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Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Arctic States, China, NATO, and the EU

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Contents

This study was commissioned by the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence to advance the centers ongoing analysis of the official narratives and related political values of eleven actors with high relevance in the Arctic, including the eight members of the Arctic Council, two international organizations NATO and the EU, as well as China. We adopt the narrative-focused research framework employed in the previous report on **Arctic Narratives and Political Values in the Arctic States, China, and NATO**, which we carry forward from mid-2019 to late 2022.

Our approach and methodology focus on discourse analysis of official external and internal messaging by the aforementioned states, NATO and the European Union. This includes analysis of policy statements, political speeches by senior state officials, press releases, and state media outlets. Our project team has language competency in English, Russian, Chinese, Norwegian, and French, and we have leveraged our network of European experts to ensure appropriate coverage of sources in other relevant languages.

We discern political values using official statements on the Arctic, news media coverage (including coverage by state media), and academic literature. The latter source is important to glean other experts' insights, as well as a source of insight into 'legitimising' narratives produced by academics when they interpret and project official communications (particularly in Russia and China).

For each of the eight Arctic states, China, NATO, and the EU, we have followed the structure of previous NATO StratCom COE Arctic studies to produce analytical narratives on each actor's self-perception of its status and role, how it conceptualises regional governance and security, and its core regional priorities or preoccupations (e.g., Indigenous Peoples, relations with other Arctic states, economic development, and climate change mitigation or adaptation).

At the end of this report, we identify key findings, highlight change and continuity in strategic messaging since the last report, and offer specific lessons for strategic communications, including proposed coordinated messaging that NATO might share with its member states to protect and advance the interests of the Alliance and its partners.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, has sent shockwaves across the Arctic. While Russia has not signalled any similar aspirations for military conquest in neighbouring Arctic countries, the world has witnessed further spill-over of international tensions into circumpolar affairs, and the Kremlin has shattered its credibility as a peaceful, law-abiding actor. Maintaining peace and stability in the Arctic, within a world of heightened uncertainty, has forced NATO Allies to re-evaluate threats, strategic responsibilities, and opportunities for deeper collaboration as Arctic partners.

Resurgent competition between the great powers and the war in Ukraine have reinforced how Russia and the other seven Arctic states are not like-minded and are engaged in competition for international legitimacy. Russia's brutal further invasion of Ukraine prompted the other Arctic states to expand their diplomatic and economic sanctions against the Kremlin. In effect, this means that Russia's actions outside the Arctic have undermined the regional Arctic governance regime. The most direct Western actions have been to suspend cooperation with Moscow in multiple regional governance forums involving Russia, including the Arctic Council, the Euro-Barents Arctic Council, and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum.[1] On the economic front, several Western business interests have withdrawn their investments in Northern Sea Route (NSR) developments and key oil and natural gas projects in the Russian Arctic. While the Kremlin seeks to compartmentalise the region from any further spillover effects of its war in Ukraine, Russia has weaponised its energy and food exports as tools of geopolitical coercion, while at the same time insisting that it will turn to 'non-Arctic states' (particularly China) to forge ahead with its regional development plans. With Russian President Vladimir Putin noting in December 2022 that ending the war 'may be a lengthy process',[2] few experts expect that geopolitical conditions will facilitate the resumption of 'normal' circumpolar affairs involving Russia anytime soon.

These storylines intersect with growing concerns about a region in the midst of profound change. A variation on the following narrative appears at the start of most Arctic books and reports these days. First is climate change, which is melting sea ice, destabilising Arctic terrestrial ecosystems, complicating ways of life for Indigenous Peoples, and opening access to resources and shipping routes. The latter conjures images of a rush for untapped energy and mineral resources, unsettled maritime boundaries in the central Arctic Ocean, as well as a flood of surface vessels transiting through previously ice-covered waters to exploit shorter distances between ports—and representing new security risks or threats to the sovereignty of coastal states. Non-Arctic state interests in the region have grown exponentially, challenging traditional patterns of Arctic state control over regional affairs. Headlines often use language suggesting a 'battle for the Arctic' or a 'new polar gold rush' or a 'new Cold War' in the circumpolar North. Dystopic images ensue, portending catastrophic climate or environmental effects, unbridled strategic competition, and even conflict.

For the eight Arctic states—Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the US—these narratives about an imperilled Arctic have significant effects. They also influence how non-Arctic States (such as China) and international organisation (e.g. The EU and NATO) perceive the region and articulate their roles and interests therein. In turn, popular concerns propelled by media coverage feed expectations of what states should do to respond to a changing physical and geopolitical environment. For leaders framing official statements, the stakes are high—and the domestic and international politics of Arctic affairs are inescapable.

In August 2022, while touring the Canadian Arctic, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg published an article in the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* pointing to the myriad new threats facing the region. While the Arctic has traditionally been one of low tension, Stoltenberg writes, a rapidly warming climate and rising global competition have created a new dynamic whereby authoritarian regimes 'are stepping up their activities and interest'. Both Russia and China are now more present and, in the case of Russia, 'clearly willing to use military intimidation or aggression to achieve their aims'.[3]

The Importance of Narratives

Narrative analysis is a useful approach to analysing national discourse and the communication efforts of governments and other international actors. Applying this method to the Arctic allows us to look at the different ways that governments communicate their political intent in the region and explore the various social, historical, and value constructs used to express this. This systematic review of the specific narratives promoted by the eight Arctic states, China, NATO, and the EU enables better understanding of how these countries perceive themselves, other actors, and the Arctic as a geographical whole. This, in turn, paints a more meaningful picture of Arctic political discourse, shedding light on the perceptions that each country is trying to promote about itself and how it may behave accordingly.

In strategic communications, narratives are also designed to provoke a particular behavioural or attitudinal change in the audience. Breaking down the narrative in terms of its value, character, and directive is therefore extremely important, as it reveals which type of behaviour is being actively promoted and which behaviour is being discouraged. This project takes the perspective that, for governments to function effectively, communication needs to be placed at the heart of planning. Communicating political intent therefore requires the careful framing, crafting, and dissemination of narratives. For this purpose, it is necessary to be aware of existing narratives, and where they may conflict with or undermine one's own message.

Methodology

This study analyses the official narratives and related political values of eleven Arctic actors, including the eight members of the Arctic Council, China, NATO, and the EU. This project builds upon previous research conducted by the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence: its 2018 report on **Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Russia, China and Canada in the High North**,[4] which assessed the narrative strategies of three key Arctic nations; and its June 2020 report on **Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Arctic States, China and NATO**.[5] Since this study is a continuation of the previous research, it follows the same structure and methodology. To ensure consistency with these previous publications, we focus our non-Arctic state analysis on China and the EU—a reflection of the prominent place that both actors hold in the narratives produced by NATO and the eight Arctic states.

Like the earlier projects, this research is 'narrative-driven' in that it focuses on particular narratives communicated by each actor and provides a qualitative interpretation of the sources. This research understands 'narrative' to mean 'story' or a particular discursive construct in which the audience internalises a specific lesson and moral message. This narrative analysis focuses on official government resources, including Arctic-related strategies, press statements, speeches, and official policy statements. Sources were selected by subject matter experts through keyword searches of online resources,

with a particular focus on the period from mid-2019 to fall 2022. This was deliberate so that the insights drawn in this study can be compared and integrated with previous research results. Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ensuing war in that country have had a transformative spillover effect on Arctic affairs, which is reflected in the report.

Narrative analysis was conducted by identifying first the key issues emphasised in each source, and then the main narratives used to frame the issues. 'Strategic frames' were then coded and categorised according to national power dimensions. The narratives were then divided into three categories: 'self'—the identity each country is building for itself in the Arctic; 'region'—the vision that country projects upon the region; and 'others'—how that country frames its relations with other actors in the Arctic.

Canada

Introduction

Canada perceives the Arctic to be central to the country's national identity, prosperity, security, values, and interests. The Canadian North and other Arctic regions span about 40% of Canada's territory and are home to an estimated 200,000 inhabitants, more than half of whom are Indigenous. This sparse population and vast territory have made Canadian sovereignty an ongoing preoccupation of federal governments for generations, and this concept (often used interchangeably with security against foreign threats) continues to factor heavily in defining Canada's Arctic policies. Concurrently, Canada's Arctic narratives have a strong domestic focus which influence the agenda that the country seeks to set for the circumpolar region as a whole.

Although Canada has often adopted language downplaying immediate conventional military risks to its Arctic territory over the past decade, Russia's war in Ukraine has prompted changed language about the future threat environment. 'While the Arctic has long been characterized by stability and cooperation, access to natural resources, impacts on northern Indigenous populations, concerns around national sovereignty and international security, and environmental considerations are intersecting in ways not previously seen', Canadian Minister of National Defence Anita Anand noted in May 2022.[6] Maintaining peace and stability in the Arctic, within a world of heightened uncertainty, has forced Canada, the US, and their NATO Allies and partners to re-evaluate threats, strategic responsibilities, and opportunities for deeper collaboration.

As part of the federal government's commitment to a safe, secure, and well-defended Arctic and North, Canada's *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (ANPF, released in September 2019) provides a strategic vision to guide government policy-making activities and investments over the next decade and beyond. The framework emphasises the need to nurture healthy families and communities, while creating jobs, fostering innovation, and growing Arctic and northern economies. The Government of Canada pledges to support science, knowledge, and research that is meaningful for communities and for decision-making while facing the effects of climate change to support healthy ecosystems in the Arctic and North. Furthermore, the ANPF seeks to restore Canada's place as an international Arctic leader while advancing reconciliation and improving relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. The ANPF concludes with a promise that the government will have ten years to 'translate its goals and objectives into reality' and advises that federal-territorial-provincial and Indigenous partners will co-develop solutions and new governance mechanisms.[7]

In Canada, the emergence of new defence and security threats to the North American homeland is reigniting important discussions about where the Canadian Arctic fits in global and regional contexts. For example, there is a growing awareness of how perceptions about increasing accessibility to and in the region drive other Arctic and non-Arctic states to pursue economic and military interests that may not align with those of Canada. Although the immediate conventional military threat to Canada's Arctic is assessed as low, the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) continue to carefully monitor the changing Arctic security environment and are focused on exercising and enhancing domain awareness and presence in the region.

Self

The Arctic as Important International Crossroads

In its Arctic policy statements, Canada has consistently committed to asserting its international leadership to ensure that the Arctic remains a region characterised by peace, stability, and low tension, where states can exercise their sovereign rights and responsibilities.

Canadian defence policy has evolved over the past 20 years to articulate a nuanced approach to Arctic security that spans the defence-security-safety mission spectrum. *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, Canada's defence policy released in 2017, describes the Arctic region as 'an important international crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security meet'.[8] Changing physical and human geographies, new economic opportunities, and the heightened interest of foreign state and nonstate actors are generating new security dynamics in the North American Arctic. Nevertheless, Canada's Arctic strategies and operational planning documents over the past decade have emphasised comprehensive security, with the military playing a supporting role to civilian departments and agencies on most security and safety issues, such as pollution prevention, illegal immigration, poaching, environmental or humanitarian disaster, and law enforcement.

Most expert commentators in Canada no longer suggest that threats to Canada's North originate from Arctic conflicts (as political scientist Rob Huebert articulated in his 'sovereignty on thinning ice' thesis in the 2000s), but instead point to the spillover of a great power competition into the Arctic and the threat posed by strategic delivery systems that would transit the region to strike targets in the North American heartland.[9] In this context, ballistic and cruise missiles, submarines, and glide weapons are Arctic challenges because they pass through the region, but they have nothing to do with climate change opening access or competition over continental shelves or Arctic resources. Instead, these threats are best conceptualised through a wider international lens, and the Canadian Arctic is best considered a region in which to deploy sensors, ships, and aircraft as part of a layered defensive ecosystem that would deter potential adversaries and defend the North American homeland as a whole.

In September 2019, Canada released its ANPF, which provides overarching direction to the priorities, activities, and investments of the Government of Canada in the Arctic to 2030 and beyond. Co-developed with Northerners, territorial and provincial governments, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, it replaces Canada's 2009 *Northern Strategy* and 2010 *Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*.[10] Emphasising that the region is 'well known for its high level of international cooperation on a broad range of issues', and 'despite increased interest in the region from both Arctic and non-Arctic states', the international policy chapter commits to continued multilateral and bilateral cooperation in the Arctic. It confirms the Arctic Council as the 'pre-eminent forum for Arctic cooperation' complemented by the 'extensive international legal framework [that] applies to the Arctic Ocean'. There is also language proclaiming how Canada 'is firmly asserting its presence in the North'. The overall message projects Canada's domestic priorities into the international sphere, emphasising the desire for regional peace and stability so that 'Arctic and northern peoples thrive economically, socially and environmentally'.[11]

The ANPF's 'Safety, security, and defence chapter', written by the Department of National Defence, highlights threats to Canada's Arctic security and sovereignty, reinforces commitments made in the country's 2017 defence policy, and further articulates that Canada's cooperation in circumpolar affairs must not result in complacency at a time of increased interest and competition from Arctic and non-Arctic states in the region.[12] The federal government made the commitment in its April 2022 budget to update the country's current defence policy,

as well as pledging more than CAD 8 billion in new funding over five years to better equip the CAF and to strengthen Canada's contributions to the country's core alliances: NATO and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). Based on recent policy statements, Ottawa plans to acquire a range of maritime, land, air, and space capabilities with Arctic applications; to prioritise partnerships, including with Indigenous Peoples and Northerners, to advance shared priorities; to invest in research and development; and to urgently modernise Canada's contribution to continental defence through NORAD. Announcements through to early 2023 have affirmed that a significant amount of these promised investments will have an Arctic dimension.

Canada, Climate Change, and Arctic Stewardship

Canada's 2017 defence strategy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, suggests that, with climate change opening new access to the region, 'Arctic and non-Arctic states alike are looking to benefit from the potential economic opportunities associated with new resource development and transportation routes.' Rather than promoting a narrative of inherent competition or impending conflict, however, the policy highlights that 'Arctic states have long cooperated on economic, environmental, and safety issues, particularly through the Arctic Council, the premier body for cooperation in the region. All Arctic states have an enduring interest in continuing this productive collaboration.'[13] Accordingly, the drivers of Arctic change cited in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* emphasise the rise of security and safety challenges rather than conventional defence threats, confirming the comprehensive approach to Arctic defence and security that has become well entrenched in Canadian defence planning over the last decade. Tensions arise between commentators who espouse an either/or binary between 'hard' and 'soft' security, or those who suggest that military investments place Northern 'soft' and Southern Canadian 'hard' security agendas in conflict.[14]

The war in Ukraine has shifted the conversation to place heightened focus on the perceived need for more Canadian investments in Arctic military capabilities. While traditional concerns about Arctic sovereignty are still present in mainstream media and parliamentary coverage, they are generally associated with great power competition and perceived threats to Canada's territorial integrity and maritime jurisdiction. General Wayne Eyre, the chief of the defence staff, told the House of Commons defence committee in October 2022 that the Far North does not face an immediate threat, but that 'in the decades to come, that threat, that tenuous hold that we have on our sovereignty, at the extremities of this nation, is going to come under increasing challenge.' Pointing to Russia and China as competitors, he used the war in Ukraine (which has seen civilian infrastructure demolished by Russian missiles and drones) as justification for investments in a more robust Arctic air defence system.[15]

'Nothing About Us Without Us': The Roles of Northern Indigenous Peoples

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has emphasised the central importance of Indigenous Peoples in the Canadian political space since coming to office in 2015. 'No relationship is more important to me and to Canada than the one with Indigenous Peoples', Trudeau highlighted in his publicly-released mandate letter to each of his Cabinet ministers in November of that year. 'It is time for a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation, and partnership.'[16] This spirit continues to guide the Northern agenda, with the phrase 'nothing about us without us', highlighting that Northern leaders

expect to be involved in every discussion and decision involving the Arctic agenda.

On 16 December 2021, Trudeau's mandate letter to Minister of National Defence Anita Anand directed her to "work with the United States to expand cooperation on continental defence and Arctic security." She was also mandated to coordinate with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Northern Affairs, and other partners 'to defend Arctic sovereignty and implement the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework to create a future where Canada's Northern and Arctic residents, especially Indigenous Peoples, are thriving, strong and safe'. Accordingly, she was instructed to 'ensure that Indigenous and Northern communities are meaningfully consulted on its development and benefit from this work'.[17] These consultations with Indigenous and Northern Territorial representatives have begun through several domestic forums, with announced investments to enhance the capabilities of the CAF to detect, deter, and defeat aerospace threats in the Arctic and the North generally framed as also providing new opportunities to deepen National Defence's northern, territorial, and Indigenous partnerships as the various parties seek to advance shared objectives.[18]

Minister Anand's public comments frequently reinforce her 'resolute' commitment to work with Indigenous Peoples and cooperate 'towards meaningful reconciliation' through smart investments that benefit both the Defence Team and Indigenous rightsholders. In the case of continental defence, this includes new infrastructure and economic opportunities that benefit Northern and Indigenous communities. An indication of what this looks like came in January 2022 when the Department of National Defence (DND) announced that Nasittuq,[19] an Inuit company, had won the seven-year, CAD 592 million maintenance contract to operate and maintain the current North Warning System.

> Russia's unjustifiable and unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine emphasizes the importance of the rules-based international order. Challenges like the security implications of climate change, show that the Arctic is not immune to the evolving strategic landscape. Through leadership and meaningful collaboration with our allies and partners, including Indigenous communities, we will ensure the safety, security, and prosperity of the Arctic, and the wellbeing of those who live there.
>
> The Honourable Anita Anand, Minister of National Defence (May 2022)[20]

Canada's three territorial premiers also have seized on changing Arctic geopolitics and North American defence and security agendas to argue for investments in the Territorial North. In March 2022, Nunavut Premier P.J. Akeeagok began his first statement of the legislature's winter sitting by addressing Russia's further invasion of Ukraine and its potential implications to the Arctic. 'Nunavut stands with the people of Ukraine and Ukrainians around the world', Akeeagok proclaimed, pledging humanitarian aid and asserting that Russia threatens 'the stability of Arctic communities and the continuity of Arctic co-operation'.[21] He also co-authored a letter with his counterparts from Yukon and the Northwest Territories calling for a meeting with Prime Minister Trudeau in light of the Russian invasion, which cited Russia's expanding Arctic infrastructure, icebreaker fleet, and military presence in its Arctic as causes for concern. The following month, the three territorial premiers met virtually with the prime minister and defence minister to plead their case for greater investment in the North as a way of reinforcing Canada's sovereignty and security.[22]

Region

An Area of Strategic International Importance

Canada believes that a rules-based order not only advances Canada's national interests but its global ones as well, offering opportunities to shape international agendas on climate change, contaminants, and other environmental threats with a global scope that have a disproportionate impact on the Arctic. Since 1996, Canada has consistently referred to the Arctic Council as the leading body for regional cooperation in the region. Preserving this role is a Canadian priority, and it has opposed overtures calling for an expanded Arctic Council mandate that would include military security. Instead, Canada typically champions initiatives that reflect its domestic priorities, and tends to promote an Indigenous agenda for the circumpolar Arctic that does not always resonate with other Arctic states where the Indigenous presence and voice are less significant politically.

The 'Safety, security, and defence chapter' of Canada's 2019 ANPF emphasises that 'while Canada sees no immediate threat in the Arctic and the North, as the region's physical environment changes, the circumpolar North is becoming an area of strategic international importance, with both Arctic and non-Arctic states expressing a variety of economic and military interests in the region.' It also cautions that 'as the Arctic becomes more accessible, these states are poised to conduct research, transit through, and engage in more trade in the region. Given the growing international interest and competition in the Arctic, continued security and defence of Canada's Arctic requires effective safety and security frameworks, national defence, and deterrence.'[23]

Canada and North American Defence

The US is Canada's 'premier partner' to fulfil its Arctic missions.[24] The White House's readout of the conversation between Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and President Joe Biden on 22 January 2021 emphasised the 'strategic importance of the U.S.-Canada relationship' and a mutual desire to 're-invigorate' bilateral efforts to advance an 'ambitious and wide-ranging agenda', including shared defence interests.[25] Trudeau's office offered more details, including the leaders' agreement 'to expand cooperation on continental defence and in the Arctic, including the need to modernize' the binational NORAD Command.[26] In a joint statement on 17 August 2021, the then Canadian Minister of National Defence, Harjit Sajjan, and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III highlighted the need to better integrate capabilities to maintain persistent situational awareness and understanding of potential threats to the continent, modernise command and control systems, and upgrade capabilities to deter (and, where necessary, defeat) acts of aggression against the Canadian and American homelands.[27]

The binational NORAD Command and the strong relationships fostered through the Tri-Command structure (which includes NORAD, Canadian Joint Operations Command, and US Northern Command) are central to Canada's continental defence posture.[28] The DND webpage highlights how 'the defence and security of Canada's North is key to the defence of North America' and that 'the North is a critical region for NORAD'.[29] The intersection of Arctic security with broader North American defence and security missions is a topic of ongoing political and academic debate,[30] with the full extent of Canada's envisaged contribution to continental defence efforts to detect, deter, and defend against or defeat threats from all domains still to be determined.

> Canada's Arctic and Northern governments and communities are at the heart of security in the region. Partnership, cooperation and shared leadership are essential to promoting security in this diverse, complex and expansive area. Working in partnership with trusted international allies and all levels of government, including Indigenous communities, organizations and governments, Canada will continue to protect the safety and security of the people in the Arctic and the North, now and into the future.
>
> Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: Safety, security, and defence chapter (2019)[31]

Strengthening Relationships with International Allies and Partners

Given the rising complexity of the Arctic security environment, Canada has indicated its clear intent to bolster its cooperation and collaboration with trusted international partners. On 16 May 2022, Minister Anand hosted a virtual Security and Defence Dialogue with her counterparts from the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the US. 'Canada, its allies, and partners are facing some of the most serious security challenges in decades', the DND news release noted. 'With climate change, technological advancements and changing economic interests increasing the strategic importance of the Arctic, collaboration between democratic Arctic states is crucial to address areas of mutual concern.'

During the meeting, Anand and her counterparts discussed evolving security dynamics in the Arctic and in the cyber domain, the imperative of developing requisite capabilities to detect, deter, and defend against these threats, and appropriate responses to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They also emphasised 'the need to continue strengthening collaboration between like-minded Arctic states and partners to address ongoing challenges into the future, including the security impacts of climate change.' During the meeting, Minister Anand highlighted Canada's commitment to strengthening its capabilities and presence in the Arctic, including joint exercises, the new *Harry DeWolf*-class Arctic and offshore patrol ships, enhanced surveillance and intelligence capabilities, and investments in equipment to bolster the defence of Canada and contribute to continental defence and global security. More generally, the readout from the event noted that 'Canada will continue to work closely with allies and partners to foster information-sharing, improve situational awareness, and enhance operational cooperation on a broad range of Arctic and regional issues.'[32]

Canada has also encouraged similar collaborative efforts amongst senior military officials. On 8 August 2022, General Eyre hosted an Arctic Chiefs of Defence (ACHOD) meeting in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, that included Chiefs of Defence (CHOD) or equivalents from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and the US (Sweden was unable to attend due to a scheduling conflict). The last meeting of the group had been convened in 2013, before Russia's initial invasion of Crimea, and had involved Russia (which was not invited to the St. John's event). The participants discussed the evolving Arctic defence and security environment, including increasing militarisation by

Russia, climate change impacts, and the increasing level of activity of non-Arctic nations in the region. In the end, the participants reached a broad agreement that ACHOD should be formalised as a collaborative forum to promote peace and security through communication, cooperation, collaboration, and information sharing amongst like-minded Arctic nations within the construct of the rules-based international order.

This also intersects with a growing openness in Canada to NATO's role in the Arctic given 'Russia's ability to project force from its Arctic territory into the North Atlantic, and its potential to challenge NATO's collective defence posture'.[33] In late August 2022, Jens Stoltenberg completed the first visit of a NATO Secretary General to the Canadian Arctic to underline 'the High North's strategic importance for Euro-Atlantic security'.[34] Emphasising the context of climate change and growing strategic competition demonstrated by Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine, he and Prime Minister Trudeau visited Cambridge Bay on 25 August, where they toured the Canadian High Arctic Research Station, met local community and Inuit leaders, observed part of Operation NANOOK-NUNAKPUT, and visited the local North Warning System station where Stoltenberg received a briefing on Canadian and American efforts to modernise the defence infrastructure supporting NORAD.[35] Academic commentators noted that Stoltenberg's visit signalled to Canadians and their allies a commitment to collective defence in the Arctic,[36] signalling that Canada has overcome its reticence in the early 2010s to having NATO adopt an explicit Arctic role. So too have repeated pledges from the CAF to increase their participation in multinational exercises and to continue to encourage key Arctic and non-Arctic allies and partners to participate in joint activities in the Canadian Arctic.

Others

Great Power Conflict: The North American homeland is "no longer a sanctuary"[37]

Situating the need for more robust defences to counter 'new threats' from strategic competitors like Russia and China, Minister Anand assessed in May 2022 that 'we do live in a world at the present time that appears to be growing darker.' She continued that 'in this new world, Canada's geographic position no longer provides the same protection that it once did. And in this new world, the security environment facing Canada is less secure, less predictable and more chaotic.'[38] This provided justification to commit to a six-year, CAD 4.9 billion plan to upgrade Canada's continental defence systems, announced the following month.[39] Most of the challenges specifically identified by NORAD fall with what Canadian scholar Whitney Lackenbauer describes as threats through the Arctic: threats that emanate from outside of the region and do not target the North American Arctic itself. For example, NORAD's 2021 *Strategy* highlights that:

> The Arctic provides a good example of the changing physical and strategic environment and is a zone of international competition. Both Russia and China are increasing their activity in the Arctic. Russia's fielding of advanced, long-range cruise missiles capable of being launched from Russian territory and flying through the northern approaches and seeking to strike targets in the United States and Canada has emerged as the dominant military threat in the Arctic.[40]

Russia

In March 2020, an astute Russian commentator characterised the Canada-Russia Arctic relationship as one of 'close competition',[41] featuring strong tones of competition with modest undertones of cooperation (or at least non-conflict). Over the past three decades, Canada cooperated with Russia multilaterally at the Arctic Council and, before 2014, bilaterally in the areas of governance, Indigenous Peoples' issues, Arctic science, and economic opportunities. Canada stopped bilateral discussions on Arctic cooperation in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and joined the other like-minded Arctic states in pausing their involvement in Arctic Council activities after Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Thus, although Canada's 2019 ANPF had suggested a desire to restart a regular dialogue on Arctic issues with Russia, most Canadian commentators see this as highly unlikely in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, Russia promotes narratives that often mirror those of Canada in characterising the international Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation, alongside those that affirm state sovereignty and point to the need for deterrence against competitors that threaten national interests. Russia also has traditionally shared a preference with Canada to have the Arctic states (and particularly the Arctic coastal states) lead in regional governance.[42]

Although Canadian official narratives provide no evidence of Russian military activity in the Canadian Arctic, Russia's power projection in the circumpolar Arctic as part of its international deterrence posture (and as a way to demonstrate what it believes to be a preponderance of military capabilities in the region) continues to shape Canadian defence and security narratives. For example, Russian strategic bomber flights up to the limits of Canadian airspace, which have been conducted since 2007, continue to serve a strategic messaging function and regularly invite a NORAD response. Particularly since Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Canadian narratives frame Russia as an antagonist and competitor that disrespects the rule of law and state sovereignty, and cannot be trusted in the Arctic given their unlawful behaviour elsewhere in the world.

Nevertheless, as noted earlier, most Canadian expert commentators seem to agree that the core short-term geostrategic drivers affecting Canadian Arctic security do not relate to disputes over Arctic territory or resources, instead reflecting a spillover of international relations into Arctic relationships. This helps to correct some of the narratives around potential conflict in the central Arctic Ocean, where Canada, Russia, and the Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland) have overlapping claims to the extended continental shelf. Official narratives highlight that all of these states have adhered to the process established by the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention, and none have blocked the consideration by the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf of any other's submission. Ongoing debate surrounds questions of whether Russia will adhere to the legal process going forward—and how it may approach negotiations with respect to the overlap with Canada in the future, once the commission has delivered its findings and the process moves to the political and diplomatic sphere.

China

The Government of Canada continues to monitor closely how the country's sovereignty, sovereign rights, and national interests intersect with China's global interests in the Arctic region.[43] This includes particular attentiveness to the threats and opportunities that China's investments and activities pose for Canada and its allies over the short and longer terms. Extensive Canadian national media coverage of Shandong Gold Mining's 2020 attempt to purchase northern gold miner TMAC (which would have secured the Chinese state-owned company a docking and ore-loading facility in a strategically significant Arctic location),

and the rejection of the bid following a national security review under the Investment Canada Act,[44] has reinforced concerns about Chinese influence. Growing Canadian concerns have also arisen with respect to Chinese scientific research in the Arctic as a vector for influence and the acquisition of dual-use information.

Published sources suggest that China has not succeeded in moving Canadian government opinion towards its desired positions on the Arctic. Indeed, there has been a discernible hardening of Ottawa's position in recent years. In 2019, official statements indicated a desire to enhance dialogue with China on Arctic issues,[45] but this formerly accommodating position has changed. Prime Minister Trudeau and various Cabinet ministers in his government have recently adopted tougher messaging, which suggest a newfound willingness to follow Canadian public opinion that is increasingly hostile to China. In a December 2021 interview, for example, Trudeau called on like-minded countries to 'show a united front' against Beijing's increasingly 'coercive diplomacy'. He observed that democracies have 'been competing and China has been, from time to time, very cleverly playing us off each other in an open market competitive way. We need to do a better job of working together and standing strong so that China can't, you know, play the angles and divide us, one against the other.'[46]

Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, released in late November 2022, touches on several core themes that encapsulate the country's Arctic messaging. First, Canada stresses that, 'as an Arctic nation', it is 'conscious that powers in the Indo-Pacific region are looking to the Arctic as a region of opportunity'. In turn, Canada commits to 'maintaining the peace and stability of the region and the safety, health and resilience of Canadian Northern populations and Indigenous Peoples'—a clear affirmation of Ottawa's core priorities. In acknowledging the 'accelerating impact of climate change and rising geopolitical competition', the strategy proclaims that 'Canada will advance its standing as an Arctic power and uphold our Arctic sovereignty and the rules-based international order in our bilateral and multilateral engagement with Indo-Pacific countries on Arctic and polar affairs.' In short, Canada is an Arctic power with sovereignty—a status to which no Asian state (apart from Russia) can claim—that will uphold the rules-based international order in all of its relationships. Canada would 'do so responsibly and sustainably, together with partners'[47]—key words associated with its approach to the Arctic and to global affairs more generally.

The Kingdom of Denmark

Introduction

The Kingdom of Denmark's position as an Arctic state rests on its relationship with the large, self-governing island of Greenland. Greenland was ruled by Denmark from the early 18th century until the beginning of 'home rule' in 1979. In 2009, Greenland approved the Self-Government Act, which transferred new areas of domestic responsibility to the Naalaakersuisut in Nuuk. Denmark retains control over Greenland's foreign, defence, and security policy, however, creating a cooperative frame where governance is undertaken as a partnership. Since 2012, the Arctic has been one of the Danish government's top foreign policy priorities.

Denmark's Arctic strategy seeks to maintain the region as a stable and peaceful area where states and local peoples work cooperatively. That cooperation is frequently highlighted by Denmark as vital to meeting the region's many challenges, chief amongst them climate change, sustainable economic development, and security: 'Cooperation is the way forward if we want the Arctic to prosper', Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod declared to the Arctic Circle Assembly in 2021.[48]

In the past five years, Denmark's attention to the question of Arctic security has grown, with Copenhagen now fully alive to the threat posed by China and, particularly, Russia in the Arctic. These considerations are calibrated, however, against Greenlandic priorities—which place local economic considerations over geopolitics. Managing these sometimes different perspectives, while coordinating responsibilities to find shared ground and advance towards shared objectives, is at the heart of the Kingdom of Denmark's Arctic policy.

Self

Because Denmark's Arctic status is derived from Greenland's membership in the kingdom, it has a limited historical and emotional connection to the region. Copenhagen's Arctic focus tends to revolve around practical considerations of economic growth, defence, and security in the region, while also using Arctic forums as a backdrop for its broader push to address climate change.

Denmark considers itself an important actor in the Arctic and has paid increasing attention to the region over the past decade. Its 2016 *Strategy for the Arctic 2011–2020* points to its desire to strengthen its 'status as global player in the Arctic'[49] while its 2022 *Foreign and Security Policy* places a heavy emphasis on the region.[50] The threat posed by Russian military activity in the Arctic has been a growing consideration for years and the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the importance of security in Danish Arctic policy.

As an Arctic island, Greenland considers itself as inherently Arctic and inseparable from the region.[51] Unlike Denmark, which views the Arctic through a global lens, Greenlandic narratives focus on its own history and economic and political requirements as the key elements of its national, Arctic identity. These narratives are expressed through the historical dimension and make consistent reference to Greenland's deep-rooted connection to the region and to 'the thousands of years that Greenlanders have been inhabiting the Arctic'.[52] Greenland's leaders frame the Arctic as their natural home and as an environment[53] that the Inuit people both 'understand and belong [to]'.[54] This narrative allows Greenlanders to forge a traceable history in the High North and to construct an Arctic identity that is distinct from that of Denmark's.

Climate Change and the Environment

Denmark takes pride in its aggressive approach to climate change, and its broader policy of decarbonisation is an important element of how it perceives its role in the Arctic. It frequently uses Arctic forums—like the Arctic Circle Assembly and the Arctic Council—to advance its climate policies. In recent years, Denmark has also sought to incorporate Greenland into its broader, international efforts as a means of increasing the visibility of Indigenous peoples, while ensuring that the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from 2007 are observed.

Climate change and environmental stewardship are also central to Greenlandic policy. According to Greenlandic sources, historic Inuit inhabitation of the High North means that Greenlanders have developed a natural connection to and superior knowledge of the Arctic environment. Greenland therefore promotes itself as a knowledge leader and long-standing caretaker of Arctic flora and fauna, reminding audiences that Greenlanders' livelihoods have always been tied to the natural Arctic environment.

With three quarters of its territory covered by ice and local temperatures rising at three times the global average, successive Greenlandic governments have recognised the dangers posed by the changing climate; however, this danger was consistently weighted against the economics and benefits of resource development—seen as crucial to eventual independence. In 2016, Greenland drew criticism from the international community when it sought to opt out from the Paris agreement, arguing that fossil fuel exploitation was necessary to financially support an independent Greenland. That position changed in 2021, and Greenland has now signed on to the agreement.

As part of this green transition, Greenland announced a halt to oil and gas exploration, preferring instead to advance its renewable energy alternatives, including hydroelectricity. This shift in environmental policy came from a shift in government, with the Inuit Ataqatigi replacing the traditional ruling party Siumut in April 2021. This shift has also impacted Greenland's position on mining, most notably leading to the halting of the Kvanefjeld rare earths mine, which was expected to produced uranium as a by-product.

The withdrawal of Greenland's government from some resource projects represents a shift in policy but not a fundamental alteration. In 2022, Prime Minister Múte Bourup Egede clarified Greenland's new direction as being a 'pro-mining nation' that welcomes new projects—so long as they keep within the limits of the established thresholds for uranium.[55]

Greenland has also increased its push for a more diversified and resilient economy.[56] It has continued to solicit investment from Asian, European, and North American partners, while investing in infrastructure and telecommunications networks. Following Iceland's success, Greenland is also recasting itself as a tourist destination, with new airports being built in Nuuk, Ilulissat, and Qaqortoq to make the country more accessible to foreign visitors.[57]

Danish-Greenlandic Relations

Greenland's position in the Kingdom of Denmark is central to its politics and economy. Denmark provides the island with an annual subsidy of DKK 3.9 billion, which represents roughly 20% of Greenland's GDP. While Greenlandic governments and society recognise the importance of this subsidy, and of the Danish connection more generally, independence remains the long-term goal. While support for independence remains high in Greenland there is no sense of urgency. 'We will take it up', Greenland's Foreign Minister Pele Broberg told *Time* magazine in May 2021, 'whether it is in four, eight, or 12 years, that is difficult to say.'[58]

Even if independence remains a future consideration, Greenland has increasingly insisted upon a greater role in regional governance and local autonomy. 'The days when far-away governments and firms could make decisions without consulting the Arctic peoples are long gone', Prime Minister Egede wrote in 2022. 'Tomorrow's relationships in the Arctic must be built on a foundation of respect.'[59]

Greenland has even sought a greater say in Danish foreign and defence policy decisions affecting the region. In 2021, Greenland sought to scrutinise Denmark's new Arctic defence spending package, despite the responsibility for defence falling to Copenhagen.[60] This line of thinking is best enunciated by former Greenlandic politician Sara Olsvig in a 2022 paper entitled 'Greenland obviously has its own defence policy', which points to the growing need for Greenland to play a more active role in its own security.[61]

This desire for improved consultation and cooperation has registered in Denmark. While the Danish Constitution and the Act on Greenland Self-Government make it clear that Copenhagen has total authority in areas relating to security, the political realities of the relationship demand a degree of cooperation and consensus. As such, the February 2021 amendment to the 2018 *Danish Defence Agreement* adds DKK 1.5 billion to the country's Arctic spending, which is specifically being done in 'close dialogue' and with the 'political support from the Faroe Islands and Greenland'.[62] During the 2021 Arctic Circle Assembly, Danish Foreign Minister Jepp Kofod told his audience that security issues would be 'dealt with together, on an equal footing'. Recognising the need to cooperate, Denmark has committed to sharing intelligence and analysis on security issues in a 'respectful, inclusive approach'.[63]

Region

The governments of both Denmark and Greenland recognise the Arctic Council as the most important intergovernmental forum for Arctic governance. Denmark described the Council as the 'prime example of how we cooperate' and one that should have a 'stronger and more visible role'. Through it, relevant stakeholders are drawn in to make real contributions, giving agreements on subjects such as fisheries more legitimacy.[64]

In October 2021, Danish Foreign Minister Kofod recognised the dangers to regional cooperation from rising tensions but insisted that cooperation was 'alive and kicking'. The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine dramatically altered that understanding. Along with the other democratic Arctic states, Denmark agreed that continued cooperation with Russia was impossible, and it joined the six other like-minded Arctic states in pausing the work of the Arctic Council in March 2022. Greenland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs also signalled its participation in this decision despite their continued 'commitment to the Council and our cooperation with the peoples of the Arctic'.[65]

Greenland's engagement on this issue represents its desire to be more involved in regional forums. Greenland's Premier Kim Kielsen opened the 2019 annual Arctic Assembly in Reykjavik saying, 'Whenever the Arctic is discussed within the Realm, Greenland always plays a central role. Thus, we are of the conviction that it should be natural for Greenland to occupy a permanent seat in the Danish delegation to the Arctic Council.'[66] The issue of direct Greenlandic influence or control over Denmark's positions on the Arctic Council remains a 'bone of contention'.[67]

Beyond the Council, Greenland has also been seeking a greater say in regional governance. 'We have always been of the conviction that our country should play a natural and central role on topics that concerns the Arctic', said former Greenland Premier Kim Kielsen in 2019, 'and when the Arctic is on the agenda, it has already

been established that Greenland is an essential element of the decision-making process, and we will always participate to carry on with this responsibility.'[68]

Before the pause of the Council's work, Denmark's agenda was increasingly business-focused. For Copenhagen, sustainable business development was an essential component of Arctic cooperation, and efforts were underway to identify international investment opportunities for the region and to link the Arctic Council more closely to the Arctic Economic Council as a means of bridging the business and political sides of those organisations.[69]

Overall, Danish and Greenlandic sources continue to express optimism that the region can be managed cooperatively as a 'low-tension area'.[70] The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the suspension of the Arctic Council has reduced confidence that this will continue to be the case in the future.

> The USA is an absolutely crucial partner in the Arctic. We stand together with the USA in handling the increasing tensions that are a result of, among other things, the Russian military build-up in the Artic. In maintaining the objective of the Arctic being a low-tension area through strengthened monitoring and having a presence in the area. And in combatting climate change, protecting the environment, collaboration on research and in creating sustainable development to the benefit of the people who live in the region.
>
> Regeringen, *Foreign and Security Policy Strategy*, January 2022[71]

Others

Geopolitics and Greenland-China Economic Relations

Recent years have seen growing concern over great power politics in the Arctic. Russia's aggressive behaviour led to new investments in Greenlandic defence. Following the invasion of Ukraine, Greenland also endorsed the EU sanctions against Russia. Greenland's Prime Minister Egede stated that Greenland 'strongly condemn[s] Russia's action against the Ukrainian people' and intends 'to show our solidarity with the Ukrainian people by joining the international sanctions against Russia'.[72]

Relations with China have proven more complex. Greenland has historically welcomed Chinese investment as a crucial element in its developing resource-based economy. Denmark has also been broadly supportive of Chinese involvement in Greenland and was an early supporter of China's application for accredited observer status on the Arctic Council. Yet, China's soft power influence in Denmark has been collapsing in recent years, a trend that is directly reflected in Denmark's harder line on Chinese infrastructure investment in Greenland. In part, this collapse relates to increasing Danish concern over Chinese behaviour in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and elsewhere, but it can also be traced to China's aggressive 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy (an aggressive style of coercive diplomacy recently adopted by Chinese officials under President Xi) in Denmark itself. The result has been a quantifiable decrease in Danish support for China and Chinese activity in the Arctic.

Denmark has clearly identified ownership of Greenlandic infrastructure as a strategic threat. This fear dates back a decade, with Chinese involvement in Greenlandic mining projects vigorously debated in the Danish media and parliament as early as 2012 and 2013.[73] Danish politicians have become more vocal in recent years, reflecting a genuine concern about Chinese involvement, while recognising the importance that the US places on strategic infrastructure.

Danish intelligence reports have increasingly stressed, in more direct language, how large Chinese investments in Greenland could bring certain dependencies and vulnerabilities, giving state-owned entities leverage in small communities in a region with limited economic diversification. For instance, the 2017 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS) report warns that, 'as a result of close connections between Chinese companies and China's political system, there are certain risks related to large-scale Chinese investments in Greenland due to the effect that these investments would have on an economy of Greenland's size.'[74] This sentiment is echoed in the 2020 DDIS annual report.[75]

The perspective from Greenland is different than from Copenhagen. Warnings over the strategic infiltration of Chinese influence have comparatively little traction amongst Greenlanders, and Danish warnings have generally fallen on deaf ears—or have provoked a backlash within a Greenlandic political class averse to Copenhagen's interference. Former Greenlandic prime minister Kuupik Kleist put it bluntly: 'are the Chinese worse than other capitalists?... Once, the Europeans colonized the rest of the world. They have ruthlessly exploited everything. Now, the economic center is shifting to the East.'[76]

Greenland's position in 2022 was to avoid excluding any potential avenue of development. In an article written for *The Wilson Quarterly*, Prime Minister Egede wrote: 'as an open market economy, we seek new partnerships with any country, organization, and commercial partner who abides by our laws and engages to the benefit of the people of Greenland [...] The main goal of The Government of Greenland's foreign policy is to translate foreign interest in the Arctic and Greenland into sustainable, socioeconomic development.'[77]

Despite that general openness to China, Greenlandic enthusiasm for Chinese investment has waned in recent years. In part, the decline in Greenlandic interest in Chinese investment stems from China's failure to deliver tangible benefits. Despite early promise, no Chinese mining or offshore project has moved forward to production. This failure can be assigned largely to falling or uncertain global resource prices, the cost of mining in Greenland, and persistent local resistance to mines in Greenland. The Chinese-owned Isua mine, for instance, was delayed by falling iron ore prices in 2014 and the decision by General Nice to wait for more favourable conditions before committing to a timetable. The project was eventually cancelled by poor economics, worsened by disputes between proponents and reindeer hunters, who complained that the site would interrupt their traditional practices.[78] The mining company's plans to bring in a large foreign (likely Chinese) workforce also sparked controversy and local activists organised in opposition.

Greenlanders are more concerned about the local consequences of Chinese investment, however, and particularly the potential influx of poorly paid Chinese workers undermining local unions and exacerbating housing issues while damaging Greenlandic gains from collective bargaining and Greenlandic national identity. In 2012, the leader of the main Greenlandic trade union, Jess Berthelsen, identified the Chinese threat to local labour, stating: 'I strongly warn against the current government, in a reckless moment of enthusiasm, wrecking the Greenlandic labour market and bombing us all the way back to the Stone age'.[79] In 2017, when the China Communications Construction Company was short-listed to build airports in southern Greenland, the SIK union once again warned against the impact of tax exemption of foreign labour on Greenlandic welfare. It was this labour issue, rather than Danish/American warnings of strategic infiltration, that most resonated with Greenlanders.[80]

While Greenland continues to welcome Chinese investment as an economic necessity and political tool to counter perceived overdependence on Denmark, all indications are that it does so in the absence of a Western alternative. One alternative for Greenland is increased investment from the US, and its government has courted this in recent years. Indeed, US State Department polling from 2019 puts China below both the US and Denmark as preferred partners in trade, tourism, and education. Prime Minister

Egede recently told *Time* magazine that 'as China, Russia and the European Union scramble for Greenland's natural resources, the US might be spurred to invest more'.[81] According to Egede, Greenland is happy to host the American military, but it expects benefits in return. The previous Kielsen government also expressed this view.

This partnership also extends to security. In a trilateral agreement in October 2020, the US, Denmark, and Greenland declared that the security and prosperity of all three parties will continue to depend on strong transatlantic co-operation, for which the Thule base is of central importance. Returning to the theme of local benefit, Prime Minister Egede told an interviewer that, while Thule is important, the Greenlandic people 'want more growth than just that military base [...] We also need to have something for it.'[82]

> NATO's article 5 is the foundation for the security of the entire Kingdom. Increased surveillance and other NATO initiatives must be tailored to the security situation so that the goal of low levels of tension is maintained, and consideration is given to the need for broad cooperation in the region. The NATO allies in the Arctic have a special role, knowledge, and responsibility for the development in the region.
>
> Regeringen, *Foreign and Security Policy Strategy* (January 2022)[83]

Finland

Introduction

Finland is a longstanding member of the Arctic community and has participated in structures of regional governance for decades. The Finnish government helped establish the Arctic Environmental Strategy in 1989 and hosted the first-ever Arctic ministerial meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, in 1991. This meeting adopted the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, which in turn led to the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996. Finland chaired the Arctic Council from 2017 to 2019 focusing on environmental protection, connecting communities, meteorological and oceanographic cooperation, and education.[84]

Finland's approach to the Arctic has long been defined by themes of environmentalism, human security, and multilateralism.[85] This has led to strong support for the Arctic Council and a consistent push for sustainable development, community-based solutions, and international cooperation—maintaining dialogue with Russia during even politically challenging times has been particularly important for Helsinki. Finland's approach to security in the Arctic is defined by its long border with Russia, leaving it to navigate a complex and, at times, conflicting set of interests. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine represented a significant shift in Finnish perceptions of Russia and security policies, leading to its application to join NATO in May 2022 and a sharp turn from its traditionally accommodative approach to Moscow.

Self

Like other countries with significant territory above the Arctic Circle, Finland fully recognises itself as an Arctic nation, despite being one of the three Arctic countries with no Arctic coastline. Indeed, its 2021 *Strategy for Arctic Policy* classifies all of Finland as an Arctic country, emphasising how 'Finland's Arctic interests and Arctic expertise are relevant to the whole country and, on the other hand, the Arctic character of entire [sic] Finland supports and enhances Finland's international image as an Arctic country in international contexts.'[86] While the entire state is Arctic territory, Finnish policy highlights the provinces of Lapland, North Ostrobothnia, Kainuu, and North Karelia as being 'of particular significance' to the country's Arctic interests.[87]

Arctic Experts

The Finnish government consistently highlights the nation's expertise in Arctic technologies and business as one of its key advantages in the North. Finnish officials often draw attention to the vast knowledge and experience that Finland has gained in the maritime and shipping sectors, as well as in sustainable tourism and infrastructure development.[88] In particular, Finland is a world leader in Arctic shipbuilding and operations, a vital sector as northern shipping routes open and fleets of ice-capable vessels are constructed to support northern development. Most notably, Finnish company Aker Arctic's has even supported Chinese shipbuilders in constructing China's newest polar icebreaker *Xuelong II*.

Finland's Arctic Council chairmanship (2017–2019) emphasised the importance of this expertise as the Arctic develops 'into an important hub of the twenty-first century' whose

economic potential can bring prosperity. Like Iceland, Finland also emphasises its Arctic expertise in green fields such as offshore wind energy, automatic sea transport, and low-carbon fuels, which it sees as offering broader solutions to climate change adaptation and mitigation.[89]

People of the Arctic

Finland's approach to the Arctic also focuses heavily on the people who live there. The country's 2021 Arctic policy 'emphasise[s] the perspective of Arctic inhabitants', who 'need possibilities for participating in decision-making as well as maintaining and improving their welfare'.[90] Emphasis has therefore been placed on improving logistics and infrastructure in the northern regions, including better telecommunications and educational opportunities for northern residents.

The Sámi receive particular attention as a northern Indigenous people who have sometimes been overlooked by national policy. Recent years have seen a significant increase in Finnish government attention to the economic, social, and cultural needs of the Sámi. The 2021 Arctic policy noted the Sámi right to practise their own culture as 'a cross-cutting objective of the Strategy' while recognising the value of traditional Sámi knowledge and the need to better incorporate the Indigenous population into decision-making processes for activities such as mining and logging that could affect their reindeer-herding activities.[91] This growing emphasis on the role of the Sámi is marked by the establishment of the Sámi Truth and Reconciliation Commission in October 2018. This commission was established by the government to address the historical treatment of the Indigenous Sámi population and to promote the attainment of the Sámi people's rights.

Outside of the Sámi, Finland has also consistently emphasised the need to strengthen work with the broader Arctic Indigenous community, highlighting the importance of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the role of the Permanent Participants within the Arctic Council, which provides an 'essential framework' for Indigenous inclusion and cooperation.[92]

Region

Environment and Sustainable Development

Finland has long highlighted environmental stewardship and sustainable development as a cornerstone for its vision of the region. The country's 2013 Arctic policy called for an 'ambitious and far-reaching' environmental policy,[93] while the 2021 update placed climate change mitigation and adaptation as the top priority in the region. The country's 2022 Climate Change Act (revised from 2015) is one of the world's most aggressive, committing Finland to carbon neutrality by 2035. This dedication to keeping the world's average temperature increase under 1.5 degrees Celsius has led Finland to oppose the opening of new fossil fuel reserves in the Arctic, an important part of neighbouring Russia's long-term economic strategy.[94] The Climate Change Act also acknowledges the need to consult with the Sámi Parliament in preparing climate change policy plans in recognition of the greater impact of climate change on the Arctic.

Cooperation and Security

Finland has long considered multilateral cooperation and peaceful dispute resolution to be central to a healthy and sustainable Arctic. Historically, Finnish statements emphasise the low tensions and risk of conflict in the Arctic region.[95] Finland acknowledges that, in the time between the 2013 Arctic policy and its 2021 refresh, the international situation degraded, pointing to 'growing military activity and presence as well as increased tensions' caused by climate change and global great power confrontation that is 'reflected on the Arctic region, where the political interests of great powers may result in confrontations'.[96] The strategy specifically highlights Russia's aggressive actions and China's Arctic aspirations as points of concern. The result, according to the strategy, is a 'potential spiral of instability'.[97]

Finland's approach to Arctic security is based on a sense of interconnectedness. Threats in the Arctic, Baltic, or Northern Europe are increasingly interlinked.[98] The 2020 *Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy* stated that 'the security situation in the neighbouring areas of Finland and Europe is unstable and difficult to predict.'[99] While in 2019, Russia was not seen as posing a direct military threat to Finland, Helsinki did recognise that a security crisis in any part of the Nordic-Baltic region would affect the region as a whole. 'Any shifts in the security situation in the Baltic Sea region, the Arctic neighbourhood of Finland, and on the North Atlantic are closely connected' read the 2020 report.[100]

> The significance of North Atlantic sea lines of communication and of Finland's neighbouring Arctic regions is growing, and military activity in the area has increased.
>
> Finnish Government, *Government's Defence Report* (2021)[101]

Despite—or because of—these new challenges, the overall goal of the country's 2021 Arctic policy continued to be the maintenance of the Arctic as a peaceful and stable region. As such, Finland advanced 'cooperation and dialogue structures which are proactive and preventive and which promote dialogue between states in a manner which builds confidence and reduces risks, also in the event of any disasters'.[102] The 2019 *Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy* referred to this as an 'active policy of stability' for maintaining a pragmatic relationship with Russia, and for a robust defence against attack or in case another state tried to use Finnish territory as a launchpad 'for hostile purposes against other states'.[103]

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine forced a significant shift in this understanding of regional security. While the desire to preserve the Arctic as a realm of peace and cooperation remains a core principle of Finnish foreign policy, much of that cooperation is no longer politically possible. With the other six democratic Arctic states, Finland chose to suspend the operations of the Arctic Council in March 2022, as well as cooperation through the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the EU Northern Dimension.

In a significant shift to its regional defence policy, Finland also applied for NATO membership in May 2022, which, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs[104], was 'based on a reassessment of the security policy situation'.[105] Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto declared in May 2022 that the 'European security situation has changed.'[106] Put more directly, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin declared that 'Russia is not the neighbour Finland thought it was.'[107]

Others

Russia and NATO

Finland's relations have soured considerably with Russia. Following Finland's application to join NATO, Russia violated Finnish airspace with military aircraft and cut off natural gas and electricity exports to the country. In advance of the Finnish application, Kremlin spokespersons also warned of consequences to the regional security dynamic, threatening to deploy new forces to the Finnish border to 'rebalance the situation'.[108]

Despite numerous threats, Russia's reaction to Finland's decision was muted. In May 2022, President Vladimir Putin announced that Finland's joining NATO posed no direct threat to Russia, a theme that he returned to in June.[109] Russia's generally subdued reaction may be related to its exhaustion in fighting Ukraine and its limited ability to impose any consequences on Finland or neighbouring Sweden.

Fear of Russia has, however, driven Finnish public opinion rapidly towards NATO and increased cooperation with the US. In advance of Finland's NATO application, public support for the Alliance surged to its highest recorded levels, with March 2022 polls showing more than two-thirds of Finns in favour of joining the Alliance.[110] In signing the Accession Protocol in July 2022, Minister Haavisto declared that 'for decades, NATO has been a key actor in advancing European security and stability. A strong and unified NATO is our common security interest also in the future.'[111] Finland's future relationship with Russia and the NATO countries will be defined by its place in NATO and the Alliance's expanding role in the Arctic.

> Security issues in Northern Europe are increasingly interlinked and any shifts in the security situation in the Baltic Sea region, the Arctic neighbourhood of Finland and on the North Atlantic are closely connected. The growing security policy interest in the Arctic region makes it also a significant priority for Finland's foreign policy.
>
> Finland's *Strategy for Arctic Policy* (2021)[112]

China

China has been the major non-Arctic state actor in the Arctic-region over the past decade. Finland has, historically, been welcoming of Chinese trade, investment, and even its role in the Arctic Council and Arctic governance forums. Amongst the Nordic states, Finland has also been the most welcoming of the Polar Silk Road (*bingshang sichou zhilu,* 冰上丝绸之路), a component of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), at least in principle. In 2017, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö welcomed the project during a state visit by President Xi Jinping, declaring that the BRI 'would deepen relations between Asia and Europe'.[113] That same message was repeated by Finnish Ambassador for Arctic Affairs Aleksi Härkönen in an interview with Chinese state media outlet *Xinhua* that same year.[114] This political support did not translate into action, however, and Finland has not officially signed onto the BRI through any formal memorandum of understanding, nor are there any Chinese funded infrastructure projects likely to advance in the near term.

In recent years, however, the Finnish discourse on China has taken a harder turn. The 2016 *Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy* envisaged the country strengthening its ties to China and promoting 'increased Sino-EU cooperation in the EU'.[115] In contrast, the 2020 report abandoned much of this optimism and recognised China as an 'economic competitor and a systemic rival'.[116] Along similar lines, a 2021 Finnish action plan on China begins with a description of cordial relations but then develops a more sceptical frame that highlights

risk in bilateral relations, ranging from strategic dependencies to systematic intelligence and influence activities.[117] Finland's 2021 *Strategy for Arctic Policy* emphasises that 'of the non-Arctic countries China, in particular, has shown increasing economic and strategic interest in the region and especially in its natural resources, infrastructure and transport routes. China's global goals and efforts to play a greater role in the Arctic may create conflicts of interest, particularly between great powers, and heighten tensions in the region.'[118] Consequently, Chinese investments are coming under increasing scrutiny in Finland, including restrictive telecommunications laws that have limited Chinese companies' access to the Finnish market.[119]

Iceland

Introduction

Iceland's Arctic policy is centred on principles of multilateralism, peaceful cooperation, and environmental stewardship. These Arctic objectives are extensions of Iceland's broader foreign policy, which centre on advancing global peace, democracy, human rights, and equality.[120] Iceland's official Arctic policy is contained in the October 2021 document *Iceland's Policy on Matters Concerning the Arctic Region*, which continues to emphasise long-standing Arctic objectives, such as promoting the Arctic Council, resolving differences based on international law and diplomatic engagement, and avoiding militarisation in the region.

While these traditional objectives continue to frame Iceland's policy, the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has shifted Reykjavik's views on security matters and dampened expectations for polar cooperation. 'How long ago and far away it seemed', lamented Icelandic Foreign Minister Thórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörd as he recounted Iceland's handing the Arctic Council chairmanship to Russia in 2021.[121] 'Everything has changed now' in Iceland, from its view of itself and the Arctic, to how it sees the region's place in the world, Reykfjörd told a Wilson Center audience in April 2022.[122]

Self

An Arctic State

With the publication of its first Arctic policy document in 2011, the Icelandic government began to make more concerted efforts to craft its own Arctic national identity. Iceland identifies as an Arctic coastal state, despite lying just outside the Arctic Circle. According to many commentators, gaining recognition as an equal Arctic state has been a key priority for the Icelandic government, even leading to a diplomatic protest when it was excluded from the 2010 meeting of the Arctic-5 coastal states held in Canada.

In its 2021 Arctic policy, Iceland declares that Iceland is actually 'the only Arctic State that can be deemed to lie entirely within the Arctic [...] which gives Iceland a special status as an Arctic State, alongside Greenland.'[123] Iceland also emphasises the fact that it possesses an extensive exclusive economic zone north of the Arctic Circle.[124]

Because of this, Iceland asserts that few states have as much interest in the safety and security of the region with regard to 'environmental, economic, political and security concerns'.[125] This unique status, coupled with the growing international interest in the region, has led Iceland to identify the Arctic as among its 'most important foreign policy points of emphasis in recent years'.[126]

Sustainability

As an Arctic state, sitting in a region where climate change is raising temperatures at three times the global average, Iceland has positioned its green credentials as central to its reputation as a responsible Arctic actor. In her 2021 address to the Arctic Circle Assembly, Prime Minister

Katrín Jakobsdóttir framed the threat dramatically, stating: 'we face storm clouds on the horizon', and the Arctic may become 'unrecognizable if we do not act'.[127] Given these concerns, the theme of Iceland's Arctic Council Chairmanship programme for 2019–2021 reflected this commitment to the principles of sustainable development. As Council Chair, Iceland chose a strong environmental focus, specifically on the health and safety of the marine environment, black carbon, methane emissions, and green energy solutions.[128]

Iceland has closely tied its Arctic policy to a broader campaign of encouraging a more forceful global response to climate change. In its 2021 Arctic policy, Iceland recognised that 'the evidence for the seriousness of global climate change has become ever stronger', since it released its 2011 Arctic policy. Meanwhile, the 'spotlight has been further focused on the special threat posed to the Arctic by global warming.'[129] This climate focus permeates its Arctic messaging and underlies much of its Arctic-focused diplomatic, economic, and scientific partnerships.

Region

Cooperation

Cooperation and respect for international law have long been at the heart of Iceland's vision for the Arctic region. This is a refrain common in official communications and clearly articulated in Iceland's 2021 Arctic policy: 'relations between states in the Arctic must respect international law and any disputes that may arise must be peacefully resolved on the basis thereof. An adequate legal framework and institutional system are in place.'[130] While the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has dampened Icelandic expectations for circumpolar collaboration, this core tenet remains the foundation of Icelandic policy.

Iceland has consistently promoted the Arctic Council as a vital regional forum for consultation and the promotion of diplomacy as the best way to resolve disputes.[131] The pause on Council activities in March 2022 dealt a significant blow to Iceland, which remains 'convinced of the enduring value of the Arctic Council for circumpolar cooperation', but the suspension of activities was recognised as unavoidable in light of Russian aggression.[132] In June 2022, Iceland and the other Arctic states (apart from Russia) announced plans to begin a 'limited resumption of our work in the Arctic Council, in projects that do not involve the participation of the Russian Federation'.[133] 'Our region is directly affected as the aggressor is an important player in the Arctic with legitimate interests', Prime Minister Jakobsdóttir explained in October 2022. 'But Russia's illegitimate actions made it impossible for us not to respond and they were rightly excluded from the Arctic Council. From day one Iceland has condemned Russia's aggression in the strongest possible way. Iceland has solidly supported Ukraine, and we will continue to do so, together with our Nordic, European, US, and Canadian friends.'[134]

> It is the proclaimed objective of Iceland and the other Arctic States to maintain a low level of tension in the Arctic region. Despite this, the tension level in the region is rising, with the main cause being increased Russian military developments and activities and the Western response to them.
>
> *Iceland's Policy on Matters Concerning the Arctic Region*, October 2021[135]

As a small state with limited national resources in an increasingly globalised region, Iceland's commitment to multilateral forums is understandable, and, while the Arctic Council retains a place of prominence, Icelandic policy also highlights the importance of a myriad of

other cooperative forums. These include the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Standing Committee of the Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, and the West Nordic Council.[136]

Most recently, Iceland has sought to expand its regional cooperation with its most immediate Arctic neighbours: Greenland and the Faroe Islands. In 2021, the Icelandic Parliament approved a parliamentary resolution on increased cooperation with Greenland. In this vein, the Greenland Committee made recommendations on practical avenues for improving relations in a report released in January 2021. This report includes 99 recommendations for measures to increase the cooperation between Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. These recommendations were wide-ranging, including suggestions for furthering trade and cooperation on commerce, education, and services.[137]

Iceland also emphasises its role in facilitating international collaboration as one of its key contributions to a peaceful and productive Arctic region. The Arctic Circle Assembly was launched by Icelandic President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson in 2013 and has grown to become one of the premier venues for international engagement on Arctic issues between government officials, academics, business people, and members of non-governmental organisations.

Iceland has also sought to advance joint research as a vehicle for improved international cooperation and regional problem solving. Iceland's 2021 Arctic policy states that 'research is the prerequisite for being able to analyse the rapid changes that are taking place in the Arctic region and to evaluate what responses are needed.'[138] Practical steps towards advancing that research are underway. The Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson Institute on the Arctic is now being established at the University of Iceland with a focus on international cooperation on Arctic issues, action against climate change, and sustainability as a means of reaffirming Iceland's position as the centre for international debate of the Arctic.[139] These new facilities will also host future Arctic Circle events.

Others

Iceland has long been one of the Arctic states most willing to welcome non-Arctic actors into northern governance structures and discussions. Prime Minister Jakobsdóttir encapsulated this welcoming approach succinctly at the 2021 Arctic Circle Assembly, telling her audience that 'the Arctic is not the private matter of us who live here'.[140]

NATO and National Security

Iceland has no military and is reliant on its membership in NATO for its defence as well as its longstanding bilateral defence agreement with the United States. Historically, Icelandic attitudes towards NATO have been mixed, balanced between on the one hand, Iceland as a founding member of the Alliance and the practical recognition of NATO's necessity; and on the other hand the nation's pacifist approach to international relations. Within the alliance, Iceland has therefore continued to advance an agenda centred on 'disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation', as well as NATO's role in advancing 'respect for democracy, rule of law, and human rights'.[141]

The Left Green Movement, which formed Iceland's then government, remained formally opposed to the alliance. Prime Minister Jakobsdóttir has made her opposition to NATO clear on several occasions. In discussions with reporters during Exercise Trident Juncture in 2018, the prime minister stated: 'my party's position is that we are against Iceland's membership of NATO [...] My personal position is that we should leave NATO.'[142] Despite this, the government recognises that most of the Icelandic population remains in favour, and thus has not introduced withdrawal from the alliance as a political priority.

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has naturally shifted Icelandic considerations, elevating NATO and security issues. At an April 2022 Wilson Center event, Icelandic Foreign Minister Thórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörd Gylfadóttir emphasised that the US remained 'an indispensable ally and friend'.[143] This reflected not only immediate concerns but several years of increasingly close security ties. The growing US and NATO focus on the Arctic and North Atlantic had refocused attention on Iceland in the late 2010s, and, in early 2019, the foreign ministers of the US and Iceland signed an agreement on increased defence cooperation, explicitly justified with reference to changed conditions in the Arctic.[144] The war in Ukraine improved the Icelandic view of NATO even further. At the Wilson Centre event, Minister Gylfadóttir declared: 'Thank God, we're part of NATO', because a North Atlantic island nation without an army can no longer 'take peace for granted'.[145]

> The landscape of security and defence issues in the Arctic region has changed significantly in recent years. This is both because of shifts in international relations and a result of climate change that has affected the geopolitical status of the region.
>
> *Iceland's Policy on Matters Concerning the Arctic Region*, October 2021[146]

Historically, Iceland has sought to separate its political differences with Russia from the Arctic as a means of preserving regional cooperation. Even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Iceland remained on relatively good terms with Russia in the Arctic. Although Iceland officially condemned Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and joined other Western countries in imposing sanctions, it sought to avoid spillover into the Far North. Speaking at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in 2018, Minister of Foreign Affairs Gudlaugur Thór Thórdarson acknowledged that although 'the conflict in Ukraine involves fundamental principles which affect most other aspects of international relations [...] there is an understanding that the urgency of safeguarding mutual interests in the Arctic demands specific dialogue and cooperation.'[147]

Russia's 2022 further invasion shifted this calculation and, according to Minister Gylfadóttir, 'changed the security around the waters of the Arctic'.[148] Iceland has joined the other Arctic democracies in further sanctioning Russia and effectively banished Russia from the Arctic Council. Further cooperation with Moscow on any Arctic issue appears politically impossible for the foreseeable future, while more emphasis is being placed on the defence of the Arctic and North Atlantic from an increasingly aggressive Russia.

China: An Attractive Partner?

Iceland was an early backer of China's application to become an observer member of the Arctic Council, and Iceland remains one of the most vocal advocates of increased economic and scientific cooperation with outside stakeholders such as China. Despite an initial surge in interest in Icelandic resources in the 2010s, significant Chinese investments never materialised.[149] Instead, business partnerships have emerged focusing on green energy, in line with Iceland's policy of developing and exporting technologies developed in the Arctic to address global climate problems.[150] This includes joint ventures in geothermal energy with Sinopec Green Energy Geothermal Development Co. (SGE) and green methanol with Jiangsu Sierbang Petrochemical Company. To highlight the latter's importance, Chinese Ambassador Jin Zhijian, together with Icelandic Foreign Minister Guðlaugur Thór Thórdarson, and Icelandic Ambassador to China Thorir Ibsen, attended the September 2021 signing ceremony.[151]

In line with a broader trend across Europe, Icelandic popular impressions of China have soured in recent years. This stems not from any

particular fear over Chinese action in the Arctic, but from broader concern over Chinese human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang as well as its increasingly aggressive economic and foreign policy. As support for more Chinese investment in Iceland has therefore shrunk, so too has overall Icelandic support for engaging with China in the Arctic, with 60% of Icelanders identifying China's growing Arctic influence as a 'high' or 'medium' threat.[152]

Norway

Introduction

Possessing both Arctic geography and extensive experience in Antarctica, Norway has long prided itself on being a polar state with extensive polar knowledge, as well as being in a distinct position to engage and affect current and emerging areas of Arctic governance, due to its status within the 1920 Spitsbergen Treaty which governs the Svalbard archipelago.[153] This agreement grants Oslo sovereignty over the islands, but under conditions of demilitarisation and open access for any other state governments which accept the treaty's parameters. Northern Norway (*nordområdene*), which has been frequently defined as the encompassing the counties of Nordland and the recently-merged Troms and Finnmark, as well as Svalbard and the Jan Mayen archipelago,[154] defining about 35% of Norway's land area but only roughly 9% of the Norwegian population, is a distinct part of the country's political and economic landscape. The strategic value of Northern Norway has only increased with the post-February 2022 security situation, amid concerns that the Russian invasion of Ukraine will spill over into the Arctic in various ways.

This section looks at the considerable changes in Norway's Arctic policies. These changes include areas of security, in which have been reflected changes of government policies, including those between the previous centre-right coalition government of Prime Minister Erna Solberg, leader of Norway's Conservative Party (*Høyre*), and her successor, Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, who assumed office in October 2021 at a time when the political and strategic situation in the Nordic Arctic region had begun to shift due to both Russia's assertive behaviour in its own Arctic lands as well as the growing interest of NATO in the security of the European Far North. The Støre government, at the time of writing of this report, was seeking to revive Norwegian Arctic policy to reflect changed security conditions, and in the interim, there has been a considerable refocusing of how both Northern Norway and the Arctic as a whole fit into Norwegian regional interests.

Self

Balancing between Cooperation and Confrontation

From a strategic viewpoint, Norway is also a front-line state, given its border with the then Soviet Union and later Russia. With the sharp downturn in relations between the West, including NATO, and Moscow, first after Russia's forced annexation of Crimea in 2014 and then its illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Norway again finds itself in a vanguard position within a great power conflict in the Arctic. As the Far North itself becomes more militarised due to ongoing deployment of Russian personnel, materiel, and infrastructure into Siberia, coupled with the greater attention being paid to NATO in the Arctic, Norway now finds itself trying to reconcile its traditional role as a conduit for communication and cooperation in the Arctic with new geostrategic realities, including the possibility of a politically bifurcated Arctic.

The Norwegian government of Jonas Gahr Støre has supported strengthening strategic ties with both the US and NATO since the outbreak

of the Ukraine conflict. Oslo's policies regarding the Arctic have remained consistent, seeking a balance of ensuring regional security while also promoting development and measures to address regional and global climate change. However, opinion within Norway has not been monolithic in its approach to Arctic diplomacy, including Russian relations. At times, the 'Russia question' has been folded into an enduring north/south political divide (as well as a difference in political views between Oslo/centre and the periphery) within Norway. The Støre administration has maintained that the Norwegian Arctic should still be a place of community-building and research, and that steps should be taken to prevent the region from becoming depopulated due to a lack of economic opportunities, with Støre noting in a February 2022 interview that an 'empty void' cannot be allowed to appear along Norway's Russian border.[155]

> Russia's military build-up and military modernisation pose a challenge to the security of Norway and other Allied countries. As a result, the US and other Allies are showing a growing interest in increasing their presence in the north in order to monitor developments in the Russian part of the region. [...] Norway's security and defence policy is based on the guarantee of support from Allied countries in the event of war or crisis.
>
> Regeringen, *The Norwegian Government's Arctic Policy* (2020)[156]

The Return of the Hard Border?

With bilateral diplomatic cooperation severed, initiatives such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), which have linked northern Norway to north-western Russia, have faltered, along with a special visa scheme developed in 2007, which had allowed for limited simplified travel over the 196 km Arctic border.[157] This has left border regions in Norway, which had already suffered economically from the post-2020 COVID-19 pandemic, with another serious economic challenge due to a loss of Russian visitors and income.[158] Other areas of Norwegian cooperation with Russia, including via the Spitsbergen (now Svalbard) Treaty and the watershed 2010 Barents Sea maritime border demarcation agreement between Moscow and Oslo,[159] have also been strained by the current strategic situation.

Norway is now facing a clash of identities in the wake of dramatic changes in the Arctic's strategic milieu. This includes the growing military threat posed by Russia in the Far North, regional spillover from the conflict in Ukraine (including from a Baltic-Nordic viewpoint), and the growing closeness of Norway to NATO, which will be further affected by the admission of Nordic neighbours Finland and Sweden to the organisation. Norway is also under pressure to continue to be a force for the promotion of Arctic development and environmental responsibility, the latter being affected by the growing demand for Norwegian fossil fuels in Europe due to the loss of Russian supplies caused by Western sanctions.

Oslo is seeking to address its Arctic policies via a combination of small power and niche diplomacy. Regarding the latter concept, although niche diplomacy has often been associated with middle powers, Norway can be considered a middle power in Arctic affairs given its historical presence, ability to affect regional cooperation and norm-making, and its reputation as an honest broker in diplomatic affairs, including on Arctic issues. Norway frequently 'punches above its weight' in Arctic affairs compared to the other Nordic states, and arguably within the Arctic Eight as a whole. At present, Oslo is presenting itself as a key partner in regional cooperation, but also assuming leadership roles based on its Arctic expertise and central position in numerous areas of far northern governance.

In the Middle of Things

Recent policy statements and comments have illustrated Norway's distinct status within the key areas of Arctic diplomacy, governance, and environmental policies. Part of this status is based on the country being a hub for regional regimes, including the Arctic Council Secretariat and the Arctic Economic Council (both in Tromsø), and the Secretariat of the BEAC (Kirkenes). In addition, Tromsø is also the centre of one the region's most prominent Track II organisations, Arctic Frontiers, which has often been used as a platform for local policy debates. The most recent governmental white paper on the Arctic was published by the Erna Solberg administration in early 2020, reflecting an emphasis on 'security, stability and interest-based international cooperation' in the region, as well as a convergence of domestic and regional-level politics.[160] The latter point was also featured in the previous Arctic policy paper published in 2017.[161]

The Støre government currently rests on a coalition between the Prime Minister's centre-left Labour Party (*Arbeiderpartiet*) and the Centre Party (*Senterpartiet*) which has agrarian roots and supports devolution of domestic governmental powers. The 2021 coalition agreement (*Hurdalsplattformen*) included mutual pledges to enhance northern dialogues, improve Arctic state-to-state cooperation via regimes including the Arctic Council and Barents organisations, but also to further cooperation with Russia and develop stronger bilateral links—although this pledge was downgraded after Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[162]

Region

Continuing as an Arctic Partner

The major shift in Arctic policy between the 2017 and 2020 Arctic white papers is the stronger prominence of security in the latter piece. While the previous policy statement made note of the importance of economic, environmental, and social sustainability in the Norwegian North, security discussions in the 2017 paper were limited to civilian issues, including maritime safety and search and rescue capabilities, (including in Svalbard). Norwegian international affairs in the Far North were framed in terms of cooperation and the building of linkages via scientific cooperation and business endeavours. Despite the international outcry from Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea, the 2017 policy statement also emphasised that 'it is vital that Norway and Russia work together to address key challenges in the north.'[163]

While the subsequent government policy document was released well before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was acknowledged in the 2020 paper that, while previously 'the stability of the Arctic has long remained relatively unaffected by conflicts in other areas of the world', shifting security conditions and the internationalisation of Arctic interests had placed Norway in a distinct, and at times risky, geographic position.[164] In addition to what was then Russian pressure on eastern Ukraine, Russian military deployments in the Arctic Ocean, and concerns about the vulnerability of the GIUK (Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom) Gap sub-region of the Atlantic Arctic,[165] this was also a time when Russia and China had laid the groundwork for the development of the Polar Silk Road (PSR, *bingshang sichou zhilu,* 冰上丝绸之路), starting in 2017, which promised to include increased numbers of civilian and potentially military vessels from both powers travelling close to Norwegian coasts.[166] Beijing specifically views the PSR as the nascent 'northern tier' of the greater Belt and Road Initiative, and continues to view the Arctic as an emerging area of economic interest, as outlined in its 2018 government white paper on the region.[167] Pre-pandemic, both China and Russia were envisioning greater use of the PSR for cargo traffic between Northeast Asia

and Northern Europe, which would have affected northern Norwegian waters. However, the economic dislocations created by the COVID-19 outbreak, and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine, have adversely affected those plans.

> Climate change and easier access to sea areas and natural resources have led to increasing human activity in the Arctic [...] As new actors with other interests and ambitions increase their engagement in the Arctic, more needs to be done to ensure continued respect and understanding for Norway's views.
>
> Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Setting the Course for Norwegian Foreign and Security Policy* (2016-2017)[168]

Methods of Cooperation

Despite the greater emphasis on security challenges in the Arctic, Norway's 2021 policy paper affirmed the importance that Norway assigns to promoting regional cooperation on various fronts, including legal agreements with respect to the environment. Norway was a prominent actor and signatory of the 2017 International Maritime Organization (IMO) Polar Code on the regulation of civilian ship traffic in the Polar Regions, as well as the Central Arctic Ocean fishing moratorium in 2018, after agreeing to a ban with the five Arctic littoral states (the Oslo Declaration) three years before.[169] Norway also promised ongoing Arctic-based cooperation in Indigenous affairs, in youth and educational interests, and in economic and business areas. Clearly, the white paper indicated that Oslo was not seeking a radical shift in Arctic policy, but was rather seeking to augment the role of security in the country's northern affairs as a result of Russia's actions (and, to a lesser degree, concerns about China), as well as growing NATO focus on security in the Atlantic Arctic that reflected its own policies and priorities.[170]

Others

Russia as the Challenger Next Door

Russia continues to be Norway's primary strategic concern in the Arctic, as reflected by the decision in October 2022 to place the Norwegian military on raised alert, not only due to Moscow's military posture but also the threat of hybrid attacks. These have included Russian nationals being arrested for photography or drone use in sensitive areas during the autumn of 2022, and the detainment of a suspected Russian spy in Tromsø in October 2022.[171] Arctic regional agreements, including Norway-Russia nuclear cooperation, remain suspended, and a difficult question facing the two states was how the chair position of the Arctic Council, currently held by Moscow, could be transferred to Norway in May 2023 with seven of the eight members having paused formal activities within the organisation.[172]

One Country Away: The Question of China in the Arctic

Although bilateral relations between China and Norway were put back to official rights via a memorandum of understanding in December 2016 (six years after the Nobel Peace Prize incident), and bilateral free trade talks have been revived after a suspension caused by the diplomatic freeze,[173] the two countries recently have disagreed over Arctic policies. Oslo has been concerned about Chinese complaints about Norwegian interpretation of the Spitsbergen/Svalbard Treaty which would set tighter parameters for research on the archipelago. In 2019, Norwegian communications giant Telenor announced that it was not going to using China's Huawei for its 5G framework, opting instead for Sweden's Ericsson.[174]

In addition, despite much initial fanfare that Northern Norway would be a major component of the PSR, including potential enhanced port facilities and the building of a long-sought arctic railway connecting the towns of Kirkenes and Rovaniemi, these plans have been in development purgatory due to lukewarm support in Oslo and opposition from local Sámi organisations on environmental grounds.[175] At present, the only tangible PSR project in Norway to which Beijing can realistically point is the Hålogalandsbrua bridge near Narvik, completed in 2018 under contract by the Sichuan Road and Bridge Group, but that project has been marred by repair and quality concerns.[176]

In short, Norway's roles in the Arctic have been marked by both continuity and change, with the former illustrated by ongoing support for regional cooperation on governmental and other levels, including combatting climate change. As Norwegian foreign minister Anniken Huitfeldt noted at the Tromsø Arctic Frontiers conference in May 2022, 'the Arctic has no pause button.'[177] However, these concerns have now had to share space with the rapidly changing hard security status of the Arctic, and Norway is now facing a change in its regional thinking to include the securitisation (or re-securitisation, depending on viewpoint) of the High North.

Sweden

Introduction

In October 2020, the Swedish government published its second Arctic policy, which began with a simple statement: 'Sweden is an Arctic country.'[178] As one of eight countries with territory above the Arctic Circle, this is a factual statement, though it is also an expression of Arctic identity. Much of Sweden lies below the Arctic Circle; indeed, its two northernmost counties—Västerbotten and Norrbotten, which represent one-third of the country's territory—are populated with just over half of a million inhabitants. This Arctic identification is therefore more than geography or history; it is a projection of Sweden's self-image and perceived place in the region. Accordingly, Swedish narratives calling for a response to the deterioration of the natural and security environments in the Arctic are both about Sweden's own security, but also about the economic and geopolitical shifts in the circumpolar region, with which Sweden is now engaging.

As political science professor Niklas Eklund of Umeå University explains, Sweden straddles different geopolitical and security-related contexts. 'In the longer historic perspective, the waxing and waning of security alliances, warfare, and trade in Northern and continental Europe have been the primary drivers of its strategic culture', he notes. 'The Arctic, which is the other significant strategic context to which Sweden belongs, has played a far less significant role in terms of security.' Accordingly, Sweden is a relative political latecomer to Arctic security discussions 'suddenly and seemingly throwing a lot of weight behind its newfound engagement, adding Arctic concerns to its historically manifest security interest in the Baltic Sea area'. Its 2020 strategy articulates 'completely new and different security perceptions' from its traditional stance, dedicating a specific section to issues of Arctic security and making note of 'new geostrategic realities in the region'—thus forging a clear link between the country's Arctic and security policies.[179]

This transition to a more nuanced or comprehensive approach acknowledges evolving geopolitical trends in the Arctic and the effects of new actors and broader international drivers on the region. While Sweden continues to highlight the importance of environmental and social issues and calls for increased scientific cooperation, it no longer assumes that regional peace and stability are inevitable. Its new strategy takes stock of the worsening impacts of climate change on the Arctic, as well as the changing security situation considering increased military presence and activity in the region. The transition towards NATO membership and a harder defence posture in the region is clearly traceable to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which represented a significant shift in Swedish perceptions of Moscow. This is a significant transition from its historically non-aligned position.[180]

Self

Sweden's Arctic strategy continues to focus on 'peaceful, stable, and sustainable development in the Arctic' and aims to strengthen the country's Arctic profile.[181] The government describes the document as a renewal of the 2011 strategy, with a new 'overall approach' to Arctic policy that articulates six core thematic areas: international cooperation; security and stability; climate and the environment; polar research and environmental monitoring; sustainable economic development and business interests; and ensuring good living conditions. The inclusion

of a focus on research is especially crucial, as the government seeks to leverage Swedish knowledge and expertise on Arctic matters, including not only from the government and state authorities, but also from regional and local authorities, Indigenous peoples' organisations, universities, companies, and other actors in Sweden.

The first priority area, international cooperation, echoes the themes of Sweden's previous strategy. There is a focus on a rules-based international order and on multilateralism and strengthening of the Arctic Council. It also states that the government supports the EU's application for a permanent observer position to the Arctic Council. Indigenous peoples are included in the international cooperation priority area as well, as Sweden plans to increase their participation in Arctic politics. The strategy continues to focus on the importance of international cooperation, stating that Stockholm welcomes the EU's strengthened profile in Arctic contexts. It also highlights that Arctic states have a special role in influencing developments in the region.

Sweden's security is linked to its fundamental values. The country will defend and support its democracy and the rule of law and uphold respect for each inhabitant's freedoms and rights against all domestic and external actors that may seek to undermine them. These values are of inalienable intrinsic value. They constitute the foundation of Swedish society's prosperity and resilience.[182] Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the notion of security and regional threat perception has naturally shifted. Whereas, in 2011, security was conceived of as a largely non-state-based set of threats, in 2022, Russia and conventional defence have come to dominate.

> The Government's Arctic policy is based on the basic principles that guide Sweden's broad foreign and security policy. Central among them are respect for international law, human rights, democracy, the principles of the rule of law and gender equality.
>
> *Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region* (2020)[183]

Environmental Leadership, Sustainable Economic Development, and Living Conditions

A second principal threat vector, which has evolved and increased in importance over the past decade, are the regional impacts of climate change. Sweden's emphasis on climate and the Arctic environment links directly to its commitment to demonstrating leadership in implementing the Paris Agreement, as well as its targets for preserving biodiversity in line with the Convention on Biological Diversity. It also reflects the country's commitment to climate-related research, and its pledge to enhance polar research and environmental monitoring with the goal of becoming a world-leading nation in polar research.

While fervently committed to environmental sustainability, the Swedish government promotes sustainable trade and investment in the Arctic region and economic growth that benefits local populations. Planned efforts include reducing technical barriers to trade, to ease the cross-border flow of goods and services in the Arctic, working with the EU to continue monitoring the implementation of the agreement on the prevention of unregulated fishing in the central Arctic Ocean, and working closely with Sweden's Nordic neighbours and Russia to promote long-term sustainable transport systems in the region. The latter plans have been put on hold in light of Russia's war on Ukraine and the suspension of Western cooperation with Moscow on most issues.

Ensuring good living conditions represents another key priority in Sweden's Arctic strategy. This area focuses especially on the rights of Indigenous peoples and improving the lives of communities in the Arctic. Although only an estimated 20,000 Sámi live in Sweden (representing 0.22% of the total population of the country),[184] Sweden strives to ensure that Indigenous peoples have greater scope for preserving and developing their identity, culture, and traditional industries and sharing traditional knowledge. Planned measures include contributing to the development of robust infrastructure in the Arctic region, including digital infrastructure; increasing opportunities for Indigenous peoples in the Arctic to preserve and develop their identity, culture, and traditional industries; working for a vibrant Sámi culture based on sustainable reindeer husbandry; promoting the preservation of Arctic Indigenous languages; incorporating a gender equality perspective in Arctic cooperation bodies; and working to ensure that young people in the region have influence over societal development.

Sweden's view of Arctic economic development focused on socially and economically sustainable investment and growth. This includes the removal of trade barriers, the construction of new infrastructure, and a greater emphasis on lateral, cross-Arctic trade. The always-controversial subject of natural resource development is addressed in Swedish policy with an emphasis on social and environmental responsibility—a framework with particular relevance to the important forestry sector. These Arctic goals are not region-specific, aligning as they do with Sweden's broader approach to development and climate change mitigation.[185]

Region

Sweden's foreign policy is firmly based on the principle of multilateralism and institutional cooperation with like-minded nations. In both bilateral and multilateral settings, the Swedish government had adopted a broad concept of security. It considers it to be an overarching Swedish interest to uphold respect for international law and the rules-based world order, which forms part of the foundation for international security and stability in the region.[186] Sweden expects that non-Arctic states will respect these rules and principles when operating in the Arctic. Towards these ends, Sweden has consistently called for close cooperation with and within the EU, which it considers the clearest path to maintaining peace, security, and stability for itself and its neighbours.

Sweden's official narratives emphasise how it will contribute, as one of the eight Arctic countries, to peaceful, stable, and sustainable development in the Arctic. Accordingly, its 2020 Arctic strategy is rooted in the idea that international cooperation and confidence-building measures contribute to collective security and stability. This represents continuity from its 2011 Arctic strategy, as do statements about international collaboration, climate and the environment, polar research and monitoring, sustainable economic development, and safeguarding good living conditions. The new departure is dedicating a whole section to hard security, in which Stockholm indicates its intention to 'work for the further development and deepening of Nordic and Euro-Atlantic security and defence policy cooperation focusing on the European part of the Arctic, the Cap of the North and the North Atlantic region'. In this construct, climate change is seen as a driver of insecurity and potential instability in the Arctic, and the policy clearly stipulates that Sweden is ready to counter such tendencies using 'the full range of security policy instruments—political, diplomatic, economic, and military— [...] in an integrated way to achieve our objectives.'[187]

Cooperation and Security

Rapid climate change, military dynamics, and intensifying non-Arctic state interests in the Arctic region are drivers changing Swedish perceptions of the Arctic security environment. The new section on security and stability in the 2020 Swedish strategy aligned Swedish security interests with those of nations supporting 'the rules-based world order', and depicted the Arctic as a fault line between Western (the US and NATO) and Eastern (Russian) interests, 'as in the Cold War'. In addition, China is identified as a threat to regional security and stability because it 'expresses general support for international law, but acts selectively, especially concerning issues that China regards as its core interests.' The Swedish government concludes that military cooperation between Russia and China merits further attention, particularly with regard to the Arctic, and wishes to encourage 'like-minded countries and the EU to cooperate and act together regarding challenges and opportunities resulting from the increase in China's global influence.'[188] This language represents a divergence from the soft security orientation in Sweden's 2011 Arctic strategy.

The Swedish government devotes the final part of the security and stability section of its 2020 Arctic strategy to national capability and 'emerging Swedish strategic defence policy interests in the Arctic'. Referencing the 2019 Swedish Defence Commission, which stated that the country had 'taken far too little account of security policy and military developments in the Arctic and how they can affect Sweden', it establishes the need for Sweden to extend its geopolitical interests beyond the North Sea and the Baltic Sea area to encompass 'a particular centre of gravity in the area around the Barents Sea and the North Atlantic'.[189] The strategy argued that Swedish military capabilities should be strengthened in the northern parts of the country, and joint military exercises with NATO and the other Nordic countries should continue to promote 'transatlantic cooperation' as a 'fundamental' element of 'both American and European security'.[190] As Eklund observes, the 2020 Arctic strategy 'represents a significant declaration of security intent and geostrategic positioning', with Swedish neutrality used as 'a highly flexible policy instrument that allows a country firmly rooted in a tradition of democracy, the rule of law, and free trade to adapt to perceived changes in its geostrategic reality'.[191]

Sweden's increased defence cooperation with NATO accelerated in tandem with Russia's growing belligerence and militarisation in the Arctic. In a keynote address to the Chatham House Security and Defence Conference in March 2020, Swedish Minister for Defence Peter Hultqvist articulated Sweden's strategic turn towards interoperability with its Nordic neighbours, particularly Finland and Norway. In his view, Sweden could best address the new security environment in the European High North through increased cooperation and joint interoperability with Sweden's Nordic neighbours, NATO, and EU partners.[192]

Two major agreements dramatically changed the Nordic military context. On 8 September 2020, the Swedish parliament voted in favour of closer military cooperation with Finland, in effect allowing the Swedish government to deploy Swedish armed forces to assist Finland in preventing violations of Finnish territory, and to receive military support from Finnish forces to prevent violations of Swedish territory or to respond to an armed attack against Sweden.[193] Two weeks later, on 23 September, a joint statement from the defence ministers of Norway, Sweden, and Finland signalled closer military cooperation between the three countries to coordinate operational planning 'in areas of common concern, for example the northern parts of Finland, Norway and Sweden'.[194] The ministerial statement concluded that the three countries had 'over the years always found pragmatic and flexible ways to cooperate, allowing our defence cooperation to emerge and evolve despite our different security affiliations', and they would 'now build upon experiences gained from [joint] exercises when enhancing our operational cooperation'.[195]

Others

Russia and NATO

Although Sweden has a history of neutrality, this is not an adequate way to characterise its defence relations. Sweden is clearly aligned with the West, with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg describing it and Finland in January 2022 as 'NATO's closest partners'.[196] NATO and Sweden share common values, conduct an open and regular political dialogue, and engage in practical cooperation across a wide range of issue areas. Sweden also places a high priority on ensuring interoperable capabilities with NATO as an 'Enhanced Opportunity Partner' under the Partnership Interoperability Initiative.[197] Historically, NATO fully respected Sweden's longstanding policy of military non-alignment, with Secretary General Stoltenberg emphasising that NATO stands 'for the right of each nation to choose its own alliances' and fully respected Finland's and Sweden's 'strong and independent security policies', with those countries having the right to self-determining their path, 'not Russia'.[198]

Sweden's relations have soured considerably with Russia over the past year. After Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Swedish public support for joining NATO surged to its highest recorded levels,[199] and Sweden submitted its official letter of application to become a NATO ally in May.[200] With the other six like-minded Arctic states, Sweden chose to pause its participation in the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and the EU Northern Dimension in March 2022. Despite early warnings, the Nordics' ultimate decision was met with feigned apathy from Moscow, with Vladimir Putin saying in June 2022 that there is 'nothing that could bother us from the point of view of Finland's or Sweden's membership in NATO.'[201] Rather than following through with some of its earlier posturing, Russia has stripped much of its military force from the Finnish border regions. Russia's war in Ukraine has created this requirement and, by necessity, Russia's response to its perceived 'NATO Arctic expansion' has been postponed. While delayed, Russia will invariably respond politically, economically, and quasi-militarily against Sweden and Finland. This will likely include a more aggressive posture in the Arctic in general. Indeed, initial signs of this response are evident in Russia's July Arctic-focused naval policy and its continued military exercises in the region.

> Sweden's membership [in NATO] provides a 1,600-kilometre long stretch of airspace extending from the Arctic to the southern Baltic Sea. [...] Sweden is the link connecting eastern NATO countries to the Atlantic. For the first time in 500 years, the Nordics will share the same defence geography, form part of the same defence alliance and gain strategic depth for joint military forces.
>
> Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, 'Sweden's role in NATO', 8 January 2023[202]

China-Sweden Relations

While Sweden's status as an Arctic state is not central to China's diplomatic objectives in the country, it constitutes an important consideration. China has tried to foster positive Arctic relations with Sweden, particularly to promote investment, to secure access to resources and technology, and to establish a scientific footprint. Of particular relevance, China has operated the Remote Sensing Satellite North Polar Ground Station in Kiruna, north of the Arctic Circle, since 2016.[203] Chinese media has also noted when Swedish defence officials have issued warnings that 'nominally civilian cooperation with China could ultimately be controlled by the military'.[204]

Since 2018, the Chinese embassy in Stockholm has mounted an intense campaign of public criticism and threats against Swedish media outlets, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, politicians, and authorities which the embassy accuses of bias against China. Consequently, Sino-Swedish relations have deteriorated dramatically.[205] Swedish media reporting has also become more critical of China and the Chinese Communist Party, and Swedish public opinion of China has fallen significantly. Although the Chinese ambassador in Stockholm declared in January 2021 that 'Sweden is not important enough to threaten', China's actual behaviour suggests otherwise.[206] As three commentators noted in *Politico* in the following month, 'Sweden's travails are of wider interest to the EU because they touch on important questions which many countries in the bloc face, namely where to draw the line between often lucrative commercial deals with China and concerns over China's human rights record and its history of spying on Western nations.'[207]

China's coercive diplomacy in Sweden has alienated the Swedish population and has led to high levels of distrust towards Beijing (including at local levels, where several cities and sub-national authorities have terminated cooperation agreements with Chinese counterparts, citing human rights concerns). Despite these developments, NATO StratCom COE research reveals several areas in which China seeks to assert influence, especially when China's narrative frames converge with existing Swedish local attitudes and perceptions of local populations on economic benefits and opportunities from cooperation with China. Chinese official statements also warn Swedes about the costly repercussions from opposing China.[208] As Sweden's 2020 Arctic strategy warned, 'China has already shown that it wants to have more influence on developments in the Arctic. This can risk leading to conflicts of interest. China expresses general support for international law, but acts selectively, especially concerning issues that China regards as its core interests.'[209]

While Swedish official documents acknowledge that 'the military dimension of China's actions in the area has so far been limited', Stockholm cautions that 'China is gradually building up naval forces with global reach' and that 'more attention needs to be given to the military cooperation between China and Russia, especially regarding possible military cooperation aimed at the Arctic.' Accordingly, Sweden's Arctic strategy encouraged 'like-minded countries and the EU to cooperate and act together regarding challenges and opportunities resulting from the increase in China's global influence.'[210]

The Russian Federation

Introduction

For the Russian state—irrespectively of its name and historical epoch—the Arctic region has always represented a matter of vital security and military, (geo)economic, and ideology-pinned interests. Starting from the pre-1917 era, the Arctic has been articulated by Russia as a zone of its 'special', and perhaps even 'exclusive', interests. Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 Murmansk speech called for the Arctic to 'become a zone of peace', reflective of 'a new, democratic philosophy of international relations, of world politics'.[211] Since 1991, however, Russia's stance and approach towards Arctic-related affairs has been marked by inconsistency. Initially designated a secondary priority, from the second half of the 2000s onward, the Kremlin has defined the region as one of Russia's top domestic and foreign policy priorities. Nevertheless, pragmatic and rational initiatives intertwine with irrational and reactionary actions, partly owing to Russia's inability to come up with a solid, well-defined Arctic strategy.[212] As a direct result of this limitation, Russia's actions in the Arctic often contradict each other. Positive, pragmatic, and rational steps—primarily initiated and supported by businesses, technocrats, and the academic community—aimed at exploitation of Arctic economic potential, encountered and were ultimately damaged by geopolitical calculations and neo-imperialist ambitions promulgated by the 'power bloc' within Russia's ruling elite. Moreover, having committed strategic mistakes in other theatres (primarily in Ukraine), Russia seems to have seriously damaged its reputation as a pragmatic, responsible, and trustworthy Arctic actor.[213]

This section is a continuation of the research conducted by the NATO StratCom COE in 2020. This content analysis is therefore primarily based on the sources analysed in the initial study, as well as on official statements and documents related to the Arctic region, published by the Russian side since 2020, including the *Strategy for the Development of the Russian Arctic Zone and Provision of National Security Through 2035* (Strategy-2035),[214] and various statements by Russian officials made at the Arctic Council and other international Arctic forums.

Self

Russia—A Historically Arctic Nation

History is often used as a tool by Russia in constructing its national identity and unifying different parts of its population.[215] Russia's claims about its exclusive position in the Arctic have a long historical background that were first articulated in the pre-1917 period and later maintained throughout the Soviet period of Russia's history. In addition to the Russian polar expeditions of the 18th and 20th centuries, heroisation of Russia's participation in Arctic exploration, study, and defence was additionally boosted during the late Soviet times, when a whole new layer of Soviet literature dedicated to Soviet military activities in the Arctic during the Second World War was created. Following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia—whose ability to play a commensurate role in the Arctic to the USSR was greatly diminished—established a legal framework that consisted of four major federal laws that both confirmed Russia's strategic interest in the Arctic and laid a solid foundation for Russia's future territorial claims in the macro-region. Incidentally, starting from 2001—the first instance, when Russia officially presented its territorial claims

in the Arctic—Russia's claims were back by the virtue of geography (officially) and historical role (unofficially).

After 2020, Russia's official statements about the Arctic region and its role therein acquired two distinct and, to some extent controversial, features. On the one hand, in his official speech after Russia launched its further aggression against Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin stated that 'Russia is not viewing the Arctic region as a sphere of geopolitical intrigues, but rather as an opportunity for sustainable partnership' with foreign actors.[216] At the same time, Putin continued making an emphasis on geopolitical and security-related vitality of the Arctic region for Russia's sovereignty and general security.[217]

> We consider the Arctic to be a unique region where the peaceful interests of all countries are in harmony. Instead of military competition, we need closer cooperation to combat the effects of global warming, to protect the interests of the indigenous [sic] population, to preserve biodiversity, and so on. Russia, like no one else, understands the importance of ensuring security in the region. Our country accounts for almost a third of the Arctic's territory, more than half of its population and about 70% of the economic activity in this region. We see no alternative to its sustainable development.
>
> Russian Embassy in Washington, May 2022[218]

An Assertive Actor with Special Interests

Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak military conflict in the Ukrainian Southeast, Russia has dramatically increased assertive rhetoric regarding the Arctic region. In addition to constant revival of the 'growing conflict potential' theme promulgated by Russia's 'power ministries', other Russian notable political figures increased harsh and frequently conflict-pivoted rhetoric as well. Although Russia's ministries and/or agencies directly related to Arctic affairs refrained from the use of aggressive and provocative rhetoric, and instead emphasised the need of partnership and cooperation, this rhetoric was undermined by aggressive and conflict-pivoted tones conveyed from influential parts of the Kremlin.

Using 'foreign-originating threats' and 'threats that seek to deprive Russia of its sovereign rights in the Arctic' as pretexts, a large portion of Arctic affairs was delegated to the *siloviki* block, who used these themes to justify the re-militarisation of the Arctic region. Russia's Strategy-2035 itself (based on both its formal title and the subject) places an equal emphasis on the development of the Arctic and on ensuring its security. In restoring the security aspect of its presence in the Arctic, Russia concentrated on three main points, summarised in the subsequent paragraphs.

The first point was the restoration of Arctic military infrastructure, bases, and facilities. These policies primarily applied to such territories as Wrangel Island,[219] the New Siberian Islands, Alexandra Land, the Severnaya Zemlya archipelago, Novaya Zemlya, and Mys Shmidta.[220] One of the symbols of the restoration of Russia's military presence in the macro-region became the 'Arctic Trefoil' (*Arkticheskii Trilistnik*) military base.

The second point involved re-armament of Arctic-based armed forces with military equipment specifically designed to fight in local climatic conditions. Considering Russia's war effort in Ukraine since 2022, it is hard to verify if this equipment is being produced on an industrial scale, or is a mere demonstration of power aimed at producing a psychological effect in Russia's Western counterparts. Examples include T-80BVM main battle tanks,[221] BTR-82A armoured personnel carriers, 'Arctic' Tor-M2DT air-defence missile launchers, the 'Arctic' Mi-8 helicopters, GAZ-3344-20 all-terrain amphibious

tracked carriers,[222] and a recently announced multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) specifically designed for Arctic conditions.[223]

Third, Russia has continued its longstanding 'icebreaker diplomacy' that combines deep symbolism, extending to the end of the 19th century,[224] with the novelty of powerful military icebreakers, such as the Ivan Papanin (Project 23550)[225] equipped with a new missile-defence system, radio-electronic defence, and Poliment-Redut ship-borne anti-aircraft weapons systems. At the same time, this icebreaker class could be equipped with the 3M22 Tsirkon anti-ship hypersonic cruise missile, with a reported striking distance of up to 1,000 km. It is also essential to underscore that Russia's commitment to increasing its superiority in the Arctic region, in terms of both quantity and quality of its (military) icebreakers, is an integral part of Russia's winning strategy in what it characterises as 'the unfolding "cold war 2.0"'.[226]

Following military defeats in Ukraine and several tranches of international sanctions in 2022, Russia's conflict-driven rhetoric and sabre-rattling in the Arctic-related discourse seems to have slowed down. Instead, Putin's most recent statements emphasise more practical tasks—realisation of socioeconomic and social programmes, means to evade economic sanctions, as well as building/strengthening ties with alternative centres of power[227]—that now dominate Russia's thinking.

A Sustainable Actor

Despite its utterly poor practical track record with devastating consequences for the local ecosystem—which should be viewed as a continuation of the Soviet legacy—Russia is constantly underscoring its commitment to the main principles of ecological (and social) sustainability in the Arctic. Russia is emphasising its adherence to the key principles of ecological sustainability through several main channels. First, Russia's President Vladimir Putin has been vocal about the need to protect the fragile Arctic ecosystem since 2011. Senior Kremlin officials continue to reiterate this narrative today, even after Russia's aggression against Ukraine has led to the country's international isolation.[228]

Second, environmental stewardship is a common theme when Russian officials participate in international forums and platforms. In addition to the Arctic Council, where Russia (before 2021, when its Chairmanship began) emphasised the 'ecological agenda',[229] Moscow has been actively using the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) to argue for stronger forces to deal with both humanitarian and natural disasters in the Arctic zone.[230] The Think Arctic[231] project—a series of conferences jointly organised by The Roscongress Foundation, the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the Higher School of Economics, and the Russian government's Analytical Centre—also aims to promote Russia's vision of the Arctic. The 'International cooperation as a guarantee of Arctic sustainable development' session (16 June 2022) was specifically dedicated to 'ecological, social and economic dimensions, determining the need to consolidate the Arctic as a region of peace, stability and constructive interaction, as well as saving the fragile Arctic ecosystem, developing a monitoring system, including monitoring the melting of permafrost, promoting the principle of responsible development of Arctic resources, protecting and taking into account the interests of the population of the region, including Indigenous peoples of the North, the development of scientific and technical cooperation.' Promotional materials emphasised that achieving this goal is possible only through combined efforts, by implementing joint projects and initiatives, and by 'maintaining mutually beneficial multilateral cooperation based on international law'.[232]

The third channel is through declarative partnership between large business, such as Rosneft and Nornickel[233] (which, rather ironically, contributed to a recent human-caused disaster in the Arctic region), and Arctic-related agencies seeking to participate in Arctic flora- and fauna-related ecological initiatives.[234]

Region

The Arctic as a Sovereign Space

As stated earlier, Russia has historically viewed the Arctic region as an area of its strategic, and in many ways exclusive, national interests. In its approach, Russia's position is markedly different from other great powers (such as the US) and Arctic-aspiring stakeholders (such as China). In addition to extensive territorial claims in the Arctic, Russia is prioritising the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as Russia's sovereign territory. In 2018, Russia introduced legislation to restrict the use of the Northern Sea Route, arguing that, since it lies within Russia's exclusive economic zone, it should be considered part of Russia's sovereign Arctic territory. The legislation foresees that any transit of hydrocarbons within the Northern Sea Route should be in Russian-flagged vessels.[235]

In 2020, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the Northern Fleet (NF) created an additional Air Defence (*Voyska Protivovozdushnoy*—PVO) division, ensuring that 'the Northern Sea Route [NSR] is now under steady protection.' He noted that protection of the east-west NSR, which follows Russia's northern coast, as well as 'the defense of vital industrial objects and protection of Russia's economic interests in the Arctic zone' is a task jointly performed by the NF, the Russian Airborne Forces (*Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska*—VDV), the Aerospace Forces (*Vozdushno Kosmicheskikh Sil*—VKS), and the Special Operations Forces (SOF). Furthermore, by the end of 2020, the NF was designated to 'receive more than 180 pieces of military equipment specifically tailored for the harsh conditions of the Arctic region', including 'the K-549 *Knyaz Vladimir*, a Borei-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, and the *Admiral Flota Kasatonov* frigate' as well as 'four capital ships, submarines and motor ships'.[236] In January 2022, nearly a month before the outbreak of the war against Ukraine, Dmitry Medvedev (Deputy Chairman of the Security Council) announced that, since the NSR fully remains under Russian sovereignty, it has the right to make any decisions on its development that it deems necessary.[237]

> Unfortunately, we have recently noted an increase in military activity in the Arctic and non-Arctic NATO countries, in particular the UK, which is sometimes provocative. This trend carries the risk of unintentional incidents that can not only complicate the military-political situation in the Arctic, but also have an extremely negative impact on the state of the fragile ecosystem of the North.
>
> Ambassador Nikolai Korchunov, remarks at the Global Finance Forum (Ecumene 2022), October 2022[238]

The Arctic, A Strategic Geoeconomic Joint Effort Between Europe and Asia

Before its war against Ukraine, Russia had outlined several steps that, when taken together, were to have formed a backbone for improving economic conditions and revitalising the macro-region. Specifically, three main priorities were declared. First, exploitation of Arctic liquified natural gas (LNG) was clearly pronounced in Strategy-2035. Furthermore, the Russian government adopted the long-term program on the development and production of LNG,[239] which, according to Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, was to assist in the pursuit of Russia's main goal of gaining a 20% share in the global LNG industry by 2035.[240]

Second of the main priorities is the digitalisation of the Arctic Region—one of the three key aspects outlined in Strategy-2035—which is supposed to connect Russia's Arctic regions and serve as a digital supplement to the NSR. This entails laying a 14,000-km fibre optic cable along and beyond the entire NSR to connect Europe and Asia. Vladimir Uyba, the acting head of the Komi Republic, stated that the realisation of this megaproject has a strategic meaning for his region since it will convert Komi into 'one of the main junctions securing the technological development of the Russian Arctic' and an indispensable element of the NSR.[241]

Third is the longstanding dream to develop the NSR as a key transportation artery, which in time could replace traditional maritime trade as well as transportation arteries such as the Suez Canal. In September 2021, Putin proclaimed that the NSR could become 'the future of the global transportation from Asia to Europe and vice versa'.[242] At the same time, Aleksey Chekunkov, the Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic, stated that 'the largest Asian countries are already looking [to] the NSR as a viable alternative to congested Suez Canal.'[243] Despite Western economic sanctions, Russian commentators still express optimism about the future and transportation potential of the NSR. For instance, an October 2022 meeting about the development of the NSR chaired by Alexander Novak disseminated the same optimistic ideas about the NSR's transportation capacity.[244] Moreover, Russia plans to establish 'strategic development knots' (*territorii operezhajushego sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitija*) along the NSR, where the city of Murmansk and surrounding area are envisaged to play the key role.[245] Despite these ambitions, Russia's actions in Ukraine appear to have stalled these plans.[246]

Others

Russia-China Relations

After Russia began its military aggression against Ukraine and international isolation ensued, Russia sought to bring in China as its key political partner, leading investor, and haven from Western-imposed isolation. De facto, the Russian political leadership offered China privileged (even exclusive) access to Russian markets and resources. Given mounting economic sanctions, Putin noted that Russia was preparing for full 'de-dollarization' of the Russian economy[247]—which, in practical terms, meant entering the yuan currency zone.

With regard to the Arctic region and its vast natural resources, and given the mass exodus of Western companies from the Russian market, the Kremlin essentially offered China full and complete access to Russian natural resources—many of which are located in the Arctic and High North. At the 19th session of the Valdai Discussion Club, Russia's top think tank, Putin emphasised that 'China is our biggest trade and economic partner [...] we cooperate in all spheres [...] and work together to promote economic project.'[248] This statement should be viewed as a continuation of Putin's previous remark (13 April 2022) about Arctic resources that should become a platform for growing economic and business cooperation with foreign partners.[249]

China's reaction to Putin's overtures has been surprisingly reserved; for now, Beijing has not provided any clear response, limiting its partnership with Russia to projects/initiatives in which China has special interest. Furthermore, given China's evasive, and to some extent unfriendly, position since the outbreak of war in Ukraine (with China limiting both economic, financial, and technological cooperation with Russia),[250] Beijing is unlikely to rush ahead and commit to costly and politically unsafe (out of fear of secondary sanctions) Arctic-based projects while international sanctions are in place.

Russia and Other Non-Arctic States

Before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Russia expressed deep and profound interest in strengthening ties in the realms of trade and business with members of the non-Arctic community from the India-Pacific macro-region. Specifically, Russia was particularly interested in using the Arctic and its resources to foster cooperation with three main players: India, Japan, and South Korea.

With regard to India, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed on 14 January 2020 that New Delhi and Moscow are tightening cooperation in the development of Arctic-based oil and natural gas projects.[251] Later, following negotiations in New Delhi, Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin announced that Indian companies would be joining the Vostok Oil extraction project.[252] Within the realm of Arctic resources, India was primarily interested in cooperating with Russia on oil, LNG, and coal projects. Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine and related international economic sanctions, India emerged as one of the main beneficiaries of Russia's economic isolation when its purchases of Russian oil skyrocketed. This had only a temporary effect: later, it was reported that the Indian Oil Corporation excluded Russian oil from its next tenders for oil procurement.[253] Furthermore, Russia's coal exports to India and other regional actors have been jeopardised owing to sanctions,[254] rendering economically unsustainable its production of coal in the Arctic region. Russia and foreign sources have reported India's decision to halt (at least for now) cooperation with Russia in the realm of Arctic natural resources due to fears of international economic retaliation and mounting uncertainty about the Russian market in general.

Russia also pinned hopes in the development of its Arctic resources on two other regional actors: Japan and South Korea. Despite its political and economic sanctions against Russia, Japan is pursuing a steady course in maintaining cooperation with Russia in the realm of non-renewable energy. In addition to sticking with the Sakhalin-2 project (which is the source of almost 10% of Japan's LNG imports),[255] Japan has also significantly increased LNG purchases from Russia (which grew by 211.2% in quantity from August 2021 to September 2022).[256] Japan, which represents 9% of Russia's cumulative LNG exports,[257] is not a realistic substitute for a shrinking EU market. South Korea served as another prospective market, but economic and business ties between the two countries have declined since Russia further invaded Ukraine in 2022. As a result of sanctions, South Korea not only cancelled several contracts on the building of LNG carriers (strategically important for Russia's ability to transport LNG from the Arctic to the India-Pacific region), but also severed long-term agreements with the Kolmar group,[258] one of Russia's key producers of coal.

The United States

Introduction

The Arctic is not at the forefront of domestic and foreign policy concerns in Washington, partly due to the limited Arctic voices in Congress (2 senators of 100 in the Senate and 1 representative of 435 in the House) and the array of competing domestic and international interests. Nevertheless, the US is considered an Arctic nation by virtue of Alaska,[259] which seeks to influence the development of US Arctic policies and strategies vigorously through its federally elected officials, state agencies, and industrial sectors.

The rising interest of the US in Arctic defence and security has become increasingly apparent since 2020, coupled with moves towards articulating a more comprehensive US Arctic strategy. While the 2013 US *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* mentioned geopolitical competition in passing, recent strategic documents explicitly name China and Russia as major competitors and potential challengers of the regional status quo. Nevertheless, the US maintains positive, even optimistic, aspirations. 'An Arctic region that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative is of critical strategic importance to the United States and a priority for Secretary [of State Antony] Blinken', a State Department press release highlighted in August 2022. 'As one of eight Arctic nations, the United States has long been committed to protecting our national security and economic interests in the region, combating climate change, fostering sustainable development and investment, and promoting cooperation with Arctic States, Allies, and partners.'[260]

The Biden Administration's Arctic discourse indicates a salient shift from US Arctic narratives under Donald Trump, which focused almost entirely on national security and oil and gas development. In 2019, the US prevented the Arctic Council Ministerial from adopting a final Declaration because of its reference to climate change, and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo adopted aggressive language towards Russia and China that broke from the usual diplomatic niceties at the high-level regional cooperative forum (where military security issues are not allowed to be discussed). By contrast, the Biden Administration does not deny the dramatic effects of climate change, promotes clean energy, and has banned offshore drilling in the Arctic—while retaining security as its top Arctic priority in light of the further Russian invasion of Ukraine and consequent geopolitical developments.

This section is based on a content analysis of Arctic-related speeches, statements, and official policy documents published by the Trump and Biden administrations between 2019 and 2022. It focuses particular attention on the National Strategy for the Arctic Region and the National Security Strategy released by the Biden administration in October 2022; other official US press releases and statements; key speeches by the US Secretaries of State; and statements by Alaskan Senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan.

Self

On 7 October 2022, the White House released its *National Strategy for the Arctic Region,* which replaces and updates the 2013 strategy released by the Obama Administration. Laying out an agenda for the 2022–2032 timeframe, the new Arctic strategy outlines four pillars to

organise action: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance. It relies on five principles to guide actions within the four pillars: consult, coordinate, and co-manage with Alaska Native tribes and communities; deepen relationships with allies and partners; plan for long lead-time investments; cultivate cross-sectoral coalitions and innovative ideas; and commit to a whole-of-government, evidence-based approach. The strategy 'also accounts for increasing strategic competition in the Arctic, exacerbated by Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine and the People's Republic of China's increased efforts to garner influence in the region, and seeks to position the United States to both effectively compete and manage tensions.'[261]

The reception to the new US Arctic strategy has been generally positive. This 'welcome, important new policy [...] marks a strong and clarifying shift in the US's focus in the Arctic over recent years', former EU Arctic ambassador Marie-Anne Coninsx extolled. 'Without exaggeration, one can say: "The US is back in the Arctic!"'[262] Alaska Republican Senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan expressed their frustration with what they saw as the strategy's 'excessive focus on climate change', which sent a 'troubling message' about non-renewable resource development opportunities in the region. Sullivan worried that 'despite America's increasing national economic and security interests in the Arctic that are being directly challenged by Russia, and increasingly challenged by China, the administration will continue to focus on shutting down responsible resource development.' For her part, Murkowski lamented how 'this strategy very clearly falls short when it comes to our Arctic resources', providing little focus on 'the opportunity and necessity of domestic production of the vast resources in our Arctic.'[263] This mirrors broader debates in the US about carbon emissions, oil and gas, and energy transitions.

Climate Change, Sustainable Economic Development, and Coordinating and Co-Managing with US Indigenous Arctic Communities

The new US Arctic strategy narrates the climate crisis as one requiring urgent action. The approach retains a strong domestic focus, pledging to support Alaskan communities to build resilience to the impacts of climate change and integrating traditional knowledge into science-based decisions. The US also commits to reducing emissions as part of broader global mitigation efforts and to pursue multilateral initiatives to conserve Arctic ecosystems. This aligns with the National Security Strategy, released on 12 October 2022, which states that 'of all of the shared problems we face, climate change is the greatest and potentially existential for all nations' and that 'no country should withhold progress on existential transnational issues like the climate crisis because of bilateral differences.'[264]

The Arctic 'possesses considerable economic potential, from tourism to vast natural resources', US Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasised in October 2022, calling the new Arctic strategy 'an important step towards shaping the future of the region.'[265] The US intends to support and promote sustainable economic development and improve livelihoods in Alaska by investing in infrastructure and improving access to services in Indigenous communities. The strategy emphasises a 'just energy transition' from fossil fuels towards renewable energy, and indicates that the US seeks to expand its involvement in emerging sectors (such as critical minerals).

The new strategy puts a specific emphasis on greater involvement of Alaskan Native Peoples, signifying a heightened prioritisation of Indigenous leadership in shaping and implementing regional agendas. 'As part of this National Strategy, the U.S. government reiterates its commitment to coordinating, and co-managing with U.S. Indigenous Arctic inhabitants, their

communities, and organizations', Monica Medina, Assistant Secretary at the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, emphasised in November 2022. 'We recognize that Indigenous communities are at the heart of everything we do in the Arctic, from addressing health, water, and energy security in a changing climate, to monitoring and protecting the health of Arctic ecosystems.'[266]

> Indigenous peoples have generations worth of knowledge about how to be good stewards of the Arctic. We must be true and equal partners in this work. And we have to bring the same partnership to bear in pursuing economic development in a sustainable and transparent way that directly benefits indigenous communities.
>
> Secretary of State Antony Blinken, 20 May 2021[267]

Region

In its official messaging, the US envisions the Arctic as a region 'free of conflict, where nations act responsibly, and where economic development and investment takes [sic] place in a sustainable, secure, and transparent manner that also respects the environment, the climate, and the interests and cultures of indigenous [sic] peoples.' The country seeks to uphold international rules, standards, and institutions in the region, and articulates the need for a comprehensive approach that is attentive 'to a full range of U.S. interests including environmental protection, scientific cooperation, safety, security, sustainable development, the reduction of greenhouse gas pollution, and the needs of indigenous [sic] and local communities.' It promotes strong regional governance, rooted in the international law and respect for national jurisdictions, and acknowledges that 'Arctic states have abided by these rules' in the region itself.[268] Although the US is the only Arctic state that has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and is thus not able to make a submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, official statements continue to emphasise that it has been gathering and interpreting the data needed to define the outer limits of its shelf and applies key provisions of UNCLOS as customary international law.[269]

Security

The security pillar of the US Arctic strategy focuses on deterring threats to the US homeland and those of its treaty allies (including Canada) 'by enhancing the capabilities required to defend our interests in the Arctic, while coordinating shared approaches with allies and partners and mitigating risks of unintended escalation.' The discussion emphasises that the Arctic operational environment 'poses region-specific challenges that require tailored technology, assets, infrastructure, training, and planning' and enhanced military and civilian whole-of-government capabilities 'to deter threats and to anticipate, prevent, and respond to both natural and human-made incidents.' Strategic objectives include improved understanding of and familiarity with the Arctic operating environment, exercising military presence (e.g., conducting regular training, exercises, and episodic deployments with allies and partners), and 'maximiz[ing] our cooperation with Arctic Allies and partners to enhance our shared security and deter aggression in the Arctic, especially from Russia.'[270] Points of emphasis include information sharing, combined exercises and training to improve cold-weather operations and interoperability, and collective deterrence, all of which resonate with the modernisation of the binational US-Canada NORAD Command and broader Arctic defence and security agendas articulated in recent years.

The US Arctic security narratives reflected in the national strategy for the region reflect the goals and priorities articulated in a series of military strategies released between 2019 and 2021. The *Department of Defense Arctic Strategy* (2019) emphasised the importance of defending the homeland and US sovereignty in the Arctic, while maintaining a credible deterrence in the region, being able to respond effectively to regional contingencies, preserving flexibility for US power projection, ensuring the right to freedom of navigation and overflight, and limiting the ability of China and Russia to engage in malign or coercive behaviour.[271] Service-specific strategies seek to expand air force capabilities in the Arctic (Air Force, *Arctic Strategy*, July 2020),[272] build a more capable naval force and maintain an enhanced presence and partnerships (Navy, *A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic*, January 2021),[273] and ensure land dominance in the Arctic (Army, *Regaining Arctic Dominance*, March 2021).[274] This suite of strategic documents, which are nested within the priorities laid out in the US National Security and National Defense Strategies, provide justification for the flow of investments in new capabilities so that the US military can compete and meet emerging challenges and opportunities in the region.

Arctic Governance and Cooperation

Secretary Blinken noted in May 2021 that the US is 'committed to advancing a peaceful Arctic region where cooperation prevails on climate, the environment, science and safety, and where sustainable economic development benefits the people of the region themselves.' He described the Arctic Council as 'indispensable to this vision'—as 'the preeminent forum for the eight Arctic states and six permanent participants to cooperate and address shared priorities together.'[275] The US joined the other like-minded Arctic states in announcing a pause in participation in the Arctic Council on 3 March 2022, while working concertedly with them to examine 'modalities' to allow the Council to resume its work when appropriate (culminating in a June 2022 decision to resume limited work in Council projects that do not involve the participation of the Russian Federation).[276] Thus, despite the challenges to Arctic cooperation caused by Russia's war in Ukraine, the US promises to continue to sustain institutions for Arctic cooperation and position these institutions to manage the impacts of increasing activity in the region. 'The Arctic Council is the foremost intergovernmental forum that encompasses both environmental protection and international cooperation in the Arctic', Medina highlighted in November 2022. 'We're proud to have been deeply involved in its work for more than 26 years since the signing of the Ottawa Declaration, and we continue to support the Council as we conduct its critical work going forward'.[277]

The North American Homeland Is "No Longer a Sanctuary"

From a North American defence perspective, the northern air and maritime approaches to the continent have re-emerged as potential avenues for an attack, with senior defence officials affirming that capabilities to detect, deter, and (if necessary) defeat these threats have not kept pace with emerging technologies. Particular attention is directed towards Chinese and Russian advanced missile capabilities below the nuclear threshold, which can strike at North America from longer ranges, can be delivered from multiple platforms, travel more rapidly, and are more manoeuvrable and difficult to detect than previous generations of strategic delivery systems.

The need to address potential threats that may pass through the Arctic shows how the region is imbricated in continental defence and global deterrence. As NORAD Commander

General Glen VanHerck explained in a March 2022 statement to the US Senate Armed Services Committee, 'The Arctic demonstrates how regional challenges increasingly take on global implications that require a global framework.'[278] According to this logic, Arctic security challenges must be nested within global and all-domain awareness, options, actions, and effects, with due consideration of global risk, resources, and readiness. Rather than Arctic-centric plans, this suggests the need for global plans with Arctic regional components that recognise the limits of existing 'stove-piped' approaches and the risk of horizontal escalation of competition and conflict beyond regional boundaries.[279] The NORAD and US Northern Command (NORTHCOM) 2021 *Strategy* describes how the forward and approaches layers consist of forward-deployed Canadian and US forces integrated with allies and partners, while the homeland layer consists of joint force capabilities integrated with whole-of-government and strategic private sector partner capabilities.[280]

Strengthening Relationships with International Allies and Partners

The *Department of Defense Arctic Strategy* (2019) emphasised that 'the network of U.S. allies and partners with shared national interests in this rules-based order is the United States' greatest strategic advantage in the Arctic region, and thus the cornerstone of DoD's Arctic strategy.' In the US view, a common approach to regional security 'helps deter strategic competitors from seeking to unilaterally change the existing rules-based order', which is 'built on a bedrock of internationally recognized principles like national sovereignty'. Accordingly, the US insists that 'a secure and stable Arctic [...] is strengthened by the U.S.-led alliance and partnership network in the Arctic and by maintaining activities in the region in line with international norms.'[281] This means that 'Arctic nations have the primary responsibility for addressing regional challenges', and the US seeks to 'deepen our cooperation with our Arctic allies and partners and work with them to sustain the Arctic Council and other Arctic institutions despite the challenges to Arctic cooperation posed by Russia's war in Ukraine.'[282]

Others

Great Power Competition

On 12 October 2022, five days after the US Arctic Strategy appeared, the White House released its 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS), which articulates a vision for 'cooperation in the age of competition'. To pursue 'a free, open, prosperous, and secure world', the US seeks to effectively compete with the People's Republic of China, which 'is the only competitor with both the intent' and, increasingly, the capability, ' to reshape the international order' while 'constraining a [...] dangerous Russia.' The specific section of the strategy on the Arctic (the first time that the region has been specifically featured in the NSS) is worth analysing in detail, given the carefully calibrated language.[283]

First and foremost, the US reiterates that it 'seeks an Arctic region that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative.' With climate change making the region 'more accessible than ever', however, this has led to 'intensifying competition to shape the region's future.' The NSS observes that Russia has invested significantly to expand and entrench its presence in the Arctic over the last decade, 'modernizing its military infrastructure and increasing the pace of

exercises and training operations.' The US insists that Russia's 'aggressive behavior has raised geopolitical tensions in the Arctic, creating new risks of unintended conflict and hindering cooperation.' The NSS also narrates how China has 'sought to increase its influence in the Arctic by rapidly increased [sic] its Arctic investments, pursuing new scientific activities, and using these scientific engagements to conduct dual-use research with intelligence or military applications.' In response, the NSS promises to 'uphold U.S. security in the region by improving our maritime domain awareness, communications, disaster response capabilities, and icebreaking capacity to prepare for increased international activity in the region.'[284]

The US Arctic strategy vows that the country will also 'refine and advance military presence in the Arctic in support of our homeland defense, global military and power projection and deterrence goals.' The strategy also calls for an increased focus on combined exercises with NATO Allies and Arctic partners 'to improve operational familiarity with the Arctic region, including cold weather operations and interoperability'. It also promises to carefully calibrate and coordinate its Arctic activities with its allies and partners 'with the aim of both defending NATO's security interests in the region while also reducing risks and preventing unintended escalation, especially during this period of heightened tension with Russia.'[285]

> DoD's strategic approach for the Arctic is to protect US national security interests and prudently address risks to those interests in ways that uphold the region's rules-based order, without fueling strategic competition. Competitive behavior in the Arctic must not distract from or undermine broader [National Defense Strategy] priorities; the Department must remain vigilant to how developments in the Arctic affects these priorities. A stable and conflict-free Arctic benefits the United States by providing favorable conditions for resource development and economic activity, as well as by contributing to upholding the international order and regional cooperation on challenges that affect all Arctic nations.
>
> *US Department of Defense Arctic Strategy* (2019), 7[286]

US-Russia Relations

The new US Arctic strategy highlights the need to 'deter aggression in the Arctic, especially from Russia.' Testimonies before congressional committees by senior military officials over the last three years provide more details on Russia's investments to reopen and modernise Soviet-era military installations in the Arctic; to deploy 'new coastal and air defense missile systems and upgraded submarines; and [increase] military exercises and training operations with a new combatant-command-equivalent for the Arctic.' The US strategy also chastises Russia for its attempts to 'constrain freedom of navigation through its excessive maritime claims along the Northern Sea Route.'[287]

The US Arctic strategy acknowledges that Moscow's invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated tensions in the region, rendering 'government-to-government cooperation with Russia in the Arctic virtually impossible.' While the document keeps the door open to the possibility that cooperation can resume 'under certain conditions', the messaging suggests that this is unlikely for the foreseeable future.[288] Nevertheless, the NSS notes that the US will 'sustain and develop pragmatic modes of interaction to handle issues on which dealing with Russia can be mutually beneficial'[289]—with arms control and climate change on the priority list.

China

The NSS emphasises that '[the People's Republic of] China is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.' This strategic assessment frames how the US plans to 'prioritize maintaining an enduring competitive edge over the PRC while constraining a still profoundly dangerous Russia'[290]—a logic that applies to the Arctic as well.

Scepticism towards Chinese interests in the Arctic remains a consistent feature in US Arctic communications. China claims to be a 'Near Arctic State', but the US does not recognise this status. US official narratives highlight how China—despite having no territorial claims in the region—is seeking a role in Arctic governance and is 'attempting to gain a role in the Arctic in ways that may undermine international rules and norms'.[291] While China's stated interests in the Arctic are primarily focused on access to resources and shipping routes (and it 'does not currently have a permanent Arctic military presence'),[292] the 2022 US Arctic strategy (the first to actually mention China by name) asserts that China 'seeks to increase its influence in the Arctic through an expanded slate of economic, diplomatic, scientific, and military activities.' It notes how, over the last decade, China 'has doubled its investments, with a focus on critical mineral extraction; expanded its scientific activities; and used these scientific engagements to conduct dual-use research with intelligence or military applications in the Arctic.'[293]

China

Introduction

Given Beijing's apparent force projection capabilities and active deployment of icebreakers *Xue Long* and *Xue Long-2* to the Arctic, the narrative of Chinese expansion into the region is rather straightforward. For all the focus on capability, however, the intent piece of Chinese Arctic identity is not widely understood. Much of the expert commentary and public discourse continues to focus on China's 2018 Arctic policy white paper and narratives of Xi Jinping China's credibility and notions of a 'global' Arctic. In practice, Beijing promotes and executes a rather different vision of its Arctic identity.

China has moved from an overall strategic narrative of merely asserting and articulating Arctic ambitions to acting on them. At the same time, Beijing has changed its modus operandi in executing its Arctic strategy—no longer relying on arguments of 'win-win' cooperation with existing Arctic stakeholders. Since the pause in the work of the Arctic Council in March 2022, and the increased scrutinisation of Chinese geoeconomic strategy in the Arctic, China has emerged as an opportunistic Arctic actor.

Opportunity abounds for Beijing to entrench its economic, political, and military foothold in the Arctic. Furthermore, China is actively developing and delivering on Arctic capability to enhance its presence in the Arctic. While, for now, indicators are that China's Arctic footprint will remain focused on the Russian Arctic Zone, it is worth considering the long-term implications for the Arctic as a whole stemming from the evident shift in Beijing's Arctic narratives since 2020.

This section builds upon the research published by the NATO StratCom COE in 2020 on Arctic narratives to assess how Chinese perceptions of the Arctic and the overall Chinese strategic narrative in the Arctic have shifted since mid-2019. Updating this previous work involved content analysis of statements, official documents, and speeches from Chinese officials since that time. Additional sources include primary source interviews with experts on Chinese Arctic strategy. While few changes have emerged in terms of Beijing's articulation of its 'near-Arctic' identity, China's discourse around its regional strategy has started to change, heightening security concerns in the Arctic states. This chapter considers China's Arctic narrative through three frames of reference: the identity Beijing is building for itself in the Arctic, the vision China seeks to promote of itself in the region, and how Beijing is framing its bilateral relationships with other actors in the Arctic.

Self

A Polar Great Power

The extant narrative for Beijing in the Arctic has long been its 'near-Arctic' identity. This purported identity, albeit self-prescribed, originated in Chinese academia before migrating to offical policy in order to signal to the international community Beijing's legitimate role in Arctic affairs. It is worth noting that the 2018 Arctic policy white paper only mentioned the 'near-Arctic' concept once.[294] Public narratives took hold of this label, and the result was the cultivation of a more reticent Arctic community, unsure of China's strategic intent in the Arctic.

Discourse analysis since mid-2019 underscores a shift away from China's 'near-Arctic' narrative towards one of a global great polar power. Beijing has long touted its Antarctic stake, via its Antarctic Treaty membership since 1983 and the rapid development of station infrastructure (namely in East Antarctica) on the continent ever since. However, a narrative has emerged in recent years in which China more purposefully links its Antarctic role, interests, and engagements with its Arctic activities. Somewhat overlooked is the Earth's 'third pole'—the Himalayas—in which China has also ramped up strategic communications with a vision to linking its stake, role, and interests in the Himalayas to its overall great polar power brand.

The intended audience for the great polar power narrative is Chinese nationals. Cultivating a sense of pride in China's emerging great power identity appears to be the primary driving factor. This invites national support for sharper economic conditions, bolsters a national sense of cohesion, and serves to further other international competitors in the polar sphere. A key aspect emerging from China's great polar power narrative is the use of strategic narratives aligned with environmental protection efforts and scientific or polar research leadership.

> A champion for the development of a community with a shared future for mankind, China is an active participant, builder and contributor in Arctic affairs who has spared no efforts to contribute its wisdom to the development of the Arctic region.
>
> China's Arctic Policy, January 2018[295]

China – a 'responsible Arctic Stakeholder'

Tapping into national interest and concern with climate change, China is establishing a strategic narrative of responsibility towards and within the Arctic. Discourse analysis indicates Beijing is slowly morphing the notion of responsibility into that of 'rightful actor'. Since mid-2019 there has been an uptick in strategic narratives about China's special responsibility to monitor and research climate developments in the Arctic, with a corresponding increase in the instances of Chinese state media publishing on Beijing's rightful Arctic role, while noting the effects of Arctic climate change on China itself.

Domestic publications namely promote national narratives of China's goals in the Arctic, outlining the agenda to 'understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the region, safeguard the common interests of all countries and the international community in the region and promote sustainable development of the Arctic.'[296] This serves to normalise—indeed, to nationalise—Beijing's Arctic identity among its population. A secondary audience is the international community, which remains eager to decipher China's Arctic intent.

It is clear that Beijing's narrative includes 'rightful' placement to participate in governance of the region—this is despite, and at odds with, China's public commitment to upholding its Arctic Council observer status. This status principally means that Beijing recognises that Arctic Council permanent members hold decision-making power and that the Council is the primary governance forum in the region. At the same time, domestic narratives published by Chinese state media since mid-2019 note that China also hopes to exploit the Arctic shipping route for its commercial fleets, while arguing that non-Arctic states have the right to do so under international law. The challenge lies in understanding at what point narratives of perceived responsibility become those of self-prescribed rights. The narrative of responsibility has been used to normalise Chinese Arctic presence and engagement, at least for Beijing's domestic audience. It has also been used to normalise China as a responsible Arctic actor for an international audience.

China's responsible Arctic stakeholder narrative is further strengthened by sharp domestic discourse since the release of the updated US Arctic strategy in January 2021. Articles

in the Chinese state media outlet *Global Times* often lash out at the 'hegemonic US [as] the real threat to [the] Arctic'.[297] This discourse includes notions of the US presenting 'repeatedly hyped' assessments of Chinese activity in the Arctic, with consistent narratives reiterating the notion that the Arctic 'belongs to all humanity, not just the eight members of the Arctic Council.'[298]

Region

A 'Win-Win' Arctic

Immediately before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, China was focused on responding to geopolitical narratives of Beijing's rise and expansion into the Arctic. Indeed, US strategic guidance during this time framed Beijing as Washington's 'pacing threat' and squarely noted the emerging role of the Arctic arena. Discourse analysis indicates China's priority was to protect and tout a 'win-win' business case to Arctic-rim stakeholders interested in engaging with (and working with) Beijing in the region.

Beijing's current 'win-win' proposition for the region is based upon the narrative that China respects sovereignty, rights, and the jurisdiction of Arctic states and that Beijing can forge regional partnerships which would benefit all parties. Engagement with China, it follows, presents an opportunity to conduct international research, protect the environment and to 'promote sustainable development' all underpinned by basic principles of 'respect [and] cooperation' leading to a 'win-win' result.[299] What exactly constitutes 'win-win' results is up for debate and invites scrutiny.

A component of China's 'win-win' narrative is that of sustainable economic development of the Arctic. An article penned by the then Chinese Ambassador to Iceland, Jin Zhijian, presented the case for China's interest in the sustainable development of the Arctic.[300] Sustainable development is a narrative increasingly framed as a collaborative endeavour, in which the sustainable development of the Arctic requires regional cooperation. This, of course, presents an opportunity for Beijing to enter the Arctic arena, legitimately (and long-term) under the guise of 'win-win' agendas.

China's narrative as a 'win-win' facilitator for the Arctic is further underscored by Gao Feng's statement at the 12th Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in 2021. The continued positioning of China as an 'important stakeholder in Arctic affairs' has since become the primary driving identity—now behind Beijing's role as 'an observer to the Council'.[301]

Beijing is carefully framing its engagement in the Arctic as somewhat of a choice for stakeholders: are states with or against Beijing in the future history of the Arctic? Despite posing this choice, China continues to promulgate an identity in the Arctic region as abiding by extant international norms and laws. However, this commitment is also subject to Beijing's interpretation, and China's actions in the international legal space that are further afield than the Arctic illustrate a tendency to perhaps mask the more coercive elements of China's long-term policies. Nonetheless, China's commitment to international law is broadly communicated in the 2021 official *Position Paper on its Cooperation with the United Nations*, whereby Beijing states that 'over the past 50 years, China has worked steadily to advance international rule of law. As a member of nearly all universal intergovernmental organisations and a signatory to over 600 international conventions and amendments, China has been fulfilling its treaty obligations in good faith, honoring its international commitments, and firmly upholding the international order underpinned by international law.'[302]

> Does China's military have a role in the Arctic? In theory, yes, because we are one of five permanent members of the United Nations' Security Council. If there is a task authorizing us to go there, and there is a task for us to implement, we can go there. If there's no task, we don't go there.
>
> Gao Feng, remarks at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, Iceland, 15 October 2022[303]

Others

Warning Shot Fired at the Arctic Council

Discourse analysis of the situation since February 2022 indicates that China is set to take advantage of souring Russian-Western ties in the Arctic. In so doing, China can walk back previous narratives of inclusive regional engagement with Arctic actors. Notions of respecting participation in Arctic Council meetings as an observer are no longer promulgated. Indeed, China has fanned narratives calling into question the legality of Norway assuming the chairmanship of the Arctic Council from Russia in 2023, given the enduring lack of consensus and unresolved legal disputes stemming from the Council's pause in activity.

In October 2022, speaking at the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, Special Envoy to the Arctic for China, Gao Feng, stated 'the Arctic Council is based on a declaration and there is no procedure for leaving the Council. I doubt that the chairmanship can be transferred to anyone or that Norway can take over the chair without Russia from a legal point of view.'[304] Planting the notion of murky legal precedent in the Arctic, Gao Feng's statement stunned onlookers. As a follow-up, Gao underlined Beijing's strategic position on the Council going forward—namely that China would 'not support Norway's chairmanship of the Arctic Council if Russia is still banned.'[305] The successful transition of the chairship from Russia to Norway in May 2023, online and with little fanfare,[306] and modest activity at the working group level since that time have rendered this threat moot.

This shift in China's Arctic narrative towards others in the region, namely the Arctic Council, appears designed to achieve two objectives. First, it underscores and promotes Beijing's support of Russia, at least in the extant Arctic governance space. Second, this narrative signalled China's intent to continue to use international law and legal regimes to further its own strategic interests—under the guise of Beijing's own interpretation of law. The net result is nonetheless the emergence of a 'lawfare' component to China's Arctic strategic narrative. Another example of China's 'lawfare' approach is its increased tendency to reinvent its role in international legal negotiations, such as claiming that 'China has actively facilitated negotiations and formulation of international rules in such emerging areas as cyber, deep sea, polar regions (Arctic and Antarctic), outer space and anti-corruption.'[307]

Promoting Alternative Structures: NATO Need Not Apply

An emerging discourse from Beijing is the need to promote avenues for alternative structures of governance and cooperation in the Arctic arena. Since 2021 this narrative has strengthened, particularly in response to an 'awakened' NATO seeking to increase its presence in the Arctic—and not least by the accession of an additional two Arctic states (Finland and Sweden) to the Alliance.

Of course, this narrative is a clear departure from China's prior Arctic position before Russia's further invasion of Ukraine. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs clearly articulated the high value it placed on the Arctic Council in its November 2020 observer report. Beijing reiterated its recognition of the Council as a main governance forum for the Arctic and reaffirmed its support for the work of the Council 'under the Chairmanship of Iceland and Russia (2021–2023)'. Of interest is China's articulation of plans in 2020 to 'intensify policy exchanges and cooperation with Member States and other observers of the Council.'[308]

China has also weaponised a narrative of considering alternative structures in the Arctic, should the Arctic Council prove ineffective at reengaging all of the Arctic-rim states. Since 2022, China has fanned concerns about NATO's Arctic agenda, with Beijing's official spokesperson Zhao Lijian noting 'NATO's wanton assertion [...] once again exposes its attempt to export the Cold War mentality and replicate bloc confrontation. NATO needs to immediately discard its dangerous thinking and approach that could destabilize the world'.[309]

An alternative model was presented in China's 14th Five Year Plan (2021–2025), which noted Beijing's plan to 'participate in the pragmatic cooperation' of the Arctic to build a 'Polar Silk Road' (*bingshang sichou zhilu,* 冰上丝绸之路).[310] The narrative of alternative development models for the Arctic, as offered by China, has garnered favour with Moscow in light of Western sanctions and fragmented relations stemming from Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. As such, China's alternative development narrative only finds deep resonance in Russia. Expansion in bilateral economic and trade cooperation was a feature of the 2022 Far East Forum, in which Chinese Ambassador to Russia, Zhang Hanhui, noted that economic and trade cooperation between the two countries remains 'resilient'.[311]

A strategic narrative thrust upon the Arctic is that of a Russia-China Arctic 'axis' or alignment. Yet, this is a narrative which Beijing carefully continues to cultivate. While assumptions abound that this 'axis' is a result of Russian isolation in the wake of its war in Ukraine, it is important to note that Chinese discourse has long touted an interest in maintaining 'low tensions' in the Arctic. Of interest is the use of new structures or suggestions of alternative mechanisms to do so. In early February 2022, Gao Feng noted that 'we can address these issues [climate, energy, security, connectivity] one by one by broadening the structure' of the Arctic Council.[312]

Furthermore, Sino-Russian alignment in Arctic affairs pre-dates the current isolation of Moscow in the Arctic. Three weeks before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Xi Jinping met with Vladimir Putin to discuss 'intensifying practical cooperation for the sustainable development of the Arctic [...] The sides call upon all countries to strengthen cooperation in sustainable transport, actively build contacts and share knowledge in the construction of transport facilities, including smart transport and sustainable transport, development, and use of Arctic routes, as well as to develop other areas to support global post-epidemic recovery.'[313]

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)

Introduction

Less than three years after French president Emanuel Macron warned that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation had lost its purpose,[314] the Alliance has not only found itself greatly reinvigorated but also becoming more active in the High North' as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's continuous militarisation of Arctic lands, including in regions close to the Nordic Arctic. Moreover, the applications for NATO membership by two Arctic states, Finland and Sweden, have further strengthened NATO's attention to the Arctic. Although the Ukraine war has not spread directly into the High North, the fighting is rarely far from the Arctic in many local governments' minds—Russia has an Arctic border with Norway, a NATO member, as well as with Finland. Although NATO has confirmed its interests in adding the Arctic Ocean to its core security concerns, there is still much debate over how the organisation will fit into the complex political and strategic mosaic of the Arctic.

NATO has, over the past years, moved the European Arctic from a peripheral interest to one much more central, a process that began with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The rapid development of Russian military presence in Siberia, including in regions adjacent to the European Arctic, has also prompted a re-evaluation of the Arctic as a NATO priority, as evidenced in policy statement and speeches by Alliance officials, especially since Russia's further invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022.

Self

Towards a changed defensive posture in the Arctic

The Arctic's security milieu may be about to change drastically in the near term. This may also have implications for the strategic identities and narratives of Finland and Sweden that prior to their applications for membership of NATO has maintained variations of neutral security stances (although both governments had joined the EU in 1995, underscoring a separation in policies on economic versus strategic cooperation). The Ukraine invasion, however, was enough of a tipping point, and both governments formally submitted their membership applications in May 2022. At the time of writing of this report, only NATO members Hungary and Türkiye were still expressing reservations about the twin applications.[315] A unanimous vote is required for any new member to be added to NATO.

More importantly, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg publicly shifted the Alliance's stance concerning its role in the Arctic. On 24 August 2022, Stoltenberg published an opinion in Canada's *The Globe and Mail* that may be interpreted to be serving three interwoven purposes: (1) to strategically message to Russia that NATO is no longer concerned about upsetting the Kremlin with perceived provocation over NATO interests in the Arctic, (2) to strategically message to the Canadian people that the country's previous position opposing a NATO role in the Arctic was no longer tenable, and (3) to pay respects to the people involved in his trip to Canada immediately following publication.[316]

Partly as a result of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, NATO has made it clear that confidence in the Kremlin is gone, and European as well as Arctic security interests can no longer depend on Moscow to preserve geopolitical stability. The Secretary General articulated such concerns in the closing of his August 2022 opinion piece, stating 'in this more dangerous and competitive world, NATO is increasing our presence and vigilance across the Alliance, including in the High North. With strength and unity, we will continue to deter aggression, protect our values and interests, and keep our people safe.'[317] Simply put, the West no longer needs to be concerned about sensitivities involving NATO's role in the Arctic. Previously, Russia had warned NATO to stay out, indicating that even publishing a formal strategy would invoke Kremlin ire. To some extent, when cooperation and stability remained noteworthy, NATO and the West considered such concerns. However, Moscow should expect no such consideration any more.

Region

Linking the Arctic and Baltic within NATO

Successful applications for NATO membership would mean that all Arctic Council members, save Russia, would be members of the Alliance, and the length of the borders separating NATO from Russia would more than double. Finland's land border to Russia' is 1,340 km long, extending well north of the Arctic Circle. This would also mean that the Arctic, Nordic and Baltic security interests will become more closely aligned, given that all littoral states in that subregion, save for the Kaliningrad enclave, would be part of NATO.[318]

The change in military cooperation between the two governments and other NATO members, especially in the Nordic region, would be minimal, as Finnish and Swedish armed forces have long cooperated with their NATO counterparts, and Finland and Sweden have for several years been participating in NATO exercises.[319]

Is It Really 'Back to the Future'?

If NATO is indeed going back to basics in the short term, how will this affect Arctic interests as well as the identity of the Alliance? Although the narrative of NATO in the Arctic tends to focus on the military aspects of these interests, there are several other variables and concepts which have appeared, mainly due to distinct political, geographic, climate change and environmental aspects on the region.

In addition to military security, NATO is also facing the challenges arising from more global competition, rapidly warming climate and increasing economic activities in the High North. For example, energy links have been identified by NATO as areas of vulnerability, as graphically illustrated by the extensive damage to the Nord Stream gas pipeline system in September 2022, which has been blamed by NATO, and several national governments, on sabotage.[320] These types of security pressures have been referred to as 'hybrid conflicts' or 'grey zone operations', which are also areas which are starting to gain a more prominent place on the Alliance's agenda, including in the High North. Beyond energy, other areas of infrastructure vulnerability under discussion include internet cables, current and planned, which provide many new opportunities for development and cooperation but are also viewed as security risks unto themselves.[321]

Even before the invasion of Ukraine, NATO had deepened its concerns about the threats posed by both Russia and China in the Arctic, as well as the potential impact of greater cooperation between the two powers. One recent analysis examined the possibility of a regional entente between Beijing and Moscow,

with the caveat that, so far, the partnership has been contained within specific parameters. The two powers have continued economic development cooperation via the Polar Silk Road (*bingshang sichou zhilu,* 冰上丝绸之路)—albeit in a more muted fashion since the beginning of this year—as well as cooperation via military manoeuvres, such as the autumn 2022 Vostok joint exercises, which included participation from the People's Liberation Army as well as Chinese material assistance.[322]

Others

Russia and Strategic Pushback

Responses from the Putin regime in Moscow to the potential enlargement of NATO were subdued, after an initial period of condemnation. Yet, in addition to economic aftershocks such as the May 2022 suspension of Russian gas supplies to Finland,[323] Moscow officials also strongly hinted that its approach to Arctic cooperation would need to be 'adjusted' in consideration of the potential NATO membership status of Finland and Sweden, suggesting that the Arctic may be subject to more overt 'strategic spillover' from the Ukraine conflict. Nikolai Korchunov, Russia's Senior Arctic Official, was direct in his views, in that he stated there would need to be 'certain adjustments' in Arctic diplomacy should the Alliance expand, but also that Russia's activities within the Arctic Council would continue as normal despite the suspension of relations between the Council's seven Western members and Moscow.[324]

> Russia has significantly increased its military activity in recent years, setting up a new Arctic Command, opening hundreds of new and former Soviet-era Arctic military sites, including airfields and deep-water ports, and using the region as test-bed for novel weapon systems. Last month, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a new naval strategy pledging to protect Arctic waters "by all means." ... In this more dangerous and competitive world, NATO is increasing our presence and vigilance across the Alliance, including in the High North. With strength and unity, we will continue to deter aggression, protect our values and interests, and keep our people safe.
>
> Jens Stoltenberg, *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), 24 August 2022[325]

The main questions surrounding NATO's increased presence into the Nordic and Arctic regions are how overall military dynamics in the Arctic will change as a result of the two new members, and how NATO's engagement will shift, and potentially expand, with the new additions. An October 2022 commentary in *Foreign Affairs* noted that, with the new members, NATO's strength may deepen but not necessarily widen, in that NATO may pull back on the possibility of expanding its strategic interests outside of Europe in favour of a more concentrated approach to continental security.[326] This is significant given discussions during mid-2022, spurred on by the inclusion of Western Asia-Pacific friends and allies (Australia, Japan,

New Zealand, and South Korea) in the Alliance's June 2022 summit in Madrid, that NATO was preparing to increase its presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

China's 'Cold War Thinking' narrative

China, predictably, remains steadfastly against the prospect of an increasing NATO engagement outside of North America and Europe, viewing the potential move as another extension of American hegemony (comments in Chinese media frequently refer to the Alliance as 'US-led NATO', or *yi meiguo weishou de beiyue* / 以美国为首的北, implying that policy decisions affecting the group begin and end in Washington).[327] Additionally, the Nordic region has been instrumental in the development of Chinese Arctic interests, as governments in northern Europe had traditionally been receptive to international engagement in Arctic affairs. The inclusion of the entire Nordic region within NATO may create an additional obstacle to Chinese engagement in the Nordic Arctic, especially considering poor bilateral relations between Beijing and Stockholm in recent years over human rights matters.[328]

Competing Narratives Appearing?

At the October 2022 Arctic Circle conference in Reykjavík, a speech by Admiral Robert Bauer, Chair of NATO's Military Committee, expressed concerns about Russian and Chinese intentions in the Arctic, noting that Russia was militarising the region and that neither power 'shares our values' and both were challenging the 'rules based international order'.[329] The speech described steps taken by Russia to develop its strategic interests in its Arctic waters, including the country's most recent maritime doctrine, which placed a higher priority on Arctic security interests.[330] Both powers were portrayed as cooperating more closely in the Arctic.

> At this pivotal moment for global security, NATO will do what it has done best for the last 73 years: unite and adapt. With strength and unity, we will continue to deter aggression, protect our values and interests, and keep our people safe. The Arctic has always had a strategic relevance for NATO as the obvious gateway to the North Atlantic, hosting vital trade and communications links between North America and Europe. As such NATO will do everything it can to make sure the Arctic remains free and open.
>
> Admiral Rob Bauer to the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, 15 October 2022[331]

In some ways, this speech may be interpreted as a frank assessment of how NATO viewed emerging risks in the High North and how NATO continously must adjust and adapt in order to be able to deter and defend threats arising from any direction, also in the Arctic region.

European Union

Introduction

Three EU states are Arctic countries and members of the Arctic Council (Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, and Sweden), and six other members are formal observers in the EU (France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, and Spain). In addition, other EU members, including Estonia, Greece, Ireland, and Latvia, have been or are interested in becoming formal observers in the Council. Thus, the EU is close to Arctic affairs. The EU has tried on several occasions to become a formal observer in the Arctic Council, but has yet to attain that status (although it has been a frequent ad hoc observer in Council deliberations, and has sought to widen and deepen its Arctic engagement in a variety of directions).[332] As with other major observer governments, the EU seeks to be recognised as a legitimate Arctic stakeholder.

Since engaging more directly with the Arctic Council and with Arctic affairs in general during the past two decades, the EU has made numerous overtures to include itself in far northern policymaking, and has included the Arctic in a series of political and environmental initiatives designed to better integrate its interests with regional discourses. Recent publications have stressed the EU's distinct position as an environmental actor, but as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has also been an accelerated concentration of the strategic support roles that the organisation can play.

Self

Forging a Northern Identity

The current era of EU Arctic policymaking can be traced back to the first communication by the European Commission, published in November 2008, which acted as a platform for the future evolution of the organisation's polar and maritime policies to follow. *The European Union and the Arctic Region* paper noted the main regional policy objectives of protecting and preserving the Arctic in the face of climate change challenges, promoting the sustainable use of local resources, and contributing to the Arctic's multilateral governance.[333] There has also been a focus on working with EU member states in the Arctic Council, as members or observers, in regional policymaking.

In addition to direct Council engagement, the EU also participates in initiatives and regimes such as Northern Dimension and the (now paused) Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), and has prided itself on being a major hub for Arctic research.[334] A follow-up communique published in June 2012 revised the policy objectives from four years earlier, while adding elements related to environmental research and the safety of maritime shipping. The main initiatives outlined in the 2012 paper included the need for EU support to ongoing research and knowledge development about the Arctic (particularly environmental stresses), to promote development in a responsible fashion, and to intensify the EU's 'constructive engagement' with local governments, Indigenous peoples, and other actors in the Far North.[335]

> We believe that a safe, stable, sustainable, peaceful and prosperous Arctic is important not just for the Arctic itself, but for the EU and the entire world. While the Arctic states hold the primary responsibility for tackling issues within their territories, many of these issues do not respect borders, and regional or multilateral cooperation can effectively address them.
>
> EU's Arctic Policy, October 2021[336]

The EU and a 'Green' Transition

The 2019 European Green Deal provided a more specific focus on what role the EU was hoping to play in the Arctic. The document was meant to be a roadmap for a more environmentally friendly future for Europe, as well as a model for other governments to follow.[337] Many of the Deal's provisions, including clean energy initiatives, curbing pollution, and protecting ecosystems, are relevant to Arctic communities. However, an even more striking EU commitment to Arctic environmental security was demonstrated in the Union's 2021 Joint Communication, *A Stronger EU Engagement for a Peaceful, Sustainable and Prosperous Arctic*, which called for the greater inclusion of multilateral actors in addressing the challenges facing the Far North, and for addressing 'geopolitical competition'.[338]

This document also included the watershed pledge that 'the Commission shall work with partners towards a multilateral legal obligation not to allow any further hydrocarbon reserve development in the Arctic or contiguous regions, nor to purchase such hydrocarbons if they were to be produced.' This view strongly distinguished EU Arctic states from Russia, which has continued to pursue oil and gas development in its Arctic lands and waters despite the diplomatic fallout from Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.[339] Norway also showed little support for the ban, having confirmed that it would continue to pursue oil and gas development in its Arctic waters. Oslo has since been under pressure to provide additional oil and gas supplies to Europe in the wake of the Ukraine invasion.[340]

The 2021 statement was the first major acknowledgement of the geopolitical complications appearing in the region, including the Russian military build-up, but the document underscored that climate change remained the most significant threat to the Far North. The EU sought to increase Arctic and global cooperation on green issues like promoting renewable resources, combatting various types of local pollution including chemical and waste plastic, encouraging more environmentally responsible maritime transportation options, and contributing to increased maritime governance in the Arctic Ocean as more of that waterway becomes navigable for longer parts of the year. Security threats were described as appearing from latent competition for resources and access, and one conclusion that was drawn was that 'the EU's full engagement in Arctic matters is a geopolitical necessity'. This suggests that the EU was on longer content to be a bystander in areas of Arctic governance, despite its tenuous political presence in the Far North.

Virginijus Sinkevičus, the EU Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans, and Fisheries, explained during speeches in Tromsø in May 2022 that human security was now being tied to environmental threats in the Arctic, as well as being linked to education, health, development, and Indigenous interests. Sinkevičus

also commented on the distinct roles that the EU was in a position to play in addressing these concerns, adding that 'the EU is in the Arctic, and the Arctic is in the EU'.[341] Mechanisms included the European Green Deal and an adjacent Fit for 55 policy, with the latter calling for carbon neutrality by 2050 while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030.[342]

Others

Russia and Gaps in Arctic Governance

The EU's green policies now face stronger diplomatic and logistical counter-pressures in light of erratic global oil prices, fears of an energy crunch, and attempts by numerous governments, including in the EU, to halt future purchases of Russian oil and gas. Moreover, with the ongoing spillover of strategic concerns in the Arctic, does the EU still have the luxury of keeping environmental affairs at the top of its Arctic agenda? As recent reports have suggested, the Union may need to consider a defence strategy for the Arctic, potentially in concert with NATO, while also working with the Arctic Council members (minus Russia) on matters relating to climate change threats, and work more closely with the United Nations on Arctic affairs.[343]

Additionally, with the Arctic Council on pause since March 2022, the EU has had fewer opportunities to coordinate Arctic policy with both member states and observers. Relations between the EU and Russia remain frozen, and the Union placed a partial ban on Russian petroleum as of June 2022, with further restrictions planned for the following year.[344]

> There is a lot of geopolitical and military positioning going on globally, and what happens in the Arctic is perhaps, to a certain extent, a reflection of that. But it doesn't mean that tension is being imported, and we don't see a danger of imminent security issues. There is mutual suspicion, but we haven't seen any flashpoints, and we don't want to see any flashpoints in the Arctic.
>
> Ambassador Michael Mann, Interview with EurActiv, 17 October 2021[345]

China and the EU: Warm Economics, Cold Politics?

The EU's relationship with China has also become more fraught over issues including human rights, the Taiwan question, and geostrategic concerns, with China's diplomatic relations with some EU members, specifically Lithuania and Sweden, being especially strained. Beijing's official neutrality policy towards the Russia-Ukraine war has also downgraded EU-China relations, and it remains to be seen whether the Arctic can still act as a conduit between the two actors, especially given mutual interests in High North engagement.[346] There are numerous examples of Track II contacts between European and Chinese Arctic specialists, including the China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre (CNARC), in operation since 2013, but the question remains whether Beijing's ongoing interests in developing a stronger Arctic economic presence, including via cooperation with Russia, will hamper Sino-EU cooperation in the region.

Despite numerous policy statements revealing a widening and deepening of EU interests in the Arctic, the Union is still finding its way in the High North, while at the same time trying to keep up with fast-moving events, juggling its environmental interests and sense of green responsibility, assessing the hardening political situation in the region, and addressing the real possibility of a balkanisation of the Arctic Ocean into competing political camps.

Conclusion

Key Findings

The Arctic space is markedly different following Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 than the 'low-tension' environment in which the last StratCom Arctic narratives publication was released in June 2020. The previous iteration of this study observed that China sought to 'internationalise' the Arctic and project a global vision of the space, while Arctic-rim states like Russia and the US promoted narratives aimed at the maintenance of the regional status quo (particularly through the Arctic Council as the premier regional governance forum). The March 2022 decision by the like-minded Arctic states to freeze their engagement with Russia reinforces that the *status quo ante bellum* is no longer a probable future outcome. After all, the June 2022 application by Finland and Sweden to join NATO signals a future in which Russia is the sole non-NATO member of the Arctic Council, and the only state with territory above the Arctic Circle that does not belong to the Alliance. Russia's war against Ukraine has had a catastrophic effect on its credibility as a responsible global actor and, by extension, as a trustworthy Arctic player.

As the chapters in this report reinforce, official messaging seeks to legitimise the various players' position as Arctic actors, often framing their actions as defensive in nature or dedicated to regional peace and stability. With the idea of a stable and predictable region shaken by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the US has astutely noted the dangers of unintended escalation. After all, forms of interstate competition in the Arctic are already occurring below the threshold of armed conflict—including in the narrative space. By mobilising Arctic narratives, competitors seek to promote their own interests in and visions for the region.

Russia's anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives align with that country's strategic interests—including varied approaches that disseminate individual messages that appear contradictory but are mutually reinforcing in seeking to discredit others and legitimise Russian actions. For example, Russia would benefit from efforts to hinder or undermine enhanced NATO involvement in the Arctic. Accordingly, misinformation efforts may seek to reinforce the narrative that increased Western military investments in the Arctic will unduly antagonise Russia and lead to unprovoked escalation. Russian narratives may simultaneously downplay Russia's strategic interests in the region, and instead accuse other Arctic states and NATO of 'militarising' the region. Accordingly, narratives that either promote pro-Russian narratives or foment anti-US and anti-NATO narratives are commonplace in Russia's strategic narratives. Accordingly, effective counter-messaging must be coordinated and aligned with strategic objectives to marginalise hostile information operations and develop opportunities for proactive information use—two goals that should now drive NATO thinking and purpose.

Beijing has taken this opportunity to reshape its Arctic narratives and seeks to capitalise on a fractured Arctic region. The aspiring self-proclaimed 'polar great power' has targeted scientific, shipping, and economic sectors in the Arctic. While Nordic Arctic states might have had open interest in welcoming outside stakeholders to the Arctic, their stance on Chinese economic coercion since 2020 has shifted their receptiveness to prospective Chinese partnerships. National security agencies in the North American and Nordic states have undertaken assessments of China's interference in their scientific, economic, and higher education spheres, and the narrative analysis in this report reveals that Arctic states are increasingly aware of the risks associated with a Chinese presence. Arctic states have also reappraised their exposure to Chinese investments in critical industries and infrastructure, with some having taken steps to block Chinese investment on national security grounds. Nevertheless, perceived risks remain as China normalises its footprints in the region and strengthens its economic partnership with Russia in the North.

Lessons for StratCom

The previous report suggested that 'all Arctic actors—albeit to varying degrees—seem willing to compartmentalise developments in the Arctic from problematic aspects of foreign policy in other regions of the world in order to maintain international cooperation in the Arctic.'[347] This is no longer the case. The idea of 'Arctic exceptionalism'—that the region can somehow stand apart from global affairs, rather than being a part of them—is no longer a dominant part of the Arctic discursive space. While official statements indicate that the Arctic states consider the threat of a conventional military attack on their territory to remain low, the spillover of international dynamics into the region is already visible. This heightens the importance of meetings between Arctic allies, such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) in Alaska in May 2022 and of the Arctic Chiefs of Heads of Defence (ACHOD) in Newfoundland in August 2022. Operationalising this collaboration as like-minded Arctic states is vital to showing the world that NATO is working together from the same playbook. It also signals that the Alliance is prepared to deter—and defeat—any potential adversaries.

In a changing world, deliberate strategic messaging is more important than ever. While European and North American countries often communicate with Russia differently, it is imperative that allies carefully calibrate messaging to ensure that we are projecting unity, strength, and confidence with clarity, precision, and consistency. This includes reinforcing how integrated or comprehensive deterrence—particularly as exercised by like-minded states in an alliance or partnership context—is a source of regional stability. By improving the sharing of information amongst allies and synchronising Arctic-related homeland defence efforts, NATO will be better placed to manage the regional security space in a rational, proportionate, and resource-effective manner while reinforcing the principle of collective defence.

The Kremlin's foremost goal is to fragment the alliances and partnerships between the seven like-minded Arctic states. NATO must ensure that these relationships remain strong and are continuously reinforced. This means being more active and less passive in tending to alliances. By remaining attentive to changing Arctic narratives, the Allies can stay on top of developments, maintain pressure, and discern ways to challenge and where necessary confront competitors in an uncertain Arctic and increasingly complex world.

Research Team

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