membership in NATO for Norway, Iceland, and Denmark. The traditional non-alignment of the Nordic bloc was thus ended. It was, in truth, no longer a bloc. The Scandinavian nations had gone their separate military ways, thanks, for the most part, to their separate experiences during the second World War.

Occasionally, one hears regret, even reproach, over Sweden's decision to stay out of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. After all, it is one of the most prosperous nations, a stronghold of democracy and human rights and thus a natural ally of the other NATO partners. Besides, Sweden spends a respectable percentage of its GNP on national defense and has a highly developed armament industry. Even if the Soviets have chosen to make its coastal inlets a playground for their submarines, Sweden is a country that pays for its neutral stand with first-class forces.

It would be, on paper, a formidable addition to NATO, but there are other reasons why NATO might be better served by Swedish neutrality. The assumption supporting that statement is that Swedish neutrality tilts toward the West. A resolute and well-armed neutral Sweden could present a more persuasive deterrent than a NATO nation standing in the way, or so goes the rationale.

Be that as it may, the argument is academic. Sweden is determinedly neutral. NATO will have to make do with what it has for Nordic allies: Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. The latter's 240,000 inhabitants do not include any in military uniform.

The Northern Flank

Norway and Denmark, together with a bit of the north German plain, make up what is known as NATO's Northern Flank, or more formally, the Northern Command of Allied Command Europe. Iceland, in the military sense, belongs to the Atlantic Command, although the logic of this is doubtless more apparent to NATO functionaries than to the Soviets. Iceland, no matter in which command, is an integral part of any northern strategy. Northern Command, with headquarters in Oslo, is a British Army fiefdom, just as NATO's South-
ern Command is always awarded to an American admiral. Over the years, Northern Command has not been much in the news, although one rather contentious Commander in Chief, North, made a few headlines in 1970 with his views on the uselessness of nuclear weapons.

A principal reason for Northern Command's low profile is the Scandinavian attitude toward foreign troops and bases: They don't want any except under the threat of war. With the exception of a Northern Command headquarters contingent of allied officers and men, Norwegians can be essentially unaware of their membership in NATO, and the Danes even more so. It is a condition of Norwegian and Danish NATO membership that there be neither foreign troops nor nuclear weapons on their soil except in wartime.

That attitude may be understandable, but it does cause a planning problem. Reinforcement of NATO's Northern Flank must necessarily be from scratch. And this lightly defended stretch of NATO responsibility extending from the Elbe-Trave Canal in Germany to Norway's North Cape—a distance of more than 1,000 miles—holds the key to Soviet maritime strategy.

The Kola Peninsula is probably the most heavily armed area in the world. It is home base for the Northern Fleet, the largest of the four Soviet Navy fleets. A formidable surface complement includes two carriers equipped with V/STOL aircraft and helicopters, eleven cruisers, nineteen destroyers, and forty-seven frigates. There are also thirteen amphibious landing ships and a 1,000-man naval Spetsnaz brigade, troops highly trained in commando tactics. Sixteen airfields with blacktop runways and navigational aids, while not all in use, are available.

Clearly, the Kola Peninsula harbors considerably more than a defensive force. Among other objectives, it is a fair bet that seizure of Norwegian air bases is part of the Northern Fleet's war plan, stemming from bitter Soviet memories of damage done to Murmansk convoys during World War II and the havoc created by the Luftwaffe operating out of northern Norwegian bases. There are only, at most, about six of these, and while the Norwegian Air Force has put some maintenance and storage into tunnels blasted out of the rocky hillsides, it is hard to imagine a prolonged defense of these northern bases unless reinforcements arrive on the scene early.

NATO plans to do just that, mainly with US naval and Marine forces. The 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), its equipment prepositioned in Norway, will fly from Cherry Point, N. C., in Military Airlift Command transports. A Marine air wing, with F/A-18s and AV-8Bs, will make the trip nonstop in the hated survival, or poopy, suits, supported by USAF tankers and eight en route refuelings. The Marines do this exercise annually in the dead of Norwegian winter—or at least they have done so until now. The Norwegian government has recently decided annual exercises are too expensive, and so, presumably, they will be held less often in the future.

The Navy's Forward Strategy

Unfortunately, the Marines, like the rest of US forces, do not have designated Arctic troops. The learning curve, including getting around on skis and snowshoes, thus has its dips. Nevertheless, the 4th MEB would present a formidable obstacle to a Soviet assault on Norway's northern airfields, provided it can get there in time. For that to happen, NATO would have to take action on the basis of strategic warning or, at the very worst, tactical warning.

To begin the complex NATO alerting process on warning of any kind is far easier talked about than done. First of all, there is always the worry that any considerable defensive preparations might appear provocative. Besides, increased NATO preparedness can come only after political wrangling. Getting the North ready would not be easy.

As a further complication, a Canadian brigade earmarked for Norwegian duty was withdrawn from that assignment this year and reassigned to the Central Front. Canadian authorities reasoned that Canada's small NATO contingent could function more effectively if it were consolidated. They are doubtless correct, but it does leave the northern Norway defense line even thinner than before.

Defense of the sparsely inhabited but militarily vital northern reaches of Europe is a complex affair. The task of the US Marines, to secure the airfields, is an important one, but it is at best a holding operation. Soviet power in the Kola Peninsula is too formidable to be neutralized by the forces NATO can provide on the ground. The US Navy, with its forward strategy, believes it has the answer. This concept, put forth vigorously by former Navy Secretary John Lehman and many senior admirals, would take the fleet directly against the Soviet forces based on the Kola Peninsula.
Of Resistance and Risk

Any sort of resistance to the Nazi occupation was both difficult and perilous. Resisters were not accorded the generally correct treatment that the Germans granted to prisoners of war, but were left to the mercies of the Gestapo.

One evening in Copenhagen, a friend and NATO colleague of mine took me to an apartment where the game had ended for him. He had concealed rifles and ammunition in the ceiling, in preparation for some serious resistance work. Instead, someone tipped off the Gestapo, and he was arrested. Fortunately, he was not shot, although there were days when he almost wished he had been.

His worst moments came during the Allied bombing of Hamburg, where he was working as a laborer. The fire storm and havoc remain fixed in his memory for all time.

Years later, in Brussels, it became my friend's distasteful chore to present to me Denmark's formal denunciation of our Christmas bombing of Hanoi. Having delivered his protest, he asked if he might sit down. Over a cup of coffee, the Dane, by this time a senior general, first apologized for his government's stand and then went on to say that he was perplexed. Why, he asked, didn't we silence critics like the Danish government by comparing the almost unbelievable precision of the Hanoi raids, and the minimal casualties even by Hanoi's own count, with the World War II bombing of Hamburg?

My Danish friend risked more, and was in harm's way to a greater extent, than most people in that war. Happily for us, there are a good many Danes such as he.

SACEUR's Northern Command is visible evidence of NATO's responsibility for its Northern Flank, but the US Navy is viewed by Norwegians as their principal ally. The Navy's bold forward strategy, considered foolhardy in some quarters, sees the US Second Fleet, with allied detachments, entering the Norwegian Sea north of the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap—or, in military jargon, the GIUK gap—before war breaks out. The plan calls for a powerful armada: probably a carrier strike force with three battle groups, the aforementioned 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, and a British antisubmarine contingent.

Unlike the Soviet Baltic ports, which freeze early in winter thanks to the freshwater flow from the Vistula and other rivers, the Norwegian fjords do not freeze—a happy fact of Nordic climatology for this maritime strategy. They also provide excellent hiding places for ships, and ships in these fjords are not only hard to find but are hard to hit from the air. Or at least they were in World War II.

Arctic operations, however, present a cruel environment for men and machinery. Temperatures in north Norway fall to minus forty degrees Fahrenheit, at which point everything moves more slowly, and tasks are infinitely more difficult to perform. The difficulty is the same for both sides, but the Soviets do have a big advantage in proximity to home and in numbers. They also have their 1939 Finnish experience to remember, when a small force of determined Finns made the mighty Soviet Army look foolish. They know, too, that the best time to attack is in the fall.

Scenarios for Conflict

The armchair strategist can conjure up a variety of scenarios for a war in the north, but the most plausible is patterned after the 1940 German invasion, with one notable variation—a determined attempt by the Soviets to capture Iceland. For while air superiority was important in World War II, it would be essential next time around. Whoever gains air superiority, whether attacker or defender, holds the key to military dominance of the sea approaches to Kola.

It follows, then, that defense of NATO's Northern Flank depends to an even greater degree than other NATO strategy on timely reaction to intelligence warning. Unless reinforcements are in place, a Soviet preemptive attack might well result in a fait accompli, much as the German venture did in 1940. An alternative to forces in place on the ground, albeit an expensive one, would be the constant presence of US naval forces off the coast of north Norway.

While north Norway and Iceland are surely the ultimate prizes in the eyes of the Soviet attacker, the Baltic and its approaches play an important role in northern strategy. At the very least, conquest of the Baltic should not come easily.

Denmark, contiguous with Germany and an easy land invasion route, shares its vulnerability with the north German plain. As in the north, air superiority is the essential element. Denmark's other contribution to the defense would lie in its ability to mine the Baltic passages to the North Sea—Kattegat and Skagerrak—thus

A Marine air wing of F/A-18s and AV-8Bs is slated to reinforce Norway in case of war. The Marines have deployed the wing to Norway in annual exercises, but because of the expense involved, those exercises will probably occur less frequently in the future.
Soviet Bear bombers routinely traverse the GIUK gap during flights into the Atlantic and to Cuba. The US Navy's forward strategy would send Allied forces into the Norwegian Sea to prevent such Soviet forces from menacing the US supply route to Europe.

bottling up, or at least slowing down, the Soviet Baltic Fleet. There is a discouraging likelihood, however, that the Soviets, on one pretext or another, would have sailed their combatants out of the Baltic before any crisis reached the point of Danish reaction.

Therein lies the difficulty in defending NATO's Northern Flank. The Scandinavian allies are edgy about stirring up their giant neighbor by readiness measures that might appear provocative. Even such stalwarts as the Norwegians require the US Marines to stockpile their war readiness gear well to the south in Trondheim rather than in the northern region where it will be needed.

This sensitivity to Soviet displeasure has not been without cause. The USSR has applied steady diplomatic pressure on the Scandinavian countries to remain defenseless and nonaligned. Norway has been a particular target of this Soviet effort to neutralize the Nordic lands. The fact that Norway has joined the Alliance and made only slight concessions to Soviet sensitivity says a lot for Norwegian courage.

In any case, a successful defense of the Northern Flank, and Norway in particular, will take some remarkable doing. A war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact or, for that matter, any war involving the United States and the USSR would almost certainly see a Soviet attack on Norway.

Soviet military literature reveals a great understanding of Hitler's successful gamble against Denmark and Norway. A key element in that gamble was the imaginative use of firepower against superior British naval forces. Then, there was the toll taken on convoys to Murmansk by the Luftwaffe based in north Norway. If Soviet planners have their way, that will not happen again.

**Important and Vulnerable**

How to hang on to the north is a most important question for NATO strategists. It will take imagination, early reaction to warning, and the combined resources of land, sea, and air. It will also require at least a holding action in southern Norway, for the Germans, remember, took the south first. After that, the north was no problem.

Occasionally, NATO's Scandinavian allies give some slight indication of a lessening will to resist. There is, for instance, the drive to declare all of Scandinavia a nuclear-free zone. Aside from the fact that such a declaration would have no more force in the real world than a similar one made in Berkeley or Boulder, it is divisive in an alliance that relies on nuclear weapons as part of its strategy.

A more serious shortcoming has been Denmark's long-term reluctance to spend much on defense. While the Danes now have a conservative government, Denmark has strong antidefense elements in its political structure. Some years ago, a Danish minister in one of the more liberal Danish governments suggested, not entirely in jest, that Denmark abandon defense in favor of a loudspeaker positioned on the border and programmed to blare, "We surrender." He was by no means typical, and there are in the Danish military ranks some of NATO's strongest supporters, but Denmark, with its two percent or so GNP defense budget, is a worry.

To be honest, we should not worry too much. The Danes don't enough toward their own and the mutual defense, but happily, they are a part of that defense. The Danish Navy, along with the Navy of the Federal Republic of Germany, shows the flag in the Baltic in full view of the satellite navies of Poland and East Germany. Danish Air Force F-16s and German Tornados are also in evidence over the Baltic, and they must be taken seriously by the other side.

NATO's Northern Flank is both important and vulnerable, and it is no overstatement to say that that region holds the key to Soviet maritime and Arctic strategy. But the Northern Flank is only a part of the larger NATO whole, all of which is both important and vulnerable. The plain fact is that the Northern Flank, like the rest of the Alliance, is most of all a symbol of a unified front against Soviet aggression. Were they outside the Alliance, Norway and Denmark might long since have gone the way of Finland.

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Gen. T. R. Milton, USAF (Ret.), is a longtime Contributing Editor to this magazine. He retired from active duty in 1974 and makes his home in Colorado Springs, Colo. His forty-year military career included combat service with Eighth Air Force during World War II, participation in the Berlin Airlift, command of Thirteenth Air Force in the Philippines, service as Air Force Inspector General and USAF Comptroller, and duty as the US Representative to the NATO Military Committee.