

ACTIVITY REPORT



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Arctic Hard Security Taskforce

Arctic Hard Security Taskforce: Summary of the 10 December expert workshop

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Co-organised by Loughborough University and Chatham House, the Arctic Hard Security Taskforce online workshop took place on 10 December 2020 with the participation of 23 experts on Arctic affairs. Five experts made opening remarks, after which the floor was opened to a discussion. This summary of key findings was commented on by workshop participants as well as by additional Arctic experts.

1/ Considerations for military security affairs in the Arctic

1.1 Format and institutions

With military activity increasing in the Arctic, the pressing question addressed by the Arctic Hard Security Task Force (AHST) is whether there is a need for a new intergovernmental approach to managing defence-related and constabulary-related military affairs in the region, or whether bolstering existing mechanisms (namely, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR), the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff (ACDS) annual conference, etc.) would suffice.

It has long been recognised that the Arctic regional governing architecture lacks a proper mechanism for international dialogue on issues of military importance. This is partly by design. Post-Cold War institution-building in the Arctic prioritised areas of consensus and shared interests, namely around human security, environmental protection and sustainable development. The Arctic Council was established in 1996 on the basis that military affairs were explicitly excluded from its mandate. Over the same period, military interest in the Arctic fell sharply.

As military interest in the Arctic returned from the mid-2000s onwards, all sides acknowledged growing demands for dialogue to avoid accidents and misunderstandings. This led to the creation of the ASFR (2011) and the ACDS (2012). However, unlike the Arctic Council, neither of these military forums survived the fallout from the Crimea crisis. Out of solidarity with Ukraine and commitment to the rules-based international order, few, if any, NATO/EU states are prepared to engage Russia in a military dialogue about the Arctic until the crisis in Ukraine is resolved. Consequently, any attempt to renew a military dialogue with Russia in the Arctic faces a significant hurdle: namely, how to do so without tacitly conceding to Russia's position on Crimea.

Experts nevertheless agree that a dedicated mechanism that helps the regional stakeholders address more directly Arctic military security concerns is urgently needed.

1.2 What kind of mechanism for military dialogue is needed?

A dialogue mechanism for dealing exclusively with the defense-related, hard-security and military diplomacy issues is necessary for several reasons:

- Military activity in the Arctic has increased significantly over the past decade,
- To reduce the distraction of discussing such issues in other fora,
- To prevent security talks from crowding out other important issues on the regional agenda, including the rights, well-being and security of local communities, environmental change and socio-economic development,
- Because the representatives suited to discussing hard military issues may be different from those who best handle soft security and other Arctic regional issues.

Such an endeavour should avoid over-institutionalisation and offer a flexible dialogue. It should also allow all participants to raise their concern and identify gaps.

In assessing the options for the most appropriate intergovernmental approach to take, the Taskforce concluded that the creation of a new mechanism, focused on flexible dialogue to negotiate a common understanding and approach to what constitutes legitimate and acceptable military activity in the Arctic, is the good way to reduce the potential for miscalculation and accident.

1.3 Hard security vs. soft security

Any new mechanism must make a clear distinction between what constitutes hard and soft security in the Arctic.¹ Experts agree that hard and soft issues and capabilities are often conflated in the Arctic. It is paramount for the Arctic states to determine where these intersect - and where they do not - and reach a common understanding of the key challenges for military operations. There is also an issue over the provision of soft security services in the Arctic, where the use of military or civil agencies varies from country to country.

Another issue raised by the expert panel is that hard security affairs in the Arctic tend to 'suck the air' out of discussions in other fora, such as the Arctic Council, even though they are not 'front and centre' considerations.

Concerns about military activity in the Arctic must also be kept in perspective. Experts broadly agree that there is very little likelihood of conflict 'over' the Arctic (in the sense of deliberate and direct confrontation). Rather, the risk is that conflict will either arise in 'in' the Arctic, most likely triggered by an accident or miscalculation, or be generated by spillover from conflicts in other parts of the world.

To the extent that soft security issues relating, for instance, to fishing agreements, joint coast guard operations, environmental disaster mitigation, support to coastal communities, and so on, the expert panel acknowledge that softer forms of cooperation among the Arctic states can help manage the risks created by the growing emphasis on hard security in the region.

Another pressing issue relates to human security and human development in the Arctic. This is compounded by the fact that climate change represents the existential threat to the way of life of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the region.

It is therefore vital that, alongside any new mechanism to address military operations, the Arctic states also commit to strengthening existing lines of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy: this must be achieved in order to resolve peacefully as many issues as possible, and therefore decrease the likelihood of tensions that could lead to military escalation. Discussions around both soft and hard security in the region must also be more inclusive of Indigenous Peoples and their institutional representatives.

Addressing the link between hard and soft security, the panel is advocating an inclusive approach to safety and security in the whole Arctic, linked with sustainable development and the imperative to find 'civilian' solutions to potential conflict issues, whilst at the same recognised the need for greater dialogue over the conduct of military operations.

¹ Workshop participants define 'hard' security as military affairs while 'soft' security relates to safety and constabulary issues.

1.4 Arctic security dilemma

Wider international developments are concerning and could endanger the observance of 'low tension' in the Arctic, namely:

- The US pivot to great power competition with Russia and China as well as Washington's renewed interest for Arctic affairs,
- Russia increasing its military footprint with the creation of a full-fledged military district for the Arctic in January 2021,
- Chinese increased interest in Arctic affairs and governance

There is a developing security dilemma between Russia and the US in terms of increased military presence, led by recent freedom of navigation operations and other military activities in parts of the Arctic adjacent to the North Atlantic.

The military efforts of regional states to protect their interests in the region, fueled by fear and mutual lack of trust, may create 'action-reaction' dynamics as well as risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of militarisation and escalation.

1.5 Geography matters

The panel recognised the importance of geography in discussing the Arctic: increased military activity for now mainly affects the Barents Sea and Norwegian Sea regions as well as the Bering strait region. However, Russia's increased military activity in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation has a direct impact on North Atlantic (and North Pacific) security, and vice versa.

Meanwhile, NATO's attention is primarily turned towards the North Atlantic and around the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) and Greenland-Iceland-Norway (GIN) gaps.

Beyond the GIUK gap, the crux of competitive military activity takes place from the North Atlantic, the Barents Sea, and the Norwegian Sea.

1.6 Engaging actors

It is wrong to default to the notion that hard security is exclusively a matter for the Arctic coastal states. Furthermore, the panel discussed the issue linked to engaging state and non-state actors beyond the Arctic

coastal states and the Arctic 8, several of which are already active militarily in the Arctic.² It is of paramount importance to start discussing the place of non-Arctic states in regional military affairs. In this, concern has also emerged over how Chinese interest in the region will evolve over the long-term.

Another important aspect of the discussion is the place and role of NATO in Arctic security affairs, to which Russia is adamantly opposed. Yet, it is crucial to separate the endeavour of the Alliance as an institution and the contributions of individual Allies to Arctic security (whether independently or in coalitions).

2/ Key principles of engagement on hard security in the Arctic

The overarching objective of discussions on hard security would be to maintain and sustain 'low tension' in the Arctic. Furthermore, it aims to increase the level of communication between concerned parties over matters of common interest. Pragmatism is key.

2.1 Deconfliction and predictability

Potential options could be discussed to avoid feeding the aforementioned security dilemma in Arctic affairs (see 1.4). Reciprocal and mutual measures should include:

- Downscaling the intensity and frequency of regional military exercises as well as reciprocal invitations to observe drills;
- Increased regional awareness during military exercises in the region;
- Agreeing on restraint with regards to where military training activities take place, notably as far as possible from land, air and sea borders;
- Reducing the number of sea and air military patrols as well as preventing air and sea incidents;
- Avoiding the use of military assets for provocations. This is particularly relevant due to concerns over Russia's aggressive behaviour in the region.

Assuming and preparing solely for kinetic action between peer competitors will increase the likelihood of accidents, miscalculations and incidents. This will also undermine the momentum on vital security issues, such as search and rescue or environmental cooperation with other Arctic states.

² The five Arctic coastal states are Canada, the United States, Denmark, Norway and Russia. The Arctic 8 encompasses the five coastal states as well as Iceland, Finland and Sweden.

2.2 Transparency and accountability

Increased transparency in the region should aim to ensure a degree of automatic and reciprocal information-sharing for military movement and planned 'shows of force' in order to avoid escalation and surprises. It is a question of accountability from state actors.

Transparency could be increased by deepening military-to-military cooperation, and notably with Russia. For instance through reciprocal invitations to observe military exercises, military-to-military contacts and exchanges of practice, etc.

Not only regional but also bilateral confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) should be further encouraged. Given the specifics of the region, these should cover not only land but also naval and air military activities.

2.3 Inclusivity and resilience

Military security-related events affect everyone in the region, including and especially Indigenous Peoples. Any discussion must take place inclusively at the bilateral and multilateral levels.

The panel discussed a potential framework of actors to engage in hard security discussions:

- Agents focus, namely actors with military capabilities interested in the Arctic;
- Capabilities focus, i.e. actors with military capabilities deployable in the Arctic;
- Impact focus, namely actors that will be impacted by military confrontation in the region.

Developing a framework that focuses on countries capable of deploying and sustaining military force in the Arctic is a relevant approach. All participants should have an interest in engaging in conflict-reducing discussions and practices in the Arctic region.

It is equally important that structures endure despite crises and tension. Structures in place are not necessarily resilient when a crisis happens - case in point after Russia was excluded from several formats of cooperation in 2014.

3/ Policy recommendations and next steps

3.1 Avoid 'Arctic clustering'

Due to wider geopolitical concerns and global dynamics, security in the Arctic is not Arctic-specific. Similarly, discussions around hard security should not be framed entirely as Arctic discussions but in the wider regional context and by engaging a wider fora of institutions and extra-regional actors.

Arctic security issues can therefore not be solely managed through an Arctic framework. Stronger bilateral engagements are also necessary. The new US administration should consider reaching out to Russia on that front.

Further to this, soft and hard security issues should be dealt with as an interdependent continuum. The significance of military security affairs, however, should not be over-exaggerated: the Arctic generally remains an area of 'low tension' where safety issues prevail.

3.2 Strengthen existing Arctic security fora

If the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable and the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff meetings are to be sustained, then all participants should be encouraged to renew their commitment - including Russia.

Russia sitting back at the table should, however, not be understood as code for accepting its intolerable behaviour, for instance with regards to the invasion of Crimea in 2014 or unprofessional military activity during NATO's Trident Juncture 2018 exercises.³ The proper amount of deterrence and consideration to Russia's unquestionable regional presence is necessary.

Considering Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum in 2021-2023, as well as the new U.S. administration, there is a unique opportunity to engage Russia over military security in the Arctic.

3.3 Increase military-to-military dialogue

To meet the principles of engagement on military security affairs in the Arctic, a practical start would be to conduct more regular, low level military-to-military contacts between states with military capabilities deployable and sustainable in the Arctic. This would mean expanding the format of actors to an 'Arctic 8 +'

³ Notably GPS jamming activities conducted by Russian forces over Lapland and Finnmark.

format - namely the eight Arctic states and non-Arctic countries capable of sustaining military operations in the region.

These contacts should be sought at the bilateral and multilateral formats, including a joint 'hot line' between all interested parties as well as a potential multilateral Incidents at Sea (INCSEA) agreement. Another priority should be military-to-military expert level and low level political discussions through reciprocal invitations to observe military exercises, expert contacts, etc.

The panel recognises the importance of a functional approach to hard security in order to avoid over-institutionalisation and over-politicisation. If creating a new, light and flexible forum to discuss hard security affairs is a good way forward, it is equally important to further these discussions within existing structures such as the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff meetings and/or the Arctic Coast Guard Forum.

A way forward is to restart such cooperation with civilian leaders in respective Ministries of Defence within the ACDS, and not with the military working level. Soft security and safety issues should lead the way to discuss military security affairs.

Ideally, at the political level, respective Ministries of Defence should agree to a joint statement of principles for military activity and cooperation in the Arctic. This would take after the Ilulissat Declaration but tailored to military activity. Militaries would subsequently be tasked with implementing the declaration through the appropriate forum.

The level of ambition is low level military dialogue, not military cooperation. All in all, this would represent a safety valve for practitioners and policy-makers to discuss together bilaterally and multilaterally. 'Military activity' in the Arctic should not be perceived as adversarial competition but rather understood as dialogue between relevant parties.

3.4 Create an Arctic Military Code of Conduct

Deconfliction measures aimed at decreasing tension in Arctic affairs (*see 2.1*) should be implemented and observed as soon as possible. It relates to a common political choice that the Arctic is not a theatre where military provocation can (or should) take place.

Further to deconfliction, the panel acknowledged the need to negotiate with all parties of the Arctic Council (members and observers) the creation of an Arctic Military Code of Conduct (AMCC) - but not placed under the remit of the Arctic Council.

The AMCC would help define what is (il)legitimate and (un)acceptable military practice at peacetime and specifically tailored to the region. It would seek to increase transparency, predictability, and accountability - and ultimately decrease the risk of miscalculation and escalation.