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### "Murmansk Initiatives" by M. Gorbachev and Their Implementation in the Arctic Region as an Element of the "New Thinking" Policy

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**Abstract.** This article, based on a wide range of sources, some of which are being introduced into scientific discourse for the first time, attempts to provide a comprehensive analysis of the implementation of Mikhail Gorbachev's "Murmansk initiatives", studying their assessments and impact on the formation of a new type of the international cooperation in the Arctic in the short-term historical period from October 1987, when they were proclaimed, to 1990. The authors came to the following conclusions: it was no coincidence that Mikhail Gorbachev chose the Arctic as an arena for the implementation of the "new thinking" policy. The "Murmansk initiatives", having become a regional reflection of the "new thinking" policy, were not perceived unambiguously in the West. The dividing line was drawn both in terms of the content of the initiatives themselves and the favorable perception of them by the Arctic countries. The authors positively assess the "non-military" component of the "Murmansk initiatives". Despite the traditionally recognized failure of the component related to arms limitation, they nevertheless played a role in the development of the international relations in the region. At the same time, it is clear that during that period, the country's leadership often acted to the detriment of national interests, making unilateral concessions in the name of reaching an agreement. The concept of neoclassical realism, which forms the basis of this study, explains this line of foreign policy behavior by the USSR as a complex combination of a number of factors: the inability to pursue the state's previous foreign policy, which was characterized by an arms race in a bipolar world, the internal socio-economic crisis in the country, as well as the personal characteristics of Mikhail Gorbachev himself.


**Keywords:** *foreign policy of the USSR, new thinking policy, Murmansk initiatives, Arctic region, M.S. Gorbachev*

### Introduction

The foreign policy of the late Soviet Union in the end of the 1980s is of considerable academic interest due to its implications for humanity as a whole, for regions around the world, and for our country. The collapse of the bipolar system, the disintegration of the global socialist sys-

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tem, and subsequently of the USSR, created a fundamentally new geopolitical situation in the world. Whether these processes had objective grounds and what their consequences were remain a subject of heated debate in socio-political and academic discourse. The "Murmansk initiatives" were a regional manifestation of Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" concept in foreign policy in the Arctic region in the second half of the 1980s. There is a view that the Arctic was not chosen by the Soviet leadership for the implementation of these initiatives by chance: the need to reduce the degree of militarization of the region, combined with the global prioritization of the climate and environmental agenda, became one of the specific features of the late USSR's foreign policy in the Arctic. In this regard, the authors consider it significant to study the implementation of the "Murmansk initiatives" and their impact on the development of international processes in the region.

The degree of study of the topic under consideration can be represented by at least two layers of research literature. The first, which is quite extensive, contains an assessment of Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" policy; the second focuses on its specific manifestation in the Arctic — the "Murmansk initiatives". The systematization of the research literature on this topic can be based on the assessment of these foreign policy phenomena of the USSR by authors representing opposing points of view. Thus, the "new thinking" policy is often assessed positively by those who were in power at that time, as well as by foreign researchers [1, Adamishin A.L.; 2, Brown A.; 3]<sup>1</sup>. The works of the Russian researcher M.F. Polynov play a significant role in the development of the "new thinking" concept. He considers the end of the Cold War to be a positive outcome of the "new thinking" policy, though this occurred due to the USSR's refusal to continue the struggle for spheres of influence in the world [4; 5; 6; 7; Polynov M.F.]. The reasons for this refusal are examined in detail both by Polynov himself and by other Russian authors [8; 9, Barsenkov A.S.]. Thus, the overwhelming majority of modern Russian authors, when assessing the policy of "new thinking", proceed from the realistic view that the USSR was no longer in a position to pursue a foreign policy characteristic of a superpower and was seeking a way out of the growing confrontation.

The second layer of research is devoted specifically to the study and assessment of the "Murmansk initiatives". It should be noted that they are generally mentioned in a broader context, as a starting point for the formation of a new type of international relations in the Arctic. A number of studies by foreign authors analyze the reaction of Arctic countries to these initiatives, assessing them in terms of their significance and feasibility. In general, the authors positively evaluate this foreign policy step of the Soviet leadership, though they note that the implementation of initiatives related to military security aspects was hardly feasible under the prevailing geopolitical conditions [10, Purver R.G.; 11, Åtland K.; 12, Janes R.W.]. Russian researchers also give cautious assessments of the "Murmansk initiatives", noting contradictions among the political elites [13, Fokin Yu.E., Smirnov A.I.; 14, Shtol M.V.]. At the same time, academic research has not fully ad-

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<sup>1</sup> The Gorbachev Era — Through the Eyes of Contemporaries. On the 100th Anniversary of Academician G.A. Arbatov's Birth. *The Gorbachev Foundation*. URL: [https://web.archive.org/web/20231023184610/https://www.gorby.ru/presscenter/news/show\\_30397/](https://web.archive.org/web/20231023184610/https://www.gorby.ru/presscenter/news/show_30397/) (accessed 24 June 2025).

dressed topics related to the place and role of the Arctic in the formation of M.S. Gorbachev's "new thinking" concept, as well as its consequences for the development of international processes in the region, which makes this study particularly relevant.

The aim of this article is to analyze the implementation and impact of M.S. Gorbachev's "Murmansk initiatives" on the development of a new format of cooperation in the Arctic. The lower chronological framework of the study is defined as October 1987, when the "Murmansk initiatives" were formulated by M.S. Gorbachev. The article examines events prior to 1990. It was important for the authors to analyze the initial impact of this foreign policy step of Soviet diplomacy, the reaction of the international community to it, and the first steps towards its implementation.

The theoretical basis of the study is represented by the concept of neoclassical realism, which assumes that the foreign policy behavior of each state is determined primarily by its power and position in the international system, in particular, by the relative share of its material capabilities [15, Ripsman N.M., Taliaferro J.W., Lobell S.E.; 16, Rose G.]. As V.N. Konyshov notes, the influence of the international system on the state is exerted "not directly, but indirectly, through the complex interaction of the international structure with the diverse internal attributes of the state" [17, p. 105]. The latter include the political and economic situation in the country, as well as the personal characteristics of the political leader. The study involved the use of general scientific and historical research methods, which enabled the reconstruction of the events that took place, as well as the drawing of key conclusions and generalizations based on critical analysis.

The source base of the study consists of three groups of documents. The first group comprises unpublished sources, introduced into academic circulation for the first time. These include materials from the Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (hereinafter — AFPRF), among which the documents from Fund 116 — "Reference on Norway" (hereinafter — F. 116) — occupy a central place for this study. The Fund contains analytical materials from employees of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, detailing the reactions and subsequent actions of foreign countries in response to the "Murmansk initiatives". It is interesting to note that the materials include studies of initiatives by Western and Northern European countries, as well as the Warsaw Pact states. The second group of sources is represented by media materials, in particular the Pravda newspaper from 1987–1988, as well as video materials from the Russian Central Film and Video Studio of Documentary and Educational Films, which depict official visits of high-ranking Soviet officials to Scandinavian countries. An analysis of bilateral treaties concluded between the USSR and the Nordic countries, which constituted the third group of sources, was significant in developing the research topic.

### ***The "new thinking" policy: the origins of formation***

Researchers who examine the reasons for the change in Soviet foreign policy in the 1980s consider the impossibility of continuing the rivalry with the United States for global dominance to

be a key factor. This manifested itself in the long-standing arms race, which resulted in disproportionate economic growth: in the 1980s, over 60% of mechanical engineering output consisted of military goods [5, p. 52]. Moreover, the Strategic Defense Initiative program, implemented by the United States since 1983, made it impossible for the USSR to continue a military standoff on equal terms. The USSR's Minister of Foreign Affairs, E.A. Shevardnadze, recalled that after assessing the prospects of establishing this system, "Gorbachev and I finally decided: we need to find common ground with the Americans at any cost" [5, p. 38]. In addition, the USSR was drawn into a struggle for political influence in the "Third World" countries and provided them with economic support: by November 1, 1989, the amount of debt of developing countries to the USSR amounted to 420.4 trillion rubles [5, p. 52]. In essence, the rules of the Cold War forced the USSR to operate under constant pressure from external factors, which the state withstood as long as it had sufficient resources to implement an adequate foreign policy. This logic of interaction in the international arena often did not correspond to the national interests of the USSR and undermined its potential. The policy of the R. Reagan administration, aimed at exacerbating the USSR's internal problems, set a specific goal: to achieve fundamental changes in the political system of its adversary. Thus, the secret directive of the US Department of Defense, "US Relations with the USSR", dated January 17, 1983, stated that one of the US objectives was "to facilitate the process of transforming the USSR into a pluralistic economic and political system in which the power of privileged elites is significantly reduced" <sup>2</sup>.

It is important to note that representatives of the Soviet school of foreign policy thinking were not united in their views on the development of the state's foreign policy. As A.P. Tsygankov notes, three main ideological groups were distinguished: pro-Westerners, who emphasized democratic consolidation with the West and a policy of détente; a more nationalistic group within the Soviet establishment — statist — who advocated limited reforms and the implementation of the concept of "balance of power" between socialism and capitalism; and ardent supporters of continuing the ideological struggle, who did not believe in the possibility of détente and rapprochement with the aggressive "imperialist" West [18, pp. 34–35].

The provisions of the "new thinking" concept were not new; they had been expressed by various government and public figures since the 1960s. Under M.S. Gorbachev, they manifested themselves in various formats: at a meeting with US President R. Reagan in Geneva in November 1985, at a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU on January 23, 1986, at which the draft report of the General Secretary to the 27th Congress was discussed, as well as at the Congress itself in February 1986 [6, p. 85].

The concept of "new thinking" is defined as a socio-philosophical, ideological theory based on the idea of a global and fundamentally indivisible world, which, as M.S. Gorbachev asserted,

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<sup>2</sup> NSD Directive Number 75, US Relations with the USSR. Department of Defense. URL: <https://archive.org/details/NSDDirectiveNumber75USRelationswiththeUSSR/page/n7/mode/2up> (accessed 20 May 2025).

was under threat of destruction. According to the official doctrine, "new thinking did not emerge overnight, but it did not arise without reason... The core of new thinking was the thesis on the priority of universal human interests and values in an increasingly integrated, interdependent world. New thinking does not deny national, class, corporate, and other interests. But it prioritizes the interests of preserving humanity, saving it from the threat of nuclear war and environmental catastrophe." <sup>3</sup> According to the authors of the article, it is difficult to assess the real reasons for the integration of such an ideological approach into the foreign policy of the late USSR. However, the authors believe that in this case, there was a complex combination of factors: the internal economic crisis in the country, the impossibility of pursuing the previous foreign policy, and the role of M.S. Gorbachev himself. In his opinion, identifying a common threat — global problems — for former geopolitical adversaries was intended to reduce tensions in relations and change approaches to mutual perception. Thus, the Soviet leader was proposing to base foreign policy on a neoliberal approach.

The change of the head of the USSR's Foreign Ministry (E.A. Shevardnadze was appointed as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs in July 1985, replacing A.A. Gromyko, who had held the post for over 30 years), the restructuring of the Foreign Ministry and the creation in 1986 of the Department for Arms Control and Disarmament, as well as the strong analytical support for the ideas of "new thinking" from the country's leading academic institutions and scientific community — all these indicated the beginning of accelerated preparations for the implementation of a "peaceful offensive" policy with the goal of creating a new, attractive image of the USSR and its foreign policy.

On March 13, 1985, brief meetings were held in the Kremlin between M.S. Gorbachev and the heads of delegations from the USA, the UK, France, West Germany, Japan and China, during which the Soviet leader repeatedly emphasized the need to resume dialogue and overcome tensions in international relations. He stated that the USSR intended to pursue a responsible and constructive foreign policy that took into account the interests of each state and would not seek military superiority [8, p. 43]. Overall, this was an attempt to overcome the established stereotypes of the Cold War and, at the same time, a tendency to rethink its conceptual and ideological foundations, as well as a desire to build relations with the West on the principles of equal partnership in the name of achieving common goals. Thus, the policy of "new thinking" — a fundamentally new approach to the country's foreign policy — laid the foundation for the implementation of regional initiatives, which, against the backdrop of and in conjunction with the core idea of disarmament, were intended to transform both the essence of the state's foreign policy and its international image.

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<sup>3</sup> Understanding Perestroika, Defending New Thinking. M.S. Gorbachev. *Russia in Global Affairs*. URL: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/perestroika-and-new-thinking/> (accessed 24 June 2025).

### ***The "Murmansk initiatives" and their impact on international processes in the Arctic***

The Arctic, in essence, was the first region where the concept of "new thinking" was put into practice. Researcher R.G. Perver notes that such proposals by the Soviet leader to ensure regional security in areas bordering the USSR can be seen as a distinctive feature of the "new thinking" policy [10, p. 147]. Indeed, the speech in Murmansk was preceded by a similar speech in Vladivostok on July 28, 1986, which addressed security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. In March 1988, M.S. Gorbachev visited Belgrade, where, at a meeting with delegates of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, he put forward initiatives to ensure security in the Mediterranean region [19, Guskova E.Yu.]. These three foreign policy initiatives share certain similarities, emphasizing measures for the control of naval armaments — an issue that was becoming increasingly important in Soviet diplomacy during the period under review.

During an official visit to the Arctic's largest city from October 1 to 3, 1987, General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee M.S. Gorbachev awarded the city of Murmansk the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star medal. In his ceremonial speech, dedicated to domestic socio-economic reforms, he focused on the international situation and outlined his vision of the Arctic through the "idea of universal cooperation" <sup>4</sup>.

Speaking about the Arctic not only as a "weather workshop" influencing the climate of the entire planet, but also as a region of geopolitical confrontation, M.S. Gorbachev noted that "submarines and surface vessels represent a huge potential for nuclear destruction, which affects the political climate of the entire world" <sup>5</sup>. In his speech, the Soviet leader offered the Arctic states "to discuss the long-standing security issues here ... through both bilateral and multilateral cooperation" [20, Panikar M.M., p. 19]. His proposals were based on the idea of establishing a nuclear-free zone in Northern Europe, restricting naval activity in the seas adjacent to Northern Europe, and opening the Northern Sea Route to foreign vessels with "our provision of icebreaker escort" <sup>6</sup>. The Soviet leader also drew particular attention to the need for countries to join forces on environmental protection, as well as to the development of international cooperation in the field of Arctic scientific research, proposing the creation of a joint Arctic scientific council and the holding of a conference of Arctic states in 1988 to coordinate scientific research in the region <sup>7</sup>. An analysis of M.S. Gorbachev's "Murmansk speech" allows determining the role the USSR desired to play in Northern Europe. Based on the concept of a "common European home", which recognized the unity of Europe despite the countries' different socio-political systems and their membership of various military-political blocs, the Soviet leader, deliberately emphasizing the achievements of Northern European political leaders, emphasized the common interests of the USSR and the

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<sup>4</sup> Speech at the ceremonial meeting dedicated to the presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star medal to Murmansk. October 1, 1987. URL: <http://historic.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z0000235/st050.shtml> (accessed 18 May 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Northern European countries, contrasting them with the "chilling breath of the Pentagon's 'polar strategy'"<sup>8</sup>.

Before assessing the international reaction to the "Murmansk initiatives", it is important to note that they also had a domestic political resonance. Following M.S. Gorbachev's visit to Murmansk on March 10, 1988, the Central Committee of the CPSU and the USSR Council of Ministers adopted the Resolution No. 338, "On Measures to Accelerate the Economic and Social Development of the Murmansk Oblast in 1988–1990 and for the Period up to 2005"<sup>9</sup>. Researcher M.V. Shtol, citing historical documents, notes that a number of issues raised within the framework of the "Murmansk initiatives" caused concern and even criticism among officials in Soviet departments at various levels. For example, the State Commission for Arctic Affairs under the USSR Council of Ministers expressed concern over the final point of these initiatives, regarding the status of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which was still considered a national transport artery. The commission instructed the Ministry of Justice to "develop proposals to protect the interests of the USSR" in the event of the NSR being opened to foreign vessels. The USSR Ministry of Justice also noted that a number of countries possessed icebreaker fleets, and their use of the NSR could undermine the USSR's position and lead to a reconsideration of the ownership of this transport artery [14, p. 191]. In response to this situation, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR developed and adopted a number of legal documents that regulated the use of the NSR and established control over it, using environmental concerns, perhaps largely as a pretext for strengthening the USSR's position<sup>10</sup>. These examples clearly demonstrate that not all Soviet officials shared the foreign policy approaches of the new General Secretary of the CPSU; many of them were rightly concerned about protecting the country's national interests and maintaining its defense capability.

The authors also believe that the analysis of the "Murmansk initiatives" by foreign researchers deserves special attention. Thus, R.G. Perver emphasizes that the USSR sought to expand cooperation in scientific research and mineral extraction in the Far North in order to "gain access to Western technologies, know-how, and capital" [10, p. 147]. He also clearly distinguishes between "non-military" and "military" initiatives, rightly pointing out that the latter were hardly feasible and even failed [10, p. 149]. K. Otland, discussing the theory of securitization, argues that Gorbachev's emphasis on ensuring security in the non-military (social, economic, environmental) sector was an important means by which security in the military sphere could be achieved [11, p. 290]. Regarding the assessment of these foreign policy initiatives from the standpoint of neoclassical realism, the authors believe that, on the one hand, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the USSR to support "hard" security economically; on the other hand, the opportunities for coopera-

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Izvestia, March 11, 1988

<sup>10</sup> For example: Resolution of the Council of Ministers of June 1, 1990 No. 565 On measures to ensure the implementation of the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of November 26, 1984 "On strengthening environmental protection in the regions of the Far North and marine areas adjacent to the northern coast of the USSR". URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/901807366> (accessed 19 May 2025).

tion and joint high-tech development of the Arctic with the countries of the region seemed promising. The initiation of international dialogue in non-military spheres — environmental, economic and scientific research — could contribute to the formation of trust for solving more complex security problems in the region.

According to the authors, R. Janes's assertion that the interdependence and traditional stability of Northern Europe made it "an excellent arena for Soviet foreign policy of 'new thinking'" is justified [12, p. 163]. Firstly, the environmental agenda and the issue of protecting the Arctic environment were in line with the key message of M.S. Gorbachev's foreign policy concept itself, aimed at prioritizing universal human values in order to harmonize international relations. Secondly, these areas of interaction, in contrast to the issue of disarmament in the region, were the most "suitable" for initiating international cooperation. On the one hand, they did not require significant financial expenditure; on the other, they were conducive to overcoming the foreign policy stereotypes of the Cold War. This can be explained by the fact that the issues of research and environmental protection in the Arctic were mainly developed by representatives of the scientific community, who were interested in combining common efforts to achieve scientific results and were not guided by political motives in their actions.

Researchers believe that the components of the "Murmansk initiative" relating to arms control can be explained as a direct response to a number of specific threats and opportunities in the field of security [10; 12]. These were explicitly outlined in the Soviet leader's speech, in which he referred to the deployment of a new radar station in Greenland in violation of the 1972 Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems, the Canadian government's development of a program to build up military forces in the Arctic, and the general increase in "US and NATO military activity in areas directly adjacent to the Soviet Arctic"<sup>11</sup>. This was also largely linked to the announcement of the Forward Maritime Strategy of the U.S. Navy in 1987 and the increase in the number of American submarine operations in the Arctic. The Soviet Union also viewed the expansion of NATO infrastructure on its northern flank as a threat in the Arctic, specifically the deployment of heavy Alliance weapons in Norway and the intensification of NATO surface warship exercises in the Norwegian and Baltic Seas<sup>12</sup>. However, the immediate impetus for the proclamation of the "Murmansk initiatives" may have been the planned signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. On the one hand, its implementation could have led to NATO compensating for the loss of the missiles specified in the treaty by increasing the number of long-range air- and sea-launched cruise missiles with nuclear warheads in and over northern waters. On the other hand, the USSR could have expected the restoration of a nuclear-free zone in the Arctic if all mis-

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<sup>11</sup> Speech at the ceremonial meeting dedicated to the presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star medal to Murmansk. October 1, 1987. URL: <http://historic.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z0000235/st050.shtml> (accessed 18 May 2025).

<sup>12</sup> O'Donnell H.K. Northern Flank Maritime Offensive. *US Naval Institute*, September 1985, Vol. 111/9/991. URL: [https://translated.turbopages.org/proxy\\_u/en-ru.ru.cb834a67-67b10250-993d0e36-74722d776562/https/www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1985/september/northern-flank-maritime-offensive](https://translated.turbopages.org/proxy_u/en-ru.ru.cb834a67-67b10250-993d0e36-74722d776562/https/www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1985/september/northern-flank-maritime-offensive) (accessed 15 May 2025).

siles were completely dismantled. Overall, issues of security and demilitarization in the Arctic were crucial for establishing dialogue at a new level; however, the "Murmansk initiatives" did not provide a reliable foundation for resolving them. Moreover, many of Moscow's unilateral arms reduction initiatives were often viewed with ambivalence even in the West and were seen as a sign of the USSR's weakness.

It should be noted that the "Murmansk initiatives" were generally viewed positively by the international community. A few days after M.S. Gorbachev's "Murmansk speech", the newspaper Pravda published a review of the reactions of representatives of several Nordic countries. For example, Norwegian Prime Minister G.H. Brundtland noted that "the Murmansk speech raised important and complex issues that should be carefully studied... We regard M.S. Gorbachev's proposals as further evidence of the Soviet Union's growing desire for mutually binding international cooperation, including in regions and spheres that affect sensitive national interests."<sup>13</sup> Similar statements were made by representatives of other Nordic countries: Swedish Foreign Minister S. Andersson, Chairman of the Communist Party of Finland A. Aalto, Danish Foreign Minister U. Ellemann-Jensen, and others<sup>14</sup>. The proposals outlined by M.S. Gorbachev in Murmansk provoked a mixed reaction in Washington. The United States assumed a cautious approach, citing the fact that it had not yet received the full text of the speech, "and therefore prefers to refrain from detailed comments"<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, White House spokesperson Philip Oakley added: "We note, however, that the Soviet Union has long sought to limit Western freedom of navigation in international air and maritime spaces in such strategically important regions as the Baltic, Arctic, Norwegian and Greenland Seas."<sup>16</sup> Based on this statement, the authors of the review concluded that the Reagan administration was not yet ready to engage in discussions on the issues raised by Gorbachev<sup>17</sup>.

Summarizing the Western countries' reactions to the "Murmansk initiatives", it can be concluded that the possibility of cooperation in non-military spheres received a positive assessment, which cannot be said of the initiatives concerning the creation of a nuclear-free zone and disarmament in the Arctic. On this issue, the countries were conditionally divided into three groups: Finland and Sweden, not being NATO members, responded to these ideas with the greatest enthusiasm; the Nordic countries and Canada, NATO members, were more reserved and cautious in their assessment, while the United States actually rejected the proposed initiatives [10]. Despite the fact that the Nordic countries began to discuss this issue on a regular basis in the second half of the 1980s, it was obvious that the creation of a Nordic Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone could not be viewed as an isolated process, but should be perceived as part of disarmament negotiations. Further developments undoubtedly depended on relations between the great powers as a whole [21, Broms B.]. According to American analysts of that period, the implementation of the concept of a

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<sup>13</sup> Pravda, 1987. No. 277. P. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

nuclear-free zone in Northern Europe was destined to fail, regardless of how strongly Moscow sought to achieve it. The United States opposed this idea, the implementation of which did not meet the national interests of Western countries [22, Lumsden C.A.]. At the same time, the discussion process itself could have been beneficial, raising awareness and reducing tensions, and therefore the potential for a nuclear war in the region. It can be assumed that the USSR largely used these debates as a tool for political détente.

A significant event in the development of the "Murmansk initiatives" was the official visit of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, N.I. Ryzhkov, to Sweden and Norway in January 1988. During a formal dinner at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ryzhkov reaffirmed that "the "Murmansk initiatives" open up enormous opportunities. They point the way to the successful development of mutually beneficial relations."<sup>18</sup>

As part of this visit, a ceremonial dinner was held on 15 January in honor of the head of the USSR government on behalf of the Norwegian government, at which N.I. Ryzhkov outlined detailed initiatives to further M.S. Gorbachev's Murmansk speech. In particular, the northern countries were invited to send observers to one of the Soviet Navy's exercises in 1988, as well as to hold consultations between NATO and WP military experts. The latter could be aimed at developing solutions to limit the number of large-scale naval and air force exercises to one every two years; establishing agreed zones in the North and West Atlantic for the USSR and the USA respectively, within which the activities of anti-submarine forces and assets of military-political alliances would be prohibited; refraining from conducting naval exercises in the areas of the main oceanic and maritime trade routes of the North Atlantic; preventing the concentration of naval force groupings in international straits and their approaches, as well as defining the maximum parameters of these groupings in terms of numbers, classes of ships and other characteristics; including the Baltic Straits (Great and Little Belts, Sound, Skagerrak), the Danish and English Channel straits, and the Iceland – Faroe Islands – Scandinavia area in the restriction zones<sup>19</sup>. Major General Y.V. Lebedev, a representative of the Soviet General Staff, publicly expressed the approval of the "Murmansk initiatives" by Soviet military circles in the *Moskovskie Novosti* newspaper, supplementing them with initiatives for "joint discussions with Northern European countries of possible regional confidence-building measures at a lower level, as envisaged by the decisions of the Stockholm Conference", as well as "the signing of bilateral or multilateral agreements on the prevention of incidents at sea and in the airspace above it, which could extend to all of Northern Europe" [10, p. 152].

In a report by I. Aboimov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, to D.K. Zotov, Deputy Chairman of the State Committee for Arctic Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, regarding the progress made in implementing the directives on the "Murmansk initiatives",

<sup>18</sup> Northern Europe – Cooperation and Security (1988). Film No. 9510. 2 parts. URL: <https://www.net-film.ru/film-9510/> (accessed 19 May 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Pravda, 1988. No. 16. P. 4.

reference was made to the involvement of socialist countries in resolving this issue. At the Warsaw Pact (hereinafter WP) meeting of foreign ministers in Sofia on December 18, 1988, E.A. Shevardnadze outlined the objectives of efforts in the northern direction. A special group on the military aspects of the Murmansk program was established within the WP. At the first meeting of experts, held in Moscow, the idea of creating a "Baltic core" was proposed, within the framework of which the Polish side began actively promoting a plan to establish sub-regional cooperation in non-military fields<sup>20</sup>. Among the WP countries' initiatives, the efforts of the GDR, which had shown interest in disarmament in the Baltic, were noted, as well as Bulgaria's proposals to sign a memorandum between WP and NATO member states on flank issues, including the North<sup>21</sup>.

The report noted that the main obstacle to implementing restrictions on naval activity in the North was the commitment of Norway, Denmark, and Iceland to NATO values, the "wait-and-see" approach of Sweden and Finland, and the need to consider the positions of all parties<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, a number of states in the region began exploring the possibility of reducing military and political tensions in the Northern European region at the expert level, creating special working groups. For example, Norwegian experts concluded that "it is both appropriate and desirable to take confidence-building measures in the maritime areas off the coast of Northern Europe"<sup>23</sup>. In March 1989, the Norwegian Parliament's Military Committee visited the Kola Peninsula, after which work began on concluding an agreement to prevent incidents at sea and in the airspace above it. Finland proposed submitting proposals on confidence-building measures at sea to the UN Disarmament Commission. In April 1989, an informal exchange of views on the "Murmansk issue" took place at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, as a result of which British experts agreed on the need to establish mechanisms for bilateral and multilateral consultations between diplomatic and military experts in order to develop methods and formats for future negotiations on naval issues<sup>24</sup>.

Iceland's proposal to hold an international conference to prepare for negotiations on naval force reductions in Northern Scandinavia did not receive the support of Iceland's NATO partners, primarily the United States: no progress could be achieved with regard to the military-political aspect of the Murmansk program, and their stance remained negative<sup>25</sup>.

Cooperation between the Supreme Soviet and the parliaments of the Arctic countries on issues of military security and disarmament in the region was also unsuccessful. For example, the foreign affairs committees of the parliaments of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway rejected a Soviet invitation to Moscow in 1988 on the grounds that participation in foreign policy negotiations was not within their constitutional mandate. Representatives of the Arctic countries also declined the

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<sup>20</sup> AFPRF. F. 116. Invt. 73, Arch. 10, P. 117. Sh. 38-39.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Sh. 39.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Sh. 40.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Sh. 40-41.

<sup>25</sup> AFPRF. F. 116. Invt. 73, Arch. 10, P. 117. Sh. 42.

Soviet invitation and did not send military observers to the military exercises in the north-eastern part of the Baltic Sea, which took place from September 6 to 8, 1988 [10, p. 153].

However, despite the lack of progress on the "Murmansk initiatives" concerning arms control and naval force reduction, a fairly productive dialogue was established in other areas of cooperation. This dialogue was particularly intensified at the parliamentary level. The year 1988 was marked by a series of such events: in April, a Soviet-Finnish inter-parliamentary seminar on the implementation of the Murmansk program was held in Helsinki, along with a trip by Supreme Soviet deputies to the Scandinavian countries. In October, Moscow hosted a delegation from the Northern European Parliamentarians on the Study of the Prerequisites for the Creation of a Regional Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (the Jørgensen Committee). During the meeting, the issue of establishing contacts between the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Nordic Council was discussed<sup>26</sup>.

The Soviet-Finnish "Kola Project" was launched, aimed at modernizing existing mining operations, establishing recycling of secondary waste, and creating new facilities for the development of raw materials on the Kola Peninsula<sup>27</sup>. In the area of environmental cooperation, Finland proposed convening a conference of Arctic states on environmental protection in the Arctic, which marked the beginning of the "Rovaniemi Process". Contacts between the indigenous peoples of the North and the Arctic Circle Inuit Association were expanding. International scientific cooperation was further developed through the creation of the first non-governmental international organization in the Arctic — the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC).

In November 1989, Canadian Prime Minister B. Mulroney made an official visit to the USSR. Despite the extensive agenda, some items focused exclusively on the Arctic. The importance of this area in relations between the two countries was underlined by the Canadian Prime Minister's visit to the Arctic and Antarctic Institute in Leningrad on November 24. B. Mulroney expressed Canada's interest in bilateral cooperation with the USSR in the region, primarily in the areas of environmental protection and climate change. A new Arctic cooperation agreement was signed<sup>28</sup>.

One of the tools used by the USSR in its foreign policy to initiate international dialogue in Northern Europe was the issue of delimiting the maritime boundaries between the USSR and the Arctic states, a matter that had remained unresolved during the Cold War. This primarily concerned demarcations in the Baltic Sea with Sweden, in the Barents Sea with Norway, in the Bering and Chukchi Seas with the USA, as well as the USSR's activities on Spitsbergen.

<sup>26</sup> AFPRF. F. 116. Invt. 73, Arch. 10, P. 117. Sh. 37-38.

<sup>27</sup> Protocol between the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Government of the Republic of Finland on cooperation on the Kola Peninsula. October 26, 1989. URL: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/international\\_contracts/international\\_contracts/2\\_contract/57999/](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/2_contract/57999/) (accessed 20 May 2025).

<sup>28</sup> USSR-Canada official visit of Prime Minister Mulroney. November 1989 // CANADA DECLASSIFIED, File № 20-CDA-9-PM-EUR. MF-7866. URL: <https://declassified.library.utoronto.ca/exhibits/show/mulroney-in-moscow--kyiv--and-/mulroney-in-moscow--kyiv-and-l> (accessed 20 May 2025).

The first steps towards resolving the issue of maritime delimitation were taken as early as January 1988 during the aforementioned visit by N.I. Ryzhkov to Sweden and Norway. During this visit, an Agreement on the Principles of Delimitation of Maritime Areas and Zones in the Baltic Sea between the Kingdom of Sweden and the USSR was signed. According to this agreement, the disputed territory between Sweden and the Soviet Union was to be divided so that 75% of the total area belonged to Sweden and 25% — to the Soviet Union<sup>29</sup>. Assessing the signing of the agreement, Swedish Prime Minister I. Karlsson called it “a product of perestroika”<sup>30</sup>. Undoubtedly, such steps by Soviet diplomacy indicated a policy of concessions in an attempt to establish interstate dialogue.

In April of the same year, another agreement was signed in Moscow with Sweden, concerning the delimitation of the continental shelf and fisheries zone of Sweden and the Soviet economic zone in the Baltic Sea<sup>31</sup>. This agreement established a line delimiting the maritime areas of Sweden and the USSR in the area of Gotland Island, which, after the collapse of the USSR, were transferred to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, on June 30, 1989, a trilateral agreement was signed between the governments of the Kingdom of Sweden, the People’s Republic of Poland, and the USSR on the common delimitation point of their maritime borders in the Baltic Sea<sup>32</sup>.

“An unconventional attempt”, as A.K. Krivorotov describes it, “to cut the Gordian knot of the territorial issue” [23, p. 70] was undertaken by the Soviet side in Norway, which N.I. Ryzhkov visited during his tour of Scandinavia from January 14 to 16, 1988. The problem of delimiting the exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf in the Barents Sea had been discussed by the parties since 1970. Ryzhkov, avoiding direct action on delimitation, proposed creating a “special zone of Soviet-Norwegian partnership” in the southern part of the Barents Sea, the shelf of which would be studied and developed by a joint venture of the two countries on a parity basis. However, this initiative was rejected by the Norwegian side due to “a sincere fear of joint management mechanisms with the USSR” [23, p. 70]. According to A.K. Krivorotov, another Soviet initiative followed in late 1988, when an unnamed high-ranking Soviet diplomat arrived in Oslo and announced the USSR’s readiness to cede to Norway the northernmost section of the disputed area, comprising 5% of its total area [23, p. 71]. Through these actions, the USSR demonstrated a willingness to make concessions, moving away from the principle of dividing maritime areas along

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<sup>29</sup> Agreement on Principles for the Delimitation of the Sea Areas in the Baltic Sea between the Kingdom of Sweden and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 13 January 1988. URL: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/bi-5121.pdf> (accessed 20 May 2025).

<sup>30</sup> Northern Europe – Cooperation and Security (1988). Film No. 9510. 2 parts. URL: <https://www.net-film.ru/film-9510/> (accessed 19 May 2025).

<sup>31</sup> Agreement on the delimitation of the continental shelf and of the Swedish fishery zone and the Soviet economic zone in the Baltic Sea (with nautical charts and protocol). Signed at Moscow on 18 April 1988. URL: <https://www.marinerregions.org/documents/volume-1557-I-27075-English.pdf> (accessed 20 May 2025).

<sup>32</sup> Agreement between the Government of the Kingdom of Sweden, the Government of the Polish People’s Republic and the Government of the USSR concerning the Common Delimitation Point of their Maritime Boundaries in the Baltic Sea, 30 June 1989. URL: <https://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIES/SWE-POL-RUS1989MB.PDF> (accessed 20 May 2025).

sectoral lines. During extensive consultations, the parties reached an agreement regarding the northern part of the "grey zone" by 1991, leaving only its southern section undemarcated [24, Zaretskaya O.V., p. 93].

Another example of the implementation of the policy of delimiting maritime spaces in the Arctic was the issue of delimitation in the Bering and Chukchi Seas, as well as in the Arctic and Pacific Oceans between the USSR and the USA. This issue was the subject of a meeting of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, represented by E.A. Shevardnadze, and US Secretary of State J. Schultz in September 1988, where the development of common approaches to resolving this problem was discussed<sup>33</sup>. The signing of the agreement between the USSR and the USA on the delimitation line of maritime spaces on June 1, 1990, became the subject of conflicting assessments both from Soviet politicians and researchers, including specialists in international law. Thus, A.N. Vylegzhanin notes that the agreement of the USSR and the USA to delimit maritime spaces along the lines of the Russo-American Convention of 1867 was consistent with general international law, but it was economically more beneficial for the USA than for the USSR<sup>34</sup>. In George Bush's letter to the US Senate for ratification of this agreement on September 26, 1990, the US President noted that "the agreement fully meets the interests of the United States"<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, its "provisional application" from June 15, 1990, until ratification by both parties also raised many questions. As V.K. Zilanov (Deputy Minister of Fisheries of the USSR in 1988) noted, "the US leadership was confident that Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, and then Yeltsin, would push the unfair Agreement... through the country's highest bodies — the Federal Assembly — and ratify it" [25]. However, this did not happen: the deputies of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and later the deputies of the RSFSR, were unable to reach a unanimous decision and ratify the agreement.

It should be noted that this Agreement did not serve the interests of the USSR. However, in the context of a comprehensive examination of the formation of foreign policy in the Arctic during the period under review, the desire to resolve all the aforementioned disputes over maritime delimitation in the Arctic primarily served as a means of achieving the goals of the "new thinking" policy, although it ran counter to the country's national interests. It is important to note that all of these disputes had a long history of resolution, often spanning decades. On the one hand, the delimitation undoubtedly had a positive effect and contributed to increased stability in the region. For example, the conclusion of the traditionally criticized Baker–Shevardnadze Agreement prevented third-party fishing and generally contributed to the regulation of fishing in the area. On the other hand, virtually all of these agreements led to territorial concessions and were economically

<sup>33</sup> AFPRF. F. 116. Invt. 73, Arch. 10, P. 117. Sh. 46.

<sup>34</sup> Vylegzhanin A.N. The 1990 Agreement between the USSR and the USA on the Maritime Delimitation Line: Different Assessments of its "Provisional Application". Expert Opinion. URL: [https://mgimo.ru/about/news/experts/124210/?utm\\_source=yandex.ru&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=yandex.ru&utm\\_referrer=yandex.ru](https://mgimo.ru/about/news/experts/124210/?utm_source=yandex.ru&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=yandex.ru&utm_referrer=yandex.ru) (accessed 17 May 2025).

<sup>35</sup> Message from the President of the United States transmitting the Agreement between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic on the maritime boundary, with annex, signed at Washington, June 1, 1990. URL: <https://marineregions.org/documents/125431.pdf> (accessed 20 May 2025).

disadvantageous for the USSR, given the potential of the ceded areas for fishing and hydrocarbon production. In this sense, it can be assumed that the signing of these agreements may have had a largely symbolic significance — a demonstration of the USSR's determination to improve relations with the West by all available means. This also includes M.S. Gorbachev's unprecedented disarmament initiatives. As M.F. Polynov notes, "the policy of ending the arms race was becoming vital for the USSR... to implement the concept of accelerating the country's socio-economic development" [26, p. 15].

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it should be noted that the concept of "new thinking" in Soviet foreign policy from 1987 to 1990 was essentially an attempt to overcome the acute geopolitical confrontation between the two superpowers. It was conditioned by both objective (external and internal) and subjective (personal) factors. These included: the USSR's inability, due to limited resources, to resist the powerful military-technical, political, economic, and ideological pressure from the United States; insufficient funds to support its spheres of influence in the world; the international community's emphasis on global human problems, the resolution of which was possible through joint efforts; the escalation of economic and social crises in the country; the ideological differentiation of the socio-political elites, among which, along with traditionalists with Marxist-Leninist views and representatives of moderate views who understood the need for reform, there were groups oriented toward liberal Western European values; the personal ideological preferences of the country's political leader, oriented toward neoliberal approaches to foreign policy.

According to the authors, it was no coincidence that Northern Europe was chosen by M.S. Gorbachev as a region for the implementation of the "new thinking" policy. The geographical proximity of the countries, the high geostrategic significance of the region, the status of the Scandinavian countries (small countries, the neutral status of Sweden and Finland), the presence of a common environmental agenda that required joint efforts, the development of conceptual provisions for the emerging Soviet image of Europe within the framework of the concept of a "common European home" — all these factors made the Northern European region optimal for demonstrating the foreign policy intentions of the USSR in the second half of the 1980s.

The "Murmansk initiatives", a regional manifestation of the "new thinking" policy, were not received equally well in the West. A dividing line was drawn both in the content of the initiatives themselves (military and non-military in nature) and in the degree to which they were received by the Arctic countries themselves, which was largely determined by their involvement in the bipolar world bloc system.

The authors positively assess the development of the "non-military" component of the "Murmansk initiatives". Archival materials attest to the successful implementation of joint activities in environmental protection and scientific research, which received institutional formalization and support at the highest level. The process of international economic partnership proceeded

somewhat more cautiously, apparently due to the challenging socio-economic situation in the USSR. However, the countries had a mutual interest: the USSR was interested in the advanced technologies of the northern countries, the latter — in the opportunity to profit from joint energy projects being implemented in the USSR's Arctic territories. Apart from the practical benefits of these initiatives, they had a significant "psychological" effect — cooperation in "non-military" spheres could foster an atmosphere of trust, laying the foundations for resolving more complex military-political issues. Undoubtedly, ties in "non-military" areas between the USSR and the Scandinavian countries and Finland had existed before, even during the height of the Cold War. However, a new multilateral level of interaction was only possible as a result of a paradigmatic shift in Soviet foreign policy. To demonstrate the seriousness of its foreign policy intentions, the USSR also used the policy of delimiting maritime spaces with Arctic countries. Apparently, in the view of the Soviet political leadership, agreements with Sweden and the United States, for example, which often did not serve the interests of the USSR, were intended to demonstrate good intentions in Soviet foreign policy.

Despite the traditionally recognized failure of some of the initiatives concerning arms limitation, reduction of naval activity, and the creation of a nuclear-free zone in Northern Europe, they nevertheless played a certain role in the development of the international situation in the region. During his visit to Finland in October 1989, M.S. Gorbachev, assessing the interim results of the implementation of the "Murmansk initiatives", presented the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty as an achievement that contributed to stability and trust in the region (tactical nuclear weapons could no longer reach the territories of northern European countries). This was complemented by a declaration on the elimination of sea-based nuclear weapons in the Baltic, as well as a unilateral reduction in the total number of troops in the European part of the USSR [14, p. 11]. The opinion that the disarmament rhetoric of the Soviet leadership could also be used as an instrument of political détente is not without foundation.

Thus, the regional dimension of the USSR's new foreign policy in the Arctic region was formalized in specific policy decisions only in the autumn of 1987. Two of Mikhail Gorbachev's six "Murmansk initiatives" envisaged the development of cooperation among the region's states in the fields of Arctic scientific research and environmental protection. Compared to other initiatives concerning the complex processes of changing the Arctic security, these two reflected the already-underway process of establishing a mechanism for multilateral scientific cooperation in the Arctic region, which had begun in 1986 with the preparatory stage of the creation of the IASC. During this period, a multi-level framework for international cooperation began to take shape, which was further developed with the signing of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (1991), the establishment of the BEAR Council (1993), and, finally, the Arctic Council (1996) — the leading inter-governmental forum in the region. All of this contributed to the broad development of international cooperation in the Arctic, involving not only states, but also subnational regions and non-state actors in international relations. For almost three decades, the Arctic has been associated in

the public and political consciousness with a region of dialogue and cooperation. At the same time, it is obvious that during these years, the country's leadership has often acted to the detriment of its national interests, making unilateral concessions in the name of reaching consensus. The belief that Western countries were sincerely striving to create a truly democratic Russian state and were not pursuing their own national interests prevented the early signs of a different attitude toward Russia from being recognized in a timely manner, which was clearly expressed in the Western countries' reluctance to jointly address the problems of ensuring military security in the region. The emphasis in international cooperation on issues of the environment, culture, and the democratization of Russia and its regions indicated that mechanisms of "soft influence" on Russia had been set in motion, a fact that only became apparent decades later.

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