

DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

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NATO and the Arctic

Recurring speculations about an expanded role for NATO in the Arctic – a discussion recently dampened by NATO's welcome declaration that it does not anticipate such a role – reflects continuing uncertainty regarding an appropriate institutional framework for cooperative security arrangements in the Arctic. That NATO is proposed at all is a classic case of politics, especially security politics, abhorring a vacuum.

The question of a regional security framework for the Arctic remains unresolved because the Arctic Council specifically abjures security matters, and that in turn leaves a political, though not a security, vacuum. There is no real security vacuum largely because the prevailing Arctic security posture is currently one of cooperation. The problem is that it is cooperation unsupported by either institutional formality or operational detail and thus there are legitimate concerns about sustainability, with old and some current East-West suspicions and rivalries serving as the primary source of uncertainty.

While there is a serious public safety gap in the region (notably in emergency services), there is now broad consensus that the northern affairs of the eight Arctic states are not encumbered by military threats. At the same time, some military actions within the region still recall old patterns of hostility that obviously do little to help build confidence in a stable future.

Recycling old rivalries

Take Russia's March 2013 simulation of air attacks on Sweden.¹ It was a routine training exercise that took place entirely in international air space, but with flights routed between the Swedish Baltic Sea Islands of Oland and Gotland,² the operation embarrassed the Swedes inasmuch as they were unable to scramble their own jets in time to meet or monitor the Russian "invaders" – it was NATO that managed to scramble fighter aircraft out of Lithuania, though also not in time to monitor the Russian exercise.³ While the Swedish Foreign Minister downplayed the incident, saying Russia's security threats are not in Sweden and that "the Russian military has neither the will nor the capacity to attack Swedish territory,"⁴ it clearly was not an episode conducive to building long-term trust or to entrenching an Arctic security cooperation regime. Russia is a formidable military presence in the Arctic, and while the core of that presence (including extensive nuclear forces) is in support of strategic objectives outside the region, such incidents are a fairly vivid reminder of the pervasiveness of the Russian presence and that there are really no regional standards or arrangements to constrain its, or any other state's, military activities.

The Russians, in turn, might well point to Operation Cold Response as similarly unhelpful. Cold Response⁵ is a major annual Norwegian-led exercise with significant participation from NATO states. In 2012 the fifth such exercise included operations in Swedish territory and involved "more than 16,000 sailors, soldiers, airmen, and Marines representing 15 nations." The focus of the exercise was "to improve and practise capabilities in high intensity and multi-threat operations during cold weather conditions." Russia is the only northern entity that could mount the kind of "high intensity" rival operation envisioned by the scenario, and of course it is not included in the annual exercises, leading some critics to charge that "old twentieth century divisions are being re-ignited" by Cold Response-type exercises.⁸

Military exercises are training missions that employ fictional scenarios to put personnel and machines through reasonably realistic operations. They are obviously not declarations of hostilities, but the fact that Russian training employs anti-Western scenarios while NATO training includes anti-Russian constructs demonstrates the extent to which the absence of pan-Arctic security models means that military training defaults to familiar, even if outdated, models focused on strategic competition. Training exercises that recycle old rivalries are hardly emblematic of the kind of "new thinking" that must finally guide cooperative security arrangements in the Arctic.

It is this paucity of cooperative security models that produces the political vacuum that inevitably produces a steady flow of ideas and proposals intended to fill it – much of it, to understate the point, unhelpful.

A good example is the ambitious, which is not to say realistic, idea that the United Kingdom position itself as the "strategic pivot" for a security arrangement encompassing the "Wider North." Put forward in the *RUSI Journal*, the context is set with warnings of the strategic assertions of China and especially Russia in the Arctic and northern Europe: "Russia's speedy resurgence after roughly two decades of relative weakness is already contributing to the alteration of the strategic balance in and around northern Europe." Both Russia and China are said to be "watching the Arctic with keen eyes," hardly news in the case of Russia, given how much of the Arctic actually *is* Russia, and both are said to be "eager to extract the maximum possible concessions from other powers so that they can consolidate their respective footholds in the region." It thus falls to the UK, according to the author, to lead efforts to "prevent any form of European dominion by the creation of counter-coalitions to break down and dislocate any hegemonic drive." More details are offered, especially descriptions of the needed expansion of UK "military capabilities in the northern proximities," including the retention of a British nuclear deterrent force.

The Atlantic Council of Canada joins this anti-Russia posture with a recently published commentary that proposes a similarly ambitious northern agenda for the UK.¹⁰ The strategic intent, says the author, would be to form a "mini-NATO" for northern Europe and thus "to limit Russia's military influence in the High North." The Heritage Foundation in the US bemoans the absence of NATO in the Arctic. "While NATO sits on the sidelines, others are trying to elbow their way into the region" – notably, says the author, the Chinese.¹¹ There is a call for NATO-Russian cooperation, but the focus is to warn that "Russia is increasingly militarizing the Arctic" and to call on the US "to push the Arctic up NATO's agenda."

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While such proposals for an expanded NATO presence in the Arctic are dominated by outdated Cold War suspicions and rivalries, NATO itself has shown rather more prudence, and realism, than some of its boosters. Notably, the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, while heavily focused on setting out conditions and arguments for NATO action outside the areas of its own membership, and while desperately looking for a credible contemporary role, includes no reference to the Arctic. And this Spring, following a visit to the region in northern Norway, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen described the Arctic as a "hard environment" that "rewards cooperation, not confrontation." Calling for continued cooperation, he made the clear statement that "NATO has no intention of increasing its presence and activities in the Far North." 12

Getting beyond the alliance model

The north is not now plagued by real or perceived military security threats, making it a propitious time for thinking about a new security framework for the Arctic. A January 2012 CSIS paper, bringing what it calls an American perspective to the discussion, does just that and proposes "A New Security Architecture for the Arctic." Although NATO "emerges as a natural candidate" for anchoring an Arctic security architecture, the study ultimately concludes that NATO is "not the right security framework for the Arctic," noting particularly Russian opposition:

"Russia, which covers 50 percent of the circumpolar area, is very skeptical of – if not outright hostile to – an increased security role for NATO in the Arctic. In November 2011, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov offered the clearest articulation yet of Russia's position vis-à-vis NATO in the Arctic: Decisions about the conduct of affairs in the Arctic are taken by the 'Arctic' countries, that is, those who are members of the Arctic Council, ...any problems should be solved on the basis of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea and the decisions of the Arctic Council. There are no reasons for drawing NATO into Arctic Affairs."

O.R. Young, writing in the Polar Journal argues that while the Arctic is developing an impressive array of agreements and cooperative arrangements that together amount to a "regime complex", ¹⁴ that regime still "lacks…a guiding discourse that can provide an overarching cognitive framework". ¹⁵ In fact, however, Arctic security discourse has gone some way toward affirming the common understanding, as Rasmussen put it, that the Arctic rewards cooperation. Similarly, it is also broadly understood that increased military transparency and shared situational awareness are essential, not only to a stable and secure Arctic, but also to advancing public safety and the cooperative search and rescue operations needed to implement the Arctic Council agreement on SAR. One element of that emerging overarching framework is the recognition that the paradigm of competitive military alliances does not contribute to a better understanding of how to approach Arctic security.

A February 2013 Conference at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace came to a similar conclusion about military alliances in the Arctic: "While NATO needs to be aware of changes in the Arctic," says the report, "the consensus was that an alliance is not needed to deal with Arctic issue. Rather, it should be up to the Arctic states to develop the necessary cooperation, taking into account the interests of non-Arctic states." It's true, of course, that as long as NATO continues to exist and retain Article Five, it will feel compelled to maintain some level of coordinated military capability in the Arctic related to the five NATO countries that have land and/or sea territory above the Arctic Circle. The NATO Secretary General made the same point when rejecting increased NATO activity there, noting that Norway, like all other Alliance members, has an expectation that its collective defence arrangements cover all the territory of NATO member countries,

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including that in the high north. The pressing point is to ensure that such a commitment does not undermine the pursuit of effective pan-Arctic approaches to security.

Efforts to cast NATO as the institutional framework for Arctic security inevitably revive east-west suspicions in a region that is actually going to some effort to set aside the legacy of the Cold War. Furthermore, there can be little incentive for either Russia or NATO states in the Arctic to manage their regional security relationships in the region through NATO when that would involve cooperating and coordinating with a large number of non-Arctic states. And even if an Arctic sub-group was to be created within NATO, Sweden and Finland would still be excluded in a Russia/NATO format – and if Russia has its way, that is not about to change. At the 2013 summit meeting of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council¹⁷ Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said that "any expansion of NATO to include Sweden and Finland would upset the balance of power and force Russia to respond."¹⁸ In other words, the appropriate forum for security cooperation in the Arctic needs to be the common creation of the member states of the Arctic Council.

NATO's Arctic region members do not themselves have a common approach the role of the Alliance in Arctic security issues. Norway, Denmark, and Iceland turn more directly to NATO, but they also actively seek to do so without unnerving Russia. By some accounts, NATO's demurring on direct engagement on Arctic matters is due in large measure to Canada. Since 2009 Canada has consistently opposed any NATO Council attention to Arctic issues, ¹⁹ and Canada's Northern Strategy document makes no reference to NATO. ²⁰ Similarly, the US does not see NATO having a significant role in the Arctic. Boundary and Sea route issues are not going to be pursued via NATO, although the NATO-Russia Council is the operational home for a cooperative traffic control system in the Arctic. ²¹

NATO was once designed, as its first Secretary-General famously put it, to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down. Well, you can't keep the Russians out of the Arctic, and though some still want to try to keep them down, in truth, Arctic security is ill-served by the military alliance model. Military competition and defence are at best irrelevant to Arctic security, and at worst, agents of insecurity.

Exploring options

While old military habits and old security prejudices die hard, they do change and some guidance may still be taken from the Murmansk Initiative of the former Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev. That initiative did not begin with a focus on military relationships, working to ameliorate military tensions so that cooperation in other areas of state-to-state or bloc-to-bloc relations could flourish. Rather it was cooperation in non-military matters that allowed military tensions to be seen in a new light. Kristian Åtland of the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment explains the significance of Gorbachev's initiative (which proposed five non-military policy initiatives and three military/arms control initiatives) in this way:

"By calling attention to the need for East-West dialogue and cooperation on 'soft' (non-military) security challenges such as environmental degradation and economic decline, the Soviet Leader was instrumental in defusing tensions and overcoming the 'hard' (military) security concerns that in the preceding four decades had been standing in the way of trans-Arctic cooperation."

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It's a process that continues. As international cooperation, especially through the Arctic Council, advances in the pursuit of the social, economic, environmental, and political dimensions of human security, as well as in public safety and accountable governance, the military security concerns will be further mollified. The Barents Euro-Arctic Council, a forum for intergovernmental cooperation on a broad range of cultural, political, and economic cross-border issues concerning the Barents Region, becomes another important example. The BEAC meets at the Foreign Ministers level and includes Norway, Finland, Russia and Sweden. Much of its work is done through a broad array of working groups addressing issues as varied as economic cooperation, forestry, customs cooperation, environment, transportation, search and rescue, health, youth, indigenous people, energy, culture, tourism, and more. Following the 2013 summit meeting of the BEAC states, Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg said that "the trust that has been built between the countries in the region has developed into unique cross-border cooperation that now furthers security, prosperity and growth in the region."

A paper from the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute proposes a similar North American Arctic Region "from Alaska to Greenland" that would involve subnational governments and sub-regional actors.²⁴ As the author puts it: "Dialogue and knowledge sharing between localities and borders, between policymakers, northerners and stakeholders from Alaska to Greenland, have the potential to empower local decision makers to take the lead in planning their futures in a decentralized North and to take innovative steps to create and strengthen local economies and economic cooperation throughout the region." And heightened cooperation in non-military affairs should help to further steer military capacity, training, and basic orientation away from competitive and toward cooperative arrangements in the region.

The February Carnegie conference concluded that:

"...providing effective security in the region will continue to put a premium on cooperation among the Arctic States. Participants suggested that developing shared programs to deal with accident prevention and environmental protection can serve as effective military confidence building mechanisms between nations and as the means to build long-term productive patterns of cooperation."²⁵

The cooperation that is expected among national military forces in the region is especially important for timely surveillance and shared situation awareness. Enforcement of laws and regulations obviously requires and follows from such awareness, making transparency, knowledge of what is happening and who is operating in the region, a prerequisite to reliable compliance. The most recent meeting of Arctic Chiefs of Defence indicates both intention and some progress on these coordination and cooperation fronts: "Improving information exchange among militaries is one key initiative" that the Chiefs undertook. Given the vastness of the Arctic and the lack of surveillance systems to monitor all areas, "upgrading data exchange mechanisms is regarded as fundamental to sharpen rapid responses to situations such as natural or manmade disasters." They agreed to "work toward a common goal in which all countries adhere to the Maritime Safety & Security Information System (MSSIS), a near real-time data collection and distribution network operated by 60 countries that shares information sourced from the marine tracking Automatic Identification System, coastal radar units and other maritime-related monitoring systems." Such cooperation, they agreed, would

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allow all the militaries in the region to "work with a common situational picture when collaborating on cross-border tasks in the Arctic."

The maritime system is based on the particular capabilities that individual states bring to the effort, a model that is likely to prevail generally in the Arctic – as opposed to the acquisition of a collective capability through jointly owned and operated military or coast guard assets managed through a pan-Arctic institution. But a system based on the assets and policies of autonomous states – perhaps not preferable, but likely – clearly requires an institutional framework to facilitate "effective political and military processes for coordination as well as plans and procedures for reacting in a crisis situation."²⁶

There may be some existing institutional forms that are comprehensive – that is, that include all Arctic states and have a mandate to address mutual security concerns – and that could be possible candidates for managing such coordination. Among these is of course the OSCE. Although it also includes many states not within the region – states that obviously do not have the same immediate stake in Arctic security – there may still be ways in which a sub-unit within OSCE, made up of the eight Arctic states, could host a forum for security cooperation in the Arctic.

As CSIS points out, "no one institution or framework meets the growing needs of the Arctic and effectively brings all state and nonstate actors together in a coherent structure." There are processes underway that may be gradually becoming institutionalized. The Arctic Council Search and Rescue agreement speaks to common situational awareness needs, thus monitoring (involving military assets and defence responsibilities) might gradually be coordinated through the Council (even though it currently eschews security matters). The annual meetings of chiefs of defence staff of the Arctic Council eight might also gradually evolve into a more formal security coordination body. The Defence commanders of the Arctic eight have agreed to focus on ways to enhance security cooperation throughout the Arctic and explore ways of deploying military resources so that they can better support civilian and cross border needs²⁸ -- although, a defence chiefs framework seems especially ill-suited to drawing in sub-state and non-state actors.

Among the CSIS proposals is one for the creation of "an integrated structure for coordinating information and the operations of Arctic nations' coast guards." It points to existing Pacific and Atlantic Coast Guard Forums and proposes an Arctic Coast Guard forum made up of the eight Arctic Council members, leaving open the possibility of involving non-Arctic states with capacity and willingness to assist in Arctic search-and-rescue operations. The Arctic Coast Guard Forum "should focus first and foremost on information sharing yet should also seek to develop methods of cooperation in support of the Arctic Council's search-and-rescue agreement and future international oil spill response agreement." The study also notes the interests and capabilities of private sector actors in the Arctic (for example, icebreakers owned and operated by mining and oil firms) and proposes their active engagement into Arctic Coast Guard operations. ²⁹

Another proposal is for the US Air Force Base in Thule, Greenland be converted into an Arctic centre for security coordination.³⁰ As such it could support an Arctic Coast Guard Forum and be used for training and exercises.

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As Åtland reminds us, cooperation and reduced military tensions in the Arctic or elsewhere are not guaranteed to be irreversible. Until cooperation and mutual security are bolstered by durable institutional forms, the possibility of reversal remains a concern. One thing is clear, any effective pan-Arctic security arrangement cannot be built on the same NATO-Russian divide that has characterized decades of East-West rivalry and military competition and that has also frustrated the very kind of Arctic cooperation that is now understood to be essential. The institutional form that will finally emerge to support cooperative security in the Arctic is obviously not yet clear. It is a process that requires ongoing attention, more research, and certainly much more expert and public discussion.

Endnotes

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