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## Securing the North: NATO's Response to Russian and Chinese Arctic Ambitions

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### Adapt Long Read



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# SECURING THE NORTH: NATO'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN AND CHINESE ARCTIC AMBITIONS

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## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Due to a confluence of climate change impacts and conflicts affecting political relations, economic engagement, and military security, the Arctic region is undergoing a transformation from an arena of international cooperation to one of intense power competition.
- The bipolar nature of this shift is progressively deepening, with two factions emerging: one represented by Russia and its ally China and the other comprising NATO Arctic members.
- Russia's objective is to solidify its standing as an Arctic power, establishing a robust footing to emerge as a key player in Arctic energy while concurrently building an effective deterrent. The Arctic and sub-Arctic territories serve as deployment sites for military capabilities, using Arctic coastal areas as strategic defence bastions and deterrence lines.
- Tensions between Russia and the Arctic NATO members have escalated since 2022. With Sweden's ratification to join the alliance, Russia will be the sole Arctic state outside of NATO structures.
- Furthermore, the conflict in Ukraine has underscored Russia's bolstered ties with its Eastern partners, notably China. The latter has displayed ambitions to expand its economic and military presence in the region.
- Several Arctic states, including the U.S., continue to lag in their presence within the region. There remains inadequate cooperation concerning military training, deployment of capabilities, and sharing knowledge about the military presence in Arctic conditions, potentially exposing vulnerabilities.
- Another shortcoming is the low level of dialogue among Arctic states following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has rendered the Arctic Council (AC), the sole platform for intergovernmental cooperation in the region, dysfunctional. The establishment of a functional platform is strongly recommended, either within the structures of the AC or as a new institution. It is also important to have a broader reflection on Russian power ambitions in the region. However, this cannot be done within the scope of the AC due to its non-military nature.

- Finally, it is recommended that NATO Arctic states promote cooperation in sharing experiences and knowledge regarding hybrid warfare, which is increasingly prevalent in the region. This aspect is essential for enhancing resilience, preparedness for hybrid incidents, and the capability to respond effectively.

## INTRODUCTION

Current trends in Arctic ice melt carry profound implications not only for the planet's climate but also for the stability and security of the region. There are increasingly acute security challenges associated with environmental degradation, the problematic provision of environmental or food security, as well as cultural and social issues in the Arctic. The region's growing geopolitical importance primarily stems from potentially positive economic or geopolitical effects: the utilisation of northern sea routes and the estimated rich deposits of oil, natural gas, metals, or rare earths. As the Arctic remains vulnerable to strategic tensions spilling over from other parts of the world, it reflects the tensions between China, the U.S., and the Russian Federation. A pivotal period in contemplating security in the region was the Cold War, during which security analysts and policymakers highlighted the significant rise in tensions between the rival powers. Arctic security during the Cold War was contingent upon a delicate balance of power derived from the threat of using the nuclear arsenals of the rival powers—the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Presently, tensions reminiscent of the Cold War era are resurfacing, particularly as the Russian Federation's position strengthens and the region becomes increasingly militarised. Russia perceives the U.S. and NATO, in particular, as obstacles to fulfilling its ambitions in the Arctic. Furthermore, the conflict in Ukraine has introduced a new dimension to the conflictual relations among Arctic states, leading to a transformation of the European security architecture. This conflict has also shifted the perception and assessment of risks for building resilience and selecting appropriate security and foreign policy doctrines for the Arctic states. This text will focus on mapping Russian power ambitions in the Arctic region, summarising the engagement dimensions, and highlighting the potentially conflicting relations between Russia and NATO.

## ARCTIC: A FIELD OF A POWER RIVALRY

One of the most significant consequences of global warming is the melting of the ice sheets, a phenomenon particularly pronounced in the Arctic region. Although summer melting is a natural process, according to the National Snow

and Ice Data Centre, the current ice coverage over the Arctic Ocean has reached a record low. Measurements indicate that the ice remaining during the summer melt season has decreased by 13% per decade compared to the 1981-2010 average (Lindsey and Scott 2022). This thawing of the Arctic makes maritime routes more accessible during summer, a trend observed in the increased presence of various actors, primarily the Russian Federation, the U.S., and China.

For China, developing access to the Arctic region has been a matter of diplomatic, economic, and security necessity for the past two decades. Presently, China is formulating a proactive and sophisticated Arctic policy, emphasising its efforts to gain economic benefits. This is evident in the involvement of Chinese companies in lucrative infrastructure or research projects in the Arctic under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), such as the construction of Greenland airports, a polar railway line in Finland, rare earth mining, and more (The Economist 2018). Additionally, China is taking diplomatic steps towards the Arctic, securing observer state status in the Arctic Council (AC) and referring to itself as a "near-Arctic nation" (The Economist 2018). The Arctic was declared an area of interest in China's 2011 Five-Year Plan, with President Xi Jinping expressing China's intention to become an Arctic power in 2014. Subsequently, China expanded its Arctic policy, allocating funds to icebreaker construction, research activities, and exploration of energy resources. In 2017, China announced the inclusion of the Polar Silk Road in the BRI (Husenícová et al. 2019). China's current Arctic policy focuses on securing access to trade and commercial opportunities in the region and enhancing its capacity to assert claims, including military capabilities (Havnes and Seland 2019).

The U.S. perception of the Arctic underwent a transformation in 2013 when China became an observer state of the AC and later emphasised the Arctic as a component of the BRI. Cooperation with partners and allies gained prominence after Joe Biden assumed office in 2021. The challenges posed by China and Russia were addressed in the Navy Arctic Blueprint and the overarching Army Arctic Strategy documents released in 2021. The rhetoric used referred to the Arctic as "an arena of competition, a line of attack in conflict, a vital area holding many of the nation's natural resources, and a platform for global power projection" (Department of the Army 2021). These documents indicated the commitment of the U.S. Army to defend the nation's interests in the Arctic region, including deploying a Multi-Domain Task Force-enabled division and adjusting Alaskan-based brigade combat teams to reassert the U.S. Army's dominance in the Arctic (Department of the Army 2021).

The current U.S. approach to the Arctic is delineated in the latest National Strategy for the Arctic Region, unveiled in October 2022 in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is structured around four pillars: 1. Security, 2. climate change and environmental protection, 3. sustainable economic development, and 4. international cooperation and governance (The White House 2022). Effectively implementing this strategy could be reinforced by investing in the maintenance of facilities (such as infrastructure maintenance and modernisation), building and sustaining icebreakers, maintaining ongoing collaboration with Arctic NATO members, and re-engaging the Russian Federation in AC activities to ensure compliance with international law (Greenwood 2023, 5-6). A March 2022 Congressional Research Service report underscored the implications of climate change and highlighted the shift from a cooperative international model to geopolitical competition involving China, the U.S., and Russia (Congressional Research Service, 2023). The imperative need to redefine relations among these nations is increasingly apparent. According to a National Intelligence Estimate by the National Intelligence Council released in October 2021, the repercussions of climate change are expected to exacerbate cross-border geopolitical tensions as states take measures to safeguard their interests. Both Arctic and non-Arctic states are highly likely to intensify their competitive activities (Congressional Research Service 2023, 26).

## **RUSSIA AS A TRADITIONAL ARCTIC POWER**

Russia has historically maintained a robust stance in the Arctic, labelling it a zone of cooperation and peace since the 1980s. This approach centred on establishing a nuclear-free zone in Northern Europe, restricting military activities in the Baltic, North, Norwegian, and Greenland Seas, and facilitating access to the Northern Sea Route for foreign vessels (Paul and Swistek 2022, 15). Nevertheless, this strategy eventually hindered Russia's expanding ambitions, particularly as its Arctic territories gained significant military and strategic significance. Russia's pursuit of Arctic dominance is founded on three primary pillars:

- It has the largest share of population, coastline, and territory among the Arctic states. Therefore, the Arctic functions as the basis for Russia's claims to be a great power;
- Russia's economic model relies primarily on fossil resources, which it draws mainly from Arctic territories, and thus has the potential to be an energy power;
- Arctic and sub-Arctic territories serve militarily as a strategic bastion for deterrence and defence (Paul and Swistek 2022, 15).

Developing economic engagement in the Arctic and securing economic growth aligns with the political objectives of the current Russian President, Vladimir Putin, who in 2007 articulated a vision aimed at restoring Russia's global power status. Broadly, Russia outlines three primary objectives that accompany its military presence in the Arctic: bolstering defence, ensuring economic growth, and establishing a base for projecting power (Conley, Melino, and Alterman 2020). However, the exploitation of the geostrategic potential of the Arctic had long been a priority for Soviet leaders. Thus, we can now speak of a Soviet "renaissance" of Russia's Arctic strategy. Since 2011, Russia has demonstrated a trend towards militarizing the region by establishing military bases, renovating airports and radar stations, and upgrading its naval nuclear capabilities (Klimenko 2019, 9). The establishment of the Joint Strategic Command North in December 2014 consolidated various military arms and branches under a unified command. According to Ekaterina Klimenko, its creation "indicates the re-emergence of the Northern Strategic Bastion Defense concept, aimed at defending Russia's nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines stationed with the Northern Fleet and ensuring their access to the North Atlantic" (Klimenko 2019, 9).

Russia's military capabilities are distributed across the eastern, central, and western sectors of its Arctic territory. In the eastern sector, the focus is on regulating the passage of international ships through the Bering Strait, a key gateway to the Northern Sea Route. Russia emphasises the need to enhance situational awareness in both air and maritime domains, leading to the construction and renovation of airports and radar stations to improve vessel and aircraft detection and tracking abilities (Conley, Melino, and Alterman 2020). The Eastern Wing aims to reinforce both military presence and control over shipping and the utilisation of the Northern Sea Route. The Central Arctic Region comprises air and sea defence installations. For instance, in areas like the Kotelný Islands and Novaya Zemlya, Russia deploys Bastion-P and Pancir-S1 defensive missile systems to fortify coastal defences. Finally, the western region of Russian Siberia houses sophisticated defensive and potentially offensive capabilities to strengthen the state's multi-layered naval and air forces. In this western flank, the primary objective is to safeguard the nuclear arsenal and second-strike capabilities commanded by the Northern Fleet based in Severomorsk on Kola Island (Conley, Melino, and Alterman 2020).



Fig. 1: Deployment of Russian military capabilities in the Arctic. (Wall and Wegge 2023)

## REVIVING THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST

Russia sees U.S. and NATO activity as an obstacle to the fulfilment of its ambitions in the Arctic, partly reviving Cold War-era tensions. Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky and Paul Stronski argue that Russia's position in the Arctic region is integral to its confrontation with the West and that this is based mainly on the strengthening of nuclear capabilities as a deterrent (Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski 2021). According to the authors, Russia has three elementary military objectives in the Arctic:

- Ensuring the second-strike capability of its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines in a conflict with NATO – 7 of Russia's 11 submarines are concentrated on the Kola Peninsula to the west;
- Protesting the ability to operate in the North Atlantic and European parts of the Arctic in the event of conflict with NATO – the Northern Fleet has direct access to the Barents Sea, the Norwegian Sea and the Atlantic Ocean;
- Military protection of Russia's growing economic development, investment, and commercial interests – by strengthening response tools in the event of accidents at sea and nuclear and environmental disasters (Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski 2021).



Russia emphasises air and maritime early warning, defence, strategic and tactical mobility in the Arctic. The guarantor of Russia's security in the Arctic is the Northern Fleet, which was established in 2014. In addition to protecting capabilities on the Kola Peninsula and monitoring the Northern Sea Route, the Northern Fleet is tasked with maintaining Russian forces' access to the Arctic Ocean, the North Atlantic, and the GIUK strategic gap (this is the line Greenland, Iceland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to Norway; see map above) (Conley, Melino, and Alterman 2020). The importance of the Northern Fleet was reinforced in Russia's updated maritime strategy of July 2017, which described the threats to Russian security in the Arctic as resulting from the involvement of the U.S. and its allies. The strategy underlined the importance of controlling sea lines of communication, defending maritime borders, strengthening command and control systems, increasing overall defence capabilities through conventional and nuclear weapons, and defending Russian territories with advanced high-precision weaponry in all spheres of naval warfare (Gorenburg 2017).

According to experts, military threat scenarios can take place within two types of escalation. One is the so-called horizontal escalation, whereby a conflict that arises beyond the Arctic spreads to the region through military geographical expansion, geopolitical spillover, and the deployment of capabilities already situated in the area. Vertical escalation represents an extension of an existing conflict that may not be purely military in nature—for example (e.g., a territorial conflict or a dispute over natural resources) escalates militarily (Paul and Swistek 2022, 16). Given the apparent trend towards militarisation of the region, both scenarios are becoming much more valid.

## THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TENSIONS IN THE ARCTIC

Since 2022, tensions between Russia and Arctic states that were not previously part of NATO, such as Finland and Sweden, have escalated. Eventually, Russia's capability to deploy military systems in the Arctic might diminish due to sanctions and export controls (Wall and Wegge 2023). It's noteworthy that Russia has long endeavoured to strengthen relations with its eastern partners, a strategy that proved pragmatic after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. As early as 2018, soldiers from China and Mongolia, the first states outside the former Soviet territories, participated in the extensive Vostok-18 military exercises. The subsequent Vostok-22 exercises conducted in September 2022 did not surpass their predecessors in terms of troop numbers and equipment involved due to

some of these resources being deployed in Ukraine. However, they were remarkable for the participating or observing states—this time, not only China but also India, Mongolia, Algeria, Syria, and Laos were involved (Shidore 2022). The Sino-Russian partnership was underscored by a joint declaration of a "borderless" partnership just before the invasion of Ukraine. This security partnership was reinforced through joint military exercises, the sale of Russian weapons systems to China, and cooperation on defence equipment development. Additionally, since 2018, exercises in eastern Russia no longer simulated attacks on China (Shidore 2022).

The war in Ukraine has reshaped the European security framework and altered the perception and assessment of risks for establishing resilience, security, and foreign policy doctrines in Arctic states. Another consequence of the Ukrainian conflict is a notable shift in the perception of Russia, resulting in reduced trust in its rational behaviour within the international environment. Colin Wall and Njord Wegge delineate the most pressing security challenges as follows:

- The AC, as the main platform for intergovernmental cooperation in the region, became dysfunctional after seven of its members (all Arctic states except Russia) suspended participation in official negotiations; the situation lasted until 2023 when Norway took over the chairmanship;
- Finland has become a member of NATO; once the application is ratified for Sweden, Russia will remain the only state apart from the alliance. This may result in even greater tensions. Also, the admission of Sweden into NATO will bring Russia's military capabilities closer to the Alliance's other borders (for example, the Northern Fleet's submarine base in Gadzhiyev is about 40 km away from the Norwegian state border);
- The frequency of Russia's use of hybrid instruments against other Arctic states is continuously increasing;
- New security documents, notably the U.S. *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* of October 2022, state that the war in Ukraine has increased geopolitical tensions in the Arctic and created a new risk of potential conflict (Wall and Wegge 2023).

## CONCLUSION

The current conflict potential in the Arctic stems from various factors, including persistent territorial disputes, increasing militarisation, and the dysfunctionality of the AC. The pursuit of Russian interests in defence, energy, and power projection is becoming increasingly apparent. The Arctic serves as a

battleground for maintaining and intensifying a covert confrontation with Western powers. Russia's ambition to reclaim aspects of its Soviet-era dominance is evident. The text argues that Russia's heightened involvement in its Arctic territories signifies a strategically significant area for the state and validates its pursuit of great power status.

To de-escalate tensions in the Arctic region, it is imperative to re-establish dialogue with Russia. While the AC has historically provided a platform for cooperation on environmental and societal issues, the foundational Ottawa Declaration of 1996 expressly excluded military security matters (although it did allow space for diplomatic negotiations and dispute resolution). However, considering the region's militarisation, a new platform addressing military concerns may now be necessary. The functionality of the AC today is limited, and its future remains uncertain. On the one hand, revitalising the platform could alleviate tensions in the region, but this cooperation might also mask problematic relations among the involved parties. Sharing information and experiences regarding hybrid operations and incidents could be a positive step toward fostering more coordinated responses among NATO Arctic members.

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