

The Arctic has played an important role in military-strategic considerations since the dawn of the "air age." Relatively speaking, however, this importance has diminished over the past twenty-five years, as long-range bombers (and the defences against them) declined in importance relative to the growth of intercontinental ballistic missiles and ballistic-missile submarine fleets. At least as long as defence against ballistic missiles was considered unfeasible, the fact that such weapons would, in most cases, pass over the Arctic made little difference to the scale of activities on the ground (apart from the erection and maintenance of some ground-based early-warning systems).

Several recent trends have succeeded in reversing this decline in the military-strategic significance of the Arctic. The so-called "air-breathing threat" has received a new lease on life with the development of long-range, air-launched cruise missiles and new long-range strategic bombers by both the United States and the Soviet Union. The introduction of cruise missiles, in particular, has raised the requirement for earlier detection and interception of air-breathing vehicles, thus extending the combat zone ever northwards into the Arctic. At the same time, the prospect of more effective ballistic missile defences (BMD) adds further impetus to the development of air-breathing systems, as a possible means of bypassing such defences, and of defences against air-breathing systems themselves, as a complement to comprehensive BMD. Elements of BMD systems themselves might well be emplaced in the Arctic, given the premium on intercepting incoming ballistic missiles as early as possible in their trajectories.

Even more dramatic than the developments in air-breathing systems, however, have been those with respect to the sea-based deterrent. As the Soviet Union has built up its submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) fleet over the past decade, it has chosen — for obvious geographical reasons — to base the vast bulk of this force in its Arctic regions, particularly on the Kola Peninsula. At the same time, the acquisition of increasingly longer-range SLBMs has enabled it to adopt a "defended bastions" strategy for the deployment of a growing portion of its force close to home waters, in the