

The Uprooted Village at the Edge of Bering Strait: Cold War Security, Soviet Militarization and Human Settlement Disruption in Indigenous Naukan

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Abstract:

Cold War era redefined a number of distant border regions as zones of strategic sensitivity in which considerations of national security often override local considerations. This paper seeks to evaluate Naukan, a coastal settlement situated in a regional proximal to the Bering Strait which was historically inhabited by a population of Siberian Yupik people, was subject to a policy of forced relocation by the Soviet authorities in the mid-twentieth century. This study elucidates the broader implications of large-scale security considerations by examining their impact on human settlement patterns. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology to evaluate the implications of human settlement by drawing on secondary literature, archival narratives, and anthropological interpretations to evaluate the socio-spatial implications of forced relocation in Naukan. This study concludes that forced relocation was not just a process, it is an event with significant impacts on culture, economic practices, and identity among the displaced population. In a broader sense, it suggests that militarized frontiers are not just zones of geopolitical sensitivity but also places that have significant human implications. In this regard, this study recognizes the human implications were highly embedded in Cold War security considerations.

Keywords: Border Studies, Cold War, Indigenous Displacement, Militarization, Naukan, Soviet Arctic

1. Introduction

In the geopolitical history of the Arctic region, the experience of small settlements are often overshadowed by large scale political decisions. One such important but relatively less discussed experience is that of the ancient Eskimo settlement of Naukan, which is situated on the northeastern far coastal part of Eurasia. This settlement is situated in a strategic position, from where there is a clear view to North America, with Alaska on the opposite side of the water. The Yupik people have traditionally inhabited this far corner of the world, living in a difficult but beautiful environment, surrounded by a culture unlike anywhere else. However, in the mid-20th century, there were rapid changes in world politics, and these had a major impact on the region around Naukan.

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The post-World War II world saw a division between opposing ideologies of Soviet Union and United States, which was historically called the Cold War. This meant a clash of ideologies, a build-up of military forces, and a concern with security issues dominating all foreign policy. Under these circumstances, the Soviet Union started to view the people living in its eastern border area as a potential security risk. It was in this environment that a decision was taken to militarize the coastal region bordering the Bering Strait, which had direct lifestyle threats for the people living in the village of Naukan.

In 1950s, the Soviet administration decided to relocate the village of Naukan for security reasons. The local people were relocated from their ancestral habitats to remote settlements. However, this relocation of the Yupik people was not only a geographical relocation but also it marked the beginning of cultural isolation, the complete breakdown of Yupik society, and a cultural identity crisis emerged within them. A lifestyle that was once centered on the idea of living in harmony with nature was torn apart by administrative decisions. A complex yet contemporary reality of conflict emerged between the security of people, cultural rights, and security policy of state, which can be regarded as an essential analysis in the study of international geopolitics.

The question of security and militarization is usually understood for the state's border security and strategic interests. However, the example of Naukan shows us how the enforcement of such policies can have negative consequences for the human rights, culture, and social stability of a indigenous population. We can tell this as, there is a dualism of security. On the one hand, there is the security of the state, while on the other hand, there is human security. Thus, the example of Naukan is not just an ordinary history of a region; it is symbolic in the context of the human consequences of larger state decisions.

This paper uses Naukan as an example to explore the question of connection between Cold War time militarization and human displacement. Especially, the discussion of this topic is based on the question of how geopolitical rivalry has changed the existence of a small indigenous community and what consequences this has had on the culture of that particular region in the long term. The question of the conflict between state security and human security is also analyzed in the context of international relations theory. Thus, the article is based on the idea that militarization in border regions is not just a question of security policy but is also closely related to humanitarian issues.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly research about Arctic border areas and indigenous communities has grown to show how geopolitical factors affect how people live in these regions. The study of Soviet Arctic governance demonstrates how northern territories served as vital assets during the 20th century because they played a critical role in the ideological and military conflict between rival global powers. The combination of administrative changes and national security requirements and territorial control efforts in remote areas during the early Cold War period serves as the foundation for historians and political geographers to study Soviet administrative changes (Josephson, 2014; Grant, 2010). Indigenous population relocation programs operated as components of state-led initiatives which aimed to establish control over remote frontier areas

according to this framework (Fondahl, 1998).

Research studies about the native peoples from Russian Far East reveal important cultural and social effects that result from their forced relocation. The research studies about Siberian Yupik groups show that their forced relocation destroyed their ability to make a living and their family ties, which resulted in permanent name identity problems for the affected groups (Krupnik & Chlenov, 2013; Vakhtin, 1992). The researchers explain that the process of relocation created more than just population movements because it resulted in the permanent disappearance of vital cultural areas where indigenous people stored their knowledge about local environmental features. When people lose access to their traditional land, they face financial hardship and emotional distress, which makes it difficult for them to adjust to their new home (Schweitzer & Golovko, 1995).

The Cold War frontiers research demonstrates that geopolitical studies show increased sensitivity about regions which lie close to opposing ideological powers. Security assessments of border areas determined that military officials viewed civilian settlements as both security threats and military assets. The research on militarized borders shows that government agencies-built security systems and combat preparedness facilities to protect border areas while ignoring the needs of local populations especially in secluded border zones (Weiner, 1996; Woodward, 2004). Global power relations used remote villages as components of their strategic plans even though local residents had no control over political matters that would determine their future.

The existing research on Soviet relocation policies and indigenous adaptation and Cold War border dynamics has established important findings but researchers have yet to create a comprehensive study that links these three subjects through a particular localized research examination. This study of Naukan settlements shows how international conflicts and border control and human displacement created their unique territorial challenges and demonstrates how security concerns affect the human settlement patterns in remote areas by connecting local experiences to global geopolitical trends.

3. Research Methodology

This paper undertook a qualitative research method to examine the influence of security concerns on the displacement of people from the far eastern Soviet settlement of Naukan in the era of Cold War. Use of a qualitative research method was appropriate in this study because it allowed the study of a single geographical location of immense importance due to its proximity to Alaska, located on the other side of the Bering Strait. This study was likely to provide a link between the broader security concerns of the region and the realities of the people living in the region. The research of this study has been conducted mainly through secondary sources of information, such as academic works, historical data, geographical information, and works of analysts. This study has been conducted from a geographical point of view, using concepts of political geography and human security. Information has been analyzed from different sources to derive a pattern of the influence of militarization, displacement, and disruption of the socio-cultural fabric of the people.

4. Geographic and Historical Background

The Arctic village of Naukan was situated on the Chukchi Peninsula beside the Bering Strait, at the extreme northeastern part of the Eurasian continent. Its geographical location was unique, situated just a short distance across the water from Alaska, making it one of the closest inhabited places between the Soviet Union and the United States during the twentieth century. Its geographical location was characterized by extreme weather conditions, long winters, strong sea winds, and scarce vegetation. Despite the extreme conditions, the indigenous Yupik people had successfully managed to adapt to the environment of that region, establishing unique patterns related to marine life, including whales, seals, and fish. The coastal environment was not just a place to reside but also a cultural environment deeply related to the people, their lives and their livelihood strategies.

The village was inhabited mainly by the Siberian Yupik people, whose social, linguistic, and economic patterns were all related to the geographical location, emphasizing their relationship with the environment, whether on land or at sea. They developed their lives around the natural environment, including the seasons, cooperation, and love towards nature. Unlike other industrial settlements, which were developed according to the Soviet Union's plans, the village developed over time, becoming familiar with the geographical environment, the people, their culture, and their way of life. During the early years of USSR, the government sought to extend its administration to the remote regions, including the extreme northeastern part of the Eurasian continent, integrating the indigenous people into the broader Soviet economy.

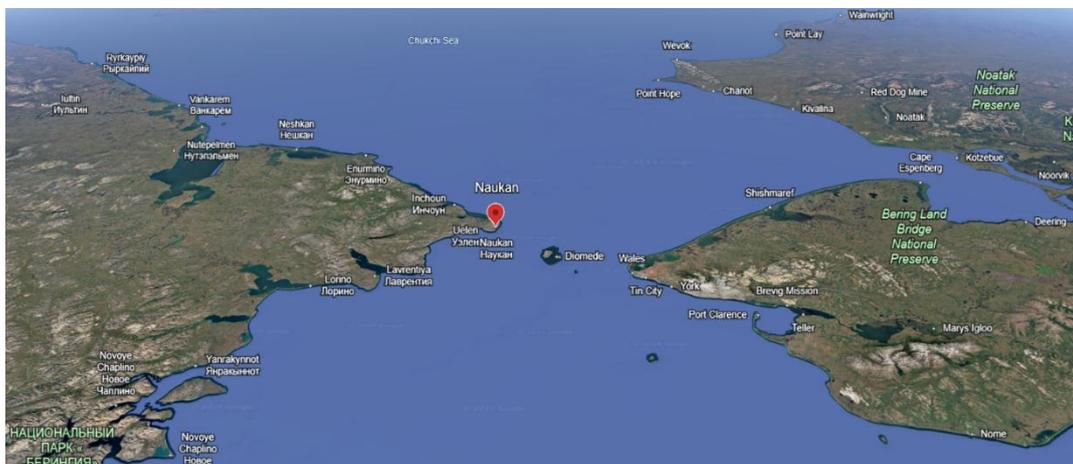


Figure 1: Location of Naukan on the Chukotka Peninsula, Russian Federation, near the Bering Strait

Strategic value of that region was heightened in the post-World War II era, as ideological tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States started to escalate. The Bering Strait was not only a physical divide between countries but also a metaphorical boundary between two highly conflicting ideologies. In such a situation, settlements close to international borders began to be viewed from a security perspective. Presence of civilians in such areas was both a strength and a weakness, especially in areas where surveillance and defense arrangements were lacking. As a result, settlements such as Naukan started to receive more attention from their governments, although they had very little to do with geopolitical conflicts.

In the mid-twentieth century, a significant change in Soviet policies came regarding settlements

in remote areas. The idea was to relocate smaller settlements to larger settlements to improve access of resources such as education, healthcare, and transportation. There was also a strategic aspect to such policies, especially in areas close to borders. In 1958, decision was made to evacuate the entire population from Naukan and relocate it to other settlements in Chukotka. Official reasons cited included economic rationalization and modernization objectives. However, there was a significant geopolitical factor in play as well. Cold War was ongoing at that time. So, the removal of the population from Naukan effectively made it a restricted region.

That relocation was not just a geographical change. It had significant implications for the indigenous people of that region as well. Removal from their ancestral lands was a significant change for indigenous people. Environmental knowledge that had been built over time could not be easily transferred to a new location. In addition, there was also a risk of culture that was linked to a particular geographical area. This makes the history of Naukan not just a simple change of settlement but also a broader socio-cultural issue as it relates to human geography.

5. Cold War Militarization and Border Security

The geopolitical environment of the mid-twentieth century significantly influenced state perceptions of the distant frontier areas of the country, especially those bordered by the lands of ideological rivals. During the Cold War period, state borders came to be seen not only as geographical lines but also as zones of strategic vulnerability that had to be protected. The Arctic frontier gained special importance in terms of military considerations owing to developments in aviation and missile technologies that minimized the distances between rival nations. In such an environment of international politics, the area bordering the Bering Strait came to be regarded as an important geopolitical area that linked the Soviet Far East with North America. The presence of human settlements in the area, such as that in Naukan, came to be regarded as an extension of broader strategic considerations that went beyond the local importance of the area.

Security concerns of the Soviet Union during the period emphasized surveillance, territorial control, and the prevention of unauthorized interaction between people across international borders. The security forces of the country were especially concerned about the presence of civilian populations living in areas bordering international borders because of the possibility of interaction between people across borders. Despite the fact that the indigenous population of the region had traditionally maintained cultural links across the Bering Strait, the security concerns of the period transformed such interactions into security considerations. The presence of a permanent human settlement in the area adjacent to Alaska came to be regarded from the perspective of military considerations, in which the geopolitical location of the area in the context of the Soviet Union created security concerns about the possibility of espionage or infiltration by an adversary nation.

Militarization of the border regions meant that there was an expansion of defense infrastructure and an increase in administrative control. The distant coastal areas gained importance in terms of early warning systems, patrols, and the monitoring of sea lanes. Even in areas where there was no immediate development of large-scale military infrastructure, the strategic importance of the area could have an impact on policy decisions related to civilians. Smaller settlements

were often considered logistically inefficient and difficult to defend, which strengthened the arguments in favor of consolidating populations in larger centers. This type of reasoning was in line with the broader Soviet ideals of modernization that emphasized the importance of centralized service provision and rationalization of the economy, while security considerations remained an underlying factor in policy decisions related to border regions.

Therefore, the 1958 evacuation of the Naukan settlement has to be understood in the context of broader geopolitical considerations. While the stated reasons for the evacuation were related to the development of the region and considerations of administrative efficiency, the broader geopolitical context of suspicion and rivalry in the international arena was an underlying factor in the policy decisions that were made. The evacuation of the settlement meant that there was less human presence in an extremely sensitive border region, which allowed for better control of the region. This was an example of how the militarization of the Cold War period was not limited to the military sphere alone but had an impact on the human geography of the regions that were under consideration.

6. Forced Relocation and Human Displacement

1958 relocation of the Naukan people has had lasting and significant impacts on the indigenous people of the region. The people had, over the centuries, developed complex and intricate relationships with the region, with hunting, fishing, and seasonal migration forming an integral part of their culture and economic lives. The relocation policy, though touted as a measure of modernization and economic rationalization, brought about a sudden and complete change in the traditional ways of the people. The relocation of the people hundreds of kilometers away from their traditional lands, in many cases to centralized and alien environments, brought about a complete disconnection from their traditional ways and culture. The relocation, in addition to the loss of traditional lands, also brought about the loss of connection with sacred sites, fishing spots, and burial sites of spiritual importance to the people. The relocation was further compounded by the physical and psychological trauma experienced by the people as they struggled to cope with the new environments, housing, and climate in the relocation sites.

The relocation brought about the fragmentation of the traditional social structure of the people, who had developed a culture of collective decision-making and traditional ways of livelihood. The relocation had a more serious impact on the younger and older people in the community, with the former struggling to maintain their identity and the latter struggling to maintain their traditional culture. The relocation of the Naukan people can be used to exemplify the relocation of indigenous people in the border regions of the Cold War, in which the interests and needs of the state took precedence over the human element. That forced relocation of the villagers can be seen as an example of the militarization and governance strategies that are being employed by the state and the effects that these strategies have on the culture, social organization, and identity of the individuals within the population. It is important to consider the human aspect of relocation in relation to the Cold War and its effects on the inhabitants of the region.

7. Discussion and Analysis

The Naukan example is one that shows the complex relationship between geopolitics, military strategies, and human geography in the context of the Cold War era. The evacuation of the

Naukan village by the Soviet government is generally perceived as a strategy to secure the borders that were close to Alaska; however, the implications of the evacuation are not limited to the military goals that were intended to be achieved. From the geopolitical point of view, the area around the Bering Strait was characterized by heightened tensions. The Naukan village, because of its proximity to Alaska, represented a point of possible weakness in terms of the Soviet strategic intentions. In order to maintain dominance in this area, the Soviet military command attempted to reduce the local human presence in the area, because of the sensitivities associated with surveillance and control in this area that was so strategically prominent.

From a social and cultural standpoint, the relocation of the Naukan people demonstrates the high human toll associated with strategic policymaking and the far-reaching effects on the social fabric of the relocated people. The relocation of the Naukan people to new and unfamiliar environments, often without the necessary resources and social networks, has had a lasting impact on the social fabric of the relocated people. The relocation has also had a lasting impact on the traditional ways of life and the identity of the relocated people, thus creating a new chapter in the history of social fragmentation in the region. The relocation of the Naukan people is, in this respect, an extension of the wider social and cultural phenomenon in the region, in which the Indigenous people in the frontier region became the focal point of the strategic policymaking of the states in the region.

By examining the strategic and human dimensions of the relocation, it becomes apparent that the relocation of the Naukan people is more than a footnote in the history of the region. The relocation has had a lasting impact on the region, thus creating a new chapter in the history of the region and the relationship between the people and the land.

8. Conclusion

Forced relocation of Naukan village during the Cold War is a prime example of the considerable impact that geopolitical considerations have on indigenous peoples living in isolated environments in the Arctic region. Despite Soviet intentions to improve administrative efficiency and facilitate economic rationalization by forcibly relocating the population of Naukan village, geopolitical considerations such as the village's proximity to Alaska played a significant role in such a decision. The forced relocation also disrupted long-standing traditions and ways of living for indigenous peoples by disconnecting them from their ancestral lands and sacred sites. In addition to disrupting long-standing traditions and ways of living for indigenous peoples, the forced relocation of Naukan village also provides a unique example of the relationship between militarization, border security, and human geography. An analysis of such a case provides valuable insights into the human cost of Cold War policies and the significance of incorporating geopolitical and social approaches to studying forced relocations in frontier regions.

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