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# Strategic ASW And The Conventional Defense Of Europe

by

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# Strategic ASW And The Conventional Defense Of Europe

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## Introduction\*

The leadership of the U.S. Navy has recommended that the United States seriously consider the option of attacking Soviet ballistic missile submarines during the conventional phase of a major war. Navy leaders argue that doing so could gain the U.S. and its allies strategic leverage over the USSR and aid in war termination on terms acceptable to [the U.S.] and our allies.<sup>1</sup> They argue further that the risk of escalation to nuclear war that may arise from strategic ASW is small because what is happening ashore, not at sea, would dominate any Soviet decision to fire nuclear weapons.<sup>1</sup>

Critics of this policy in the United States have vigorously argued the contrary, asserting variously that: attacking Soviet SSBNs would produce little advantage because SSBNs make up only a small fraction of Soviet strategic forces.<sup>2</sup> Or the risk of escalation would be unacceptably high because the Soviets would feel significant pressure to rectify the [nuclear balance] with a counterforce strike [on the U.S.].<sup>3</sup> At its worst, critics argue, a calculated strategic ASW campaign by the U.S. would encourage the Soviets to attack preemptively because they would see it as little other than a precursor to a surprise U.S. attack on Soviet ICBMs and intercontinental bombers.<sup>4</sup> Some

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\* This article draws on an earlier unpublished paper entitled, "The Pros and Cons of the Soviet Pro-SSBN Mission" (1981). Like that paper, this work is indebted to colleagues James M. McConnell, for inspiration and seminal ideas, and Robert G. Weinland for wise counsel and advice. Neither is, of course, responsible for its flaws.

critics, indeed, express concern that Soviet SSBN losses that might occur in the course of U.S. operations against Soviet general purpose submarines would have similar effects on Soviet leaders, leading to "inadvertent" escalation.<sup>5</sup> Finally, critics say, even if these effects were somehow avoided, the Soviets would respond to the progressive destruction of their SSBN force not by moving to terminate the war but with limited nuclear strikes--at sea, to redress the balance against their submarines, or ashore, to signal how seriously they view the loss of their most secure strategic forces.<sup>6</sup>

These radically contradictory positions reflect vocal debate in the United States about the wisdom of strategic ASW. Perhaps surprising then, those directly affected by its resolution, the allies of the U.S. in Europe and elsewhere, have been publicly silent: so far U.S. strategic ASW has been neither welcomed nor rejected. This silence almost certainly does not stem from lack of awareness. More likely is deeper uncertainty about what is afoot. Privately, it seems plausible to assume, many in the nations of the Alliance may be asking exactly the questions at the center of the debate in the U.S. Is the U.S. Navy envisioning unilateral actions at sea that could be: (a) dangerous or (b) irrelevant? What can be gained and what risks are entailed in destroying Soviet SSBNs? What is the nature of the mechanism by which strategic leverage (if any) might be achieved--that is, exactly how are

U.S. actions at sea linked to anticipated Soviet actions ashore? What is the connection between strategic ASW and the conventional defense of Europe?

This article addresses those questions. It focuses on today and the immediate future—until force structures and strategic policies alter the situation in its fundamentals. Its purpose is not to seek conclusive answers, but to clarify—for example to point out that the U.S. has no interest in attacking Soviet missile-carrying submarines except on behalf of the security and integrity of the Alliance. (Where are the targets of these missiles? Few would answer in Europe.) Only the most serious commitment of the U.S. to share risks on behalf of larger, Alliance-wide goals would justify incurring any risk that may arise. Given the alternatives, the author regards such risk as acceptable and the potential gains great. But enthusiasm for this judgment is dimmed by recognition of two sobering realities: the somber gravity of the circumstance we must address; and our all-too-limited ability to predict the behavior of statesmen in it.

To examine these questions we are obliged to specify the kind of war of interest, the situations in it where strategic ASW might be executed, and the alternatives that would be open to the West in those circumstances. The last is vital because rarely in war is any option an unalloyed good. As a general rule in the nuclear world, statesmen and military commanders have to choose, from among unpalatable alternatives,



the one that seems the least bad; so to examine any option in isolation is sterile. The question is not whether strategic ASW is good or bad, but whether it is better or worse than the alternatives open at the time. Clearly, we need to consider the range of possible Soviet reactions to a strategic ASW campaign in light of the conditions for terminating the war that the Western Alliance would set. This latter is a sine qua non for understanding the entire issue.

#### What Kind of War

Even though it seems familiar indeed, we have to specify the kind of war we are concerned with in order to anchor the arguments that follow. It is one between the two great coalitions whose stakes are great enough to justify its enormous risks--for example, control of Western Europe or a part of it-- but still antagonism between the sides is not complete. If it were (or if it became so as the war unfolded), each would seem bound to fight on to eradicate the other. Since both have large and diverse nuclear forces, mutual annihilation would in all likelihood result. So despite their ideological enmities or the losses and damage they suffer, the superpowers are unlikely to choose to fight to the finish--though events could get out of control with that result.

In short, we are interested in a war that ends not through complete victory but through bargaining. As Kecskemeti observed nearly 30 years ago, all victories, except those where the loser is utterly helpless,

are based on the bargain that the losing party can strike through the threat of imposing further costs on the victor.<sup>7</sup> This trenchant observation implies that since the winner's victory would not be complete, it might also not prove durable. The loser retains some level of military and political wherewithal to threaten, or actually resume, hostilities in a new phase of the war.

It seems highly probable that a war of this kind would begin and be fought by the winning side with conventional weapons. Not only are the risks in using nuclear weapons very large and ultimately unforeseeable, but the principle of proportionality implies that the less-than-total nature of the stakes dictates less-than-total means.\*

#### Strategic ASW and The West's Central Problem

The central problem facing the Western Alliance is that for decades it has not expected to be the "winning side" at the conventional level. Thus it would face the agonizing choice of defeat or resort to nuclear weapons. Indeed General Rogers, like Supreme Allied Commanders before him, has forcefully stated that he will very likely be forced to ask NATO political authorities for the early release of nuclear weapons for battlefield and quite possibly theater-wide use.<sup>8</sup> For a variety of

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\* Clearly calculations of this sort assume the existence and continued authoritative direction of events by political leaders who have reasonable information about what's going on, and the capacity for rational assessment.

reasons--not least the role of intermediate nuclear forces on each side\*--the threat of nuclear war in Europe carries with it the stark possibility of intercontinental war. These nuclear connections compensate for Western conventional inferiority, to some degree, give meaning to the concept of shared risks, and constitute the U.S. nuclear guarantee to Europe.

Where does strategic ASW fit into this rather complicated skein? The answer is that, if the West should foresee conventional defeat on the ground, strategic ASW could hope to provide at least a partial and temporary--or even a full and permanent--alternative to the use of nuclear weapons. The causal linkage is best approached by laying out the roles that Soviet ballistic missile submarines play in Soviet strategy, then taking up how a campaign against them might be fought, and concluding with an examination of the connection between the campaign and the West's war termination goals.

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\* U.S. Pershing II and GLCM may nor may not be launched against targets in the western USSR depending mainly on whether the Soviets fired SS-20 and other intermediate nuclear forces from Soviet territory into Western Europe. The possibility of strikes on Soviet soil by U.S. missiles based in Western Europe is widely recognized as the most recent in a series of efforts to strengthen the credibility of broader U.S. threats to engage in nuclear war on an unspecified, if large, scale, on behalf of the territorial integrity of the Alliance--including strikes originating from U.S. territory proper. The Soviets, for their part, have promised to answer attacks on their territory from U.S. missiles based in Europe (as much as attacks originating from U.S. soil) with attacks on the continental U.S., thus making the linkage between U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe and intercontinental nuclear war fairly clearcut.

### SSBNs in Soviet Strategy

When Delta-class submarines armed with intercontinental range missiles began to enter service in 1972, the Soviets had already indicated their intention to shift to a doctrine of limited intercontinental war.<sup>9</sup> Before they had a survivable, sea-based ICBM the Soviets had essentially only one option for intercontinental war--all-out strikes aimed both at U.S. cities and at U.S. intercontinental forces.<sup>10</sup> They could do little else because their land-based intercontinental forces might well not survive the initial exchange. With an adequate inventory of sea-based ICBMs, however, the Soviets could (and can) choose to withhold some or all from initial strikes--strikes which themselves could then avoid U.S. cities and focus on U.S. intercontinental forces.

SLBMs thus held in reserve could then be fired at surviving U.S. military targets if the war continued. Their principal role however would be that of a force in being. Its existence would deter U.S. attacks against Soviet cities by posing an answer in kind and would make the USSR immune to the threat of nuclear coercion. (And, of course, in the unlikely event that the U.S. did not possess a comparable sea-based force, the Soviet SLBM force would permit the USSR to engage in nuclear blackmail of its own.) The presence or absence of this capability would play a central role in determining the war's outcome, and who got what in the "postwar" world.

One way to think about the Soviet sea-based reserve is to examine its impact on the Soviet navy. The emergence of a naval task of paramount importance to the Soviet state made a profound difference in the importance of sea power. Before the sea-based ICBM and the doctrine of "withholding," the Soviet Union needed sea power only to deny others the use of the sea--be it to interrupt the lines of communication connecting Europe with North America or to defend the USSR against attack from the sea. Now, however, it was necessary for the Soviet Union herself, not merely to deny the use of the sea to her adversaries, but to control those areas of the sea where her own ballistic missile submarines had to survive to accomplish a mission of supreme importance.

For the operations of the Soviet navy this meant that at least since the 1970s\* sea-based strategic offense held priority over strategic defense at sea. Rather than placing top priority on hunting down Western SSBNs, the Soviets have sought to neutralize them by posing an offsetting threat against Western cities. This aim was more likely to be within Soviet technological grasp, and it was more robust because the SSBN bastion, on which their operational plans centered, exploited the inherent advantages that come to the side that can dictate the location of combat operations.

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\* And earlier for decisions about its size and shape.

In sum, the strategic reserve of Soviet SLBMs produced an historic change for the great continental power. Now, like its "transoceanic" adversaries, it must be able to use the sea for its own, vital purposes. It is this reality that has underlain the growth and vitality of Soviet naval power in the modern era.\*

Soviet SLBMs are very likely not the only reserves the Soviets have.<sup>11</sup> It would be most uncharacteristic of them not to seek diverse solutions to such an important problem. For many years it has been commonly believed in the West that cold-launch Soviet ICBM silos were capable of and intended to be reloaded after initial strikes. These and possibly some intercontinental bombers could therefore serve as a strategic reserve. But from the Soviet point of view, compared to SLBMs, these have serious shortcomings. First, prudent Soviet planners can not be especially optimistic that their land-based forces would survive a focused U.S. attack. They would have to be concerned that the U.S. would know the locations of their ICBM silos, major airfields and nuclear weapons storage sites; that a combination of ICBM strikes followed up by bomber attacks might have a good chance of destroying all

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\* Students of the Soviet navy have debated the factors that have led the Soviets to accord special status to their navy. Compared to this raison d'etat, the influence of a naval lobby in the Soviet Union (akin to those found in the Western countries) or of the individual, Sergei G. Gorshkov, who has become that (presumed) lobby's personification, seems ephemeral. Admiral Gorshkov has indeed given us Sea Power of the State but he remains an epiphenomenon in the broad sweep of Soviet military policy.

or nearly all of these facilities; and that it would be logical for the U.S. to attack them while avoiding Soviet cities.

Second, land-based forces are a less desirable reserve than those at sea if they must be launched when threatened with attack. For example, some land-based forces probably would survive U.S. missile strikes; these could form a reserve in the sense that they, plus bombers recovered and ICBMs reloaded, might be launched before U.S. bombers reached them. This point is technically accurate but it makes a faulty assumption about the role of the Soviet strategic reserve. The reserve must survive enemy attacks and be available to launch at Soviet discretion—not in response to the enemy's threat to destroy it. A missile that must be fired to avoid being destroyed is a poor candidate for the reserve. After all, the inevitable question arises, fired at what? At U.S. cities, before the U.S. has struck Soviet cities? Doing that might indeed cause the U.S. to cease such attacks.\* But the structure of the situation probably should not make Soviet planners optimistic. It is usually easier to respond to, rather than initiate a new level of violence. Other things being equal, the Soviets would have to be concerned that the U.S. would do just that.

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\* Even independent of this situation the Soviets could launch demonstration strikes against one or a few U.S. cities and risk, at a minimum, a U.S. answer in kind.<sup>12</sup> But that would most likely be a step taken in desperation, whose desirability would be judged in light of the alternatives available—which will be addressed below.

In sum, until the Soviets are able to field a sizable force of mobile ICBMs\* that can avoid being hunted down and destroyed by the U.S. (itself not a trivial problem), they almost certainly have been (and are) concerned, in their own worst-case assessments, that the U.S. might be capable of destroying any land-based forces that they might designate to play a reserve role. If we look back over a considerable period of time then, (say, to the mid-1970s), the Soviet strategic reserve has been at sea.

While it is accurate to observe that sea-based missiles contribute only a small fraction of the Soviets' total deliverable megatonnage, they are a very large fraction of the reserve--that is, of forces whose existence has a special meaning for the core security values of the Soviet state. As will be seen, threats to the security of Soviet SSBNs carry a potential to influence Soviet behavior which is disproportionately large relative to their power to destroy--a working definition, of "strategic leverage."\*\*

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\* Sea-launched cruise missiles might also contribute to the reserve. But the Soviets could not be very confident that their SLCMs would reach U.S. targets because of U.S. ASW. Assuming they are concerned with the security of their bastions, a fortiori they are worried about their submarines in the open ocean.

\*\* Another variety of leverage arises in the naval battle per se. U.S. threats to Soviet SSBNs would presumably tie up Soviet naval forces on the defensive and prevent their use against Western SLOCs. This article will not address these purely naval issues, despite their immense importance.



### A Strategic ASW Campaign

But what of the vulnerability of Soviet SSBNs and their defenders to the general purpose\* ASW forces of the U.S. and its allies. For the purposes of this essay we are assuming that the Soviet SSBN force is in fact vulnerable. However, there is considerable debate on this point.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of its outcome, the debate has produced a certain picture of the battle under seas: the writer is not aware of any authoritative arguments that the destruction of the Soviet SSBN force could be accomplished quickly. History suggests this is plausible. The rule in ASW in the past has been patience: Search rates have been slow; many more weapons have been fired than targets sunk; and the results of attacks were often difficult to gauge. Modern technology may have changed these historical realities, but how much is difficult to tell. Expert opinion, in any event, seems to suggest a measured pace rather than quick decisive action.

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\* These are, almost by definition, meant to operate with conventional weapons. Arguably, the U.S. might use its tactical nuclear ordnance in a strategic ASW campaign. But to go nuclear in that campaign would be to vitiate one of its principal attributes: that it continues the war at the conventional level in a fashion the Soviets, it is believed, can not match.

Moreover, the Soviets have focused on building and defending SSBNs for more than two decades.\* The importance of the task and the conditions in which it may have to be executed—from a war's opening shots, through its nuclear phases (if any), and of course into the world that would follow a cease-fire—imply that the Soviets have sought to develop a characteristically diverse defense. While we do not know the details, it is reasonable to assume their defense is designed, at least, to degrade gracefully in the face of enemy pressure and, especially, to preclude catastrophic failure at the hands of any single enemy system. So, even if our acceptance of the basic assumption is grudging, we should be more comfortable yet with the assumption that, if strategic ASW is feasible, results can not be achieved in a hurry.

To Soviet strategic planners this means that, while the threat to their land-based forces from U.S. missiles must be measured in minutes and tens of minutes and from U.S. bombers in days (or large fractions of days) and tens of days, the ASW threat to Soviet sea-based forces is most probably reckoned in tens of days, at least. If that is true, then, faced with the progressive loss of their sea-based forces, Soviet leaders would have ample time to determine the origin of these losses, develop and evaluate possible defensive responses, and extrapolate the

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\* To say that the Soviets have expected their SSBNs to be attacked does not mean that they are indifferent to the results of those attacks. Nor to observe they would attack their adversaries' SSBNs—if they could—mean that they would remain nonplussed if they suffered from corresponding attacks. Both mean the Soviets regard SSBNs—their own and their adversaries'—as the most important entities at sea, a proposition with which this writer can not disagree.

likely outcome of the campaign. The radical contrast between the situation at sea and that ashore--where responses must be made in minutes or hours at most--means Soviet leaders could reflect carefully on their options and exercise the strategic foresight on which their doctrine puts such store. The crucial decision then might well be made under circumstances that encourage full consideration of all the options that are open.\*

#### Linkage with War Termination

The nature of those options would depend critically on the terms for ending the war that the U.S. and its allies would be demanding. Today, consistent with nearly four decades of Alliance policy, those terms are nothing other than an immediate cease-fire and the return to the status quo ante bellum\*\* That said, what alternatives would be open to the Soviets? There would appear to be three: (1) to try to restore the combat stability of their SSBNs by using tactical nuclear weapons, (2) to fire the missiles aboard their remaining submarines before they are lost or (3) to ignore what is happening at sea and to fight on ashore to achieve what they can with conventional arms. Let us look at each in turn.

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\* Even if it were technically possible to achieve quick results at sea, U.S. leaders, for these reasons, might well choose not to seek them.

\*\* Demanding the immediate restoration of something seized by force is one of those universally recognized, manifest and "fair" actions that are easily understood and easy to comply with.<sup>14</sup> Demanding more is explicitly outside the scope of this review.

Unquestionably, the Soviets could resort to tactical nuclear weapons at sea to defend their SSBNs. By all accounts their forces are well equipped with nuclear weapons of all sorts. And they are no doubt as aware as we in the West that nuclear weapons at sea produce much less so-called collateral damage--that is, damage to non-military people and things--inviting retaliation in kind. So presumably the strength of one of the main inhibitions to their use would be less.

But the option to use tacnucs at sea suffers from a debilitating disadvantage. Firing nuclear ASW weapons where many of one's own and few of the enemy's forces are present--arguably the case when U.S. SSNs are attacking Soviet bastions--requires that very stringent engagement criteria be met. How frequently the Soviets could in fact use nuclear ASW weapons and be confident that they were not destroying their own forces would seem problematical. In general the situation does not encourage the Soviets to use tacnucs in the direct defense of their SSBNs.\*

What about nuclear weapons elsewhere at sea or, especially, ashore, not in direct defense of SSBNs but (in addition to military payoff) to signal deep concern about the security of these boats? Here we encounter the second, dominant drawback to going tacnuc. In the

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\* This article will not address other possible ways to use nuclear weapons--e.g., periodic detonations underwater to hinder acoustic search or outside the atmosphere to interrupt communications--that could promote the defense of Soviet SSBNs.

situation of interest, the Soviets are winning the conventional ground war. Thus, the Western Allies already have ample incentives to escalate and the Soviets every reason to intimidate or otherwise persuade them not to. Why, we must ask, would the Soviets provide a powerful new incentive, by themselves being the first to cross the nuclear threshold. Surely, the direct effects on the battle at sea would have to be fairly significant to justify such a move.

If tactics cannot solve the problem, what about firing surviving SLBMs before the remaining boats are lost? This--the shoot-'em-or-lose-'em dichotomy--may correctly apply to tactical nuclear weapons ashore, but it fails to exhaust the real alternatives open to the Soviets regarding SLBMs. If the Soviets chose to fire their SLBMs, the question is the same we asked of their land-based forces in this situation: fire them at what? Leaving aside limited, demonstration strikes, if remaining Soviet SLBMs were fired on their own, they would be too few to prevent a large-scale U.S. answer against Soviet land-based strategic forces. The decision to fire SLBMs then would be irrational unless it were accompanied by a decision to launch a major attack that included their land-based forces. Again the question would be: fire them at what? If they confine their attack to U.S. intercontinental forces they would exhaust their own land-based forces, and lack (or foresee a time certain when they would lack) a sea-based reserve whose existence would secure their own cities. If they launched an all-out attack that included U.S. cities, they would face suicide because the U.S., by

virtue of its own SSBN force could—and certainly would—answer in kind. A decision to fire SLBMs in these circumstances then would seem fairly unattractive.

Even more unlikely is the notion that the Soviets might provide rules of engagement that would authorize their submarine commanders to launch missiles when faced with the threat of destruction. We have only to ask whether a U.S. president would grant such authority to his immediate subordinates in the Navy, that is to the senior leadership of the Navy, much less to relatively junior officers aboard submarines thousands of miles away. We can not rule out bizarre situations where the Soviets might grant such authority, but to do so would be a gross abnegation of political control—which lies outside the boundaries of this assessment.

As for unauthorized independent action by one or even a few submarine commanders, again we can not rule out that possibility. But both the U.S. and USSR (it seems reasonable to assume), select such commanders with extraordinary care and instruct them (it is further reasonable to assume) that to fire their weapons without authorization could be to jeopardize the very existence of the nation they are sworn to defend. By and large then, concern with both an official policy of

launch-if-you-think-you're-going-to-lose-them and the unauthorized launch by individual skippers seems questionable.\*

If for the Soviets firing SLBMs as a matter of policy is undesirable and firing them inadvertently is unlikely, what about the alternative of ignoring the loss of SSBNs entirely? This alternative has the clear merits that it keeps the war at the conventional level and buys time for the Soviets to inflict military defeats on the West that they could hope would lead to political collapse and capitulation. Indeed, this is exactly the central problem facing the West that introduced this section.

In what ways, if any, would a successful strategic ASW campaign alter this situation? First, since its foundation the Alliance has depended crucially on the credibility of the U.S. pledge to use nuclear weapons rather than accept any involuntary alterations in the boundaries or political systems of its members. Strategic ASW is in its essence an expression in the idiom of military action<sup>16</sup> of the seriousness of U.S. intentions to honor that pledge. Specifically if the conventional

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\* Analysts<sup>15</sup> who point out the great peril of nuclear escalation present in a global conventional war are absolutely correct: a misstep in any of a horrifying long list of political and military actions could lead to escalation. In the case of strategic ASW, however, the Soviets have thought about the problem very seriously. To this writer, at least, to envision their response as "inadvertent" could reflect a view of Soviet military thought in general as fairly underdeveloped. As noted earlier, if strategic ASW is judged bad on this (or any other) score, the better question is whether it is worse on balance than the alternatives--which will be discussed below.

defense of the Alliance is in doubt, the U.S. is willing to attack strategic nuclear weapons (which in the main happen to be aimed at itself). Through strategic ASW, the U.S. gives specific and quite credible meaning to the notion of shared risk within the Alliance.

Looked at from the Soviet viewpoint, the willingness of the U.S. to engage in strategic ASW seems a very powerful earnest of the U.S. commitment to see matters through, rather than accept changes to what it has defined as a vital interest--namely, the integrity of the Western Alliance. Indeed, a strategic ASW campaign would seem especially compelling to the Soviets because it raises the genuine possibility that the U.S. would at some point fire intercontinental weapons rather than accept defeat in Europe. Going after Soviet strategic weapons at sea does not signal an incontrovertible commitment to do the same ashore, but it expresses an unambiguous and quite plausible possibility.

These linkages are important but they form only part of the story. The credibility of any threat direct or implied, can only be evaluated in light of the goal it is designed to promote. In this case the U.S. would no doubt take every possible measure to communicate to Soviet leaders that it wishes to avoid nuclear war and engages in strategic ASW only for the purpose of bringing about a cease-fire and the restoration of the status quo ante. No one can be sure how the



Soviets would react to this offer.\* However, compared to the alternatives of a nuclear war with the U.S. without a secure reserve force, it may well be the best available choice. Through this mechanism strategic ASW adds weight in Western side in the bargaining that would lead to the termination of the war.

That said, it must also be clear that strategic ASW is not an alternative to the conventional defense of Europe. Nothing would be superior on that score than the acquisition by the Alliance of a convincing capability to defeat a attack of any scale by the Group of Soviet Forces Germany and their counterparts in other theaters. On the other hand strategic ASW would not be especially desirable if the West possessed superiority at the conventional level. It would be clearly undesirable if used to attempt to impose a fundamental change in the nature of the government of the USSR. That would reverse the situation of interest and make credible Soviet threats to fire nuclear weapons.

#### Conclusion

To the degree the arguments presented here have merit, we would judge strategic ASW as directly linked to the conventional defense of Europe. Indeed, it would seem to have no meaning except in that context; specifically the United States would have no compelling reason

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\* This writer believes however that they would understand the deal very clearly, since it is quite consistent with the strategic thinking that gave rise to the SSBN reserve in the first place.

to attempt strategic ASW but for its commitments to its Allies. If some increase in the likelihood of nuclear war arises as a result--itself a complex and contingent probability--that risk is directly borne by the U.S. at least as much as by the European members of the Alliance: a concrete manifestation of the principle of shared risks on which the Alliance rests. The notion that strategic ASW is somehow a unilateral and autonomous policy is a fundamental misreading.

Similarly misplaced is the view that the case for strategic ASW underestimates the likelihood that the Soviets would respond with nuclear weapons. Tacnucs at sea appear an unpromising solution for the Soviets as do demonstration weapons at sea or ashore. The shoot-'em-or-lose-'em dichotomy for SLBMs does not exhaust the real options that would be open to the Soviets; in particular it does not address the option of complying with the West's demands for a cease-fire and a restoration of the status quo. Moreover, the probable results for the Soviets of firing SLBMs, and presumably other intercontinental weapons, appear either disadvantageous or suicidal.

Less likely yet than a conscious choice by the Soviets to fire nuclear weapons in response to strategic ASW is "inadvertent escalation."\* For many years Soviet planners have anticipated and prepared, both physically and intellectually, for attacks on SSBNs. To extend the notion of inadvertency to a situation where individual Soviet submarine commanders might be authorized to fire ballistic missiles if threatened with the loss of their boats would require one to believe that Soviet leaders are prepared to renounce political control of a special group of weapons of mass destruction of central importance in their planning.

The strategic relevance of attacking Soviet SSBNs with conventional weapons arises from the role they play as the principal component of Soviets' strategic nuclear reserve.\*\* The nuclear reserve at sea has produced a change of unprecedented historic dimension: for the first time in history Russia, now the land of the Soviets and for centuries the great continental power, must meet the requirement to use the sea for its own purposes. No longer is possession of naval power capable of the less demanding task of denying the use of the sea to others adequate for the nation's security--a reality that above all others has accounted

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\* The writer freely grants that a future war could occur inadvertently and that there are excellent reasons to study that possibility.<sup>17</sup> The specific point here is that inadvertent is an unlikely characterization of Soviet responses to a threat to their SSBN force.

\*\* Clearly if this reading of the SSBN's importance is exaggerated then attacking them does not produce strategic leverage nor danger of escalation. Thus attacking SSBNs could do no strategic harm--not the least desirable attribute of any option.

for the development of Soviet naval power over the last 20 years, if not perhaps longer.

In an important sense sea-based strategic weapons have been and very likely remain the ultimate military foundation on which the security of the Soviet state rests. They are not so much second-strike weapons as last-strike weapons. They are the last card the Soviet leadership would have to play in a major war. Thus, their fate could be a matter of enormous consequence to Soviet leaders.

No one can (or does) claim that the progressive destruction of the Soviet SSBN force would guarantee favorable Soviet actions of strategic importance. A number of other factors would play major roles in the calculus of a Soviet response. Of these three are dominant: (1) the war termination terms the U.S. and its allies are demanding of the Soviets; (2) the balance in the battle ashore; and (3) the credibility of the Alliance threat to use nuclear weapons rather than accept defeat. Successful strategic ASW could add weight to the Alliance's position in bargaining for a cease-fire and termination based on prewar boundaries and conditions.\* The principal mechanisms involved are its effects on the Soviet view of the credibility of the West's nuclear threat and the imposition on the Soviets of a highly disadvantageous situation if the war should reach the intercontinental level.

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\* Successful strategic ASW very likely can not be used to impose fundamental changes on the Soviet Union.

If one grants the Soviets a reasonable degree of strategic foresight, in these circumstances accepting a cease-fire on the basis of restoration of the status quo would appear to be a more attractive option, by a considerable margin, than initiating a nuclear war. Similarly the Soviets might also see a cease-fire more desirable than simply ignoring changes in the nuclear balance and fighting on at the conventional level in the hope of gaining offsetting advantages on the ground. As we have seen, that would be a highly dangerous course for them to follow. Nonetheless, they might gamble on the credibility of the Western nuclear threat and do so anyway.

This last only confirms that strategic ASW is not a substitute for strong Western ground forces in Europe. Rather it is an employment option for the use of existing maritime forces that holds promise--under conditions of acceptable risk--of helping the West cope with its central security problem. If we envision a war where the conventional defense of Europe may be in doubt and pose the question, would the U.S. and its allies prefer to engage in strategic ASW or to initiate nuclear strikes, we see why it is an option that indeed merits the most serious consideration.

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