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Is the Arctic Still a Forgotten Flank? Examining NATO Engagement in the Arctic

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Introduction

On January 28, 2021, a NATO press officer tweeted that “What happens in the #Arctic matters to #NATO. We’ve increased our presence in the High North, including with exercises & key capabilities like icebreakers. [...] We support stability, security & cooperation in the region.”¹ This statement represents an increasingly common view that NATO should increase its operations in the Arctic. It makes sense; five of the eight Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the United States) are NATO members, and two others (Finland and Sweden) are close NATO partners. During the Cold War, the Arctic was one of the most important security areas for NATO due to the strategic importance of the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap in denying Soviet submarines access to the Atlantic Ocean.² However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the Arctic’s strategic importance to NATO quickly decreased. Tensions between Russia and the other Arctic states declined, and the Arctic seemed well on its way to becoming a “zone of peace,” as Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev had called for in his famous Murmansk speech in 1987.³

Today, however, NATO once again looks north, with some seeing allied engagement in the Arctic as a promising way to reconcile differences within the Alliance and forge a consensus among members.⁴ Tensions between Russia and NATO in the Arctic are on the rise once more. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea put the modernization of Russia’s Arctic military forces, which had been ongoing for years prior to the annexation, in a new light, causing scholars and analysts to call for an increase in NATO’s presence in the Arctic to counter the growing Russian forces.⁵ In addition to these outside calls for a larger NATO presence, members which had previously not supported a large NATO role in the region, such as Canada, have become more amenable to the Alliance being active in the Arctic.⁶ These changes in the geopolitics of the region, alongside longstanding arguments of NATO members such as Norway, which has long called for greater NATO involvement in the Arctic, are creating an opportunity to forge a new consensus among members on what role NATO will play in the region.⁷ How NATO chooses to engage in the Arctic could have serious repercussions for the security and stability in the region. As such, it is important to understand the role NATO has played in the Arctic historically, how it operates in the Arctic now, and what possible roles it could play in the Arctic going forward.

As the Arctic becomes an increasingly active area of military activity, NATO should work to create a unified Arctic strategy while carefully managing its activities in the region to keep international tensions low. This policy primer will first examine NATO operations in the Arctic from its founding to the end of the Cold War. It will then explore NATO's post-Cold War role in the Arctic, looking at the effect that Russia's annexation of Crimea had on NATO's view of the Arctic, and what actions NATO has taken in the region since 2014. Finally, Russia's views on NATO's presence in the Arctic, and how these views affect NATO's role in the region moving forward will be analysed. NATO's long history of operating in the Arctic reinforces how vital the region is to the Alliance's security, but Russia's fear of being encircled means that NATO must ensure its engagement in the Arctic is clear and transparent to avoid a rapid rise in tensions between the different sets of actors.

The Arctic in the Cold War

From its inception, NATO has been present in the Arctic, with five of the eight Arctic states being founding members of the Alliance. While the Arctic had been a theater of the Second World War, it was mostly used as a transport corridor from the Western Allies to the Soviet Union and was not a frontline in the conflict. This changed as the Cold War began and the strategic geography of the region shifted, with the Arctic suddenly becoming the fastest route for bombers and missiles to reach the territory of the United States and Soviet Union. This change was only reinforced as the Soviet Union built up its maritime forces in the Arctic, with the Northern Fleet submarine force becoming the largest of the Soviet fleets by the late 1950s, containing half of the Soviet Union's strategic submarines and over two-thirds of its total submarine-based nuclear forces by the mid-1980s.⁸ NATO was thus forced to look at the High North as a critical part of its security, with control of the region vital to prevent the Soviet Union from threatening NATO's northern flank and cutting off North American troops and supplies from the European theatre.⁹

As Russia grew its Northern Fleet in the aftermath of the Second World War, NATO forces in the region were built up to counter it and ensure Allied command of the North Atlantic. Intelligence and patrol aircraft based in Norway, Iceland, and Britain allowed reconnaissance of the Barents Sea, and the GIUK Gap became a major area of focus for NATO's naval strategy.¹⁰ Throughout the Cold War, the GIUK Gap remained NATO's best way to detect Soviet ballistic submarines entering the Atlantic, where they would have the potential to directly threaten member states with nuclear strikes.¹¹ Underwater listening posts across the Gap were established early in the Cold War, but as Soviet submarines became stealthier and more difficult to detect, NATO was forced to establish underwater listening posts further and further north, eventually reaching as far as the Barents Sea.¹² The Arctic remained an area of focus for NATO throughout the Cold War, but the primacy of Central Europe to NATO war planning meant the High North was not often seen as a priority for NATO until the 1980s.¹³

In the strategic discourse of the Cold War, Central Europe was always seen as the epicenter of any hypothetical conflict between NATO and the Soviet Union. In the eyes of generals and politicians on both sides of the Iron Curtain, World War III would be fought and won on the plains of Germany, not in the fjords of Norway. NATO's northern flank was often referred to as "the forgotten flank," with the head of NATO's Northern Command in 1962 stating that the best way to defend the northern flank of NATO was to ensure the Alliance had control over the Central European front.¹⁴ Norway was understandably frustrated with the low priority assigned to Arctic issues, and as early as the 1950s, Norway worked hard to develop a strong bilateral relationship with the

United States, cognizant of the outsized influence the U.S. exerted on strategic priorities within the Alliance.¹⁵ By the 1970s, closer bilateral ties resulted in the United States using Norwegian air bases among its Co-located Operating Bases (COB), which involved close cooperation between the U.S. Air Force and the Norwegian Armed Forces and culminated with an amphibious brigade from the U.S. Marine Corps being assigned to Norway in 1981.¹⁶ At the same time, shifts in strategic thinking at NATO command led the Alliance to prioritize holding northern Norway and containing Soviet forces in the north so that vital supplies could reach the central European theatre from across the Atlantic. This shift tied together the north and central fronts and led to a more holistic approach to European defence.¹⁷

Although strategic necessities ensured it could not be entirely ignored, it was not until the 1980s that the Arctic became seen as vital to the security of the Alliance. But almost as soon as this was realized, the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, and the necessity of NATO's presence in the Arctic was called into question, leading to a re-examination of what role the Arctic would play in the Alliance's future. Even the GIUK Gap, so vital to NATO strategy in the Cold War, faced a sharp downturn in strategic focus, and the NATO presence in the region was allowed to atrophy following the end of the Cold War.¹⁸

Post-Cold War Struggles for Purpose

By the end of the Cold War, NATO funding was being used to build fuel and ammunition storage sites, communications and aircraft early-warning systems, and runways in the Arctic territories of NATO members, particularly Norway, which bordered the Soviet Union.¹⁹ Bilateral and multilateral defence agreements between Arctic allies had been used to build early warning and reconnaissance bases throughout the Arctic, though not all these agreements took place through NATO.²⁰ Striking Fleet Atlantic, under the command of Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, would routinely deploy to northern Norway with carrier, anti-submarine warfare, amphibious, and Marine strike forces, a massive show of Allied strength and commitment to the region.²¹ Prepositioned equipment was stored in Norway so that U.S. Marines could quickly deploy in the event of a crisis, and many other members had units that were ready to quickly reinforce Norway, such as the Canadian Air-Sea Transportable Brigade Group and the British Mobile Force.²²

However, after 1991, NATO leaders were forced to re-examine the Alliance's activities in the Arctic as the importance of the region to NATO had become seemingly negligible. If there were no Soviet submarines threatening to break out into the Atlantic, was there a need for NATO to be involved in the Arctic at all? As NATO searched for an Arctic purpose in a post-Cold War context, it began withdrawing from the region, reducing, or dismantling military installations throughout the Arctic and reducing and disbanding units based in there. As the Russian military presence also receded, non-military forums for inter-state cooperation in the Arctic, such as the Barents Regional Council and the Arctic Council, entrenched the idea of the Arctic as region of peace which should no longer be heavily militarized.²³ Although NATO involvement in the Arctic greatly diminished after the end of the Cold War, the United States continued to hold exercises in the Arctic and maintained bases throughout the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as Thule Air Base in Greenland and Keflavik in Iceland, though at reduced scales from the height of the Cold War.²⁴

Despite growing interest around climate change and its effects on the ability to extract resources in the Arctic emerged in the early 2000s, NATO remained unconvinced about the region's relevance to Euro-Atlantic security.²⁵ However, after 2008, NATO slowly began returning to the Arctic, though with a larger emphasis on soft security than during the Cold War.²⁶ Many allies questioned whether NATO, as a military alliance, was the correct forum to address these new, softer issues such as the ecological consequences of climate change and other human activities in the Arctic.²⁷ Then-Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer proposed the Alliance should make itself a forum where Arctic member states could bring their disputes and regional issues to be resolved, warning against the regionalization of the Arctic.²⁸ This was reinforced in 2010 in NATO's 6th Strategic Concept, which reaffirmed the ability of any member state to bring any security issue of interest to the NATO table in order to "share information, exchange views and [...] forge common approaches."²⁹ Canadian reluctance over involving NATO in the region had led to a weakening of the language in the 6th Strategic Concept, removing a paragraph explicitly calling for a stronger NATO presence in the Arctic.³⁰

From 2010 onwards, NATO acted to improve its situational awareness of the region, but it did not lead or coordinate any major military activity in the High North.³¹ Despite high ranking officers and officials like Supreme Allied Commander Europe Admiral James Stavridis and Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen (de Hoop Scheffer's successor) warning the changing Arctic environment could rapidly increase tensions with Russia in the Arctic and calling for integrating national security and defence responses for the region, Canada's outright opposition to the involvement of NATO in the Arctic kept the Alliance from engaging with the region.³² NATO forces still took part in military exercises in the region following the 2010 Strategic Concept, with exercises such as Cold Response in northern Norway and Operation Nanook in Canada's Arctic working to improve military preparedness in the Arctic, though the exercises were organized and run by the host nations, not the Alliance.³³ Despite some calls for NATO to prepare for greater security threats in the region, prior to 2014 there was little urgency to radically change how NATO operated in the Arctic.³⁴

The Russian invasion of Crimea drastically changed perceptions of the Alliance's role in the Arctic. Overnight, non-NATO forums for military cooperation in the region disintegrated, with Russia no longer taking part in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, the Arctic Chiefs of Defense Conference being suspended, and allied criticism of Russian military activity in the Arctic increasing substantially.³⁵ The annexation of Crimea reinvigorated calls for NATO to rethink its strategic approach to the Arctic, and pressure has continued to build as concerns about Russian and Chinese activities in the region grow.³⁶ In 2017, NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller said the Alliance needed to improve its knowledge of processes in the region, adding that NATO was looking for ways to increase its activity in the region in certain respects, and that it would look to revise the military dimension of its presence in the Arctic.³⁷ In 2019, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg acknowledged the Arctic was a region of growing importance to the Alliance, and in 2020, again made reference to the Arctic as he launched the NATO 2030 initiative, signalling that NATO is becoming more willing to discuss its role in the region.³⁸

The GIUK Gap has begun to see greater strategic focus placed on it, with regional missions focusing on anti-submarine warfare and homeland defence taking place once more.³⁹ The GIUK Gap is increasingly being seen as a new center for conflict between NATO and Russia due to the strategic importance of the region for European security, and as Arctic sea ice continues to melt and the Arctic becomes more traversable, its

importance will only increase.⁴⁰ Several prominent voices, including senior U.S. naval commanders, have pointed out that with Russia's increasing submarine activity in the Arctic and Atlantic, a "fourth Battle of the Atlantic" represents a major threat to NATO, underlining the continued importance of the GIUK Gap to NATO's strategic position.⁴¹

NATO has also increased joint military exercises in the High North since Russia's aggressive actions following 2014, with operations like 2018's *Trident Juncture*, which mobilised over 50,000 troops from 31 countries, taking place in Norway, with the "fictitious aggressor" in the combat scenarios clearly an analogue for Russia.⁴² *Trident Juncture* followed on the heels of Russia's massive *Vostok-2018* exercise in the Russian Far East and allowed the Alliance to demonstrate its resolve and willingness to defend its northern flank.⁴³ A growing view is that through routine engagement in the Arctic, including exercises like these, NATO will normalize its presence in the region and reinforce the Arctic's importance to the Alliance.⁴⁴

Views of Arctic NATO Members

Amplifying NATO's difficulties in developing a policy for the Arctic has been the different views Arctic members of the Alliance have of what role NATO should play in the region. **Norway** has viewed NATO as a cornerstone of its national defence since the inception of the Alliance due to its vulnerable position and shared border with the Soviet Union/Russia.⁴⁵ As such, Norway has actively lobbied for the Alliance to play a larger role in the Arctic for decades, such as the 2008 Core Function Initiative that aimed to revitalise the Alliance's commitment to collective defence in all member states' territories, even those on the geographic periphery.⁴⁶ Norway's 2017 foreign and security policy White Paper clearly underlined a desire to deepen cooperation with NATO in order to ensure a level of security Norway is incapable of providing on its own.⁴⁷ Norway sees a strong NATO presence in the Arctic as a way to preserve the low-tension nature of the Arctic and ensure the geopolitics of the region remain stable and predictable.⁴⁸

Denmark has been less enthusiastic than Norway in calling for NATO engagement in the Arctic but has been shifting its focus to the High North more and more since 2007. During the Cold War, Denmark, through Greenland, played a large part in NATO's northern operations, but after the end of the Cold War, Denmark's military focus shifted from territorial defence in the Arctic to expeditionary operations in theatres such as Afghanistan.⁴⁹ Following the end of the Cold War, Denmark had focused most of its diplomatic efforts on its relationship with Greenland, but after the Russian flag-planting at the geographic North Pole in 2007, began to take a broader view of the Arctic and worked to build bi- and multi-lateral ties in the region.⁵⁰ A 2016 foreign policy report stated Denmark's foremost policy in the Arctic was to strengthen Western institutions, most notably NATO, while maintaining the cooperative nature of the High North.⁵¹ Denmark has continued to shift funding and attention towards the Arctic while looking to further cooperation with NATO in the region, tripling its military budget for the region in 2019 to signal its commitment to NATO.⁵²

Iceland is a strong supporter of NATO in the Arctic. With no military of its own, Iceland relies on NATO for its security, with Iceland's first National Security Policy in 2016 identifying NATO as the key pillar of Iceland's defence.⁵³ Iceland, along with Norway, was one of the members calling for the Alliance to explicitly mention the Arctic as an area of interest in NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, but despite Norwegian and Icelandic calls for

greater NATO involvement in the region, the Alliance took few actions to engage with the region.⁵⁴ Iceland's bilateral relationship with the United States is another key part of Iceland's national security due to the U.S. Air Force base at Keflavik, which was abruptly closed in 2006, but since 2015 has seen a slow return of U.S. forces as the U.S. became more concerned with Russian activity in the region.⁵⁵ As the U.S. and NATO shift their focus towards the Arctic, it can be expected that Iceland will be supportive of this shift, and work to ensure greater NATO engagement in the region, as the 37% increase in Iceland's 2019 defence budget shows.⁵⁶

Canada has recently undergone a shift in its Arctic foreign policy and views on NATO in the Arctic. Under Stephen Harper's government (2006-2015), Canada rejected the idea that NATO has a role to play in the Arctic and lobbied to remove references to the Arctic from NATO documents.⁵⁷ The Harper Government's initial "use it or lose it" view of Canadian Arctic issues, such as the status of Hans Island and on whether the Northwest Passage was an internal or international waterway, led to Canada pushing strongly for Arctic issues to be handled by Arctic states, with little involvement by international organizations such as NATO.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Lackenbauer observed that "over the last decade, Canada has typically opposed appeals to have NATO assume a more explicit Arctic role because this would unnecessarily antagonize Russia, draw non-Arctic European states more directly into Arctic affairs writ large or amplify the misconception that Arctic regional dynamics are likely to precipitate conflict between Arctic states."⁵⁹ However, the Trudeau government's 2017 defence policy document explicitly outlines a desire to increase NATO involvement in the Arctic, a major shift in the Canadian position.⁶⁰ This new willingness of Canada to involve NATO in the Arctic is an opportunity the Alliance should take advantage of, as Canada has historically been reluctant to increase NATO's involvement in the region.

The United States has, until recently, been passive on NATO policy in the Arctic, content to follow the initiatives from other members for the region.⁶¹ The United States has long maintained that NATO is a foundational pillar of the Arctic's security architecture, though the Alliance has not been the United States' primary way of ensuring Arctic security.⁶² The United States has preferred to utilize bilateral relationships with other Arctic NATO members to shore up defence in the region, with military bases in Canada, Greenland, and Iceland.⁶³ As recently as March 2021, the U.S. State Department Coordinator for the Arctic Region stated that any solution to Russian military activities in the Arctic began with NATO, and that the Alliance needed to be unified when looking at security challenges in the region.⁶⁴ The United States' concern over the growing activities of Russia and China in the Arctic has led to a renewed and expanded focus on the Arctic since 2016, with American troops returning to Iceland and Norway and increased diplomatic activity throughout the region, particularly with Iceland and Greenland.⁶⁵ Donald Trump's administration prioritized reengaging with the Arctic, but the erratic actions the Trump administration took in the region and within NATO caused confusion on where the Arctic actually sits on America's list of priorities.⁶⁶ Joe Biden's new administration may see the United States more willing to engage in the Arctic with NATO in a predictable and cooperative way, but it remains to be seen how exactly the Biden administration will ask Arctic and non-Arctic NATO members to contribute to the defence of the region.⁶⁷

While **Sweden and Finland** are not NATO members, they are close partners of the Alliance, and often take part in NATO exercises and missions. Since the end of the Cold War, cooperation between Sweden, Finland, and NATO has only increased, with both Sweden and Finland adapting their militaries to NATO standards and increasing their interoperability with NATO.⁶⁸ From this close cooperation, it is clear that, other than Russia, all the Arctic states support a role for NATO in the Arctic, though the level of support does vary somewhat.

Russian Opposition to NATO in the Arctic

Russia has viewed an increased NATO presence in the Arctic as dangerous for regional stability and is opposed to a greater role for the Alliance in the Circumpolar Arctic. Russia's Arctic territory accounts for 20 percent of the country's GDP and contains a vast majority of Russia's oil and gas reserves. As a result, the Arctic has become a key part of the Russian identity, and Arctic issues are seen as domestic issues first and foremost.⁶⁹ While it is not hard to see the Russian government using this nationalistic view of the Arctic to push back against a perceived encroachment by NATO and other Arctic states, Russia has maintained a cooperative stance with other Arctic nations following the annexation of Crimea through international bodies like the Arctic Council, as well as treaties and international exercises.⁷⁰ Russia has invested heavily in economically developing its Arctic territory and turning the Northern Sea Route into a globally important transport corridor, and because of these investments, Russia is eager to keep the Arctic a zone of peace so that commerce in the region can continue.⁷¹

Despite maintaining cooperation with other Arctic states following the Russian invasion of Crimea, Russian officials continue to discourage NATO from increasing its presence in the Arctic, attempting to sow discord amongst Arctic member states, and using provocative military actions to demonstrate its willingness to defend the region. After 2014, Russia stepped up its military exercises and drills in the region, violated the airspace of several member states by simulating bombing runs on NATO military installations and bases, and increased its submarine activity in the North Atlantic and Arctic.⁷² Russia also increased its military activities in and near the territories of Sweden and Finland following the annexation of Crimea, violating their maritime and air spaces many times in an attempt to intimidate its neighbors and show strength in the region.⁷³ Russia has also greatly increased its military forces in the Baltics and Eastern Europe; in 2019 alone Russia's Western Military District, which directly borders the Baltic states, created three army commands, five new division headquarters, and fifteen new mechanized regiments.⁷⁴ In response, NATO has assigned several multinational battle groups to the Baltic states to act as a tripwire in case of Russian invasion, and has moved to increase its ability to rapidly deploy land, air, and sea forces to the theatre within 30 days of the start of any hypothetical conflict.⁷⁵

These heightened tensions just south of the Arctic only increase tensions between NATO and Russia in the Arctic, as both sides view military activities in the region with suspicion. Beyond these military threats, Russia has attempted to disrupt NATO exercises in the High North, and made political efforts in Greenland, Iceland, and Norway to discredit and undermine trust for NATO, especially those Alliance activities taking place in the High North.⁷⁶ Diplomatically, Russia has vociferously attacked any actual (or perceived) increase in NATO activity north of the Arctic Circle, depicting the Alliance's presence as destabilising and warning that further increases could lead to military conflict.⁷⁷

Russia's historic fear of encirclement has caused it to be especially concerned by the possibility of Sweden and Finland joining the Alliance. The close cooperation between NATO, Sweden, and Finland has created pro-NATO groups in both countries, with support for joining NATO at around 30% and growing in both Sweden⁷⁸ and Finland.⁷⁹ If one or both states were to join NATO, Russia's fear of encirclement could cause Russia to take military action against the Alliance, with a high-ranking Russian official declaring in 2014 that Finland joining NATO could start World War III.⁸⁰ NATO must therefore tread carefully when looking to expand its role in the Arctic, as Russia has made it clear that it will react aggressively to perceived incursions in the High North. If

Russia became threatened by an increase in NATO activity in the Arctic, it may choose to respond in a manner below the threshold for conflict, like it did in Crimea, by encroaching on Svalbard or even northern Norway.⁸¹ If NATO failed to respond to an incursion in the Arctic, it would be devastating to the Alliance, completely undermining the collective defence NATO is supposed to guarantee and destroying the rationale for the Alliance. NATO can best avoid a dangerous situation like this from occurring is by showing a strong, unified front and through normalizing regular NATO exercises in the region, similar to how U.S., British, and Dutch marines and special forces regularly conduct exercises with the Norwegian military.⁸² NATO's combined forces are superior to Russia's, and if the Alliance can show it is committed to defending all Allied territory in the region, Russia may deem the risk of reprisal too high and use non-military means of expressing its displeasure.⁸³

Conclusion

NATO's role in the Arctic has been a persistent question for the Alliance ever since the end of the Cold War. While control of the North Atlantic and Arctic was a vital role of the Alliance during the Cold War, the Arctic remained a "forgotten flank" for almost the entirety of the period. NATO's efforts to integrate and expand its presence in the region after the end of the Cold War by shifting towards a soft security focus were hampered by internal divisions on what its role in the region should be. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, calls for NATO to expand its role in the Arctic were reinvigorated, and recently NATO has made efforts to discuss what its role in the High North should be. Russia is apprehensive of an increased NATO presence and has loudly decried efforts to expand the Alliance's role in the region, using both military and political means in an attempt to deter the Alliance. What happens in the Arctic will continue to matter to NATO, and the Alliance should work towards a consensus among its members on what role it should play in the region while working to normalize its presence in the Arctic. By normalizing its presence in the Arctic, NATO can reduce tensions and uncertainty currently caused by its activities in the region and help ensure the Arctic remains a zone of peace.

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⁸⁰ Pezard, et al. 2017: 56.

⁸¹ Ibid., 55.

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⁸³ Foggo and Fritz, 2018: 125.