

DECEMBER 17, 2021

The European Arctic: Developments in 2021

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Introduction

Looking at a map of the world that centres on the intersection of 0 degrees latitude and longitude, the Arctic appears as one single strip, a latitudinally prescribed band that provides limited differentiation on the horizontal plane. Furthermore, although they are linked, the left and right edges of this map appear, if one excuses the pun, poles apart. When the Arctic is viewed from 'above', however, the perception shifts. Now the Arctic Circle appears primarily linked not to proximate locations on a similar latitude, but on longitudinal lines.

Without becoming bogged down in discussion of boundary creation, drawing cartographic boundaries to delineate geographic regions is inherently a human artifice. If one were to step across the line that indicates the start of 'the Arctic', the environment would probably not be appreciably different. The same is true of the boundary between the 'European Arctic' and the 'North American Arctic', although the deeper environmental content of the two areas described can differ significantly. Alongside this, if one were to move away from the centre of the 'map of the Arctic from above', there is quite the spectrum of destination countries that would represent one's initial landfall.

Consequently, we need to see the European Arctic through two lenses: first, as a distinct locale, with

unique political considerations, and second, as a region indivisibly intertwined with the 'North American Arctic' and beyond. As such, actions taken in one Arctic can have consequences in the other, and reaching across the boundary between the two regions to effect change can pose significant political challenges. The deployment of nuclear weapons by Russia on the Kola Peninsula, for example, falls within what is traditionally perceived as the European Arctic. Nevertheless, if a missile were to be launched from here, it is conceivable that it would chart a course over the Arctic towards North America. In doing so, it would become a matter of North American Arctic security and would appear to stem from a breakdown in the Russia-U.S. relationship, rather than the Russia-Europe relationship.

Further highlighting this degree of (dis)continuity, in February, the Kingdom of Denmark, which is indisputably European, committed funds for defence technology to be deployed in Greenland.¹ Although (depending on the precise definition) Greenland technically straddles the two Arctic regions, it is significantly closer to Canada than to continental Europe and thus can be seen as a North American security imperative. Examining the European Arctic therefore requires an appreciation of political and security considerations that are both distinct from, but ultimately entirely connected to, North America. In this light, it is notable that, in

Lloyd Austin's confirmation hearing in the Senate Armed Services Committee, comments were made that suggested an often blurred understanding of the region that is referred to by the term 'the Arctic'.²

It almost seems clichéd to say that there has been a 'military build-up in the European Arctic' in 2021. Nevertheless, these changes are indicative of a genuinely altered regional context, with increasing military activity symptomatic of, and contributing to, competition between the U.S. (and its allies) and Russia. Norway's Arctic-focused white paper, published at the end of 2020, stresses the Norwegian perception of a deteriorating security situation and expresses concern about the "Russian build-up of forces and military modernization [that] could directly challenge Norwegian and allied countries' security".³

Changes in Russian Military Posture

Though essentially a change in nomenclature, the confirmation on 1 January 2021 that Russia's Northern Fleet – which is responsible for military operations in the Arctic, the Russian Arctic coastline, and the Northern Sea Route – had been designated as a 'Military District' served to highlight the region's importance.⁴ Furthermore, the Northern Fleet is responsible for a number of Russia's nuclear weapons, and its new status is indicative of their perceived strategic importance. Alongside this, Russia's airstrip in Franz Josef Land is now being used by large military aircraft.⁵ This was not surprising given that work has been going on there for some time, but it is nevertheless significant, bringing Russian aircraft closer to the U.S. and Canada, as well as providing a further operating location for Russian aircraft relatively proximate to Europe.

In addition, and again predictably, Russia's quadrennial Zapad exercise, testing forces in its Western Military District and linking operations with the Northern Fleet, took place in September. As is always the case, Zapad-21 was subjected to considerable scrutiny. One of the 'opponents' against whom Russia was fighting in the exercise was the "Polar Republic".⁶ Russian claims that these opponents are not based on real states or organizations must be stressed, although the idea it did not incorporate components that improve the ability to fight against NATO members may raise an incredulous eyebrow. Nevertheless, while it seems hyperbolic to suggest that the Russian military is preparing to initiate combat in the European Arctic, Russia is undoubtedly ensuring that it is prepared for combat.

U.S. and NATO Responses

Russian perceptions of security require military dominance in its near abroad and maintaining a wide range of strategic options. This becomes problematic given NATO's efforts to ensure that enhancements in Russian capability are robustly responded to and that its members feel themselves to be secure from attack. Such efforts limit Russia's strategic options, resulting in a perception of insecurity that risks spiralling. Consequently, the high level of interaction between the U.S. and Norwegian militaries is notable, even with the disruptive influence of COVID-19 (the press release for exercise Thunder Cloud, noting that "[t]he exercise will integrate COVID-19 mitigation measures to protect participants and host nation communities", demonstrates the pandemic's ongoing influence).⁷ Statements from senior U.S. and Norwegian officers about U.S. troops training alongside, and learning from, their Norwegian counterparts also highlight the increased focus on

the ability to operate in cold weather environments.⁸

Multi-domain or pan-domain operating concepts have become *de rigueur* amongst the U.S., Canada, and their Western allies.⁹ It is therefore interesting that, after it was activated in September, the U.S. Army's 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) immediately engaged in exercise Thunder Cloud in Norway's "High North".¹⁰ This is not a demonstration that there is an expectation of active multi-domain operations in the European Arctic, but rather illustrates that the ability to do so if required is important. Further highlighting joint operations in terms of inter-alliance and multi-domain capability, U.S. B-1 bombers and F-35s of the Norwegian Air Force engaged in joint training exercises in November to enhance "5th generation integration and interoperability".¹¹ Again, this is not inherently aggressive, and explorations of 5th generation capability are ongoing across similarly equipped forces. However, in combination with the aforementioned MDTF training, it is apparent that this is a zone of particular competition and that the European Arctic is seen as a useful region in which to test new approaches to conflict.

The engagement of the U.S. military in Norway adds a further dimension to European Arctic security. The U.S. military has, of course, had a European presence for decades, but its enhanced activity in the Norwegian High North suggests an increased European emphasis. Unfortunately, the presence of the U.S. forces, seen within NATO as a vital component of European security, unsettles Russia.¹² Military enhancements in the European Arctic are more complex than a simple spiral of reciprocity, but U.S. engagement in Europe is nevertheless, as Lt. Col. Heier indicates, a contributing factor.¹³ The possibility of European states being able to replicate U.S. capability and enable similar outcomes without U.S. involvement is slim. As such, the U.S. must form

part of the conversation about European Arctic security, but attention needs to be paid to the potential impact of its contribution.

An Opportunity for Dialogue?

In a similar vein, Russia indicated that while it "does not have a relationship with NATO", its bilateral relations with Norway (as well as the U.S., to a lesser extent) provide an opportunity for constructive dialogue.¹⁴ This represents something of a dilemma for NATO. Negotiating as NATO provides and represents solidarity, while bilateral negotiation can suggest a relationship outside this framework. It was suggested during Cold War negotiations around Confidence-Building Measures that the Soviets were trying to isolate NATO members to undermine their collective position.¹⁵ This is not to say that Russia is deliberately trying to divide NATO members, nor is it a suggestion that Norway should not have independent relations with Russia and encourage bilateral communication in times of tension (their telephone 'hotline' is an asset), but it is a reminder that Norway also needs to maintain dialogue with its NATO allies in order to maintain unity of purpose. The recognition that Norway and its allies will pay close attention to Russian manoeuvres in the region, and vice versa,¹⁶ highlights the importance of open communication in preventing inadvertent escalation.

After becoming its chair, Russia suggested at the Ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council in May that the country should be included in the annual meetings of the heads of the militaries of Arctic states, from which it disengaged in 2014.¹⁷ This suggests that there is at least an opportunity for dialogue on military matters, and a similar position has been taken by experts and policy-makers outside Russia.¹⁸ Whether this would be effective is not certain, but creating the space for that to occur would be helpful, even if it does crystallize the Arctic

as a region of military competition rather than the zone of peace that has been its moniker.¹⁹

Other multilateral organizations have encouraged conversation in the Arctic, with the EU pressing for dialogue and greater EU “visibility”, while also expressing concerns at military enhancements.²⁰ In addition, although not limited to the European Arctic, September’s agreement between Sweden, Norway, and Denmark provides a further layer of engagement between actors with an interest in the politics of the European Arctic.²¹ The agreement further binds states that are members of NATO with one that, while closely aligned, is not part of the alliance. How this intersects with NATO activities and shapes Russian perceptions of regional security remains to be seen and is worth watching in 2022.

Conclusion

Concern regarding the uptick in military action in the European Arctic is in danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nevertheless, the warning about heightened tension within Norway’s 2020 white paper is depressingly indicative of a region that is of increasing significance in conversations about military security.

Managing competition in the European Arctic requires an appreciation of the distinctions and similarities between it and its counterpart in North America. While it is tempting to see everything through the lens of the Russia-U.S. ‘great-power rivalry’, which indeed represents crucial context, there are unique considerations to take into account when examining European Arctic competition. These include the geographical environment, the threat perceptions of northern European states, these states’ relationship with Russia, and the

involvement of regional organizations such as the EU.

Even so, we cannot lose sight of the deep connection between the European and North American Arctics. The involvement of the U.S. military in the European Arctic, as well as Russian activities in both, emphasizes the inescapable link between the two, and actions in one can spill over into the other. This could be direct, such as the airfield in Franz Josef Land enhancing the perceived need for more defensive systems in North America, or indirect, with Russia or the U.S. seeking to ‘offset’ a relative disadvantage in one region by gaining an advantage in the other. Such calculations may also spread (or be influenced by) actions outside the Arctic.

Despite this danger, there are also opportunities. Military developments have rendered conversation of greater importance, and there seems to be some willingness to engage in dialogue. The Arctic is already a site of multilateral engagement, with the Arctic Council being prominent, but there are also conversations via other fora, including the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, in addition to bilateral communication. As such, there is scope for expanding the conversation to encompass the discussion of military affairs. It is by no means definite that this would result in improvement, rapid or otherwise, but the simple reality is that the current trajectory appears premised on continued military build-up and calculations of relative capability. Consequently, engaging in conversation is a prerequisite to averting further escalation. NATO’s members and other European states already have enough to contend with without unaddressed uncertainty and competition in the European ‘High North’.

Notes

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- ⁴ Malte Humpert, "Russia Elevates Importance of Northern Fleet Upgrading it to Military District Status," *High North News* January 13, 2021. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-elevates-importance-northern-fleet-upgrading-it-military-district-status>.
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- ¹² Mathieu Boulègue and Duncan Depledge, "New military security architecture needed in the Arctic," *Chatham House* May 4, 2021. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/new-military-security-architecture-needed-arctic>.
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- ¹⁴ Hilde-Gunn Bye, "Lavrov: We Do Not Have Relations with NATO, but we Have with Norway," *High North News* October 26, 2021. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/lavrov-we-do-not-have-relations-nato-we-have-norway>.
- ¹⁵ Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- ¹⁶ Peter B. Danilov, "Norwegian Frigate Monitoring the Russian Military Activity in the Arctic during Easter," *High North News* April 7, 2021. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/norwegian-frigate-monitoring-russian-military-activity-arctic-during-easter>.
- ¹⁷ Trine Jonassen, "Russia on Arctic Council Chairmanship: Wants to Revive the Military Dialogue Between Arctic States," *High North News* May 21, 2021. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-arctic-council-chairmanship-wants-revive-military-dialogue-between-arctic-states>; Hilde-Gunn Bye, "Military Leaders Discuss Military Cooperation and Security in the High North," *High North News* November 12, 2021. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/military-leaders-discuss-military-cooperation-and-security-high-north>.
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