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Edited by
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Executive summary

The Northern Flank: New Security Policy Institutional Framework

The Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland – have been known for their reserved approach to many aspects of European integration and Transatlantic defence cooperation. This has also been visible in their defence strategies, stemming from different historical and socio-cultural circumstances. Today, 8 years since the annexation of Crimea and just months after Russia's full-on invasion of Ukraine, the same memory is becoming the reason for Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Stockholm to review their approach to collective security.

NATO's New Northern? – Assessing the Northern Flank after 2014

The radical changes to European security have demonstrated how NATO's Northern Flank has suffered relative neglect in recent decades. Western Arctic littoral states have consist-

ently promoted and maintained that the circumpolar region is an exemplary zone for cooperation. One consequence of this policy has been to understate the challenges of the northern operational environment. Such challenges had been primarily framed as restoring a limited northern posture and developing capabilities suitable for expeditionary activities in the region. However, the diversity of the challenges and vulnerabilities between Allies and their various regional outlooks have fed a general reluctance to consider the Northern Flank in its broadest sense – in its maritime, air, land, cyber and space domains, the hybrid threat environment, and the multilateral cooperation required to ensure a holistic approach to northern security – which is vital to both European and North American security and defence.

The expansive front in the north – geographically and across all domains and dimensions – suggests NATO should newly consider how it integrates the Northern Flank into its deterrence and defence posture, as well as how it figures in both national and collective resilience. Strategically and operationally, preparedness will be key: enhancing pre-positioning, strengthening logistics supply chains and distribution capabilities, and ensuring an ongoing presence of Allied forces in the region to further develop multidomain readiness and to renew essential Arctic operational skills and capabilities (i.e. ISTAR, anti-submarine warfare, and cold weather fighting capabilities). Finland and Sweden's NATO membership will further change the dynamic and will offer significant opportunities to address many of these key defence planning and preparedness issues while further improving the integration and interoperability of these nations with the NATO Command Structure and Force

Structure. They also force a reconsideration of conventional land and maritime forces in the region and the impact of a new Nordic-Baltic dynamic, a region that should be seen as a single strategic and operational military theatre to ensure the coherence of NATO's multidomain operational planning and activities.

Russia and NATO's Northern Flank since 2014

Russia's invasions of Ukraine, both in 2014 and in 2022, have fundamentally changed the European security landscape. While the primary threat remains on NATO's Eastern Flank (not to mention terrorism and instability in the South), climate change, a resurgent Russia in the Arctic, and great power competition are driving Allies and NATO to rethink their approach to the Northern Flank.

Over the past decade, Russia has increased its presence in the Arctic, driven by a desire to control and exploit commercial opportunities. Russia has also laid the groundwork to defend its territory and, eventually, to project power. The approach is a familiar one. Russia is incrementally reconstituting its bastion defence infrastructure, but the scale and military presence are today still dwarfed by the USSR.

The real danger is that tensions elsewhere could spill over into the Arctic and jeopardize what little cooperation remains. A militarization of the region could also have detrimental environmental impacts through the construction of facilities, release of harmful carbon and toxic gases from minerals extraction, and greater commercial traffic. Given the shortest distance (for ICBMs) between Russia and North America is over the Arctic Ocean, Moscow's introduction

of nuclear exercises presents challenges for NATO and the Allies' nuclear deterrence calculations.

China: A New Player on NATO's Northern Flank?

2022 has not been without challenges for China. It is experiencing mounting economic problems at home, especially given its collapsing real estate market, growing debt problems, and draconian COVID-free policies. Still, the question stands: how might China relate to the Northern Flank?

At least two observations are in order. The first is that China's room for manoeuvre will narrow along the Northern Flank as NATO members become more conscientious of the political challenge that China poses. Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine may yet jolt European publics from their complacency about great power authoritarian regimes and their relative willingness to use military force to mount offensive operations. China does not have the capacity to operate militarily as far afield in the Arctic – a harsh environment that Arctic states themselves find challenging – but it could do so against Taiwan.

The second observation relates to China's alignment with Russia. Much has been made that these countries are "on the verge of an alliance" and that they have a like-minded approach in pressing their political revisionism against the liberal international order and those countries that they consider really to be their own, be it Ukraine or Taiwan. That said, although it has voiced support for Russia, China has abided to some extent by the sanctions that the United States and its Euro-Atlantic allies have imposed on Russia.

Dominik P. Jankowski, Tomasz Stępniewski

NATO's Northern Flank in the Era of Strategic Competition: Introduction

Russia's renewed attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, constitutes the gravest threat to Euro-Atlantic security in decades. It has shattered peace in Europe and is causing enormous human suffering and destruction. Russia's unjustified and unprovoked war against Ukraine is also a tectonic change for NATO and its closest partners, including Sweden and Finland which are on their path to officially join the Alliance in the coming months.

At the NATO Summit in Madrid (June 29-30, 2022), Allies concluded that Russia is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. Russia threatens Allies and partners to the East, South, and North. In fact, the Russian threat is to stay with us over the next decade and beyond. Moreover, at the Summit, NATO Allies concluded that rising strategic

competition and advancing authoritarianism challenge the Alliance's interests and values.

In this context, over the last months a growing attention has been given to NATO's Northern Flank that broadly includes the North Atlantic's arctic region. With this publication the Institute of Central Europe (Instytut Europy Środkowej, IEŚ) in Lublin contributes to a broader expert discussion aimed at better understanding of NATO's Northern Flank, its vulnerabilities as well as threats and challenges to the region. This publication also offers an assessment of the ongoing strategic competition in the High North and its impact on NATO.

In his article Miłosz J. Cordes (Lund University) underlines that the Nordic countries have been known for their reserved approach to many aspects of European integration and Transatlantic defence cooperation. This has also been visible in their defence strategies stemming from different historical and socio-cultural circumstances. Just months after Russia's full-out invasion of Ukraine, the same memory is becoming the reason for Copenhagen, Helsinki and Stockholm to review their approach to collective security. Furthermore, Hasit Thankey (International Staff, NATO) and Paul Dickson (Canadian Department of National Defence) argue that the radical changes to European security have demonstrated how NATO's Northern Flank has suffered relative neglect in recent decades. Western Arctic littoral states have consistently promoted and maintained that the circumpolar region is an exemplary zone for cooperation, while understating the challenges they face in the northern operational environment. Therefore, NATO should newly consider how it integrates the Northern Flank

into its deterrence and defence posture, as well as how it figures in both national and collective resilience.

Moreover, Marc Ozawa (NATO Defense College) emphasizes that any hopes of shielding the Arctic from geopolitics were effectively dashed when Russia invaded Ukraine. Even before the invasion, however, there were signs that the Arctic was heating up driven by climate change and Russia's growing military presence in the region. Since 2014, the region has experienced a crescendo of Russian military activity that includes reopening abandoned facilities and constructing new ones. This infrastructure is designed to put pressure on Allies and NATO to keep out by reinforcing and outwardly extending the limits of Russia's A2/AD bastion.

Finally, Alexander Lanoszka (University of Waterloo) discusses China and its potential impact on NATO's Northern Flank. China presents "opportunities and challenges" with respect to the Arctic. On the one hand, China has the potential of providing the much-needed capital investment useful for developing Arctic infrastructure. On the other hand, China is not geopolitically neutral – it is an authoritarian, great power that has ratcheted up its domestic political repression in recent years. Adding to these security concerns is the fact that China has cultivated closer defence and military ties with Russia.

This special series of IEŚ Policy Papers is the result of collaboration between the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin, and international researchers from Canada, Poland and the NATO Headquarters in Brussels. We would like to thank the authors for providing their input and analysis on NATO's Northern Flank during the Russia-Ukraine war and

rapidly changing security situation in Central and Eastern Europe. We hope that this IEŚ Policy Papers will be well received by the readers and will encourage experts who study this issue to continue their research.

Dominik P. Jankowski, Tomasz Stępniewski
Brussels and Lublin, August 2022

Chapter 1

Miłosz J. Cordes

The Northern Flank: New Security Policy Institutional Framework

February 24, 2022, has become a turning point for the security situation in Northern Europe. Up until Russia's attack on Ukraine, cooperation around the greater Baltic Sea Region had been highly successful in a variety of areas such as environmental protection, transportation networks, municipal networks, and innovative economies. All this was dealt a serious blow when Russian forces launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine, supported by Belarus. For all the Nordic countries, it was a moment for drawing conclusions regarding their defence policies, already influenced by the 2014 events: the annexation of Crimea and a de facto protracted conflict in Donbas.

For Sweden and Finland, it meant responding to growing Russian pressure in the form of large-scale military exercises with offensive scenarios, aerial and naval provocations

as well as political statements made by the Kremlin and its subordinates, carrying both open and concealed threats. For Denmark, Russia's activities seemed somewhat more distant, yet they still evoked considerable public discontent and rather hawkish reactions, for instance, in 2018 when Sergey and Yulia Skripal were poisoned by Russian security forces. Because of Greenland, they were also visible in the Arctic.

The 2014 events did not, however, trigger a major shift in the core of the defence policies of Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Stockholm. They all remained on the outer rim of the Euro-Atlantic institutional dimension of collective security. Denmark, although belonging to NATO, kept its opt-out clause on the EU defence cooperation, in place since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. Finland and Sweden stayed outside of NATO, even though they intensified their relationship with the Alliance by carrying out military training and increasing technical compatibility. The only NATO member states in the region remained Denmark, Iceland, and Norway.

There were many reasons for such a turn of events. Apart from the assessment of the current security challenges, they stemmed from the way that the Nordic region has been shaped in unique socio-cultural terms and from its countries' historical experiences with Russia.

Nordic exceptionalism

The Nordics had already begun to drift away from the core of political developments in Europe in the 18th century. The Great Northern War heralded the demise of Sweden as a regional power, which was confirmed during the Napoleonic Wars. When Denmark supported France in the blockade of

Great Britain, the British fleet bombed its capital, Copenhagen. Not only did it cause serious destruction, but it also made Danes rethink their place in the European order after control over Norway was ceded to Sweden as a punishment measure.

The two traumas – Sweden's declining importance and Denmark's shrinking territory – made the Nordics increasingly reluctant to take part in military conflicts. Especially since Copenhagen's defeat by Prussia in 1864, the principle of neutrality and preserving scarce human and economic resources became the beacon for the region's foreign policy.

The two world wars proved it. Whereas Sweden managed to retain neutrality at the expense of providing the Third Reich with minerals, Denmark did not fight, and Norway presented heroic but short resistance to Nazi Germany. Finland's case was slightly different as it had fought its way towards independence, first in a class-driven civil war right after the revolutions in Russia in 1917-1918, and then after the Soviet Union's aggression in November 1939.

These experiences resulted in a similar approach to domestic policies. After 1945, the Nordic countries became the avant-garde of reshaping societies with the use of social welfare models: increased taxes, the growing role of the state as the provider of goods and services, and the latest achievements in behavioural psychology. The Nordics could follow this approach because of their relative isolation from the rest of Europe, which made the echoes of the Cold War weaker and less direct.

At the same time, Scandinavia embarked on an ambitious agenda of intergovernmental cooperation. Such projects as the Nordic Passport Union drew from a shared feeling of lin-

guistic proximity (with the exception of Finland, although it also had a considerable Swedish minority and introduced obligatory Swedish classes at schools) and cultural parallels. This paved the way for similar projects elsewhere and became a source of inspiration for the founding fathers of European integration.

Separate defensive and integration paths

Nordic unity was not envisaged in collective security and European integration. Whereas Denmark, Iceland, and Norway became part of the founding members of NATO due to their World War Two experience, Finland and Sweden chose the non-bloc status. Stockholm believed that the approach taken in 1939-1945 was the right one and still served the purpose. Finland, on the other hand, had to remain wary of its eastern neighbour. The Soviets tolerated Finnish independence in exchange for influencing Helsinki's foreign policy. Finland also acted as an intermediary in economic exchanges between the two blocs.

Denmark was *rara avis in terra* among the Nordics when it joined the European Economic Community in 1973 (although society was divided: Jutland was more in favour than those living in the capital city). Norway rejected such a possibility. Greenland joined, too, and remained in the EU for 12 years, although its inhabitants rejected the membership by a landslide.

Copenhagen was still sceptical about advancing integration in specific fields. It took two referendums to ratify the Maastricht Treaty, establishing the European Union and the Common Foreign and Security Policy as one of its pillars. The Danish government signed the treaty only after nego-

tiating four opt-out clauses, including one on defence co-operation. In addition, Denmark did not agree to introduce the Euro as the EU's single currency, although it pegged the Danish krone to it.

Finland and Sweden entered the EU in 1995 – soon after the end of the Cold War. Yet in their case, geopolitics mattered less than the economy. The collapse of the Swedish real estate bubble in 1990 led to a deep 4-year-long crisis, with the government rescue package costing 4% of the country's GDP. Speculative actions taken by the Finnish banking sector caused an even bigger recession, further deepened by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the sheer drop in profits from international trade. For both countries, joining the European Union seemed the only, albeit reluctantly accepted, solution.

Norway and Iceland stayed out mostly due to the nature and source of their wealth. The agricultural and fishing policies of the European Union would have severely hampered the fish industry in both countries. In addition, Norway's riches come from oil and gas which made membership of the EU unattractive for most citizens. For the second time, they voted 'no' in a nationwide referendum in 1994. Nevertheless, both countries retained a significant degree of integration with Brussels-made policies as members of the European Free Trade Association.

A long game-changer

The regional security dimension of Nordic exceptionalism only started to change in the last 15 years. Russia's growing assertiveness and aggressiveness in foreign policy resulted in increased pressure on its former Soviet vassals. Reaction

to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine was merely a beacon of what we saw in Georgia in August 2008. Military assault and the creation of breakaway states in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia followed the old *divide et empire* doctrine while adding a whole new set of components to it. Russia openly violated another nation's territorial integrity and supported the independence of political entities whose only reason for existence was to wreak havoc in Georgia.

Back then, the Kremlin's rhetoric was that Russia had its own canonical territory, its sphere of interest as much as specific civilisational traits in the Huntingtonian sense of the term. As countries such as Georgia and Ukraine expressed their will to join Western institutions, Moscow had to show its discontent. This logic, clearly disrespecting sovereign nations' rights, met with wide understanding in many West European countries, and continued in the following years, particularly in Ukraine in 2014.

For the Nordics, the threat was still rather remote even after the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea. It is true that Russia's actions evoked concerns in Finland, which had constructed its defence policy on good-neighbourly relations with Russia, backed by a high potential of deterrence. Yet even for Finnish society, both Crimea and the war in Donbas did not constitute a major change in their approach to collective security. While Stockholm and Helsinki were reaching an increased level of compatibility of their armed forces with NATO, their non-bloc status remained unwavering.

The post-2014 period facilitated reflection on the memory of the Nordics' experience of dealing with Russia and the Soviet Union. The Danish island of Bornholm represents an

interesting case in this regard. It was the only part of Denmark taken by Soviet forces after the war had ended in May 1945. Red Army troops stayed there for 11 months, causing uneasiness in the cabinets of Copenhagen and uncertainty among the islanders themselves. Many Danes started to rediscover their nation's history and as they turned their eyes to Bornholm, they realised the whole country really only became fully liberated in April 1946.

The North back on the stage

The real game-changer, however, has been the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the importance of which for the Nordic countries is visible on a number of levels. The first is the blatant violation of international law and rules laid out by the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and other agreements that followed. By attacking Ukraine unprovoked, Russia opened the pandora's box of claims and disputes that the continent had hoped to have experienced for the last time in the Balkans.

The second level is the narrative being used by the Russian state propaganda. If it can be applied to Ukraine, it might be used against any other country located within the Kremlin-defined zone of influence. This logic brings potential conflict dangerously close to the Nordic region through Russia's hostile stance towards Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as well as historically challenging the relationship of the former with Finland.

The third level is regional security across the whole of the Baltic Sea. The last 30 years have brought an unprecedented level of cooperation to this area, with people-to-people contacts, increasing cargo, and the creation of new cultural and

intellectual linkages from Copenhagen to Helsinki and from Oulu to Gdańsk. In this matrix, even the Russian regions of Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg managed to mark their presence, albeit to a significantly lesser degree, and draw experience from their Nordic neighbours. The intensity of this process, however, has been decreasing along with the tightening of control over Russian civil society.

In addition, the Baltic regions of Russia have been excluded from any tangible form of exchange since the outbreak of the pandemic. Under the present circumstances, it is likely that the Baltic Sea will enter a period of decisive change related to the green transition, sustainable cities, and more inclusive societies without the Russians on board. With this incomplete integration framework, it is even more important for the remaining Baltic Sea states to increase cooperation and build multi-level resilient capabilities.

The fourth, and perhaps the widest and most significant level, is the return of the Baltic Sea to the global geopolitical stage. The war in Ukraine has tied the developments in Europe's north with policies pursued by such actors as China. Beijing's stance turned out to be one of the variables having a major impact on Moscow's decision to invade Ukraine. At the same time, the sit-and-wait approach of the Chinese leadership is already backfiring regardless of Western sanctions on Russia. In the last years, China has heavily invested in the New Silk Road initiative, increasing the number of freight trains which contributed to easing the bottlenecks in global supply chains. Current instabilities in Eastern Europe have impaired this booming trade route. They can also have an impact on the Baltic Sea ports as part of the railroad cargo was being loaded onto ships there.

It remains an open question whether the above-mentioned variables bring more damage or open up new opportunities for the region. In any case, the Nordics need to prepare themselves for a period of uneasiness, potential barriers to economic growth, and greater geopolitical gamesmanship. One thing is clear: the Baltic Sea is back on the global chessboard.

Challenging the worldviews

It is no wonder that the war in Ukraine has triggered tectonic shifts in the perception of security across Northern Europe. Denmark has decided to hold a referendum on abolishing the opt-out clause on EU defence cooperation, even though just months ago it had seemed unimaginable. After a short and intense campaign, 66,9% of Danes said 'yes' to joining other member states in a plethora of defence-related projects, such as research, joint planning, and stabilisation missions in areas vital to EU interests.

For Finland and Sweden, the immediate consequence of the events in Ukraine was the revival of discussion on whether both nations should join NATO. Already after 2014, the proponents of such a move argued that the threat stemming from Russia was considerable and would only rise in the future. Yet both societies did not seem ready for dropping the legacy of neutrality that, in their eyes, had been a well-functioning deterrent to any potential aggressors for many decades. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine in place, this conviction started changing rapidly thanks to the quick forging of a broad political consensus on the need for bringing both countries into the institutional framework of Transatlantic security.

One might say that both Denmark and Finland, together with Sweden, have been influenced in their actions by the decisive and quick response of the United States and the European Union. Whereas the former was in the avant-garde of delivering weapons to Ukraine and providing NATO members with additional forces, the latter managed to introduce six packages (at the time of writing this article) of the most ambitious and far-reaching sanctions in its history. It has proven the usefulness of a collective response both in hard security and economic terms, which matters especially to relatively small nations.

Another important aspect of the shifting perspective on collective security in Northern Europe is the cultural proximity. The *oikumene* of the Swedish language has proven to be a useful tool for creating a deeper sense of understanding between the Finnish and Swedish political and diplomatic elites. It should not be overlooked that a large number of officials in the Finnish foreign service are ethnic Swedes, which greatly facilitated contact in the weeks before announcing the decision to apply for NATO membership on May 12. It was also easier for ordinary Finns to obtain information in Swedish as well as discuss the security issues with their western neighbours. Once again, the education policies of the Finnish government, which ever since the 19th century treated the Swedish influence as a counterweight to the Russian one, turned out to be far-sighted and highly useful.

Conclusions

Changes in security developments in the Nordic region constitute an important element in filling the gaps in the Euro-Atlantic security environment. They show the attrac-

tiveness and effectiveness of the NATO collective defence system as part of a broader Western community of nations based on common institutions as well as values. Finland and Sweden, while belonging to this group by the merit of their strong democracy, for a long time were reluctant to join one of its most important organisations. Similarly, Denmark for a long time had treated the European Union as a community for coordinating economic policies but not for advancing security-related issues. The war in Ukraine has clearly altered this thinking.

An important part of these tendencies is the debate held in Norway. Although belonging to NATO, it has twice rejected membership in the European Union. Now, however, Oslo is looking on with great interest at developments in Denmark; if the Danes decide to drop one of their opt-out clauses and see the merits of engaging more in EU defence activities, their northern neighbours might receive an important incentive for intensifying their relations with Brussels.

All of this does not mean, however, that the Nordics will abandon their rather reserved approach to tightening up integration. Their social models are too unique and based too much on the benefits of small nation-states for Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Stockholm to embark on an ambitious integration agenda in other areas. In this sense, dropping the opt-out clause on defence cooperation and joining NATO will most likely turn out to be exceptions that confirm the general rule.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any institution the author is affiliated with.

Chapter 2

Hasit Thankey and Paul Dickson

NATO's New Northern? – Assessing the Northern Flank after 2014

NATO's Northern Flank is vital to the Alliance's political-military thinking, strategy, policy, planning, and civil and military preparedness. The flank connects North America and Europe, so ensuring its security is of key importance to all Allies. As NATO focuses on strengthening its deterrence and defence posture, it must contend with an increasingly competitive and unpredictable security environment, including both indirect and direct threats against a strategically and geographically extended Northern Flank.

The Alliance's approach and posture towards its Northern Flank have reflected changes in geopolitical circumstances and technology and the limits imposed by its austere environment, with its climate, terrain, maritime expanse and minimal infrastructure. The Northern Flank is also understood through different localized defence considerations;

it is not one military region but several. At the height of the Cold War, the Northern Flank as an operational region and theatre included a maritime region spanning the Arctic Ocean, Barents Sea and North Sea as well as the North Atlantic and continental European High North. As the Cold War ended, what was understood as NATO's Northern Flank constricted to focus on the North Sea and Norway's borders with Russia.[1]

These considerations have largely prevailed through the tumultuous past decade, but the North is now being seen in a new light. Russia's military modernization and the renewal of its northern force posture have prompted general concerns about its capabilities and intent, which only intensified with its illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. While acting belligerently, Russia has been able to successfully compartmentalize the Arctic, in part due to its use of its hybrid toolbox to create confusion about its objectives in the region. Climate change is creating a similar challenge, with consequences for the region that include increased access to and through the Arctic Ocean and its resources. This raises the spectre of new routes and new competition, including from China, which is increasingly interested and active in the Arctic. In addition to considerations about maritime access, trade and resource exploitation, climate change will also affect energy security considerations, affect northern fisheries as water temperatures rise, and support more human population growth in the region. Also, new technologies will create new vulner-

[1] N. Wegge, *The Strategic Role of Land Power on NATO's Northern Flank*, Arctic Review on Law and Politics, vol. 13, 2022, pp. 94-113.

abilities, from the sea, air, cyber and space domains, as well as in the cognitive and social spheres.

These developments are leading to renewed assessments about the adaption necessary to secure NATO's Northern Flank. Over the past half-decade, the Allies have increasingly recognized the renewed importance of the region from a defence and security perspective, and are starting to reconstitute their capability and capacity to operate in northern conditions. Examples of this include strengthening anti-submarine and underwater warfare capabilities; increased US rotational deployments and modernization of its pre-positioning stocks in Norway; Canada altering its long-standing reluctance about NATO's role in the Arctic and inviting NATO Allies to its Arctic exercises; 2018's NATO Exercise Trident Juncture, which recognized that preparedness for conventional warfare in Europe necessitated the projection of forces across the Atlantic;[2] and the UK's growing participation in northern exercises and its organization of the multinational Joint Expeditionary Force. In addition, while the physical outlines of NATO's north as a flank remains centred on Europe, the multidomain relationship with the security and defence of North America's northern approaches is growing stronger.[3] The modernization of NORAD (the binational Canada-US organization charged with aerospace warning, aerospace control and

[2] Notably, a few weeks before Trident Juncture, Russia conducted Vostok 2018, characterized as its largest war games since the Cold War, which included the exercise by Russian marines of an amphibious landing in the eastern Russian Arctic that resembled a simulation of an attack on northern Norway. L. Sevunts, *NATO's Arctic dilemma: Two visions of the Arctic collide as NATO and Russia flex muscles*, Eye on the Arctic, December 2018.

[3] Ibid.

maritime warning for North America), the stand-up of the US Navy's 2nd Fleet in August 2018, and the establishment of a new NATO Joint Force Command (JFC) in Norfolk responsible for the North Atlantic all reflect a recognition of the changed strategic environment. They also point to the need for strategic and operational links between the Alliance's two continental northern areas.

The expansion of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 introduces additional complexity in planning for the defence of NATO's Northern Flank. While the wider implications will be further assessed, the Alliance's enlargement to include Finland and Sweden will double NATO's border with Russia and introduce a lengthy Baltic Sea coastline to Alliance deterrence and defence considerations. These and other changes – new geography, new operational boundaries, evolving and distinct climatic conditions, new domains and new technologies – will require a hard look at existing and emerging vulnerabilities and a stronger NATO posture in the region in order to revitalize its place in the defence and security of the Alliance.

Vulnerabilities

The unique nature of the Alliance's Northern Flank, and of the broader circumpolar region within which it is nested, presents a number of political, military, economic and geographic factors that feed national and NATO thinking about Alliance vulnerabilities and how to address them. In addition to competition with Russia and China, climate change and the rapid pace of technological change are driving further change in how these vulnerabilities are seen and managed.

The geography presents the first challenges to Allied policy, strategy and planning. NATO's Northern Flank includes vast stretches of national airspace and air defence identification zones, international airspace and waters that serve as key corridors for civilian and military shipping and aviation, and maritime chokepoints (including the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap and the Straits of the Baltic Sea). The higher northern latitudes pose challenges for satellite services, such as geolocation and communications. In political terms, having Finland and Sweden outside NATO (until now) has presented complications for the Alliance's posture, particularly after Poland and then Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined NATO in 1999 and 2005, respectively. In addition to NATO and a number of regional security organizations, North America and Europe are also divided into separate commands and can see the north in different ways: until 2016, Canada's position was that NATO had no role in the "Arctic", which the Canadian government at the time saw as a policy to preserve the sovereignty and exceptional nature of its own northern regions. The March 2021 US-NORTHCOM and NORAD Strategy suggests a change. The North American Arctic is characterized as "a zone of international competition", and defence "in and through the Arctic" is a shared responsibility "with allies and partners, including Indigenous peoples and governments".[4] Expanding this perspective, and considering its planning implications for Europe, requires synchronization across multiple commands, countries and levels of government.

[4] NORAD and USNORTHCOM Strategy, March 2021.

The geography of NATO's northern territory and approaches should also be seen in relation to Russia's. The Arctic and its prospects are an important dimension of Russia's economic activity and central to its military strength. As part of Russia's military modernization that began in 2008, Moscow has allocated significant resources to increasing Russian military and economic activity in the Arctic. Russian air and maritime forces, many of which are located in close proximity to NATO territory (particularly in the Kola Peninsula), have been the focus of a significant portion of military modernization efforts, alongside the significant development of Russia's suite of missiles, to include dual-use and hypersonic capabilities, and a new generation of capable Russian attack and ballistic missile submarines. Major Russian economic and infrastructure projects focus on natural resource development and the protection of its maritime passage, the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which is not expected to change given the impact and consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine.

NATO's Northern Flank also contains a significant amount of economic activity and potential, and it features infrastructure that is critical to the global economy. The "European High North" is both populated and economically productive. Industrial activity, mining, forestry, energy production and fisheries, to name a number of sectors, make this broader region economically vital to a number of nations. This will only grow with Finland and Sweden's entry into the Alliance. From an energy security perspective, the region is of critical importance given offshore oil and gas production and the vital sea lines of communication that carry energy products from North America to Europe and

support their distribution throughout Europe and further afield. As European nations decrease their reliance on Russian hydrocarbons, the "west to east" distribution of energy will become more important to maintaining Allies' access to stable energy supplies. Many northern nations have embraced efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change, but the extent to which they will be able to decarbonize given northern communities' energy requirements remains unclear, and contentious. Along with the need for NATO military forces to continue to use conventional sources of fuel, the infrastructure and services that underpin fossil fuel supply and distribution will remain crucial to NATO's Northern Flank.

Despite this economic importance, NATO's Northern Flank is not particularly "infrastructure rich", especially at higher latitudes, due to the challenging climate and sparse population. There are few ice-free ports and major airfields, and limited road, rail and energy infrastructure. Climate change is set to change some of these conditions, which could increase the extent of both civilian and military air and maritime traffic in the region. For the moment, however, national governments and armed forces and the private sector have low capacity for surface, sea and air transport that are suited for operations in northern conditions.

NATO's Northern Flank is also home to critical undersea infrastructure, particularly a large number of fibre-optic communications cables that connect North America and Europe. International submarine communications cables carry 98% of global internet traffic. Due to their fundamental importance to the international financial system and to a number of major technology companies, their security

and resilience is of vital interest to NATO Allies and to the private sector. This infrastructure is designed to withstand limited disruption, but governments and industry must also be ready to manage the effects of a wider disruption and to restore service.

Since 2014, northern European nations have also had to contend with how Russia (and Belarus) have instrumentalized issues that impact security but straddle EU and NATO mandates. For example, in order to send political signals or exert political pressure, Moscow and Minsk have facilitated the travel of migrants from outside Europe (including the Middle East, parts of Africa, and South Asia) to their borders with Norway, Finland, the Baltic states and Poland. This has established another vulnerability that NATO Allies and the EU must address. The potential environmental consequences of the mix of increased economic and human activity, and multiple and local sovereignties with different perspectives on the balance between economic and national security challenges, are potentially divisive issue that straddles the local, national and multilateral mandates, and can be exploited by adversaries.

Threats

As the review of vulnerabilities suggests, the northern defence and security threat environment is expansive and includes hard and soft security considerations that have major strategic implications for NATO. Russia's conventional posture and capabilities in the north have both a defensive and potential offensive role. While Russia postures itself in the High North to defend itself, its northern posture and its new air, missile and naval capabilities could threaten north-

ern European Allied territory and populations, challenge Allied reinforcement to and across Europe, and hold North America at risk. Russia's pursuit of hypersonic technology is proceeding, with their independent manoeuvring capability posing a challenge for North America's legacy early warning systems. North American vulnerabilities have expanded the importance of Greenland and Iceland and their links with NATO as a continental defence issue, as well as highlighted the threat posed to the region by Russia's space-based and cyber capabilities.

NATO recognizes the potential threat that Russia poses to its Northern Flank (both its "bastion defence" as well as its ability to project power into the North Atlantic through the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap). In rebuilding its capabilities, Russia has already provoked NORAD, Norway, the UK and Japan through extensive Long-Range Aviation patrols, maritime activity and snap exercises, which have, among other things, disrupted fishing in Norway's exclusive economic zone and caused other economic disruptions. Russia has also been accused of spoofing and jamming GPS signals in and around Norway, and is suspected of being responsible for attacks on undersea cables off Svalbard, which reinforces the threat it could pose to disrupt the transport and communications lifelines that connect North America and Europe. But developments along the Northern Flank also have implications for Baltic security. With Finland and Sweden on a path to join NATO, Denmark and southern Norway may have renewed importance as a "hinge" between the Baltic and Norwegian seas. Kaliningrad will also continue to be a major factor in that it is seen by NATO as a Russian power projection hub in north-eastern Europe, but is seen by Rus-

sia as a vulnerability, especially as the Baltic Sea becomes a veritable "NATO lake".

Russia's hybrid threat toolbox is designed to complement its efforts to undermine the political resolve of NATO, the European Union and their member states in the northern context, including by raising difficult political questions about how much defence and security the Arctic itself requires. Russia's Arctic disinformation narrative has focused on exploiting Western desire to safeguard the Arctic as a zone of cooperation and collaboration. Russia has amplified divisive issues, for example, promoting false narratives regarding NATO's building dual-use capabilities in contravention of the Svalbard Treaty and using that to rationalize its development of bases and other infrastructure. During the Ukraine conflict, Russia has signalled that it would engage more non-Arctic states – notably China – in discussions of Arctic issues. Nikolai Korchunov, Russian ambassador at large and chair of the Arctic Council, issued a warning against NATO's enlargement in the Nordic region, suggesting that Finland's and Sweden's memberships could "force" Russia to challenge the exclusivity of the Arctic Eight.[5]

Russia may also seek to exploit continental and regional divisions over the "remilitarization" of the Arctic. "Soft" security threats can affect the Allies' resilience, and require particular attention in the Arctic regions, where collaboration between civil and military stakeholders is critical to maintaining national security and societal stability.

[5] A. Edvardsen, *Russia's Chair of Arctic Council: "The Council's Work Should Be Resumed As Soon As Possible"*, High North News, June 1, 2022, https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russian-chair-arctic-council-councils-work-should-be-resumed-soon-possible [18.08.2022].

Russia may indeed enhance its economic cooperation with China in the region. The opening of the Northern Sea Route also improves Chinese access to northern Europe, as it dramatically shortens the distance from China's eastern seaboard to major ports in Western Europe. The growing proximity of NATO's Northern Flank to the Asia-Pacific via Russia's northern route could facilitate greater Chinese presence and influence. Among other things, China's declaration that it is a "near-Arctic state" in its 2018 Arctic Policy, its incorporation of the Polar Silk Road as part of its One Belt, One Road programme, and its progress towards establishing the world's largest icebreaker fleet demonstrates the political and strategic interest that it places on the Arctic.

NATO's response

NATO heads of state and government declared at the 2021 Brussels Summit that "in the High North, we will continue to undertake necessary, calibrated, and coordinated activities in support of the Alliance's security interests". This statement was carefully crafted in a larger paragraph that reflects NATO's broader "360-degree" adaptation since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

In strengthening the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture, the Northern Flank has not been the centre of public attention, which has largely dwelled on developments on NATO's Eastern Flank. As part of a wider adaptation of the NATO Command Structure, the establishment of JFC headquarters has given the North Atlantic (including parts of the High North) a proper military "owner", which also facilitates North American reinforcement of Europe. The main focus has been on increased exercises and training in

the High North, and on ensuring the Allies have the right capabilities to ensure NATO and the Allies can credibly deter and defend against any Russian misadventure in the region. As noted, Exercise Trident Juncture 2018 was NATO's largest live exercise in years and helped the Alliance challenge itself in how it would reinforce its Northern Flank. National exercises such as Norway's Cold Response practise how the Allies, together with Finland and Sweden, would operate in the High North in a demanding, high-intensity military operation. The US and the UK have also regularly rotated land forces to Norway to regain lost skillsets in winter warfare. Northern Allies have also been stepping up their defence investment, acquiring, among other things, F-35 fifth-generation fighters, modern maritime patrol aircraft and air defence systems, while continuing to invest in naval combat systems and upgrading their land forces and cyber capabilities. Northern European Allies are also increasing efforts to strengthen national resilience, increasing the civil-military cooperation required to address a more challenging and dynamic risk environment that ranges from the potential for armed aggression, terrorism, cyber-attacks, more frequent natural disasters and, as COVID-19 has demonstrated, pandemics. For example, Norway is reinvigorating its "Total Defence" to strengthen its preparedness to absorb, respond and adapt to a major crisis, which includes more effective cooperation among national and societal actors.

Finland and Sweden's membership will bolster NATO's ability to defend its Northern Flank. As partners, they have made significant contributions to Nordic and Baltic security through information and intelligence sharing; ready, responsive and interoperable military capabilities; and par-

ticipation in joint and combined exercises and training. As members, their integration into NATO advance planning and increased interoperability will, among other things, substantially contribute to the Alliance and its political and military objectives. Further, their approach to national resilience and civil preparedness will inject useful thinking and practice into how the Alliance ensures that national civil capabilities and societal efforts can support collective defence planning, posture and activities. NATO's Nordic enlargement will also have important implications for how the Alliance should approach security in an expanded Arctic region. With Finland and Sweden, seven of eight Arctic states will be NATO Allies. But it remains to be seen how Russia's role and intentions towards Arctic governance will evolve, particularly given its position that existing governance mechanisms are sufficient.

Thinking forward

The radical changes to European security have demonstrated how NATO's Northern Flank has suffered relative neglect in recent decades. Western Arctic littoral states have consistently promoted and maintained that the circumpolar region is an exemplary zone for cooperation. One consequence of this policy has been to understate the challenges of the northern operational environment. Such challenges had been primarily framed as restoring a limited northern posture and developing capabilities suitable for expeditionary activities in the region. However, the diversity of the challenges and vulnerabilities between Allies and their various regional outlooks have fed a general reluctance to consider the Northern Flank in its broadest sense – in its maritime, air,

land, cyber and space domains, the hybrid threat environment, and the multilateral cooperation required to ensure a holistic approach to northern security – which is vital to both European and North American security and defence.

Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has shattered peace in Europe, prompting NATO to take further steps to ensure the Alliance can deter and defend against a Russia that has now proven to be a risk taker with no regard for its neighbours' security and territorial integrity. NATO's virtual Summit on 22 March 2022 focused on Russia's aggression, and the Allies declared that they would "accelerate NATO's transformation for a more dangerous strategic reality". They followed up at their June Summit in Madrid, releasing an updated Strategic Concept and committing to significantly strengthening the Alliance's longer-term deterrence and defence posture. In taking this decision, the Allies highlighted the need to develop the "full range of ready forces and capabilities necessary to maintain credible deterrence and defence", including enhanced exercises focused on collective defence and interoperability.

NATO's new Strategic Concept identifies in particular Russia's capability to disrupt Allied reinforcements and freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic as a strategic challenge to the Alliance. It is too early to say how Russia's posture in the High North will be particularly affected by its war against Ukraine, but its modernized aviation, missile and maritime capabilities indicate that it will continue to be able project power both along and against NATO's Northern Flank. NATO's decisions in 2022 on forward presence and readiness reflect the impact of Russian aggression, but NATO's plans to strengthen its Northern Flank will have to ac-

count for its longer land-border with Russia with possible implications for Sweden and Norway's land forces. NATO will need to continue to develop and refine defence plans; invest in modern, robust and resilient capabilities, logistics and infrastructure; ensure a fit-for-purpose command and control structure; and commit to challenging multidomain exercises and training. This will also have implications for NATO's nuclear deterrence along its Northern Flank, particularly given the ambiguity surrounding Russia's doctrinal approaches to its nonstrategic nuclear weapons and its dual-capable systems and missiles.[6] Conversely, the war in the Ukraine and related sanctions will have paradoxical consequences: slowing Russia's restoration of its military capability, reinforcing the attractiveness of low-cost techniques and tools, and underscoring the economic and geostrategic importance of Russia's high north and eastern regions

Russian intentions, or the risks of underestimating the extent to which they will be pursued, should compel the NATO Allies to seriously consider the importance of their Northern Flank and what it will take to secure and defend it against an unpredictable adversary. This consideration has already driven a revolution in Finland and Sweden's foreign and defence policies. Russia has shown it can be ruthless in pursuit of economic self-sufficiency and in gaining leverage over others; these are existential issues for the Putin regime. Indeed, a Russia that is starved of access to western resources and markets will look to the Arctic – and also perhaps to its newer but risky partnership with China – as a source of

6 United States Congressional Research Service, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization*, April 21, 2022.

strength, potentially as strategically vital and attractive as the Black Sea region, given its vital oil, gas and rare earth element deposits.

The Alliance should not allow Russia to compartmentalize the Arctic as an area where they will cooperate unreservedly. This would allow Russia to obscure its real interests and give it an opportunity to use polarizing narratives, contrasting Western "militarization" of the Arctic with Russia's professed determination to maintain cooperation in the region. In this manner, Russia and China may find a common objective in shaping the discussion on sustainable development in the Arctic at the expense of the West.

In a region that is environmentally fragile, particularly in its sensitivities to climate change and human activity, the NATO Allies should also use every mechanism at their disposal to understand, assess and anticipate the security impact of climate change and to enhance societal resilience. This is more challenging in the northern context, where responsibilities for these vital national and societal functions are spread across different levels of government and where defence and security is just one of many demanding requirements. As a result, the Allies will also need to strengthen civil preparedness, which enables military planning, capabilities and activities. In the Arctic, particularly in North America, the military is also a critical enabler of civil authorities, and provides situational awareness and essential services (i.e. search and rescue, and disaster response and recovery). By taking steps to protect the population, assure the continuity of food and energy supply, protect civil communications and transport networks and infrastructure, and ensure sufficient capacity is available to protect public

health, the Alliance can harden its Northern Flank against hybrid threats. It can also help mitigate the effect of disinformation from Russia that attempts to depict NATO as an aggressor and the primary threat to peaceful cooperation in the Arctic, trying to amplify divisions and undermine trust in governments and institutions.

The expansive front in the north – geographically and across all domains and dimensions – suggests NATO should newly consider how it integrates the Northern Flank into its deterrence and defence posture, as well as how it figures in both national and collective resilience. Strategically and operationally, preparedness will be key: enhancing pre-positioning, strengthening logistics supply chains and distribution capabilities, and ensuring an ongoing presence of Allied forces in the region to further develop multidomain readiness and to renew essential Arctic operational skills and capabilities (i.e. ISTAR, anti-submarine warfare, and cold weather fighting capabilities). Finland and Sweden's NATO membership will further change the dynamic and will offer significant opportunities to address many of these key defence planning and preparedness issues while further improving the integration and interoperability of these nations with the NATO Command Structure and Force Structure. They also force a reconsideration of conventional land and maritime forces in the region and the impact of a new Nordic-Baltic dynamic, a region that should be seen as a single strategic and operational military theatre to ensure the coherence of NATO's multidomain operational planning and activities.

Looking beyond the European High North, NATO also has a historic opportunity to develop an integrated approach to

its Northern Flank that would address the deterrence gap between North America and NATO Europe resulting from the air and missile threat to Canada and the US. The North American Allies have recognized that the quality, quantity and range of Russian capabilities makes it very difficult to separate the defence of NATO's northern European regions or of the North Atlantic with that of North America itself.[7] This gives considerable scope for further strategic thinking and planning to improve how the Allies can bridge the gaps and vulnerabilities between the two regions. The organizations should seek opportunities to inter-relate and be mutually supportive, particularly in the air, maritime and space domains.

The dynamics of NATO's "new northern" are still developing but the trend towards its greater importance seems clear. The still to be determined outcomes and implications of Russia's war in Ukraine, the West's wide-ranging sanctions, and China's increased assertiveness will further shape the new security landscape. In order to effectively deter and defend through "360 degrees", NATO's will need to ensure its Northern Flank is afforded a similar level of attention and planning as it has given in recent years to its southern and eastern strategic directions.

Disclaimer: The assessments and interpretations in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect those of NATO or the Government of Canada.

[7] Canada Chief of the Defence Staff, *Statement to Standing Committee On National Defence*, June 20, 2017, https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/nddn/meeting-56/evidence [18.08.2022].

Chapter 3

Marc Ozawa

Russia and NATO's Northern Flank since 2014

During the Cold War, NATO's strategy for the Northern Flank was clear – to monitor Soviet activities in case of a nuclear strike on North America and to maintain a strong nuclear deterrent against the USSR. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian military fell into a disarray and NATO drew back from the region, save a diminished presence maintained by the arctic Allies. Since 2014 the Northern Flank has once again been in the spotlight, driven by a receding polar ice sheet, climate change and a resurgent Russian presence. While NATO does not have a strategy devoted solely to the North Flank, its presence is growing through military exercises and greater cooperation with arctic Allies.

This chapter argues that Russia's return to the Arctic is accelerating as demonstrated by the reconstitution of military facilities, intensification of military exercises, strategic policy publications, and overall presence in the region. Until

recently, Russia's top strategic priorities were operations infrastructure, low tension through international cooperation, and defence of the region and resource extraction. In light of the latest publication of Russia's arctic strategy, growing military presence and geopolitical fallout following the invasion of Ukraine, defence of the region is likely to be as, if not more, important than resource extraction in the immediate future. In terms of building infrastructure, Russia is focusing on 'dual-use' capabilities so that investment may contribute to either commercial or defensive operations. The intended combined effect is to extend the line of pressure on Allies and NATO further out from Russia's strategic installations and claimed areas of interest – particularly around the Kola peninsula.

Consequently, specifying a NATO strategy toward the High North is less important than developing Allied capabilities in a tempered and flexible way. Most crucial is that NATO maintains an adaptable and agile posture in the region – one that neither accelerates the militarization of the Arctic nor neglects the aggressive movements of Russia. This entails continuing military exercises to train a new generation of forces, establishing a robust intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability, and in conjunction with Arctic Allies, building a competent and adequate presence in the region capable of projecting defensive power. These components are already part of NATO's approach – "High North, low tensions". However, as Russia's war with Ukraine and confrontation with the West progress, it will be important to resist the temptation of escalating confrontation in the Arctic and at the very least, to

minimize the risk of conflict on the Eastern Flank spilling over into the north.

The following analysis will first introduce geographic and historical context contributing to NATO's current challenges in the region, with a special focus on Russia. Then it will analyse events since 2014 and NATO's responses, and conclude with recommendations for NATO in light of Russia's remilitarization of the Arctic.

NATO's Northern Flank, the Arctic or the High North?

While the "Northern Flank" is a NATO-specific term, it refers to the region that broadly includes the north Atlantic's Arctic region. This spans the area above the Arctic Circle including the Arctic Ocean. The "High North" is a political term defining NATO's Northern Flank but extending throughout the circumpolar region where military, commercial and scientific activity take place.[1] For this analysis, all three terms will be used interchangeably. When it is necessary to separate the political, economic and scientific intentions of the actors, a distinction will be made.

The High North is of strategic value to NATO because five of the six littoral states surrounding the Arctic Ocean are NATO members. These are Norway, which shares a land and maritime border with Russia, Denmark (because of Greenland), Canada, and the United States. The area also includes Sweden and Finland, which are strong NATO partners, soon to be new NATO members. Russia is the fifth littoral state and possesses the longest coastal area in the Arctic.

[1] E. Buchanan, *Cool Change Ahead? NATO's Strategic Concept and the High North*, NATO Defense College, no. 7, April 2022.

Over the past two decades, the polar ice cap has receded, giving way to more coastline that is ice-free for a longer period of the year. This is opening potentially lucrative transportation routes for trade between Asia and Europe. The Northern Sea Route (NSR) runs along Russia's northern coastline, approximately 4,000 km from Asia to Norway and into the North Atlantic. On the other side of the Arctic Ocean, the Northwest Passage (NWP) stretches through an archipelago of islands in Canada's northern territories through the Alaskan North Slope and Bering Strait, where the US and Russia share a maritime border. Between the two coastal corridors, the NSR is more navigable with a higher average temperature and more ice-free days of the year. In 2020, Russia announced a record number of 88 ice-free days, which has implications for future trade and commerce in the region.[2]

From Bastion to "peaceful cooperation"

During the Cold War, the High North was of strategic importance to NATO for two reasons. The first was that it represented the shortest distance between the USSR and United States, the two major nuclear superpowers. This put it on the flight path of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Secondly, the ice sheet and harsh weather conditions created cover for submarines. Both features still apply today. The Soviet Union maintained three areas (bastions) of defence in the area around the Kola Peninsula, the Barents

[2] *Northeast Passage Opened 88 Days Setting New Arctic Record*, Maritime Magazine, https://maritimemag.com/en/northeast-passage-opened-88-days-setting-new-arctic-record/ [14.06.2022].

Sea, and the Sea of Okhotsk. To access Atlantic waters, the Soviet fleet had to pass through the shallow waters of the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap (GIUK). This was an area where NATO focused ISR efforts on monitoring Soviet naval and submarine activities. As a result, the High North became highly militarized.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1991, the country's military, which had drained the economy of resources for decades, fell into disarray. Given Russia's volatile political and economic transition in the 1990s, its military was neglected for the better part of the decade until an independence movement in Chechnya gave it a new-found purpose. Because the close of the Cold War also ended (temporarily) Russia's rivalry with the West, there was no need for either side to continue investing and maintaining Cold War level defensive postures. NATO Allies' defence spending fell significantly and their presence in the High North receded.

With reduced tensions, the region became a space for dialogue and cooperation through the Arctic Council (AC) – a platform created by the Soviet Union's last General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev. The AC was intended to address environmental challenges through scientific exchange and collaboration for search-and-rescue operations.[3] Founded in 1996, the organization is currently made up of member states and indigenous groups located in the Arctic region. They are joined by observer states and organizations.

[3] K. Åtland, *Mikhail Gorbachev, the Murmansk Initiative, and the Desecuritization of Interstate Relations in the Arctic*, Cooperation and Conflict, vol. 49, no. 3, SAGE Publications, Sept. 2008, pp. 289-311.

As a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, AC members have boycotted the council meetings currently chaired by Russia.

Nascent regulatory environment

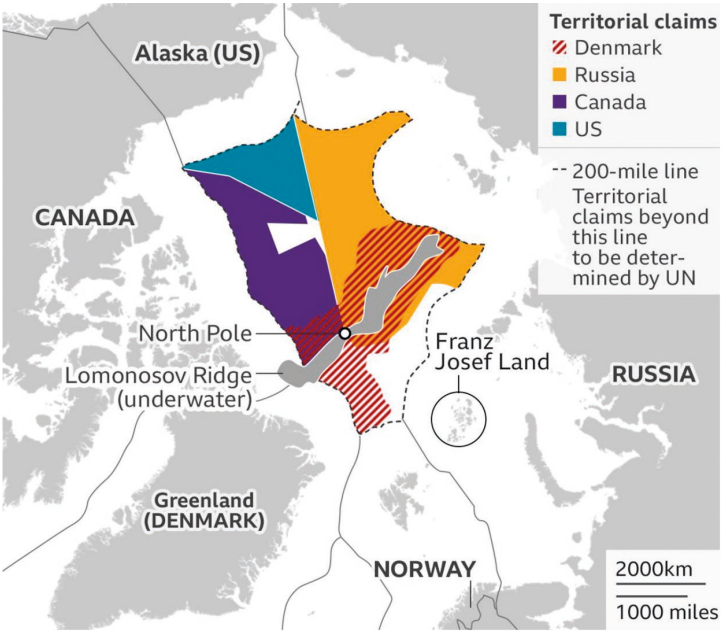
From the 1990s until the early 2010s, the High North was largely sheltered from political tensions and great power competition. While the AC is still the primary platform of engagement for Arctic states, regulatory ambiguity, territorial disputes, climate change, and commercial opportunities have brought about increased competition among Arctic states and, since 2014, tension with Russia in particular.

The regulatory framework in place is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), which went into effect in 1994. Accordingly, states have control of their territorial waters as Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) extending 200 nautical miles from the coast. Additionally, "if a continental shelf extends beyond these 200 nautical miles, a state has the right to explore and exploit natural resources of the shelf."[4] Beyond the 200-mile line lie international waters with freedom of navigation. Despite all Arctic littoral states subscribing to UNCLOS, points of conflict have lingered. The first is maritime border disputes. For example, until 2010, the maritime border between Norway and Russia had remained unresolved spanning back to WWII. Until June 2022, Denmark and Canada had a similar ongoing dispute over Hans Island. The second is Russia's implementation of the rules. Russia insists that vessels traveling through international waters over its professed continental

[4] J. Larsonneur, *Security Challenges in the High North*, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 016DSCTC21E, October 26, 2021.

shelf must receive permission from Russia and allow a Russian representative aboard the vessel during the journey.

There is also a disagreement among Arctic states on the area covered by their continental shelves. Canada, Russia, Norway and Denmark have filed claims of their subsea territory and have agreed to settle disagreements through the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), but these claims remain unsettled as depicted in the following map.



Source: University of Durham, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Denmark, BBC.

For commercial purposes, the delineation of the continental shelf has implications for drilling rights of the vast

hydrocarbon fields in the region. As the ice shelf recedes due to global warming, these fields will become accessible, and consequently, more attractive to exploit from a commercial perspective. Territorial claims will also impact fishing in the region, which is likely to become more lucrative as changes in the water temperature impact fish migration patterns, drawing more fish to the region.

Russian developments since 2014

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine fundamentally changed the geopolitical landscape in Europe, and the ripple effects of this event will be felt around the world in the years to come. The first invasion began in 2014 when Russia illegally annexed Crimea and began destabilizing Ukraine's territorial integrity, supporting separatists in the Donbas region. This was a "watershed" moment that changed NATO-Russia relations substantively. When compared to NATO's Eastern Flank, the Northern Flank has been calm with continued dialogue and cooperation taking place between Arctic Allies and Russia. At the same time, Russia has raised the level of military activity and overall tension in the High North since 2014 with a proliferation of military exercises and by re-establishing a permanent military presence.

Even before 2014, Russia was expanding its footprint in the Arctic but this was focused on commercial development. The impacts of global warming were already being felt prior to 2014. The rising prices of oil and gas generated greater interest in expanding industrial projects in the Barents Sea and the NSR shipping route. Yet Russia's Arctic strategy was still cooperative in nature. For example, Russia and Norway resolved a long-standing maritime border dispute in 2010,

and Western companies such as ExxonMobil and Statoil were still invited to join Russian-led business ventures.[5]

After 2014 however, Russia's approach changed, emboldening its military posture and returning to abandoned bases in the region.[6] Nearly 50 abandoned Cold War stations have been reopened in addition to newly constructed facilities such as the showcase northernmost base at Nagurskoye.[7] The changing military posture has come in two forms, in the maritime and air domains. Immediately following Russia's takeover and annexation of Crimea, Allied forces in the region recorded more frequent sightings of Russian bombers and fighters who pushed the boundaries of international air space, often crossing into Allied and neutral partners' (Finland and Sweden) airspace. The 2017 naval doctrine provided context to the increase maritime presence by articulating Russia's intentions to build a modern naval force, one that would dominate the Arctic.[8]

Signalling the growing importance of arctic maritime defence, Moscow recently upgraded the Northern Fleet (NF) to a "military district", a status the NF has not held since the Cold War.[9] A key goal of maritime investment is to ena-

5 A. Staalesen, *No More Shtokman Development*, The Independent Barents Observer, https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2019/06/no-more-shtokman-development [14.06.2022].

6 M. Boulègue, *Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a "Low Tension" Environment*, NDC Research Paper, no. 4, July 2019.

7 K. Manenkov and V. Isachenkov, *Russia's Northernmost Base Projects Its Power across Arctic*, The Associated Press, https://apnews.com/article/arctic-europe-russia-business-technology-b67c5b28d917f03f9340d4a7b4642790 [02.08.2022].

8 D. Gorenburg, *Russia's New and Unrealistic Naval Doctrine*, War on the Rocks, July 26, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/russias-new-and-unrealistic-naval-doctrine/ [20.07.2022].

9 M. Humpert, *Russia Elevates Importance of Northern Fleet Upgrading It to Military District Status*, High North News, https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-elevates-impor-

ble Russia to project power to both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. In order to achieve this, Russia has invested in new submarines, ports, and icebreakers to the Northern Fleet. Notable examples are a new Borei-II class ballistic missile submarine (Knyaz Oleg), the Kazan Yasen-M guided missile submarine (K-561), and the refurbished Oscar-class Belogorod (K-329) capable of delivering long-range nuclear torpedos (Poseidon).[10]

As during the Cold War, the Arctic is a strategic region for nuclear weapons. Not only does it represent the shortest distance for delivery of a nuclear payload between the United States and Russia, it is also the gateway for submarines to deliver ballistic missiles through the Arctic, Atlantic, and Pacific oceans. For this reason, Russia's maritime reconstitution has focused on submarines that can carry these missiles. Additionally, Russia plans to add 13 icebreakers to its fleet of already 40 strong, the largest in the world.[11] Unlike submarines, icebreakers have a dual-use role to play. While they are integral for securing scientific and commercial activities (resource extraction and transportation), icebreakers also contribute to naval military operations.

With respect to air defence, in 2015 Russia consolidated its forces under the command of the Northern Fleet. The centralization of the Arctic command structure has allowed Russia to perform larger and more complex operations. Complementing the maritime advancements, Moscow has rebuilt abandoned Soviet-era airfields and installed new

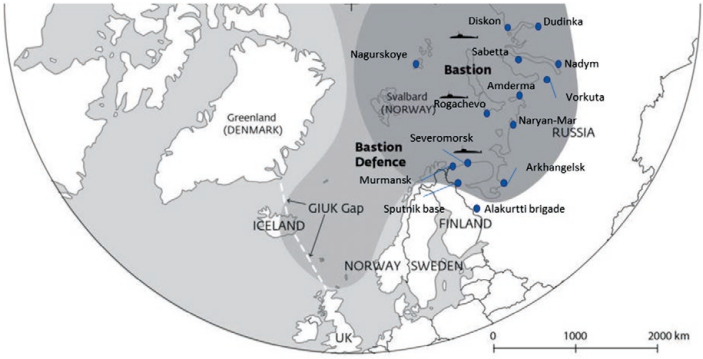
tance-northern-fleet-upgrading-it-military-district-status [02.08.2022].

10 J. Kjellén, *The Russian Northern Fleet and the (Re)Militarisation of the Arctic*, Arctic Review, no. 13, March 9, 2022, pp. 34-52, https://doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v13.3338 [07.07.2022].

11 Defence and Security Committee, 2021.

radar facilities. As a part of the bastion strategy of regional defence, Moscow has also brought in new air defence systems including the S-300, S-350, and S-400.[12]

The following map shows the existing, reconstituted, and new facilities intended to secure Russian dominance in the High North and enable its bastion defences.



Source: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, FIIA Briefing Paper 259, November 2019; military facilities added by the author and updated in August 2022.

In tandem with the build-up of defence infrastructure in the Arctic, Russia has been conducting larger and more complex military exercises in recent years. Beginning with an unannounced snap exercise in 2015 that included 40,000 soldiers, 15 submarines, 40 ships and 100 aircraft, exercises have continued with annual Ocean Shield naval exercises.[13] While not focusing on the Arctic, the 2018 Vostok and 2019 Tsentr exercises incorporated an Arctic dimen-

12 Ibid.

13 A. Staalesen, *Russia's Newest Strategic Sub Shoots Torpedos through Arctic Ice*, The Independent Barents Observer, https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2022/05/russias-newest-strategic-sub-shoots-torpedos-arctic-waters [02.08.2022].

sion. The most recent Umka-21 exercise, which took place in March 2021, included ballistic missiles in the exercise to demonstrate the offensive strike capabilities of the Northern Fleet's submarines.[14]

Russian strategy

Russia's current Arctic security strategy was revised in 2020 with the release of The Basic Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic to 2035.[15] The document makes clear that Russia's priorities are to secure "sovereignty and territorial integrity", with a focus on the potential for future resource extraction from the vast hydrocarbon reserves of the Arctic, and to build up infrastructure for transportation via the NSR corridor.[16] Both hydrocarbon extraction and transportation infrastructure assume that the region will continue to experience warmer weather and a receding ice sheet, opening new commercial opportunities. The document also emphasizes the potential for military conflict in the region as a reason to build Russia's defence capacities. Prior to the release of the 2020 strategy document, President Putin signed a declaration stating that Russia would unilaterally require any non-Russian ships entering international waters along the NSR to receive permission from Moscow. This is in line with the combined goals of the Arctic strategy document: to exert ever more control over the

14 Ibid.

15 Team of the Official Website of the President of Russia, *Vladimir Putin Approved Basic Principles of State Policy in the Arctic*, President of Russia, http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/62947 [14.06.2022].

16 *Совет Безопасности Российской Федерации*, http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/economic/Arctic2035/ [14.06.2022].

region and to thwart future encroachment by other states. When compared to the previous Arctic strategy document released in 2013, the most recent version is notably different with the inclusion of military and defence priorities. The strategy also appears to explain Russia's resurging presence and military build-up in the region.

Another point of concern for Arctic Allies, and potentially for NATO as a whole, is Russia and China's deepening cooperation since 2014. In response to US and EU sanctions after the annexation of Crimea, Russia implemented an economic and security reorientation toward China (and away from Europe). The process began with showcase joint venture projects in the energy sector, including the Power of Siberia pipeline and Yamal LNG projects. The former connects Russian natural gas supplies in Yakutia to Chinese markets. The latter is an Arctic LNG facility on Russia's Yamal Peninsula using shipping lanes of the NSR. Both are intended to bring Russian energy supplies to China (and global markets in the case of Yamal LNG) while making Russia less dependent on Europe for natural gas exports. They also bring China further into the Arctic. As an observer to the Arctic Council, China reinforced its intentions to be an Arctic actor with the release of the Arctic Policy in 2018. The document outlines the NSR as a "Polar Silk Road" (PSR) and defines China as an "Arctic neighbour".[17] While China's interests in the region are primarily economic, there are signs that this may change in the future. Russian-Chinese military and security cooperation have deepened since 2014, with the clearest example

[17] *China's Arctic Policy*, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm [14.06.2022].

being the Vostok military exercise in 2018. While Vostok took place primarily in Siberia and the Russian Far East, in 2021, Russia and China conducted their first military drills in the Arctic.[18] Despite growing bilateral cooperation in the Arctic, Russian leadership are still cautious about a Chinese presence in the region. Moscow aims to dominate the NSR and China's PSR stands directly opposed. For Russia, cooperation with friendly states in the Arctic is fine as long as, in the end, Moscow calls the shots.

NATO's return to the High North – in deeds more than words

Russia's invasions of Ukraine, both in 2014 and in 2022, have fundamentally changed the European security landscape. While the primary threat remains on NATO's Eastern Flank (not to mention terrorism and instability in the South), climate change, a resurgent Russia in the Arctic, and great power competition are driving Allies and NATO to rethink their approach to the Northern Flank.

Over the past decade, Russia has increased its presence in the Arctic, driven by a desire to control and exploit commercial opportunities. Russia has also laid the groundwork to defend its territory and, eventually, to project power. The approach is a familiar one. Russia is incrementally reconstituting its bastion defence infrastructure, but the scale and military presence are today still dwarfed by the USSR.

The real danger is that tensions elsewhere could spill over into the Arctic and jeopardize what little cooperation

[18] R. Weitz, *Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises: Past Progress and Future Trends*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2021.

remains. A militarization of the region could also have detrimental environmental impacts through the construction of facilities, release of harmful carbon and toxic gases from minerals extraction, and greater commercial traffic. Given the shortest distance (for ICBMs) between Russia and North America is over the Arctic Ocean, Moscow's introduction of nuclear exercises presents challenges for NATO and the Allies' nuclear deterrence calculations.

While there is good reason for improved NATO surveillance, expertise, and preparedness, this does not necessitate a High North strategy reminiscent of the Cold War. Instead, it makes sense to lay the foundation for NATO to project power in the future if and when it is needed. This has been NATO's approach since 2014, in cooperation with, and led by, the Arctic Allies.

Recent events also present opportunities. Russia's actions have united the Alliance and its partners in unexpected ways. The two Nordic states who were previously close partners in the region will soon join NATO. Secondly, concern over reactions to a greater NATO presence in the High North are now overshadowed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's antagonism toward the West. Simply put, Russia has no friendly Arctic neighbours left. In the meantime, Canada's position is changing from opposition to a NATO presence in the region to growing openness. This will afford NATO new possibilities in the future.

Despite growing tensions, the High North is nevertheless a region of relatively low tension between the Allies and Russia and presents an opportunity to maintain some dialogue with Russia. The primary platform for cooperation is still

the Arctic Council. It remains to be seen whether this will continue to be the case after the members' boycott period.[19]

Conclusions: Russia's return to the Arctic

Any hopes of shielding the Arctic from geopolitics were effectively dashed when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Even before the invasion, however, there were signs that the Arctic was heating up driven by climate change and Russia's growing military presence in the region. Before 2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea, the Arctic Council was the dominant multilateral forum for international interactions. Since 2014, the region has experienced a crescendo of Russian military activity that includes reopening abandoned facilities and constructing new ones. This infrastructure is designed to put pressure on the Allies and NATO to keep out by reinforcing and outwardly extending the limits of Russia's anti-access and areal denial (A2/AD) bastion. The number, size, and complexity of Russian military exercises is also a clear sign of Russia's militarization of the region. Moscow's actions are guided by policy and, in this respect, recent strategy documents on the Arctic, military, and national security attest to the priority Moscow assigns to the region.

If Crimea and the events of 2014 were a watershed moment in NATO-Russia relations, they also motivated the Allies to respond, cautiously, to Russia's aggressive posturing in the High North. Over the past eight years, the Arctic

[19] G. Dickie, *Russian Officials Call Arctic Council Boycott 'Regrettable'*, Reuters, March 4, 2022, sec. Europe, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-officials-call-arctic-council-boycott-regrettable-2022-03-04/ [10.06.2022].

Allies have expanded their presence and deepened cooperation both with each other and the Alliance. NATO too has returned to the High North in deeds more than words with exercises such as TRJE18 and the formation of JFC Norfolk with a focus on the north. Given the expertise, knowledge, and national interests of the Arctic Allies, it makes sense that these states continue to lead activities with NATO in their backyard. However, the merits of a full-scale NATO return to the High North are still unclear. For now, there is no reason to change the current approach, one that is led by the Arctic Allies and flexible to changing circumstances. Whether NATO publicly announces a strategy for the High North is less important than ensuring that the Alliance improves monitoring capabilities, especially around the GIUK gap, and establishes a nimble and responsive presence.

Disclaimer: The views expressed here are entirely those of the author and do not represent the views of NATO or the NATO Defense College.

Chapter 4

Alexander Lanoszka

China: A New Player on NATO's Northern Flank?

In concluding the 2019 NATO Summit in London, the Alliance issued a declaration that asserted that "China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance." This statement may be indicative of how hard it is for NATO to reach a consensus on China and whether its assertive rise in international politics poses a general security concern to the North Atlantic community. Yet this statement may also genuinely encapsulate how some countries within the Arctic Circle – a geographical region entirely omitted in the 2019 London declaration – feel about China, too.

China offers opportunities insofar as it could provide the capital investment that can help further develop the region, especially as climate change might render certain waterways – most notably, the Northern Sea Routes – more useable for commercial shipping. However, China presents

a challenge, if not a threat. As an authoritarian state with major international ambitions, it feels that it has certain prerogatives in the region and so, could coerce Arctic states into hosting some sort of Chinese presence. Because of the linkages that it has developed with Russia, China's engagement in the region may be more than opportunistic – it could try to use that partnership as part of a larger global strategy to secure more resources that it can then use for its own political projects elsewhere.

This essay will discuss China and its potential impact on NATO's so-called Northern Flank – that is, the region broadly conceived as spanning Scandinavia as well as the waters of the Arctic Ocean and the Norwegian and Barents Seas. It will outline how China has positioned itself vis-à-vis the Arctic region, with attention also paid to the ties that China has cultivated with Russia. This essay will then review how China has related to Arctic countries in advancing its own strategy and interests. Thereupon, it will discuss how China might come to relate to the Northern Flank given Russia's renewed offensive against Ukraine since February 2022, and other regional developments.

China as an Arctic player?

A simple glance at the global map would lead any naïve observer to conclude that China has no stake in the Arctic. China is much closer to the equator. The shortest distance between China and the Arctic is 900 miles, with Beijing being about four times that distance from the North Pole

itself.[1] Yet these considerations have not prevented China from asserting itself as a "near-Arctic state" and drawing up an official Arctic strategy in January 2018, making it the first regional strategy that Beijing has developed for a part of the world where it is not located.[2] This strategy appears innocuous enough: its emphasis is on scientific exploration, resource development, and commercial shipping. After all, if climate change means a further warming of the planet and more melting of the polar ice caps, the Northern Sea Route could open and be far more accessible, thereby cutting dramatically the time it takes for maritime trade to pass between ports in Northeast Asia and those in Northern Europe. Accordingly, as part of its Belt Road Initiative, China announced the "Polar Silk Road" project in 2018, so as to co-develop with Russia a network of shipping routes through the Arctic.

The region is also replete with extensive resources, especially in areas adjacent to the northern Russian coasts. Minerals like coal, iron ore, zinc, lead, and various precious metals are abundant. Major reserves of oil and gas can also be found in the region. An oft-cited estimate by the United States Geological Survey assesses that "about 30% of the world's undiscovered gas and 13% of the world's undiscovered oil may be found there, mostly offshore under less than 500 meters of water", with much of that natural gas found

1 B. S. Zellen, *China and the "Near-Arctic": An Opportunity Lost Over 150 Years Ago*, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, September 5, 2019, https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2019/09/05/china-and-the-near-arctic/.

2 *China's Arctic Strategy*, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.

in Russia.[3] Accordingly, the Arctic seems bountiful in key resources. Having access to them could, therefore, advance China's economic prosperity.

Nevertheless, these minerals and hydrocarbon resources are not easy to extract. Overheads are significant and the economics underpinning Arctic investment are dubious.[4] The shale revolution has created high opportunity costs while parts of the energy sector are embracing renewables as well as sustainable production and consumption. Indeed, the Arctic remains a very difficult area in which to operate, even with warmer temperatures and melting ice caps. Traversing the Arctic remains highly capital-intensive, with the waters often choppy and difficult to navigate.

These constraints might help to explain why the Arctic region has not become the "wild west" it is often purported to be, whereby the Arctic states – Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States – are supposedly racing for resources, with China using its growing partnership with Russia to seize what it can. This popular image of Arctic competition is only partly accurate. To use Timo Koivurova's words, "orderly development" is also an apt description that takes into account Arctic states' willingness to abide by their international legal commitments and to use international fora to address what disputes they have, even if a body like the Arctic Council lacks any legally

[3] D. L. Gautier et al., *Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas in the Arctic*, Science, vol. 324, 2009, no. 5931, pp. 1175-1179.

[4] L. Lindholt, S. Glomsrød, *The Arctic: No Big bonanza for the Global Petroleum Industry*, Energy Economics, vol. 34, 2012, no. 5, pp. 1465-1474.

binding authority.[5] Adding to the region's complexity are the considerations that countries might have with respect to local ecological conditions as well as the welfare of local Indigenous populations. This complexity in turn raises the costs of taking extra-legal actions that directly undermine Arctic cooperation. As such, non-Russian Arctic states have been reluctant to involve NATO in polar affairs. Hence, the Arctic gets no mention whatsoever in either the 2010 Strategic Concept or the 2019 London declaration. The High North did receive its first mention in the 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué, but only vaguely in reference to "necessary, calibrated, and coordinated activities in support of the Alliance's security interests."[6]

China thus presents "opportunities and challenges" with respect to the Arctic. On the one hand, China has the potential of providing the much-needed capital investment useful for developing Arctic infrastructure. On the other hand, China is not geopolitically neutral – it is an authoritarian, great power that has ratcheted up its domestic political repression in recent years. As one Brookings Institution report observed, China speaks with two voices – an externally-facing discourse and an internally-facing one – that reflect this very duality. Foreign-facing texts benignly stress science, development, and cooperation. However, leader speeches, domestic media, official and research commentaries, and

5 T. Koivurova, R*ace to Resources in the Arctic: Have We Progressed in Our Understanding of What Takes Place in the Arctic?*, in: B. Evengård, J. N. Larsen and Øy. Paasche (eds.), *The New Arctic*, Springer, New York 2015, p. 195; D. C. Burke, *Diplomacy and the Arctic Council*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, QC and Kingston, 2019.

6 *Brussels Summit Communiqué*, NATO, June 14, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm.

government reports convey notions of China being a "polar great power", with the Arctic itself constituting a "new frontier" that has significance for national security and military competition.[7]

Adding to these security concerns is the fact that China has cultivated closer defence and military ties with Russia.

Although their alignment arguably traces back to the late 1980s, when Moscow began looking to Beijing's example for economic partnership, they have deepened their defence cooperation in the last two decades along multiple dimensions.[8] In the Arctic region, as noted, embodying their bilateral cooperation is the "Polar Silk Road." This broad initiative encompasses multiple projects that include the construction of an LNG terminal in the Kamchatka Peninsula and the 3,000-kilometre-long Power of Siberia pipeline, the plans for which predate the "Polar Silk Road."[9] The biggest project is the Yamal LNG megaproject in north-western Siberia, a project that began in 2013 and is sometimes cast as an exemplary embodiment of Chinese-Russian cooperation.[10] Yamal may be more exceptional than normal. As two observers write, "despite the apparent deepening of the bilateral relations, concrete results of these ambitious plans

7 R. Doshi, A. Dale-Huang and G. Zhang, *Northern Expedition: China's Arctic Activities and Ambitions*, Brookings Institute, Washington, D.C. 2021, pp. 8-9.

8 A. Korolev, *On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation*, Asian Security, vol. 15, 2019, no. 3, pp. 233-252.

9 *New Polar Silk Roads Discussed At The Arctic Circle Assembly*, Silk Road Briefing, October 19, 2021; G. Shao, *Russia opens Siberian pipeline to China as Beijing expands its influence in the Arctic*, CNBC, December 3, 2019, https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/04/siberian-pipeline-from-russia-to-china-polar-silk-road.html.

10 F. Lasserre, O. V. Alexeeva, *An Analysis on Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic in the BRI Era*, Advances in Polar Science, vol. 29, 2018, no. 4, p. 21. Pagination based on Research Gate pre-print.

are limited. Some joint projects were dropped, as China and Russia could not agree on the conditions of the deal, others are progressing very slowly and have an uncertain future. Mutual strategic mistrust and different understanding of the mechanics and final goals of the Sino-Russian partnership in Beijing and Moscow seem to undermine the scale and the rhythms of their cooperation in the Russian Arctic."[11] Nevertheless, the reality of their cooperation, imperfect as it may be, has geopolitical importance.

Scandinavian responses to China

China's growing involvement in the Arctic has impinged upon the interests of the Scandinavian countries, who themselves have had to wrestle with the two-faced character of China's Arctic démarches. Norway historically has had friendly ties with China, even giving the latter its first permanent access in 2003 with the establishment of the Arctic Yellow River Station by the Polar Research Institute of China on Svalbard. Bilateral trade expanded between the two countries in the following years. However, in 2010, after the Oslo-based Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese writer and imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo, Beijing retaliated by suspending high-level talks, breaking off negotiations for a new bilateral free trade agreement, imposing a ban on Norwegian salmon, and tightening visa restrictions on Norwegian citizens. Norway's efforts to mend ties with China – as with its support for China to receive

[11] Ibid., p. 29.

Arctic Council observer status – went unreciprocated for several years.[12]

Sweden, now a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner that openly seeks allied membership, allowed China to construct a satellite facility on its own territory in 2016. At that time, Swedish leaders were careful not to offend Chinese sensibility, but a 2017 kidnapping of a Chinese-born Swedish citizen in Thailand by China put stress on the bilateral relationship. Sweden sought to depoliticize the matter, but China's hardline approach continued, ultimately leading the Sweden Space Corporation to withdraw Chinese access to Swedish antennas. It also banned Confucius Institutes and denied Huawei the ability to develop 5G infrastructure.[13] According to the Pew Research Center, polls conducted show that Swedish respondents went from being 40% unfavourable towards China to 85% unfavourable between 2007 and 2020.[14]

Sweden and Norway are not unique. Finland, currently openly seeking NATO membership, had pursued a cooperative relationship with China in such a way that Chinese President Xi Jinping called their bilateral ties an "enduring friendship" in 2017 during his visit to Helsinki. A 2016 government report positively noted that "Finland intensifies its relations with China, especially in fields that interest Finland and are essential to the development of China."[15] Yet

12 R. Doshi et al., op. cit., pp. 20-21. China received observer status in 2013.

13 Ibid., pp. 18-20.

14 L. Silver, K. Devlin and Ch. Huang, *Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries*, Pew Research Institute, October 6, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/.

15 *Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy*, Prime Minister's Office Publications, Helsinki 2016, p. 23.

Finnish attitudes towards China soon became wary, with a 2020 report describing China as an "economic competitor and a systemic rival."[16]

Denmark and Iceland are not typically seen as part of the Northern Flank nowadays, but their Arctic interests deserve a mention. NATO member Denmark followed a similar path as Finland. In 2008, Denmark and China established a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that sought to expand their bilateral relationship, especially in areas relating to energy, infrastructure, and the environment.[17] Thereafter, China expanded its operations in resource-rich Greenland. Local authorities welcomed Chinese investment, with Chinese companies subsequently undertaking projects to develop zinc mines and other mineral deposits.[18] Nevertheless, Denmark has also cooled on China: it vetoed an attempt by a Chinese company to purchase a former U.S. military base in Greenland in 2016 and pushed back against another proposal from a Chinese company to build an airport there, resulting in its eventual withdrawal.[19] This latter proposal was especially worrisome because an increased Chinese presence could have posed a serious intelligence risk to the United States, not least because the Thule Air Base in Greenland

16 Quoted in: M. Puranen, J. Aukia, *Finland's China Shift*, The Diplomat, February 8, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/finlands-china-shift/.

17 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, *Denmark's Strategic Partnership with China*, https://kina.um.dk/en/about-denmark/denmarks-strategic-partnership-with-china.

18 Ch. Chen, *China's Engagement in Greenland: Mutual Economic Benefits and Political Non-interference*, Polar Research, vol. 41, 2022, no. 7706, http://dx.doi.org/10.33265/polar.v41.7706.

19 A. Mehta, *How a Potential Chinese-built Airport in Greenland Could be risky for a Vital US Air Force base*, Defense News, September 7, 2022, https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/09/07/how-a-potential-chinese-built-airport-in-greenland-could-be-risky-for-a-vital-us-air-force-base/.

is critical for providing early warning for North American missile defence. Iceland, however, bucks these trends somewhat. It signed a Memorandum of Understanding and a Free Trade Agreement with China in 2012 and 2013, respectively. It subsequently has hosted significant Chinese investment in geothermal energy.[20] Iceland's bilateral relationship with China has seen fewer tensions than other Nordic countries have seen in their dealings with it.

China and the Northern Flank in the years ahead

The European security environment has undergone profound change over the course of 2022. Russia's renewed military offensive against Ukraine on 24 February, and its associated brutality, prompted a major reconsideration of various countries' security strategies. The two Arctic states of Sweden and Finland, for their part, have now set themselves formally on the path towards NATO membership. Although Sweden and Finland already have cooperated extensively with NATO and several of its members in the defence realm, their official inclusion in the Alliance would consolidate NATO's presence in the Arctic. Indeed, although the Arctic Council has tried to compartmentalize and downplay security issues, Russia stands to be that organization's only member that is not part of NATO.

To be sure, 2022 has not been without challenges for China. It is experiencing mounting economic problems at home, especially given its collapsing real estate market,

[20] R. Tómas, *Iceland Helps China Implement Geothermal Energy*, Iceland Review, October 29, 2021, https://www.icelandreview.com/news/iceland-helps-china-implement-geothermal-energy/.

growing debt problems, and draconian COVID-free policies. Still, the question stands: how might China relate to the Northern Flank?

At least two observations are in order. The first is that China's room for manoeuvre will narrow along the Northern Flank as NATO members become more conscientious of the political challenge that China poses. Beijing's heavy-handed tactics with Norway and Sweden have contributed to a frosting of popular attitudes in the region. Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine may yet jolt European publics from their complacency about great power authoritarian regimes and their relative willingness to use military force to mount offensive operations. China does not have the capacity to operate militarily as far afield in the Arctic – a harsh environment that Arctic states themselves find challenging – but it could do so against Taiwan. Russia's war with Ukraine cannot simply be reduced to a struggle between democracy and autocracy, but the fact that China has only become more autocratic in recent years means that it will face even more scepticism in NATO capitals.

The second observation relates to China's alignment with Russia. Much has been made that these countries are "on the verge of an alliance" and that they have a like-minded approach in pressing their political revisionism against the liberal international order and those countries that they consider really to be their own, be it Ukraine or Taiwan. That said, although it has voiced support for Russia, China has abided to some extent by the sanctions that the United States and its Euro-Atlantic allies have imposed on Russia. It has reduced technological exports and even put on hold major projects that involved major energy investments in

Russia.[21] Sanctions have put at risk the involvement of Chinese firms working on the Arctic LNG 2 project in Siberia.[22] Precisely because China is currently experiencing various domestic challenges, it may be reluctant to offer much relief to its partner. As a result, Russia has a much smaller scope to step up hostile activities along NATO's Northern Flank than might have been the case had China been much more supportive.

What these two observations suggest is that the non-Russian Arctic states are well-placed to safeguard their own interests. That should not invite complacency on their part. Both China and Russia have interests that they wish to advance in the Arctic region. However, their political revisionism is now transparent and far less ambiguous than it has been in previous years.

21 Ch. Aizhu, J. Zhu and M. Xu, *China's Sinopec Pauses Russia Projects, Beijing Wary of Sanctions – Sources*, Reuters, March 28, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-chinas-sinopec-pauses-russia-projects-beijing-wary-sanctions-sources-2022-03-25/; J. Whalen, *China Cut Tech Exports to Russia After U.S. – led Sanctions Hit*, Washington Post, May 17, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/17/china-russia-tech-exports/.

22 O. Zhou, *CNOOC Sticks to Russia's Arctic LNG 2 Project, Will Continue Assessing Risks*, S&P Global, May 30, 2022, https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/033022-cnooc-sticks-to-russias-arctic-lng-2-project-will-continue-assessing-risks.

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Russia's renewed attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, constitutes the gravest threat to Euro-Atlantic security in decades. It has shattered peace in Europe and is causing enormous human suffering and destruction. Russia's unjustified and unprovoked war against Ukraine is also a tectonic change for NATO and its closest partners, including Sweden and Finland which are on their path to officially join the Alliance in the coming months. At the NATO Summit in Madrid (June 29-30, 2022), Allies concluded that Russia is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. Russia threatens Allies and partners to the East, South, and North. In fact, the Russian threat is to stay with us over the next decade and beyond. Moreover, at the Summit, NATO Allies concluded that rising strategic competition and advancing authoritarianism challenge the Alliance's interests and values.

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