

Commentary

The Forgotten Spirit of Gorbachev

Benjamin Schaller

The Arctic, representing the shortest flight distance for strategic bombers and intercontinental missiles between the Soviet Union and North America, and with strategic nuclear submarines (SSBN) hiding deep below the Arctic ice, had been a central arena in the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Arctic was not only home to strategic bombers, missile systems and nuclear submarines, but also to highly advanced early warning radar and air defence systems, making the Arctic for many years one of the most heavily militarized regions in the world.

In a period of political détente, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the East and West engaged in a number of initiatives of rapprochement. With the signing of important treaties, such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) in 1987, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe as well as the Charter of Paris in 1990 or the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) in 1991, a foundation for a more cooperative and stable post-Cold War security order was laid. In 1987, during a trip to the Kola Peninsula, Mikhail Gorbachev, at the time General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, proposed to transform the Arctic into a ‘zone of peace’, in what later became known as the ‘Murmansk Initiative’. While his proposals for increased regional cooperation and cross-border people-to-people contacts found their realization in the establishment of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in 1993 and the founding of the Arctic Council in 1996, his initiatives in the military security sphere, such as the establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (NWFZ) or of restrictions on naval activities in the Arctic, never succeeded.

Today, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked the symbolical end of an ideological and geopolitical confrontation that had divided Europe and the world for more than forty years, we unfortunately see the return of great power politics to Europe and the Arctic region. The

Benjamin Schaller is a PhD-candidate and research fellow at the Centre for Peace Studies at the Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø. His research focuses on military security, arms control and NATO-Russia relations in the High North.

fundamentally opposing views of NATO and Russia regarding the past, present and future of the post-Cold War security order have become blatantly obvious on a number of occasions over the last couple of years. Be it through Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, in which he fiercely criticized the hegemonic dominance and unilateral actions of the United States in world affairs and NATO's expansion to the East, in the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, in connection with the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine or through the decay of the nuclear and conventional arms control architecture that had ensured peace and stability in the world for so many years. In short, the idea of cooperative security has widely disappeared and deterrence and the risk of a looming arms race have returned to the top of the security agenda.

These renewed tensions between East and West have also not failed to leave their mark on the otherwise rather cooperative Arctic security environment. While usually united by common economic interests and cooperation on addressing the numerous non-military security challenges of the region, for example, climate change, search and rescue or environmental protection, we today observe a growing military activity in the region, a more assertive force posture of Arctic states and an increasing suspicion regarding Russia's considerable military presence in the region. Earlier this year, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo openly attacked Russia for its military activities in the High North, including Russia's reopening of Cold War military bases as well as the deployment of military troops and hardware as "part of a pattern of aggressive Russian behaviour [that is] already leaving snow prints in the form of army boots" and stressed that the United States will not allow the Arctic to become "a place of lawlessness". These developments underline the growing risk of fundamental disagreements between Russia and the West in other parts of the world spoiling the so far rather cooperative security environment in the High North. The increasing threat to the idea of the Arctic as 'a zone of peace' does not – as some have previously suggested – derive from a scramble over natural resources or territorial disputes, but is clearly the result of the overall deterioration in NATO-Russia relations as Russia is increasingly challenging the existing post-Cold War security order.

A stop or reversal of this trend seems not in sight. The conventional arms control in Europe has been in a deadlock for more than ten years. The INF Treaty lies in ruins as Russia and the United States abandoned this for security and stability, meaning the important nuclear arms control treaty and Russia and the West have openly returned to the deterrence logics that dominated the security agenda throughout the heights of the Cold War. Amid the increasing confrontational attitudes between the East and West, one might wonder if we have forgotten the spirit of Gorbachev and the idea that security can be more than a simple zero-sum game?

In his 2018 documentary portrait 'Meeting Gorbachev', German film director Werner Herzog asks Gorbachev, who understands that his legacy of détente and nuclear disarmament is severely at risk, what he would wish to be written on his gravestone. Gorbachev, after briefly reflecting, simply replies: 'We tried' ('Мы старались'). Let us make sure that his legacy in the sphere of conventional and nuclear arms control as well as his vision of the Arctic as a 'zone of peace' do not sink into oblivion.