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Worlds Collide: Diverging Interests, Provocations, Conflicts, and Challenges in the High North

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Worlds Collide: Diverging Interests, Provocations, Conflicts, and Challenges in the High North

There is little doubt now that the era of 'High North, Low Tension' has melted away, yielding instead a complex region with an emerging new security environment. The recent accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO has further altered the security dynamics along NATO's Northern Flank. NATO's center of gravity has shifted northward as the Alliance seeks to recommit to deterrence – and defense – amidst Russia's war in Ukraine. Deterring adversaries in the arduous conditions of the High North demands a thoughtful approach that must integrate carefully balanced defense policy, strategic planning, and operational capabilities suited to the unique challenges of the region. Though security has catapulted to the forefront of regional concerns, it must be examined through a comprehensive lens.

Indeed, the pan-Arctic region is at the intersection of climate, economic, human, geopolitical, and military security trends. These trends are at times in conflict, and complicate the security situation as national, geopolitical, economic, and environmental interests converge – and diverge. This paper will seek to explore the region's unique characteristics and highlight the increasing strategic competition for and militarization of a region largely insulated from past conflicts. The Arctic, however, has never been immune to conflict and we should apply lessons of the past to prepare for and prevent conflict in the future. The region's strategic location and resources will continue to attract global interest – and we must now enact appropriate defense policies in order to ensure a future of peace and stability.

Arctic Interests Abound

While indigenous communities have inhabited the Arctic region for thousands of years, the extreme weather conditions and geographic remoteness generally relegated the region to the margins of global interest. Local and indigenous communities have long prioritized preservation of the environment and sustainable economic development in order to sustain their traditions and communities. While explorers had long sought a suitable maritime route as a transpolar bridge connecting the economic centers of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, activity in the Arctic was generally limited due to the vast distances, extreme cold, inhospitable conditions, and poor infrastructure.

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Yet the discovery of vast natural resources that include rare earth elements, oil, and natural gas potentially worth more than a trillion US dollars, has sparked international interest. Corporations and national governments alike are weighing investment strategies in the region, where warming trends are beginning to serve as key enablers for regional economic activity. With the Arctic warming at least at twice the rate of the global average (and possibly four times faster), climate security is converging with human security to demand investment into infrastructure challenges such as permafrost thaw and coastal erosion that permeate the region.[1] Communities in the North have long faced challenges with adequate medical care, education, nutrition, transportation, and employment. National governments now must add climate-driven issues to the already costly list of human security challenges faced by regional populations.

Strategic competition is further upending the region, as it converges with the unprecedented rate of climate change, economic development, and Russian belligerence. While long considered a strategic space during the Cold War – the shortest flight path of a strategic bomber or intercontinental missile being over the North Pole – the region largely remained the focus of early warning and missile defense systems, though there was no shortage of activity below the ice-covered waters as submarines lurked beneath. Focus on the region as the most likely vector of an airborne attack diminished following the collapse of the Soviet Union. While homeland defense remained an important mission, the intensity of focus given to the northern horizon by national governments ceded to areas considered to be of greater strategic importance.

The security environment has drastically shifted from the decades of low tension that followed Gorbachev's 'Zone of Peace' speech in Murmansk in 1987.[2] The venerable cooperative mechanisms which enabled peace and stability for decades are functioning at a vastly diminished capacity following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. An emerging Sino-Russian cooperation in the Russian Arctic has tremendous implications for the pan-Arctic region. Two decades after opening its Yellow River research station on Svalbard, China has invested heavily in the Arctic. Russia has looked to China to fill the Western investment and technology gap in order to continue developing its northern resources. Last August, nearly a dozen Russian and Chinese warships conducted drills near Alaska.[3] The evolving Arctic security environment demands a renewed look at the regional security architecture and investments in order to defend national interests.

Arctic Provocations, Conflicts, and Challenges

The war in Ukraine has served as a poignant reminder that conflict remains possible despite decades of cooperation. In addition to upending cooperation in the region, the war has served as an impetus to reshape the security architecture. The accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO redefines the Alliance's Northern Flank in a way unimaginable even during the Cold War. With the 1,340 km (833 miles) Finnish-Russian border, new geographic challenges have been added to Russia's security dilemma. Indeed, Severomorsk naval base, home of Russia's formidable Northern Fleet, is barely 185 km (115 miles) from Finland. Other ground force bases are even closer to the border,

1 Rantanen et al. 2022.
2 Exner-Pirot 2016.
3 Syler/Martinez 2023.

although most have already been decimated with the loss of troops and equipment sent to fight in Ukraine.[4] Whereas the Soviet Union enjoyed a buffer zone with neutral Sweden and Finland, today's Russian Federation must accept the new reality of NATO next door.

It is of little wonder, then, that Russia engaged in such saber-rattling to thwart the membership bids of Sweden and Finland given their perception of NATO posing a so-called existential threat. Yet those two nations are hardly the only ones that have faced Moscow's predilection towards hybrid activity and belligerent rhetoric. The past couple of years have demonstrated the Kremlin's intent on shoring up its own Arctic capabilities while honing the skillsets needed to impact Western nations.[5] It is necessary to consider the capabilities and provocations associated with Russian activity in order to understand the Russian approach during times of heightened tensions and conflict.

Historically, the Arctic has been a strategically, culturally, and economically important area for Russia.[6] In 2021, the Arctic accounted for approximately 10% of the country's GDP and 20% of its exports, however, those numbers are now likely shrinking, though no official data is available.[7] Russia views the Arctic as a singular strategic space – a "theater-wide, strategic continuum with a common operating picture—from the North Atlantic and the High North, to North Pole approaches in the Central Arctic, to the North Pacific, the Bering Strait and further south towards the Sea of Okhotsk."[8] The Northern Fleet – though downgraded from its status of a military district with the most recent military realignment – remains the premier Russian naval fleet. Russia's Arctic forces are tasked with protecting its nuclear deterrent capabilities, its Arctic Zone, and the Northern Sea Route to enable security and economic viability.

Russia has also long valued the icy waters of the north as a test bed for the newest weapons – notably the Tsirkon, Poseidon, and Skyfall. Some of the most capable weapons systems and platforms are homeported to the Northern Fleet first, given the strategic importance of the region to Russia. Stationing advanced missiles – particularly hypersonics – at northern bases decreases flight time to NATO capitals. Since assuming office more than two decades ago, President Putin has taken personal interest in the economic and military development of the region, posing for numerous photo opportunities at northern bases and newly constructed facilities such as the Sabetta port terminal on the Yamal Peninsula.

Russia has further utilized their military infrastructure of the North to engage in malign activities. Critical infrastructure remains a key vulnerability in the High North. Well documented Russian activity near maritime infrastructure such as pipelines, cables, and windfarms in the North Sea comes following suspicious cable-cutting incidents that have affected Svalbard and the Baltic Sea.[9] While attribution is often delayed or impossible, these incidents highlight potential vulnerabilities.

— The January 2022 incident off Svalbard involved cutting one of Space Norway AS's two subsea fiber-optic cables, known as Svalbardfiberen. This resulted in

4 Goble 2023; Staalesen 2024.
5 Melvin 2024.
6 Baev 2021.
7 Rumer/Sokolsky/Stronski 2021.
8 Boulègue 2024.
9 Kaushal 2023.

the loss of reserve capacity; loss of the redundant cable would have halted data flow from the SvalSat satellite station and internet to Longyearbyen.[10] Attribution has not formally been declared, though Russian trawlers were known to have navigated in the vicinity of the break just before it occurred.[11]

— Powerful blasts in September 2022 ruptured three of four Nord Stream pipelines in Sweden and Denmark's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in the Baltic Sea, with no public attribution.[12]

— In October 2023, the Chinese-owned/Moscow-linked ship *New New Polar Bear* damaged the Baltic Connector gas pipeline and two underwater communications cables linking Finland-Estonia and Sweden-Estonia respectively.[13]

The presence of Russian auxiliary ships and fishing vessels near critical infrastructure – combined with the proven capabilities of Russia's GRU and GUGI directorates – serves as a warning to the West to redouble efforts to protect vital infrastructure.
Indeed, the High North offers numerous opportunities for those willing to engage in grey zone or sub-threshold military activities. In addition to offshore critical infrastructure, societal seams and existing disagreements between local and indigenous communities and governments often located far to the south can be exploited by disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation campaigns. Environmental activists are often in conflict with local communities, national governments, and corporate developers as they seek to protect fragile ecosystems.

Yet full-scale conflict over territorial disputes is unlikely. With seven of the eight Arctic nations unified under the NATO Alliance, mechanisms exist for dialogue to resolve most conflicts. Indeed, there are very few territorial disputes remaining among the Arctic states – the largest still to be resolved is between the United States and Canada. While there is some concern that the resolution of the overlapping claims of extended continental shelves amongst Russia, Canada, and the Kingdom of Denmark (all claiming an extension to the Lomonosov Ridge, specifically the North Pole) may require arbitration, a prompt decision on the validity of each claim is unlikely, thus making the concern of little relevance now.

The most likely vector of conflict in the Arctic is either spillover from another region or the result of a misunderstanding or misperception. It is essential to both be prepared to deter and defend in the Arctic, while also seeking to protect critical infrastructure, reduce tensions, and mitigate the potential of inadvertent escalation.

(Re)Learning Arctic Warfighting

To effectively deter, one must demonstrate credibility and commitment – while clearly signaling both to the adversary. The Arctic poses unique security challenges that require rethinking deterrence in the North. In particular, the unique environment must be

10 Nagelhus Schia/Gjesvik/Rødningen 2023.
11 Ibid.
12 Kaushal 2023.
13 Reuters 2023.

considered in military and strategic planning. Climate trends will increasingly affect the ability to operate in the region, with logistical challenges arising from permafrost thaw, coastal erosion, and unpredictable weather. Enduring challenges like inhospitable terrain, vast distances across remote regions, and lack of adequate domain awareness and polar communications will continue to require creative – and often expensive – solutions.

Arctic warfighting is not new, but it is time to reexamine the lessons from the Cold War and the World War II campaigns – notably the Aleutian Islands campaign, Murmansk resupply missions, and the liberation of Norway. Warfighting in the region is challenging and demands development of appropriate training, tactics, and supply systems in order to ensure both survival and success.

Defense policy responses should be formulated to account for the uniqueness of the Arctic region, but also with an understanding of how the Arctic integrates into the broader strategic picture. In the United States, each of the military services has developed an Arctic strategy that aligns with the national and Department of Defense strategies. Yet formulation of a good strategy is only the first step – it is essential to then appropriately resource the strategy and commit to exercising the capabilities in the most demanding conditions in order to develop warfighting prowess. Resourcing of Arctic strategies must be prioritized in order to generate the infrastructure and capabilities necessary to operate – and fight – successfully in the demanding conditions of the north.

Deterrence should be at the forefront of policy objectives, with an effort made to strengthen capabilities in order to demonstrate credibility and commitment to the region. In particular, the continued emphasis on developing interoperability and interchangeability of forces in the region will prove to be a powerful deterrent. Hybrid activities and those below the threshold of conflict must not be tolerated. Similarly, it is essential to reexamine command and control across the pan-Arctic region to ensure no seams exist to be exploited. With the accession of Finland and Sweden, NATO must assert deterrence and defense plans that best account for the expanded northern flank. Updating regional plans and C2 structures, as well as logistics support and regional infrastructure will be essential in presenting a coherent and formidable deterrent.

Forces must also be exercised in the Arctic region in order to fully develop warfighting capabilities in a region that makes mere survival demanding. The Arctic is not a pick-up game – forces cannot be dispatched to the region without appropriate training, systems, and tactics. Commitment must be made to enhance skillsets in the demanding – and evolving – waters of the north. Allied navies must train together to understand the nuances of the region, which include unique weather conditions, evolving sound profiles due to the influx of fresh water and warming temperatures, and the location of critical infrastructure assets. Exercises and operations like Trident Juncture 2018, Dynamic Mongoose, and Nordic (Cold) Response should be refined and amplified to expand both their scope and complexity.

Finally, greater effort should be made to understand Russia's Arctic interests – and its complex relationship with China in the region. In order to deter, it is essential to understand what matters to Russia. Too often communications have been lacking and messages between nations are misunderstood. Reopening communication channels – to at least the level that existed during the Cold War – is a vital step in ensuring successful deterrence. Though there are considerable differences from the bi-polar world of the

Cold War to today's multi-polar world, some noteworthy lessons may still be gleaned from the past.

In particular, NATO's dual-track policy of 1979 still holds insights. The decision tied potential deployments of U.S. long-range theater nuclear forces with proposals for arms control negotiations. NATO leaders viewed the policy as necessary to respond to Soviet long-range forces targeting Europe, but Moscow viewed the policy as a threatening escalation of the nuclear-arms race – which cemented their belief that they had nothing to lose by invading Afghanistan.[14] The decision triggered an immediate deterioration of NATO-USSR relations as well as anti-nuclear protests throughout Europe. However, the policy should receive some credit for the ultimately successful negotiations culminating in the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

As demonstrated by the dual-track policy, focusing on strengthened force posture and capabilities – and a clear demonstration of commitment to the region – is simply not enough. This still holds true today, particularly in the Arctic. As an Arctic nation, the United States has enduring national interests in the region. The Arctic is critical to both U.S. homeland defense and the collective defense of NATO Allies. It is also a region of both economic opportunities and vulnerabilities to climate change and ecosystem degradation. The 'monitor and respond' approach to Arctic threats requires investment in capabilities and infrastructure in the region, while clearly communicating intentions in order to avoid the possibility of escalation or misinterpretation.[15] The latest U.S. Arctic defense strategy offers a sound strategic approach. While sound strategy is important, the implantation and resourcing will ultimately determine its effectiveness.

The U.S. should certainly improve its Arctic defense policy, strategic planning, and operational capabilities, but it must also advocate for cooperation amongst willing Arctic nations on areas of critical importance such as climate change, environmental protection, economic development, and strengthening of local and indigenous communities. Multilateral fora such as the Arctic Council have proven their value in preserving peace and stability. These mechanisms should be encouraged to flourish in hopes of establishing trust and building relationships that help sustain and enhance the Arctic region. They also provide mechanisms for dialogue which are so critical in accurately understanding both the perceptions and intentions of other nations.

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