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## The Potential for Arctic Collective Security: Fundamental Challenges

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In recent years, commentators have engaged in a growing dialogue about the need for an Arctic collective security forum that bridges the divide between Russia and the West.<sup>1</sup> Russia's signal of interest in such a mechanism has prompted various interesting proposals about how to consider such an organization. Some commentators believe that NATO should be the default lead for such efforts. Others consider that traditional organizations, like the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) and the Northern Chiefs of Defense (NCHoDs), offer a natural path forward. Such associated proposals fall significantly short in appreciating current realities. Furthermore, the reasoning behind these propositions seems embedded with Western bias. This short note explores two core issues about the potential for a new or renewed Arctic collective security mechanism, namely 1) problematic assumptions about Russia, and 2) presumptions involving Western organizations.

Analysts often find it difficult to specifically contextualize Russian Arctic military capability and in what context(s) it applies. Russia's combined year-round Arctic military capacity far exceeds that of the other Arctic states, but it is unclear what leverage that gives it as an *Arctic* player. Given Russian capabilities, a growing attentiveness to defence dynamics in the Arctic region remains appropriate. Even though NATO and U.S. military power remains superior overall, its applicability to influence Arctic affairs is limited given Russia's focus on national *defence* and domain control rather than kinetic intent to project power vis-à-vis other Arctic states in an Arctic context. Russia is not a centrist state geopolitically. Rather, it thrives on the peripheries, where the Kremlin can justify authoritarian governance as critical for protecting its citizens and interests. Russia can and does consider, as well as manages, select topics in various external spheres as separate. For example, following the post-Crimea annexation, Russia fully expected the West to separate the event from matters involving management of the circumpolar Arctic and other international affairs. There was no conflict over Russia's behavior in Crimea, and there is no reason to believe there would be conflict over Russian's behavior in its Arctic – particularly given that Russia has been developing a justification for total control of *its* Arctic for many years.

The first fundamental challenge in any discussion about a collective Arctic security effort involves the Russian position: there can and will be no productive, purposeful, or meaningful Arctic collective security without Russia. To think otherwise indicates a lack of understanding the security environment of the Arctic region as well as Russian interests, priorities, and capabilities. Knowing this position means that Russia can largely dictate the terms of any collective Arctic security arrangement. Much Western thinking completely bypasses this reality, leading to various false conclusions. Assuming that Russia will happily join whatever forum that the West proposes is arrogant and misguided. Stakeholders should reflect on Russia's call for military experts to conduct Arctic security dialogues.<sup>2</sup> It is doubtful that Russia did so to foster Arctic good will and inclusivity. A more effective approach would be to ask "why would Russia want to participate in a collective Arctic security forum given their superior military Arctic stance" or "how can Russia further gain militarily as member of a Western-dominated Arctic security organization"?

One potential response to such questions might be that Russia wishes to get ahead of NATO involvement in the Arctic (and in a collective security forum in particular). There is nothing that Putin and the Kremlin despise more than NATO. The organization remains Russia's primary global security adversary. A collective Arctic security forum that has anything to do with NATO is a total non-starter for Russia. They do not have to, and will not, accept such conditions. Again, there is no forum without Russia. Any thinking otherwise indicates entrenched Western bias. Moreover, NATO is not in any position to participate in a *collective* regional forum even if it wanted. NATO is a highly political organization. Of the thirty members, only a handful are concerned with Arctic security.

Some U.S. defense officials suggest that reinvigorating the previous ASFR organization or NCHoDs offers an obvious solution to the perceived need for a collective Arctic security forum, which leads to the second fundamental challenge: the presumption that Russia will thankfully join a traditional, Western-established and led organizations. The security circumstances have significantly changed for the Arctic since these two mechanisms played a useful function. The safe assumption of a collective forum would seem to involve the ability to pursue decision-making with regard to conduct of military entities within the Arctic, such as rules for contact and interaction in the maritime environment, as well as opportunities to deconflict issues or even collaborate between adversaries. ASFR is a two-star level organization, and thus incapable of performing such a function. The NCHoDs, at the four-star level, could more readily provide decision-making authority. However, past activities lacked the kind of purpose and intent that is now needed. The cooperative and competitive nature of the Arctic affords actors the opportunity to build off best practices and successes, including the Arctic Council as a model process.<sup>3</sup> Current Arctic security circumstances allow for military diplomacy to take on an elevated role, with greater purpose in support of decision making and confidence building.<sup>4</sup>

Many commentators think a new organization is unnecessary, and the Arctic states can simply revitalize one of the previous forums or create a combination of both. While this may be true, a whole new purpose is required, and either organization would resemble its previous version in name only – hence the idea for a new organization and purpose, such as the Arctic Security Cooperation Forum (ASCF).<sup>5</sup> Again, going back to arguments, however, why would Russia want to rejoin the prior, traditional Western-led organizations? These mechanisms did work very well previously – for the West.

Recent assumptions about Russian involvement in a collective Arctic security forum are consistently underpinned with Western bias, similar to traditional approaches of interacting with northern Indigenous people. Regarding Russia, especially as it finds itself in an increasingly assertive international position, the West needs to more effectively think about issues from Russian perspectives. Otherwise, Russia might blindside the West with requirements it would need to participate in any Arctic security forum.

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Abbie Tingstad, "Today's Arctic Diplomacy Can't Handle Tomorrow's Problems," Defense One, accessed 04 March, 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/01/todays-arctic-diplomacy-cant-handle-tomorrows-problems/162719/>; Troy Bouffard and Elizabeth Buchanan, "Establishing an Arctic Security Institution: Essentials from NORAD and NATO," *The Strategy Bridge* (2020); Kathrin Stephen, "An Arctic Security Forum? Please, No!," The Arctic Institute, accessed 15 October, 2016, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-security-forum-please-dont/>; Troy J. Bouffard, Elizabeth Buchanan, and Michael Young, "Arctic Security and Dialogue: Assurance through Defence Diplomacy," *Modern Diplomacy*, accessed 11 July, 2020, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/07/11/arctic-security-and-dialogue-assurance-through-defence-diplomacy/>; Joshua Tallis, "NATO Is the Right Forum for Security Dialogue in the High North," *Defense News*, accessed 15 October, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/07/28/nato-is-the-right-forum-for-security-dialogue-in-the-high-north/>.
- <sup>2</sup> "Russia Urges Contacts at Level of Arctic States' Military Experts," TASS, accessed 10 April, 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1052764>.
- <sup>3</sup> Of note, the Arctic Council will not consider defense-related security matters as a charter requirement and is largely considered an impossible option as a security forum, even though some mistakenly still hint at the misguided idea. Laura Leddy, "Russia and the Arctic Council: What Happens Next?," *American Security Project*, accessed 15 October, 2020, <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/russia-and-the-arctic-council-what-happens-next/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Frédéric Charillon, Thierry Balzacq, and Frédéric Ramel, "Defense Diplomacy," in *Global Diplomacy* (Springer, 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> Dick Zandee, Kimberley Kriuijver, and Adája Stoetman, "The Future of Arctic Security - the Geopolitical Pressure Cooker and the Consequences for the Netherlands," (The Hague, Netherlands: The Clingendael Institute, 2020).