



ARCTIC SECURITY BRIEFING PAPERS

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Pan-Arctic Military Cooperation: still the most reliable (and likely?) option

It is now seemingly routine for pundits and security professionals to warn of an impending militarized scramble for dominance over the lands, seas, and resources of the Arctic, with Russia enjoying a formidable advantage – all evidenced by the undeniable expansion of military facilities throughout the region. But it's not clear that the official West is buying it. The Americans have ratcheted up the rhetoric, but little else has changed. The 2019 NATO summit ignored the Arctic, and individual states like Canada and Norway are sticking with a more nuanced and restrained posture on Arctic security.

While the Kremlin no doubt welcomes any characterizations of Russia as a fearsome presence on the world stage, in the Arctic it insists that its increasingly robust armed forces and exercises are a practical and strictly defensive necessity. With a substantial civilian population and a critically important economic stake in the region, and a national identity that is heavily invested in the north, Russia cannot ignore the reality of an increasingly accessible Arctic – accessible to its own population and industry, to its northern neighbours, and also to friends and potential rivals from China and Europe and beyond.

For essentially the same reasons, the other four Arctic Ocean states (United States, Canada, Greenland/Denmark, Norway), all in NATO, are similarly led to assign a higher priority to northern defence, also recognizing that to be a practical necessity.

Part of the practical reality of the Arctic region is that it is one place where Russia truly is unrivaled as a regional power – and that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. The Russian armed forces have decades of Cold War operational experience in the Arctic, and the north is not for Russians the remote north, but is fully integrated into national life, including national security life. Globally, Russia is a much-diminished power (its current military spending is at the level of Germany and roughly a twentieth of NATO states collectively¹), but in the Arctic that imbalance is essentially reversed, but it is not by definition destabilizing.

Russian re-militarization in the Arctic now involves a string of some 30-plus military bases, many re-emerging from post-Cold War dormancy, that stretches from Anadyr-Ugolny and Provideniya across the Bering Sea from Alaska, around Russia's Bering Strait shoreline, along its Arctic coastline, extending into the Arctic Ocean through new and upgraded military installations on five major islands and archipelagos, and culminates on the Kola Peninsula. Those military sites run the gamut of isolated airstrips, infantry and artillery stations, radar and air defence installations, forward operating locations for fighter and bomber aircraft, ports and naval infrastructure, and finally the Kola naval bases which host more concentrated nuclear firepower than any other single location on the planet.²

All around wariness is an understandable and prudent response, but much of the analysis, including offerings in the lead up to and since the December 2019 NATO summit, ignores the massive global Russia/NATO conventional military imbalance in favor of the West, while insisting that forces in the region itself must be more balanced, typically advocating for a much more overt NATO operational presence in the Arctic.³ It's a posture that really belongs to the same strain of imprudence that has long privileged NATO's eastward expansion over the careful pursuit of Eurasian stability. It is notable, however, that in London, NATO leaders demurred. Their final declaration was silent on the Arctic, as had been the 2018 summit communique.

Notwithstanding Russia's expanding military presence, the Arctic remains well down the list of official worries for an alliance that faces a rather high wariness quotient these days – on its Baltic and southern flanks, the North Atlantic Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap, and, notably, a political flank that features growing internal challenges from both sides of the Atlantic. There are good reasons for the official silence and for questioning the more alarmist warnings about Russia's Arctic ambitions, and it's not just a matter of NATO having more immediate concerns elsewhere.

Even their critics recognize the legitimacy of the Russian forces' basic military missions in the Arctic: sovereignty protection, public safety (e.g. search and rescue), the defence of its northern resource assets, and enforcement support for a more robust regulatory infrastructure for the emerging Northern Sea Route that runs entirely through Russia's exclusive economic zone or territorial waters. Furthermore, a primary Kremlin interest in the Arctic is to avoid military confrontation in favour of promoting a stable security environment conducive to exploiting northern resources and to enticing much needed foreign investment and technology. In other words, military adventurism against neighbours does not fit Russia's basic Arctic game plan.

The degree to which Russia's Arctic military assets are seen as a threat to stability depends heavily on the context. Viewed in the global context (with places like Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria looming large), Russian intentions anywhere are automatically suspect in the West. Viewed in the context of the Arctic itself, suspicions should be, and actually are, mitigated by the reality of an ongoing tradition of Arctic cooperation, and wariness should also be eased by a recognition of the centrality of good governance in resisting Russian meddling and destabilization efforts.

As the Ilulissat Declaration⁴ affirms, Arctic cooperation and a political commitment to a rules-based order are real. Canada's "Arctic and Northern Policy Framework" acknowledges that "the circumpolar Arctic can and should continue to benefit from a deeply ingrained culture of international cooperation" (while also warning of "complacency"),⁵ and key Arctic states recognize that continuation of that cooperation accords with Russian interests.

Canada's Arctic foreign policy simply declares that "Canada does not anticipate any military challenges in the Arctic and believes that the region is well managed through existing institutions, particularly the Arctic Council."⁶ More recently, a Department of National Defence spokesperson is reported as reaffirming the current absence of a military threat, albeit while also emphasizing "growing international competition in the region."⁷ Even Norway, sharing a land border with Russia and facing the Russian Arctic brigade stationed a mere 30 kms from that border, continues to insist that it does "not consider Russia a military threat"⁸ – though it doesn't hesitate to characterize some Russian actions and current posture as worrisome.

The central role of good governance is a reminder of just how different the Arctic context is from that of other locations where Russia has intervened or interfered in independent sovereign states. All the non-Russian states of the Arctic are obviously led by highly stable and competent governments – free, in other words, from the kinds of internal weaknesses that Russia was and is able to exploit in places like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and even Turkey. Russian political and military adventurism threatens in contexts of local instability and dysfunction, but retreats in locations of solid, confident governance and strong national consensus. And, of course, that

points to a primary source of protection for territorial integrity and national security in the states of the Arctic – namely, good governance, domestically and regionally, that avoids the kind of disunity and dysfunction that create opportunities for foreign manipulation for nefarious ends.

There is, at the same time, no denying that legitimate national military roles do come with capabilities that could be turned to more threatening purposes. Fighter and bomber aircraft deployed to Russian Arctic locations for air and coastal defence operations certainly also convey threats to neighbours. And Russia's newest icebreaker is explicitly equipped for operations beyond ice breaking – it comes with combat capabilities that include electronic warfare systems, artillery, and the *Kalibr* cruise missile with a range of up to 2500 kms for anti-marine and land attack missions.⁹

It is also true that the military roles of NATO states carry the same dual capabilities. The US and NATO can install ballistic missile defence batteries in eastern Europe in the interests of defence, but from the Russian perspective, it pays to worry that those launchers for interceptor missiles could be re-purposed with missiles aimed at Russian targets. Indeed, Russia views NATO's northern engagements with the same suspicion that it views NATO's eastward expansion or NATO's deployments and accelerated patrols in Eastern Europe and the Baltics. The Russians are unlikely to forget that their four Arctic Ocean neighbors are all members of NATO and lay claim to the all-for-one principle of Article Five.

The key challenge for NATO states in the Arctic is thus to manage that foreboding NATO presence, to Russia, in ways that avoid adding to the escalatory pressures already present. Any constructive Arctic security policy needs to encourage individual Arctic states to focus their military developments on defensive territorial and sovereignty protection missions, on contributions to public safety through enhanced emergency response and search and rescue capabilities, and on support for region-wide cooperation toward those same ends.

American troops now in Norway,¹⁰ technically on rotation but practically on permanent deployment that ignores Norway's early Cold War assurances that foreign combat troops would not be stationed there,¹¹ are an example of the opposite. While that presence is at least in part a response to Russian infantry forces in the upper Kola Peninsula, its emerging permanence not surprisingly generates Russian wariness, raises tensions, and risks instability, even though Norway, the NATO member most directly affected if tensions rise in the Arctic, has an obvious and declared interest in holding on to the Arctic's rules-based order and tradition of post-Cold War cooperation and reducing tensions. There has been political opposition in Norway to the deployments, and Norway's Senior Arctic Official, Bård Ivar Svendsen, assured the opening session of the 2019 Arctic Circle in Reykjavik that, while it is important to address the geopolitical and security issues that emerge out of the profound changes in the region, the Norwegian objective

“is to not cause unnecessary tension. The current situation is that the Arctic is a peaceful and stable region. We will do what we can to contribute to continued peace and stability, and we do not see anything that goes to indicate that that will change significantly. Maintaining the stability and peace we have today is in the interest of all Arctic states” (emphasis added).¹²

NATO restraint and regional collaboration with Russia's far superior conventional capabilities are in a sense the only realistic options, since there is, after all, no regional Arctic military balance with Russia available (and, more to the point, no one is seriously trying for that kind of regional balance). Icebreakers, for example, while not a good basis for comparing relative military strengths, are nevertheless indicators of the level of priority assigned to a surface naval presence in the region. It will take the US at least a decade to double its current fleet of one heavy icebreaker to a total of two.¹³ Compare that with Russia's six-plus heavy icebreakers, some nuclear powered, its three dozen-plus medium and light icebreakers, and its plans for almost a dozen more,¹⁴ and you get a sense of how little importance the Americans assign to icebreakers in support a conventional naval presence in the Arctic.

The Pentagon also attaches little urgency to expanding its conventional military capacity in the Arctic. Even though it characterizes Russia and China as Arctic competitors, the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, with its record-breaking \$738 billion defence budget, does not commit any new funding for Arctic operations to respond to those declared Russian and Chinese challenges.¹⁵ Furthermore, the enhanced conventional Arctic naval roles that American military planners envision involve cooperation with the Coast Guard and such missions as preserving commercial operations, protecting the environment, and securing sovereignty¹⁶ – concerns about Russian and Chinese threats are more rhetorical than operational.

Much of Russia's Arctic presence, notably the nuclear and strategic naval forces based on the Kola Peninsula, is obviously countered by American strategic forces far from the Arctic. Russia's northern conventional forces, focused on regional operational roles, will not be "balanced" by the regional operations of the Arctic's NATO states – nor should that be the latter's objective. Canada's Arctic military capabilities, for example, are not now and won't in the future be a response to Russian military installations on the other side of the Arctic Ocean. Canadian military requirements are determined by domestic sovereignty, law enforcement, and public safety needs, not by threats to national defence posed by Russia's forces. Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institute argues that Arctic military operations "should not be viewed principally as a matter of rivalry with Russia (or China or anyone else),"¹⁷ but focused on building a credible emergency response and law enforcement capacity.

National military deployments should be responsive to domestic defence and public safety needs in the region. The Arctic continues to be a zone in which no state insists that it is facing a state-based military threat – leaving defence forces to focus on aiding civil authorities, reinforcing sovereignty, border security, emergency response/search and rescue, domain awareness (especially air and maritime), peacetime air and maritime surveillance and control.

The situation in the European Arctic is of course different from that in the North American Arctic. Significant Russian forces are virtually on the borders of Norway and Finland, and in both of those cases close monitoring of Russian activity is unavoidable. But Norwegian or Finnish forces on their own will not counter or deter Russian military adventurism. Broader conventional and strategic forces outside the Arctic are the defence and deterrence forces that Russia must contend with in its security relations with Norway and Finland.

There are serious political differences/conflicts that bedevil the Russia/NATO relationship, notably regarding Ukraine, but it does not follow that those differences create Arctic security challenges to which NATO must respond,¹⁸ or that those conflicts are amenable to Arctic-based influences. NATO is part of what restrains Russian behaviour in the Arctic, not by means of a military presence in the Arctic itself but by virtue of the global strategic dynamic. Indeed, a more overt NATO operational presence in the Arctic would be taken as a provocation that would undermine the tradition of cooperation and would very likely encourage more confrontational, rather than cooperative, behaviour in the Arctic by Russia.

Ratcheting up military competition in the Arctic has no redeeming virtue, and the Arctic's NATO states seem to have well-warranted reticence about going there. It is thus time for commentators and editorialists to focus on the real challenge, and that is to encourage further development of pan-Arctic coast guard¹⁹ and military arrangements that foster cooperation and facilitate joint operations as needed to support public safety and emergency response, law enforcement, and environmental sustainability, while respecting national sovereignty. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute's David Bercuson has recently concluded that "the only Arctic nation that has the capacity to monitor and support...[Arctic] shipping is Russia." His frank assessment is that "neither Canada nor the United States have much to offer in the event of a maritime disaster in North American Arctic Waters"²⁰ – all the more reason to work at nurturing the region's still viable impulse to cooperate and to focus on aid-to-civil-authorities roles.

A minimalist but constructive initiative is the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable. Canadian Major-General William Seymour commended it to the House of Commons Defence Committee during a 2018 appearance.²¹ The Roundtable is a regular gathering for the mutual exchange of information and exploration of the Arctic security and threat environment. Gatherings of Arctic chiefs of defence have had similar functions. The problem is that since 2014 these forums have excluded Russia, and that's an exclusionary tactic that is no way to run a region like the Arctic. Trying to marginalize Russia in a region that it dominates will not work, and refusing to engage Russia on security matters in the Arctic will do nothing to change realities in Ukraine, Crimea, Georgia, and elsewhere.

The Arctic would clearly benefit from a forum dedicated to addressing regional security concerns, coordinating military relations within the region, and facilitating mutual cross-border assistance in support of public safety – a mechanism for ongoing regional engagement on the requirements for strategic stability and public safety cooperation in a region that, by general consensus, requires both. The nature, scope, and institutional home of such a forum will continue to be debated, but in the meantime, Arctic stability would be served by an immediate resumption of direct, inclusive engagement among the region's military commanders and security policy-makers.

Notes

¹ *Military Balance 2019*, International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, January 2019, 119(1), --. 513-518.

² Ernie Regehr and Amy Zavitz, *Circumpolar Military Facilities of the Arctic Five* (September 2019), The Simons Foundation.

<http://thesimonsfoundation.ca/sites/default/files/Circumpolar%20Military%20Facilities%20of%20the%20Arctic%20Five%20-%20updated%20September%202019.pdf>

³ Mathieu Boulègue, "NATO Needs a Strategy for Countering Russia in the Arctic and the Black Sea," *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 02 July 2018. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/nato-needs-strategy-countering-russia-arctic-and-black-sea>

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⁴ In the Ilulissat Declaration, first issued in 2008 and reaffirmed in 2018, the five Arctic Ocean states attest to their ongoing commitment to the legal framework, notably the Law of the Sea, that governs the Arctic and to the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims.

<https://www.arctic-report.net/product/859/?lang=>; <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/ilulissat-declarations-10-year-anniversary>

⁵ Government of Canada, “Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: Safety, security, and defence chapter,” <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1562939617400/1562939658000>

⁶ Government of Canada, “Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy” (site last modified 12 May 2017). https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/arctic-arctique/arctic_policy-canada-politique_arctique.aspx?lang=eng

⁷ Shane Miller, “As Russia and China Increase Arctic Activities, Is Canada Keeping Up?” *The Epoch Times*, 31 December 2019. https://www.theepochtimes.com/as-russia-and-china-increase-arctic-activities-is-canada-keeping-up_3188962.html

⁸ Siri Gulliksen Tømmerbakke, “Ambassadors’ panel with seven countries met in Bodø: - We do not consider Russia a threat, we consider it a concern.” *High North News*, 04 April 2019. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/we-do-not-consider-russia-threat-we-consider-it-concern>

⁹ Brenden Cole, “Russia unveils ‘unique’ weaponized icebreaker as it eyes Arctic oil and gas,” *Newsweek*, 28 October 2019. <https://www.newsweek.com>

Ivan Papanin (Project 23550) Class Arctic Patrol Vessels. <https://www.naval-technology.com>

¹⁰ In June 2018 the Government of Norway agreed to double Americans stationed in Norway from 350 to 700 – with American forces reaching that level in October 2018. The soldiers are stationed at Værnes in Trøndelag and Setermoen in Indre Troms. Gerard Taylor, “350 US troops in place in Troms,” *Norway Today*, 3 October 2018. <https://norwaytoday.info/news/350-us-troops-place-troms/>

¹¹ Bill W. Williams, “Norway to Host 700 American soldiers,” *Norway Today*, 16 August 2016. <https://norwaytoday.info/news/Norway-host-700-american-soldiers/>

¹² Siri Gulliksen Tømmerbakke, “This is Why Finland and Iceland Want Security Politics in the Arctic Council,” *High North News*, 22 October 2019. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/why-finland-and-iceland-want-security-politics-arctic-council>

¹³ The operational U.S. polar icebreaking fleet currently consists of one heavy polar icebreaker, Polar Star, and one medium polar icebreaker, Healy. “In addition to Polar Star, the Coast Guard has a second heavy polar icebreaker, Polar Sea. Polar Sea, however, suffered an engine casualty in June 2010 and has been nonoperational since then.” In 2013 a decision was taken to add three new heavy icebreakers, the first of these is now in the design phase and “is scheduled to begin construction in 2021 and be delivered in 2024.”

“Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress,” 20 December 2019, Congressional Research Service, Report R41153. <https://crsreports.congress.gov>

¹⁴ The US Coast Guard puts the combined total numbers of Russia’s Arctic icebreakers at 46 with another 11 under construction. Major Icebreakers of the World. The US Coast Guard Office of Waterways and Ocean Policies. <https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Assistant-Commandant-for-Prevention-Policy-CG-5P/Marine-Transportation-Systems-CG-5PW/Office-of-Waterways-and-Ocean-Policy/#>

¹⁵ Melody Schreiber, “The latest US national defense bill expands focus on Russia and China in the Arctic,” *Arctic Today*, 19 December 2019. <https://www.arctictoday.com/the-latest-u-s-national-defense-bill-expands-focus-on-russia-and-china-in-the-arctic/>

¹⁶ Melody Schreiber, “New Senate legislation would require a greater US Navy presence in the Arctic, more collaboration with Coast Guard,” *Arctic Today*, 24 December 2019. <https://www.arctictoday.com/new-senate-legislation-would-require-a-greater-u-s-navy-presence-in-the-arctic-more-collaboration-with-coast-guard/>

¹⁷ Michel E. O’Hanlon, “Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe” (Brookings Institution Press, 2017), p. 103.
https://www.brookings.edu/uploads/2017/06/full-text_beyond-nato

¹⁸ Siri Gulliksen Tømmerbakke, “This is Why Finland and Iceland Want Security Politics in the Arctic Council,” *High North News*, 22 October 2019. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/why-finland-and-iceland-want-security-politics-arctic-council>

¹⁹ The Arctic Coast Guard Forum includes the coast guard of all eight Arctic states and promotes “safe, secure, and environmentally responsible maritime activity in the Arctic.” The coast guards have held two live exercises, in 2017 and 2019, to test and model international cooperation in search and rescue operations.
<https://www.arcticcoastguardforum.com/>

²⁰ David J. Bercuson, “Russia set to dominate the Arctic unless Canada acts quickly to address shipping concerns,” *National Post*, 28 November 2019. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/david-j-bercuson-russia-set-to-dominate-the-arctic-unless-canada-acts-quickly-to-address-shipping-concerns>

²¹ Maj-Gen William Seymour, Testimony, Standing Committee on National Defence Number, 01 March 2018. <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/meeting-85/evidence>