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Military History

French Rubis Class SSN

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A French *Rubis* Class SSN, a type that had

been given serious consideration by the Canadian Navy.



Strength through Personnel



Strength through knowledge

SOVEREIGNTY, SECURITY AND THE CANADIAN NAVY SUBMARINE PROGRAM

by Adam Lajeunesse

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Introduction

On 5 June 1987, the Brian Mulroney Progressive Conservative government of Canada announced its White Paper on national defence. The document, *Challenge and Commitment: Canada's Defence Policy*, was advertised as a plan to rejuvenate the Canadian military, which the former Liberal governments of ignoring and allowing to decline. The White Paper was a landmark document, seeking new equipment for all three services for use in both Europe and Canada to enhance Canada's contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), national sovereignty. The 'crown jewel' of the White Paper, however, was the concept of a three-year planned acquisition of 10 to 12 nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). This submarine program, the largest acquisition program in the history of the Canadian military, represented a shift in the Canadian Atlantist alliance-oriented policy toward a program more inclined toward the defence of Canadian territory, and, particularly, the maintenance of national sovereignty.¹

The Strategic Background and the Perceived Imperative

The late 1980s were a time of great concern with respect to Canadian Arctic sovereignty. A major issue for the Canadian government was the status of the North West Passage. The American rejection of Canadian control over these waters, along with widespread rumours that both American and Soviet submarines regularly patrolled the region, had provoked a general fear that a lack of Canadian control, and physical presence in its northern waters, might seriously imperil its claim to sovereignty. The White Paper was, in large part, a response to that fear. The acquisition of nuclear submarines was seen as an attractive remedy to the Canadian defence dilemma, as the SSN was a platform capable of providing a respectable presence in both the Atlantic and Pacific, the SSN was the only tool capable of reaching into Canada's ice-covered Arctic waters. Most importantly, by extending its influence into the Arctic, the government hoped to demonstrate sovereignty by exerting a previously impossible degree of control over the North West Passage. The defence and sovereignty roles that these submarines played were thus not two separate tasks but part of one consistent mission, that of asserting Canadian sovereignty over its waters by demonstrating a measure of real control.

Cover: Challenge and Commitment

The 1987 White Paper on Defence was a plan to plug the 'commitment capability gap' between Canada's commitments to collective defence and national security, and the Canadian responsibilities. While the scope of the program was broad, the centrepiece of the document was a focus upon the navy, the Arctic, and the concept of a three-ocean fleet. This focus becomes clear on a cursory glance at the White Paper. On the cover of the document is an unusual global map with emphasis placed on the Arctic Ocean and the Canadian North. Throughout the document, Canada (in relation to the rest of the world) continues to make this emphasis. Canada is presented in the White Paper as a northern country with obvious sovereignty and security responsibilities in the Arctic region.

The SSN was seen as the ideal weapon for the Canadian Navy in 1987, due to its unparalleled versatility. These boats were capable of travelling under the Arctic icecap, giving them a direct route from the Atlantic to the Pacific, through the North West Passage, in just 14 days.² During the Cold War, they would allow rapid reinforcement between the oceans and would provide Canada with the capability to detect Soviet submarines within its Arctic waters. In peacetime, the SSN would allow Canada to monitor intruders, and to establish a powerful presence in a region where Canadian sovereignty is shared with a number of important nations, including the United States.

Prime Minister Brian Mulroney

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Prime Minister Brian Mulroney

Canadian Arctic sovereignty issues had caused anxiety in Ottawa since the region was under Canadian jurisdiction in 1880. However, by the 1980s, this concern had shifted from control over the water (or ice) surrounding the landmass. The time during which the 1987 White Paper on the Arctic witnessed a dramatic increase in Canadian concern over the North West Passage in terms of national security. The passage, an inter-oceanic waterway running from the Atlantic through the Arctic to the Pacific, had been officially claimed as internal Canadian waters by the Mulroney government through the charting and application of straight baselines.³ However, without the recognition of a physical presence in the region to support these claims, Canada's legal position was tenuous.

To exacerbate matters, recent developments in military technology were beginning to take on important strategic significance. The greatest fear from the region came from cruise-missile submarines. From firing positions in the Lawrence Sea or the Davis Strait, Soviet missile submarines 5000 kilometres had the ability to reach an alarming number of North American cities. The Soviet fleet possessed 80 SSNs and 62 ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) capable of firing cruise missiles. These submarines, the majority of which were already stationed on the Kola Peninsula, made these submarines far more difficult to detect than the traditional intercontinental ballistic missiles, and thus provide the Soviets with a devastating first-strike capability.⁵ In addition to providing a strategic advantage, that the Canadian Arctic could also serve as a convenient route by which Soviet submarines could reach the Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom (GIUK) gap to the east, where NATO had always feared a submarine breakout into the Atlantic convoy lanes.⁶

Arctic Ice cap

Challenge and Commitment – A Defence Policy for Canada

At the time of the 1987 White Paper, there was a concern that Soviet nuclear submarines could reach both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by transiting under the Arctic icecap.

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In addition to its increasing strategic importance, Canadian Arctic waters were also important for economic reasons. Recent gas and oil discoveries, and the growing profitability of a number of mines in the north, gave many the impression that the north might soon realize its potential as a source of great wealth. The tanker *Manhattan* had demonstrated the possibility of using the North West Passage to the eastern US seaboard could be supplied with Alaskan oil, while the 1985 voyage of the *Polar Sea* had made it abundantly clear that the United States did not recognize Canada's claim to a potentially vital sea route.

United States Navy (USN) activities were not limited to single icebreaker transits, and continued throughout the 1980s. In 1985 USN Vice-Admiral DeMers told Congress that at least "one nuclear submarine every year" was travelling to the North Pole.⁹ In 1987, the USN published a report claiming that American submarines at the North Pole and announced the construction of at least 10 new submarines specifically for under-ice operations.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Canadian sovereignty over these waters rested upon little more than proclamations made by politicians in Ottawa. Its *de jure* sovereignty over the superpower neighbour and its *de facto* control was confined to rare overflights by patrol aircraft (from 10 in 1985 to 20 in 1986), the utility of which were limited.¹¹ Without an underwater presence to patrol and defend against potential Soviet attacks, Canada could not claim the exercise of sovereignty within the confines of its territory, a central requirement to any definition of sovereignty. As scientist John McGee: "The meaning for Canadians [was] simple. Either we take on a patrol of the Arctic or we shall be deemed, in terms of realpolitik, to have ceded sovereignty to the United States. The primary purpose of the proposed SSNs was to remedy this situation; to bring a C

Central Europe overlay

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The vastness of Canada's north becomes obvious through this Central Europe overlay of the territory.

The new focus upon Arctic defence and sovereignty represented a fundamental shift oriented naval strategy under which the Canadian Navy had always operated. Previous concerns were primarily concerned with submarines. In 1987, the navy had only three *Oberon Class* boats that were approaching obsolescence, and the role of Canada's navy throughout its history had been one of emphasis on submarine warfare. To this end, during the latter half of the 20th Century, Canada had relied upon a surface fleet of frigates and destroyers that were ideally suited to these tasks. A fleet of SSNs was thus totally out of character for the Canadian Navy. This radical shift was explained by a radical shift in *objectives*. It was unlikely that the SSNs were intended for submarine warfare in the Atlantic and Pacific since an adherence to Canada's traditional surface fleet would have accomplished this more efficiently for less money and less political turmoil. The SSNs were primarily for use in the only region that demanded this radical shift in mentality and

HMCS Ojibwa

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HMCS Ojibwa, the first of three *Oberon Class* submarines in Canadian

Sovereignty Implications

The notion of sovereignty is a nebulous one. However, at its core is the concept of control. Sovereignty, as defined by the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs, is "the prevention of trespass, the provision of services and the enforcement of national and international law over (Canadian) territory, waters and airspace."¹³ To be sovereign, a nation must thus to be able to control its territories and, when necessary, defend its territorial integrity through the use of force."¹⁴ Canada's objective in acquiring an ability to operate under the Arctic icecap was to intercept any Soviet submarines operating within Canadian territory, and to monitor and enforce its laws within its territorial waters. Without this capability, Ottawa could not contend to control its possession of sovereignty, in both a legal and practical sense, would be limited. Even the presence of SSNs, regardless of whether they were deployed to the Arctic on a continual basis, would provide a deterrent against trespass, since, unlike an icebreaker, they provided, not a *visible* presence. Vice-Admiral James Woods put it succinctly when he said: "...the nice thing you can do what the British did in the Falklands... say they are there."¹⁵

Sea ice in the Beaufort Sea

www.mar.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/.../seaice/public.html DSC_0654

Sea ice in the Beaufort Sea.

During the course of the debate over the acquisition of the SSNs, a number of alternatives were intended to offer Canada the ability to monitor or guard its Arctic waters without the use of nuclear submarines. The idea of an underwater sonar network was presented as such a concept of defending the north by mining the Arctic passageway in wartime.¹⁶ However, the Surveillance System (SOSUS) – style sonar system was dismissed as offering monitoring that was equitable to buying an alarm system but not hiring a policeman. The idea of mines was also dismissed because they would prove both expensive and unworkable but also because they, like the sonar system, would not provide Canada with what it needed most, a physical presence ex-

In 1931, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had ruled that it was the exercise of a claim that was the principal consideration when dealing with matters of sovereignty. This claim was based on discovery or contiguity.²³ In 1985, during the passage of the *Polar Sea* through the Arctic, an international tribunal would have undoubtedly found Canada's claim to Arctic water "…indifferently pursued and inconsistently expressed," which would have seriously damaged Canada's position.²⁴ During another boundary dispute in the Gulf of Maine, which went before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in 1984, the Canadian lawyers emphasized events in recent (the previous decade) history, which were based upon historical occupation. In the event of a similar case over the North West Passage, the actions taken by the Canadian government in 1985, the presence of even a few Canadian submarines in the Arctic, had gone a long way toward establishing a precedent of Canadian control and occupation. The 'policy of diplomacy' may not have been a solution in the strictest sense, it was intended to precede a precedent *when* and *if* Canada was ever forced to prove its occupation of its northern waters.

The SSN purchase was not meant to accomplish this goal of asserting Canadian control over the Arctic, but merely the keystone in a larger attempt to bring a Canadian presence to the Arctic. In 1985, the submarines, Beatty had asked for an underwater sonar detection system, five forward-deployed defence fighters (at Rankin, Inuvik, Yellowknife, Iqualit, and Kuajuaq), a new headquarters for the Canadian Rangers, a new High Arctic training centre at Nanisivik, new reconnaissance aircraft, a terrain vehicle fleet, and a *Polar Class 8* icebreaker.²⁶ Thus, the defence of Arctic sovereignty was a concern that the Conservative government had pledged itself to address by bringing a Canadian presence into the Arctic to ensure Canadian *security* while safeguarding Canadian sovereignty.

The ideas of sovereignty and security were brought together in the White Paper in a 1986 Defence White Paper, the Trudeau government had focused sovereignty concerns upon environmental issues such as pollution.²⁷ Unlike the approach taken by the Liberals in the 1970s, the Conservative government Mulroney saw sovereignty and security as being intimately connected. For Beatty and Mulroney, enhancing security in the North would bring about a corresponding increase in national sovereignty. The plan laid out in the White Paper was meant not only to ensure that Canada was secure from Soviet submarines but also to make sure that it was Canada and not the United States that was the dominant power in the Arctic. Canadian government had been strictly concerned with security, the most efficient policy would have been to allow the USN to continue to operate in the Arctic while devoting Canadian resources to other areas. Historically, they have been applied more effectively.

Northwest Passage

wikimedia.org

The Northwest Passage and its approach corridors.

However, in 1987, the Canadian government's chief concern was not Soviet attack; it was the presence of an international 'freeloader.' In 1986, only a year before the White Paper, the Department of Foreign Affairs admitted that there was no reason to believe that Soviet submarines regularly trespassed into Canadian waters.

waters.²⁸ Because of the confined nature of the North West Passage, the difficulty in communicating through ice, and the relative ease of guarding the exit choke points (L and Davis Strait), it was considered unlikely that the USSR would send its boats through it became absolutely necessary. As for cruise missile launches, there were, in fact, relations that could not be easily guarded. More to the point, the USSR could have devastated Europe easily with Sea Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) without Soviet SSBNs even in waters in the Barents Sea. In a strictly military sense, SSNs and cruise missiles were not the highest security priority.²⁹

While the threat of a Soviet attack from the Arctic was very real, in 1987, this threat was not the primary focus of funds that the Canadian government planned to spend upon northern defence, since the threat was already being countered largely by American SSNs.³⁰ In fact, if war did break out, Canada was not called for a full submarine offensive into the Barents Sea, meaning that unless the Canadian government participated in this forward maritime strategy, which was seen as destabilizing and highly risky, Canadian SSNs would have little to do.

Aurora Borealis

Photo by Jan Curtis, from www.geo.mtu.edu

Despite the White Paper's assertion that a Canadian submarine force would be a valuable asset, despite the DND contention that Canada's allies welcomed the acquisition,³¹ some senior officials and government were "appalled" at what they saw as Canadian military interference in a Canadian-American sovereignty dispute.³² During a 1987 trip to Washington to secure nuclear technology from Britain to Canada, as was required by the 1958 US Arms Control Treaty, Beatty and his associates were told in no uncertain terms by the U.S. Defence Department officials that a Canadian nuclear submarine program was unnecessary and even unwarranted. The Canadian SSNs were not meant primarily as a contribution to NATO, nor were they

security concerns. Rather, the program was designed to allay the fear of Canada becoming a second-rate power. *Defence Update 1988-89* states: "...[that] to be a truly independent nation we must show that we can do that which comes with independence by contributing more fully to our own defence. If we cannot 'contract out' the defence of Canada."³⁵ It was this notion, that "Canada [must] do the defence of Canada" that is frequently emphasized in DND publications and statements. The 'death' of the 1987 White Paper.³⁶ Perrin Beatty recognized that Canada did not need nuclear weapons for security, which was already provided by the Americans. However, to delegate the security to the USN would have placed Canada in a position of complete dependence on the United States.

What Might Have Been

The acquisition of the SSNs would have done more than support Canadian claims to a seat at the table. It would have allowed Canada to claim that it was contributing its fair share in NATO. It would have given Canada a degree of credibility that two decades of neglect had eroded. In Perrin Beatty's words: "The program would have restored our sovereignty to the degree to which, in the context of alliance and collective defence, we are entitled to national security."³⁷ Canadian SSNs, coupled with Canadian Navy frigates and destroyers (under construction), would have given Canada a balanced fleet.³⁸ In 1987, Canadian admirals outlined terms of future independent Canadian task forces that would have given Canada some voice when dealing with its NATO allies.³⁹ This move to "hoist Canada into the world of nations" was an attempt to pull back from the abyss of irrelevancy in NATO, and to prove that Canada was a nation with the ability to control its own waters, its own territory, and participate on an equal footing with the superpowers.

British Trafalgar Class submarine

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A British *Trafalgar* Class submarine, a follow-on to the *Swiftsure* Class of SSNs that was also being considered for Canadian acquisition.

The Canadian nuclear submarine program, and most of the programs outlined in the 1987 White Paper, were never undertaken. By January 1989, Perrin Beatty had left DND and had been replaced by John McKnight. And, by May 1988, when the cabinet failed to meet to discuss the SSN contract, the program was not *officially* dead.⁴¹ This cancellation was due to a combination of factors, including the end of the Cold War and the rapid decline and collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴²

The Cold War was dying, as was public desire to spend upwards of \$C10 billion on a

rationale for the White Paper program was based upon the notion that the Soviet Union was “...ideological, political, and economic adversary whose explicit long-term aim [was] to destroy the West and its own image.”⁴³ The imagery and language of the White Paper was designed to convey a sense of peril, and, once that threat began to melt away, so did public support for Cold War policies. Public support for the SSN acquisition paralleled the decline in East-West tensions. In June 1987, 63 percent of Canadians backed the purchase (with 37 percent opposed).⁴⁴ A little more than a year later, opposition had risen to 69 percent.⁴⁵ By 1989, 71 percent were against the purchase, as most Canadians polled expected a Soviet attack was highly unlikely.⁴⁶

Domestically, the Conservative government had a substantial deficit to battle, and, in 1987, its opponents were not from *outside* the government, but from *within* it. Rebuilding the economy was simply unaffordable. Following the 1988 election, the government’s priorities changed, and defence became the decisive issue.⁴⁷ After their re-election in 1988, the Tories slashed 38 percent of the defence budget and allowed defence spending to fall each year as a budget percentage.⁴⁸

It was this rush to collect a ‘peace dividend’ that ultimately killed the submarine acquisition program. Only two years after the White Paper was first presented, Defence Minister Jean Charest announced that the task of defending Canada’s under-ice sovereignty would be left to the United States and explained: “...[that] there [were] better ways of defending northern sovereignty but we cannot afford those ways.”⁴⁹ As such, the Canadian government effectively contracted out its northern sovereignty to a neighbouring power that did not recognize its claim to it. For Canada, the cost of under-ice sovereignty had, once again, proven too high.

HMCS Corner Brook



DND photo HS2007-G025-006

A Canadian *Victoria* Class submarine (HMCS *Corner Brook*) during a summer 2007 deployment to Canadian Arctic waters.

Conclusion

The idea of a Canadian SSN fleet died on a balance sheet, and with it, the White Paper’s vision of Canadian control over the North West Passage. And it was that control that the Canadian government lost when it decided to alter radically its maritime strategy and to pursue nuclear submarine

previous Liberal understanding of defence, the 1987 White Paper functioned under the assumption that sovereignty was directly related to its ability to defend itself from foreign attack in war and national territory and providing for its own safety in peacetime. It was with this logic that a Canadian SSN fleet would be the ideal solution for asserting Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic. It was necessary that, for the purposes of Canadian sovereignty and self-respect, it be Canada's defence of Canadian waters. To allow the USN to continue to provide Arctic security in the Arctic would be incompatible with Canada's claims to its northern waters and would be incompatible with the responsibility of an independent nation. The issue was not simply a matter of security but whether Canada should provide that security. For, according to Perrin Beatty, a nation that contracts out the defence of its waters is not *sovereign*, but a *protectorate*.⁵⁰



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NOTES

1. The Canadian Submarine Acquisition Project: *A Report on the Standing Committee Report*, Issue 41 (Tuesday, 16 August 1988), p. 1.
2. A similar transit would take 28 days through the Panama Canal and two months around the Cape of Good Hope. See the report of the House of Commons, *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on National Defence* [hereafter referred to as *Proceedings*], evidence presented by Rear-Admiral Anderson, Section 24:28.
3. A step building upon the actions of the Trudeau government in 1970, which established the Arctic Pollution Prevention Zone and a 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone.
4. F.W. Crickard, "Nuclear-Fueled Submarines: The Strategic Rationale," in *Canadian Defence Review* 2 (Winter 1987), p. 19.
5. *Proceedings*, evidence presented by Rear-Admiral Anderson, Section 24:28.
6. Canada: Department of National Defence, *Challenge and Commitment: A Defence White Paper* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1987), p. 11.
7. Indeed, Canadian participation in the defence of its seabed was considered by some to be more important than the defence of its airspace, since the seabed contained infinitely more riches to be exploited. See the report of the House of Commons, *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on National Defence* [hereafter referred to as *Proceedings*], evidence presented by Rear-Admiral Anderson, Section 24:28. See also *Arctic Imperative: Is Canada losing its North?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 11.
8. Tony German, *The Sea is at Our Gates: The History of the Canadian Navy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), p. 318.
9. John Harbran, "Yankee Sub, Go Home," *US Naval Proceedings*, Vol. 114, (August, 1988), p. 11.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Exercise Norploy '86* saw the dispatch of two Canadian Navy vessels to Davis Strait, and Barrow Strait to show the flag. However, their presence lasted only two months and they did not go farther than the ice line.
12. John E. McGee, "Call to the Arctic," in *US Naval Proceedings*, Vol. 114, (March, 1988), p. 11.
13. The Canadian Submarine Acquisition Project: *A Report of the Standing Committee Report* (Tuesday, 2 February 1988), Section 17:14.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
15. Harbran, p. 88.
16. The White Paper did plan an underwater listening system. However, it was designed to detect and track SSNs rather than *independent* of them.

17. *Proceedings*, evidence provided by Mr. Blackburn, Section 25:33.
18. *Proceedings*, evidence provided by Mr. Ferland, Section 25:26.
19. Joe Clark quoted in: *The Globe and Mail*, 29 April 1987, p. A5.
20. *The Wednesday Report: Canada's Aerospace and Defence Weekly*, at <http://twr.mobrien.com/articles/historical/historical-2004-3.htm>.
21. Rob Huebert, "Canadian Arctic Maritime Sovereignty – The Return to Canada's TM Military Journal, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer 2007), p. 14.
22. Perrin Beatty, "A Defence Policy for Canada," in *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Vol. 1
23. Shelagh Grant, *Sovereignty or Security?* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia
24. Library of Parliament: Political and Social Affairs Division, *Canadian Defence Policy* Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1988), p. 20.
25. *Ibid.*
26. It was also at this time the DEW line was being taken over by Canadian forces and Northern Warning System; Canada, Department of National Defence, *Defence Up* of Supply and Services Canada, 1988), pp. 10-13.
27. Canada: Department of National Defence, *Defence in the 70's* (Ottawa: Minister of 1971) pp. 1-8.
28. *Proceedings*, evidence presented by Vice-Admiral Brodeur, Section 1:37.
29. Matwin S Davis, "Le Mieux est L'Ennemi du Bien," in *Canadian Defence Quarterly*,
30. R.B. Byers, "An Independent Maritime Strategy for Canada," in *Canadian Defence* (Summer 1988), p. 28.
31. Britain and France welcomed the decision because it was from one of them that Ca submarines; *Proceedings*, evidence presented by Mr. Manson, Section 24:44.
32. Julie H. Ferguson, *Through a Canadian Periscope* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1995),]
33. Ferguson, p. 315.
34. Perrin Beatty: Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, (5 June 1987), p. 6777.
35. Canada: Department of National Defence, *Defence Update 1988-89* (Ottawa: Minis Canada, 1988), p. 1.
36. Canada: Department of National Defence, *Defence '86 – '90* (Ottawa: Minister of Su 1987).
37. Bruce Johnson, "Three-Ocean Strategy: Right for Canada, Right for NATO," in *Can* No. 1 (Winter 1988), p. 38.
38. *Challenge and Commitment*, p. 52
39. *Proceedings*, evidence presented by Minister of National Defence Beatty, Section 2
40. *Toronto Star*, 6 June 1987, p. 1.
41. The plan was officially terminated in April 1989.
42. The program's proponents promoted it on the understanding that the Soviet thre: even *increase* over the next 20 years. *Proceedings*, evidence presented by Rear-Adm
43. *Challenge and Commitment*, p. 5.
44. *Ottawa Citizen*, "50% Back Subs," 22 June 1987, p. A4.
45. John Manthorpe, "Poll says no to Nuclear-Powered Subs," in *Ottawa Citizen*, 26 Ma
46. *Toronto Star*, "Torpedo the Subs for Budget Fairness," 25 April 1989, p. A18. Doug V

Soviet Threat Poll Finds," in *Vancouver Sun*, 22 April 1988, p. A8.

47. Perrin Beatty, 30 March 2006, Re: Nuclear Submarines. [e-mail to Dr. David Bercus]

48. *Defence Update* '86 – '90.

49. *Vancouver Sun*, "Canada to Turn to U.S. after Subs Sunk," 28 April 1989, p. A9.

50. Perrin Beatty, *The Globe and Mail*, 20 July 1987, p. A8.

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China's Future Nuclear Submarine Force. Insights from Chinese Writings, this concept eliminates the concept of "normal", but the Epiphany walk enlightens the natural damage caused, based on the definition of generalized coordinates.