

January 22, 2024

Arctic Defence in 2023: A Review

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On the surface, it seems that 2023 simply saw a continuation of the trends in military activity in the Arctic that occurred in 2022, with consistent military exercises, interceptions of adversary aircraft, and protestations about the importance of the region by military decision-makers. However, this masks a more fundamental shift in how Arctic defence is being structured and, from NATO's perspective, a genuine effort to engage more holistically in the region. The constant question of "how likely is military confrontation in the Arctic?" makes sense, but it also obscures the simple reality that the militaries with an interest in the Arctic are preparing for the possibility of conflict. This is not to suggest that conflict is likely – most commentators agree that in the North American context at least it is not – but it is important to be aware that Russian and NATO militaries are thinking carefully about how to win in the Arctic, and the role of the region in their respective defence, security, and broader economic policies.

Defence in the North American Arctic

The degree of attention being paid to Arctic defence in North America rose again in 2023, with the U.S. Secretary of the Navy stating in April that "We've increased the number of operations just this past

year that we conduct in the high north and in the Arctic," while indicating that this trend was likely to continue.¹ NORAD's frequent publication of press releases relating to interceptions of Russian aircraft within the North American Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) continued through 2023, again highlighting the extent of military competition that centres on the North American Arctic. The Canadian Standing Senate Committee on National Security, Defence and Veterans Affairs also published a report on Arctic security in 2023. The subtitle, "Urgent needs in a changing geopolitical and environmental landscape," hints at the perception of required changes. The report is not limited only to military activity, but nevertheless refers to a "deteriorating" security environment and the necessity of gaining a stronger understanding of Canada's capabilities and the enhancements that must be made.²

February 2023 saw a particularly notable event in North American defence and security, at least in terms of media coverage: the identification, tracking, and destruction of what China claimed to be a weather monitoring balloon over South Carolina. Setting aside discussion of the actual purpose of the balloon and the equipment that it carried, its presence was a useful reminder of North America's geography and the significance of the Arctic as an avenue of approach. Although the path that the

balloon took over the continental U.S. took it on a south-easterly route, it travelled through Alaska before moving south.

The incident was also a further reminder of the challenge both of domain awareness in the Arctic and the difficulties of responding to potential threats. In the aftermath of this balloon transit, a more detailed image of Arctic airspace was generated, and the presence of further unidentified objects was detected. This led to shooting down another balloon over the Yukon by U.S. aircraft operating in Canadian airspace. The reason given for this was that Canadian aircraft had been delayed by “freezing rain.”³ This is not a criticism of the Royal Canadian Air Force, but simply highlights the vast distances and hostile conditions encountered in Canada’s north, further emphasised by the challenge that both Canada and the U.S. faced in attempting to recover the remnants of these objects. Ensuring comprehensive domain awareness and operating effectively in the Arctic is not straightforward.

The balloon overflight made the majority of the headlines, but it was not the only case of discovering unexpected surveillance capability in the Arctic in 2023. Roughly a week after the discovery and destruction of unidentified objects in the air, the Canadian Department of National Defence indicated that it had discovered “Chinese monitoring buoys” in Canadian Arctic Waters.⁴ China is active participant in scientific research in the Arctic, and the equipment on the buoy was “capable of mapping the sea bed and measuring ice thickness.”⁵ However, the surveillance equipment was also capable of “monitoring US submarine activity.”⁶ Again, this demonstrates the challenge of real-time domain awareness – it is possible that the buoy had been there for some time without Canadian or U.S. defence forces being aware of its presence. At a political level this is also problematic, emphasising

the challenge of responding appropriately to “dual-use” technology. It is possible that the buoy was solely for scientific purposes and there was no military-related intent behind its deployment. There is, however, no way to prove this and, as a result, the buoy represented a threat to North American defence in the Arctic, providing a degree of situational awareness and intelligence capability to a potential adversary. Again, this represents two challenges, first in identifying activities that are occurring in the Arctic, and second in responding appropriately to information-gathering operations that have both civilian and military functions.

Defence in the European Arctic

The accession of Finland to NATO and the ongoing process of potential Swedish accession were headline components of changes related to military activity in Europe’s ‘High North.’ In May 2023, a month after joining NATO, Finland hosted its first joint exercise as a member of the alliance. Involving 6,500 Finnish troops and 1,000 troops from the US, UK, Norway, and Sweden, the exercise occurred in northern Finland and was the “biggest [Finnish-led] modern-time land force drill above the Arctic Circle.”⁷ Although the number of non-Finnish participants was not high, the exercise nevertheless points to the new structure of NATO capability in the European Arctic, and was followed by Finland taking the lead in Exercise *Arctic Challenge 2023* in June. This “large-force, live-fly field training exercise,” originally including Finland, Sweden, and Norway, involved air forces from “nearly every Arctic nation and many NATO Allies and Partners.”⁸

Denmark’s foreign and security policy strategy, released in May, further emphasised this theme of integrating allied capability in the Arctic. The document indicated that “Russia’s military forces in the Arctic are largely intact,” despite the war in Ukraine, and that Russia has “increased its military

strength and expanded its military capabilities in the Arctic” in recent years. In responding to the increasingly “unpredictable” Russia, Denmark highlighted the importance of NATO in strengthening security in the Arctic and North Atlantic. Norway’s annual publication of the country’s threat and risk assessment, published in February, also suggested that “Russian activity in the High North” may become “less predictable,” in part as a function of NATO’s Arctic capability being enhanced by the accession of Sweden and Finland to the alliance.⁹

Norway suggested in August that NATO should create an “Arctic Air Operations Center” that would involve “representatives from close allies – who have Arctic interests – such as the US, the UK, and Canada’s Air Force,” alongside the other Nordic states. (The Nordic states signed a memorandum of understanding to create a “Unified Nordic Air Force in August.”)¹⁰ Although this is only a suggestion rather than a concrete plan, it has interesting implications. First, the centre would represent a change in focus for NATO air operations, with the Arctic rising in prominence. Second, this would raise questions about the degree of connection between the North American and European Arctics, and possibly the more formal integration of NORAD into broader NATO-led airspace monitoring across Europe’s High North. Admiral Rob Bauer, the Chair of NATO’s Military Committee, also commented on the “increasing...militarization in the Arctic region” and, in relation to the “Regional Plan North,” noted that the plan “sees to the Atlantic and European Arctic,” but will be handled by JFC Norfolk¹¹ in the U.S. The emphasis in this case was on the connection between Europe and North America, and ensuring “that forces and equipment can flow between” them freely.

Alongside this, the Royal Navy’s *HMS Queen Elizabeth* aircraft carrier operated off the coast of

northern Norway for this first time, as part of NATO’s Joint Expeditionary Force,¹² and a French nuclear submarine docked in the Grøtsund harbour in Tromsø, Norway, for the first time.¹³ Although France is not an Arctic state, the visit and subsequent three-month deployment of one of its submarines to the Arctic was a signal of increasing French commitment to Arctic defence. As noted above regarding ‘dual-use’ capabilities, it is also notable that a Russian civilian research vessel, *Akademik N. Strakhov* was travelling off the coast of Finnmark while the French submarine was in Trømso, with an incomplete trace on its route available via publicly available sources.¹⁴ U.S. nuclear-powered submarines were also authorised to visit Iceland in April. Although this is for service visits only, and the submarines must not be carrying nuclear weapons,¹⁵ this change in Iceland’s policy is a further indicator of the increasing integration of NATO members’ Arctic military activity.

The Russian Arctic and the Northern Fleet

The changing geopolitical landscape, particularly the expansion of NATO, and the importance of the Arctic to Russian domestic politics has influenced an important administrative change. The Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command was designated as a “Military District” in its own right in January 2021, becoming the fifth Military District in Russia, and the third largest. However, the accession of Finland to NATO (and the likely accession of Sweden) has caused the Russian Defense Ministry to re-consider the appropriateness of this administrative configuration and, in the words of the Russian Defence Minister, conduct “retaliatory measures...to create an appropriate grouping of troops in Northwest Russia.”¹⁶

In October, a draft Presidential Decree suggested that the Western Military District would revert to its

pre-2010 configuration of “Moscow Military District” and “Leningrad Military District,” with the Northern Fleet being “absorbed into” the latter.¹⁷ This should not be taken to indicate that the Northern Fleet has diminished in importance. Instead, grouping the Northern Fleet into a new Leningrad Military District highlights the continued importance of the Arctic to Russia, and the integral connection between defence and security across Russia’s interior and in its ability to project force into the Arctic.

Russia has claimed that it is opposed to the ‘militarization’ of the Arctic, and this is reinforced in the new Foreign Policy Concept released in March 2023 which states that “Russia is seeking to preserve peace and stability” in the Arctic. However, the document also indicates that Russia will focus on “counteracting the unfriendly states’ policy aimed at militarization of the region and limiting Russia’s ability to exercise its sovereign rights in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation.”¹⁸ This concept of ‘counteracting’ such militarization leaves open the possibility of Russia further enhancing its Arctic military capability on the basis of what they perceive (or attempt to justify) as equivalent increases in NATO’s ability to disrupt Russian Arctic activities.

Russian commentator Sergey Yermakov stated in December 2022 that Finland and Sweden joining NATO would be “the most urgent challenge to Russia’s security in the Arctic... [and] requires the adoption of a set of adequate responses.”¹⁹ The combination of NATO forces’ potential proximity to Russia (especially its aircraft) and the losses suffered by land-based forces drawn down from northern basis to Ukraine have added to the sense of the importance of the Russian Navy in the Arctic to “reduce looming threats.”²⁰ The indication in the foreign policy concept that “Russia’s foreign policy in the Arctic is an organic extension of its domestic Arctic development policy”²¹ further highlights the

perceived importance of maintaining the ability to defend Arctic economic infrastructure.

Alongside this conceptual and administrative reconfiguration, Russia’s naval and air activities continued relatively unabated in the Arctic in 2023, although land forces in the Kola Peninsula “suffered extensive losses of personnel and materiel in Ukraine,”²² and some surface vessels have been re-deployed to the Mediterranean and Black Sea. Patrols by Russian strategic bombers have also been on a “downward” trend. Offsetting this, there have been more temporary deployments of strategic bombers, and the “number of aircraft on the Kola Peninsula is largely the same” as before the invasion of Ukraine. Similarly, the “supply of new silent multi-role submarines” increases the Russian military’s capability of operating in the “Norwegian Sea and the Atlantic” to disrupt NATO operations.²³

Emphasising the significance of the region, Sergei Shoigu, Russia’s Defence Minister, travelled to “remote Arctic garrisons of the Northern Fleet” in August²⁴ to perform inspections as a Northern Fleet exercise commenced. This exercising of the Northern Fleet continued despite Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine, with the North Sea seeing in May the “highest [level of Russian naval] activity since before the pandemic.”²⁵ The Norwegian Joint Headquarters noted in a press release that “Russian vessels are sailing in international waters and that the activity is legitimate and in line with international agreements,”²⁶ although it is significant that a spike in small exercises in May (eleven between the 2nd and 18th) coincided with NATO’s exercise *Formidable Shield*, part of which took place off the coast of northern Norway. *Finval-2023*, a much larger exercise by the Northern Fleet in September, reportedly included up to 1,800 people, ten aircraft, and fifteen ships, submarines and support vessels,²⁷ involving operations in the Barents, Kara, and East Siberian Seas. The Russian

description of exercise suggested that its purpose was to “protect coastal civilian infrastructure and Northern Fleet facilities,” but included Notices to Air Missions (NOTAMs) “in waters close to the maritime border with Norway.”²⁸ Predictably, two U.S. aircraft approached the area of the exercise without entering Russian airspace and were intercepted by Russian jets from the Northern Fleet.²⁹

Although news reports frequently cite such surveillance flights and interceptions, it is important to emphasise the normality of these operations. It is also notable that the degree of professionalism seen in Russian aviators operating in the Arctic appears to be much higher than in their counterparts elsewhere. Interceptions in international airspace in or close to the Arctic are conducted more smoothly and with less risk of accidents than interceptions that have occurred in the Mediterranean. This behaviour is indicative of the perceived importance of the Arctic to Russia, reflected by a degree of caution in its activities and the deployment of more highly-skilled personnel to operate in the region.

In late August, Russia and China engaged in a multinational naval exercise that took place in international waters close to the Aleutian Islands. The exercise drew considerable media attention. Again, interpretations of the implications of the exercise differed markedly. On one end of the scale, commentators expressed concerns that this presaged a new degree of Sino-Russian Arctic co-operation, was “highly provocative,”³⁰ and represented a new focus on co-operation in Arctic military activity and capability. On the other end of the spectrum, commentators framed the exercise as an expected component of Sino-Russian military co-operation that has been occurring in recent years with no special threat inherently ascribed to it. Nevertheless, it will be interesting to see how the Arctic component of the military engagement

between China and Russia develops in the near future.

Conclusion

It is tempting to view 2023 simply as the continuation of a broader arc of Arctic defence activities. While it is important that we do not divorce the actions in the last twelve months from what has come before, 2023 also marked an intriguing crystallisation of some of the processes and challenges that have been at the forefront of discussion. Longstanding questions about how Arctic defence should be structured have also been re-emphasised by the increased attention being paid to the Arctic, and reinvigorated by new awareness of a broad spectrum of threats.

NATO and individual NATO members – notably not only the Arctic states – are more openly emphasising the Arctic as a key point of attention. Importantly, this has been manifested in action, not simply in rhetoric. Russia’s purported reorganisation of its Arctic military forces, and particularly its rationalisation for doing so, emphasised the country’s perception of the need for Arctic military capability. Regardless of whether Russian military officials already viewed Sweden and Finland as NATO-adjacent, the changing geographic scope of NATO and the alliance’s emphasis on the Arctic appears to have concentrated Russian efforts to ensure that they have comprehensive Arctic military capability. Importantly, this is framed as concerning both force projection capability and maintaining control of Russian territory.

The challenge of ‘closing the seams’ between the North American and European Arctics has long been a point of discussion for NATO, and the Arctic defence activities in 2023 have demonstrated its ongoing significance. Developing clear appreciation of the political, administrative, and logistical

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challenges inherent in understanding how to integrate the Arctic capabilities of all of its members is a vital next step for NATO, but it is also important to remain cognizant of the threats and challenges that make different geographical portions of the Arctic unique. To take the metaphor further, while the seams must be fastened, the 'cloth' that they connect must also be assiduously maintained.

Continuing the theme of returning to longstanding questions, the Arctic has been highlighted again as an avenue of approach to North America. This time, through non-traditional security threats rather than missiles transiting over the north pole. This renders the challenge of responding to them more complex: while the threat has direct military implications, countering dual-use technology will also require political solutions.

2023 should not be considered as a culminating inflection point for Arctic defence, but the past twelve months have nevertheless seen notable changes to the defence profile of the region. Questions about the nature of Arctic threats and the likelihood of military confrontation in the Arctic remain, but the 'urgency' indicated by the Canadian Senate Committee report has been universally acknowledged by NATO and Russia through both discourse and tangible action.

Notes

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⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Anne Kauranen, “NATO launches Arctic manoeuvres, vowing to protect newest member Finland,” *Reuters*, 31 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/nato-launches-arctic-manoeuvres-vowing-protect-newest-member-finland-2023-05-30/>.

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