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## Defence in the European Arctic in 2022

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### Introduction

The war in Ukraine is undoubtedly the defining feature of defence in Europe in 2022. It is also undeniable that the consequences of this conflict are likely to influence the dynamics of defence in the European Arctic, both directly (for example, through the acceleration of Sweden and Finland joining NATO) and indirectly (for example, potential changes in Russia's military capability and negotiating position). Historically, direct discussion of military activity in the Arctic has not occurred in the Arctic Council. However, heightened military activity prior to 2022 suggested that some contact in an alternative forum may be beneficial in order to reduce the potential for misunderstanding and miscalculation. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, the possibility of formal international engagement about defence-related activities in the Arctic has further diminished. In the context of frequent military activity in the Arctic, this may become increasingly problematic.

Nevertheless, the future of the conflict in Ukraine remains uncertain, and the defence activities that have occurred in the European Arctic in 2022 also demonstrate that there is a dynamic of action in the region that is only tangentially linked to events in Ukraine. This paper therefore focuses on NATO and Russian military exercises in the European Arctic in 2022, and their respective responses, as well as touching on the implications of Sweden and Finland joining NATO. With COLD RESPONSE 22, NATO

further indicated the importance of being able to fight in northern Europe, while Russia's Northern Fleet continued to develop and practice its Arctic capability. The final section of the paper briefly highlights the vocal position that NATO has taken on the Arctic in 2022, as well as Norway's dramatic proposed increase in defence spending.

### NATO and COLD RESPONSE 22

Taking place four years after the TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18 exercise, which was conducted primarily in Norway, NATO's exercise COLD RESPONSE 22 was one of the highest profile activities that took place in Europe during 2022. This exercise, the latest in the biannual series of COLD RESPONSE exercises that are hosted by Norway, involved around 30,000 troops from twenty-seven countries, as well as some civilian agencies, and was designed to test the ability of participating forces to "to work together in cold weather conditions...on land, in the air and at sea".<sup>1</sup> While considerably smaller than roughly 50,000 participants in TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18,<sup>2</sup> this year's COLD RESPONSE was the "largest Norwegian-led exercise conducted in Norway since the 1980s",<sup>3</sup> and was almost twice as large as COLD RESPONSE in 2020. The size of the exercise is an indication of the interest shown by NATO's members and partners in enhancing their Arctic war-fighting capability,<sup>4</sup> and also emphasised the perceived significance of the ability to reinforce Norway during a crisis in Europe.

The number of participants in COLD RESPONSE meant that it clearly exceeded the threshold at which the organisers are obliged to invite external observers under the terms of the 2011 Vienna Document on Security and Confidence-Building Measures. However, although invited to attend and observe the exercise, Russia declined the invitation.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this is a little unclear. Nevertheless, engaging in some speculation, it is possible that Russia had, essentially, calculated that the value of the information that could be learned through formal observation was outweighed by the perception that attending the exercise would give an improper impression of a normal relationship between Russia and NATO, and add legitimacy to the manoeuvre. Whatever the true underlying rationale, the lack of attendance suggests a new erosion of the relationship in the European Arctic, and the absence of formal Russian observers also indicates that Russia was comfortable that the information that they could gain from external observation outweighed the signalling value of their attendance.

Russia's primary objections to the exercise were more muted than those relating to TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2018. One of the most prominent headlines during the TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18 exercise was the failure of some GPS systems used by participants, a circumstance that has been broadly attributed to Russian activities.<sup>6</sup> Although the location of some parts of COLD RESPONSE would have allowed for similar GPS jamming by Russia, it does not appear that there was a repeat of the extent of the jamming that occurred during TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18. The interference in TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18 marked a major, and potentially dangerous, shift in responding to exercises, with an attempt to directly disrupt the manoeuvre. The fact that Russia seemed to step back from similar

behaviour during COLD RESPONSE (even if more recent interference with GPS has occurred)<sup>7</sup> suggests that there was some caution, even if only in the short term, around the potential for escalation in the European Arctic.

Russia did, however, pay close attention to COLD RESPONSE and there was Russian presence close to the exercise. As occurred during TRIDENT JUNCTURE, Russia issued a Notice to Aviation (NOTAM) "danger area" that suggested that some form of weapons firing would take place in a small area of international waters between Norway and Iceland, well outside the area in which COLD RESPONSE was taking place (this represents a slight change from Russian activities during TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2018, in which some of the zones indicated as potentially containing Russian firing activity overlapping with areas in which part of the exercise was taking place).<sup>8</sup> Russia's largest combat ship, the *Pyotr Veliky*, as well as one other ship, was identified by the Norwegian military as sailing towards the area identified in the NOTAM.<sup>9</sup> In addition, one Russian *Vishnya*-class intelligence-collection vessel was in relatively close proximity to northern Norway, where some sections of COLD RESPONSE were taking place.<sup>10</sup>

As was the case during TRIDENT JUNCTURE, NATO took these activities in its stride and continued the exercise as planned. Russia's activities were "expected", and perceived to be a natural part of Russian signalling, without signifying a change in Russia's attitude or approach.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, one stand-out criticism made by Russia regarding COLD RESPONSE 22 centred on the participation of non-Arctic states.<sup>12</sup> This follows a pattern of Russian critique of the NATO exercises that demonstrate a high degree of alliance cohesion, particularly in

proximity to Russia's borders, rather than indicating concern with NATO capability more broadly.

## Russia in the European Arctic

The primary focus of the Russian armed forces in 2022 was their invasion of Ukraine. To an extent this reduced their presence in the European Arctic, with land-based forces heavily drawn-down in the regions that are close to the Baltic states and southern Finland, with suggestions that around eighty percent of the roughly 30,000 troops in this area have been moved due to conflict in Ukraine. Air capability, however, has not been subjected to the same level of reconfiguration (with the exception of some anti-aircraft units being moved to support operations in Ukraine),<sup>13</sup> and the Northern Fleet remains broadly untouched (although, again, at least three amphibious landing vessels of the Northern Fleet were moved to the Black Sea for potential operations against Ukraine).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, and highlighting the ongoing importance of north-west Russia, the Barents Sea, and the European Arctic more broadly to Russia's economy and defence posture, Russia's Northern Fleet has remained active and in July President Putin emphasised Russia's desire to protect Arctic waters "by all means".<sup>15</sup>

The Northern Fleet has been involved with a number of very visible exercises throughout 2022, and Russia also repositioned a number of long-range bombers to the Kola Peninsula in late summer.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in mid-October Russia issued around eight NOTAMs covering areas of the Barents and Kara Seas,<sup>17</sup> as well as some land areas of the Kola Peninsula, to warn of missile impact locations. While not at threateningly unusual levels, this indicated a slightly higher level of activity than the same period in 2021. Russia also ran a large-scale naval exercise

in January and February of 2022, with over 140 ships and 60 aircraft involved across all areas of naval operations, including in the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. This involved the "Arctic expeditionary group" of the Northern Fleet practicing to "resolve crisis situations in the Arctic Ocean region", with a total of up to thirty ships and twenty aircraft being involved.<sup>18</sup> As usual, the nominal 'opponent' in the exercise was a "terrorist group", and practiced a wide array of operations, including "protecting the communications of the Northern Sea Route and defense of the Northern Fleet garrisons".<sup>19</sup> The exercise also provided Russia with the opportunity to move ships from the Northern Fleet into a position where they could be used to directly support Russia's land-based operations in Ukraine if necessary. While not an Arctic event, a component of this exercise in February was intended to happen in Ireland's Exclusive Economic Zone, which resulted in considerable protest.<sup>20</sup>

August saw further Russian exercises in the Barents Sea, again intended to provide Russian personnel the opportunity to practice repelling "attacks on the country's Arctic islands".<sup>21</sup> This exercise was notable in that although most of the NOTAMs issued in relation to the exercise covered areas well out into international waters, one overlapped slightly with Norway's Exclusive Economic Zone, representing a departure from normal procedure. As anticipated, NATO members tracked the exercise closely, and it was only a week earlier that a Royal Air Force C-135W reconnaissance aircraft had been intercepted by a Russian MiG-31 for allegedly "violating [Russian] airspace" around the Kola Peninsula.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, Russian reporting in August indicated that Russia would be paying increased attention to the Arctic and regularly deploying nuclear-powered submarines to "ensure the security of the Northern

Sea Route”,<sup>23</sup> as well as revealing a new concept for a submarine designed primarily for Arctic operations.<sup>24</sup> Exercises to train this capability in 2022 took place primarily in the Pacific side of Russia’s border with the Arctic. This should not be taken to indicate that the focus is only on the eastern end of the route and it seems likely that Russia will continue to train its submarine forces to deploy across the entirety of the Arctic. Interestingly, Russia also announced in January that the “Northern Fleet’s Arctic group” would “conduct joint drills with the vessels of Russia’s FSB on protecting the Northern Sea Route” during 2022. This is an intriguing insight into the connection between Russia’s armed forces and the civilian “border directorate” of the FSB in matters relating to the Arctic. The connection is not inherently problematic for the west, and co-ordination of the two bodies to engage in search and rescue and “preliminary control of suspicious vessels” is reasonable,<sup>25</sup> but it again highlights the significance of the Northern Sea Route to Russia and the breadth of potential challenges in maintaining control of the waterway. The depth of the connection between the Arctic and Russia’s financial wellbeing was further emphasised in an exercise during September involving thirty ships from the Northern Fleet which was used to “assess the level of preparedness of the Northern Fleet military command...to ensure military security **and maritime economic activity** of the Russian Federation in the Arctic” (emphasis added by author).<sup>26</sup>

Russia’s exercises and activities in and around the Barents Sea in particular, even while Russia is engaged in a large-scale conflict in Ukraine, signals the importance of the region to Russia. In developing a high level of capability, as noted by Ina Holst-Pedersen Kvam of the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy, Russia also uses the threat of force from

the Arctic to add weight to their negotiating position in other areas.<sup>27</sup> Thus, considering the European Arctic in the context of Russian defence, it is important to keep in mind that activities in the region represent functions beyond the desire to defend Russian territory from attack or planning to conduct offensive operations against European Arctic states.

## Finland, Sweden, and NATO

Perhaps the most significant change to the geopolitical situation in the European Arctic is the likely addition of Sweden and Finland to NATO. This was not solely a reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, although the conflict undoubtedly sped up the decision-making process. While not yet fully confirmed, Sweden and Finland joining NATO changes the dynamic of European Arctic defence. Both can add to NATO’s presence and capability in the European Arctic, and their membership highlights Russia’s isolation in the Arctic Council.<sup>28</sup> While Putin has indicated that Sweden and Finland joining NATO is not seen to pose a greater threat to Russia,<sup>29</sup> NATO would nevertheless have greater presence and capability in the European Arctic, as well as an enhanced ability to reinforce Baltic states. In addition to changing NATO’s ability to project force into Europe during a crisis, as with the Norway-based exercises that have been conducted, this also has training and competency benefits for other NATO members. The comment from the British Secretary of State for Defence, following the joint UK-Sweden-Finland exercise VIGILANT KNIFE that took place in Finland in September, that engaging with Swedish and Finnish forces provides an “invaluable opportunity for UK personnel to develop their skills and experience of warfighting in cold weather conditions” is indicative of the level of expertise that they provide.<sup>30</sup>

Finland joining NATO also provides intriguing new defence implications for the Kola Peninsula. The northern part of the border between Finland and Russia could, in theory, bring NATO forces into relatively close proximity to the vital naval facilities on the Kola Peninsula, as well as to the primary road that connects Murmansk to Moscow and St. Petersburg. While there is no suggestion that this represents an active threat to Russia – NATO is, of course, a defensive alliance – it nevertheless has the potential to change the defence posture in the region.

The extent of the change should not, however, be over-played. Both Sweden and Finland have been involved in NATO exercises in the recent past (troops from both were present during COLD RESPONSE 22, for example) and there has been broad alignment between NATO and both countries regarding European security. Indeed, Russia has indicated that Sweden joining NATO will not lead to a particular change in the Russian posture in its north-west,<sup>31</sup> and Sweden has long been categorised by Russia as a NATO member in all but name. Consequently, it is possible that the impact of Sweden and Finland joining NATO on activities in the European Arctic is limited, at least in the short term.

## NATO's Increased Interest in the Arctic and Norway's Enhanced Spending

Alongside Sweden and Finland joining the alliance, NATO has also been more vocal about the importance of the Arctic in international relations. This was particularly notable during the visit of NATO's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, to Canada, where he stated that "NATO has a clear interest in preserving security, stability and co-operation in the High North".<sup>32</sup> Although

Stoltenberg was speaking from North America, and the emphasis of many of his comments was on Canada's role in defence in the North American Arctic, the link to Europe was clear. Emphasising that "freedom of navigation and unfettered access [to the Arctic] is essential to keep our economies strong and our people safe" highlights the interconnected nature of the regions.<sup>33</sup> This was reinforced by the attendance of the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Bauer, at the Arctic Circle Assembly in Iceland in October, where he stressed that the "vital trade and communications links between North America and Europe" mean that it is necessary for NATO to do "everything it can to make sure the Arctic remains free and open".<sup>34</sup>

Norway also announced a large increase in its 2023 defence budget,<sup>35</sup> with Russia's military capability and aggression previously noted as "the most significant change in the Norwegian security environment".<sup>36</sup> By both the position of the country and reputation, Norway's capacity to operate in the Arctic is important and notable, and a further enhancement in its military capability will have positive effects on NATO's ability to conduct operations in the European Arctic. However, despite this investment and the reference to Russian activities, there is a consistent position that there are "no signs of an increased security threat in the North...[and] no military threat to Norway".<sup>37</sup> At face value there is a seemingly obvious disconnect between these two statements – why place more emphasis on military capability if the threat environment has not changed? However, Norway's efforts to improve its military is an indication that the defence environment in the European Arctic is site of greater unpredictability and volatility than in recent years.<sup>38</sup> As such, while there is a generally high degree of stability at present, and seemingly

little appetite for confrontation, there is also awareness that this could change quickly.

## Conclusion

Although they are always entertaining to make, predictions are inherently difficult. The two political acts in 2022 likely to have a long-term (if indirect) impact the European Arctic are Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and Sweden and Finland joining NATO. However, we are not yet in a position to be able to say definitively what this impact will look like. Remaining patient and resisting the temptation to speculate will be important as defence activities in the European Arctic are re-oriented to this new environment.

Nevertheless, the defence activities in the European Arctic in 2022 offer a clear insight into the

perception of the importance of the region, and emphasise the growing unpredictability that exists. The scope of COLD RESPONSE 22, in addition to the seemingly expanded frequency and size of Russia's Northern Fleet exercises, highlight the extent to which the European Arctic is a focus of military activity. Even while large numbers of its troops and military matériel is committed to attacking Ukraine, Russia's military has retained a significant ability to operate in the Arctic, particularly at sea, and has sought to develop this further. For NATO, 2022 has seen confirmation of the importance of the Arctic and the North Atlantic to the alliance. It seems likely that this will continue to be an area of focus in the coming year, both in terms of developing the capability to engage in military operations, as well as ensuring that the political and operational 'seams' that divide the European and North American Arctics are comprehensively addressed.

## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> Astri Edvardsen, "Cold Response 2022," *High North News* January 19, 2022. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/cold-response-2022-35000-soldiers-26-countries-northern-military-exercise>.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Nilsen, "Russia won't observe NATO's next Arctic exercise" *Arctic Today* March 8, 2022. <https://www.arctictoday.com/russia-wont-observe-natos-next-northern-exercise/>.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Nilsen, "Stoltenberg condemns GPS jamming from Kola," *The Barents Observer* February 13, 2019, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2019/02/stoltenberg-condemns-gps-jamming-border-region-he-was-first-get-visa-freedom>.

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<sup>9</sup> Nilsen, "Russia won't observe."

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# POLICY BRIEF



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