

SUGGESTED READINGS

Hybrid Threats in the Arctic

Compiled by P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv

March 2024

The internet is filled with perspectives and opinions. These lists, compiled by academic subject matter experts, are intended to help direct policy makers, practitioners, and academics to credible, open-access sources, available online, free of charge, that reflect leading-edge research and thinking. The compilers of each list have been asked to select readings that are accessibly written (i.e. they are not filled with excessive jargon), offer a diversity of viewpoints, and encourage critical thinking and debate.

While most commentators and analysts do not perceive an immediate risk of conventional military conflict in the Arctic, there has been a recent surge of interest in hybrid or “grey zone” threats (those that fall within the competitive continuum between peace and war and below the threshold of armed conflict) in the region. The European Hybrid Center of Excellence (CoE) notes that:

An inherent characteristic of hybrid threats entails blurring traditional dichotomies and creating ambiguity and uncertainty. The goal is to achieve national interests and objectives through strategies such as undermining public trust in democratic institutions, deepening unhealthy polarization, challenging the core values of democratic societies, interfering in democratic elections, and affecting the decision-making capability of political leaders, even by the use of military means.¹

The following is a selection of recent, open-access publications that examine how these concepts are defined and understood, as well as what and how different threats to and in the Arctic are perceived from individual, society, state, and international levels. These studies suggest different ways of managing threats, including bolstering resilience and societal trust, “Total Defense,” and Whole-of-Society or Comprehensive Approaches.

Christopher Coates, “[North American Defence and the Canadian Arctic in the 21st Century](#),” *Canadian Military Journal*, Winter 2023.

Dangers and threats to the Canadian Arctic in the 21st Century are not limited to advanced military threats and also include adversarial activities that seek to achieve aims and goals without resorting to military means. Russia continues with ambiguous, dual-purpose military activities that would allow it to dominate approaches to North America. China, through dependencies or other means, seeks access to resources and decisions favourable to its interests. It can achieve these

through non-military means — economic, informational, and political — insidiously degrading the sovereignty of Canada and other nations. Coates argues that countering this requires a comprehensive Whole of Government and Whole of Society approach to address a key threat in the Arctic to Canadian security and sovereignty — hybrid or gray-zone threats that are below-the-threshold of armed conflict.

Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, [Security and Geopolitics in the Arctic: The Increase of Hybrid Threat Activities in the Norwegian High North](#), European Hybrid CoE, 27 March 2024.

This working paper and country case study investigates the recent increase in hybrid threat activities in the Norwegian High North, most of which are either attributed to Russia or suspected to originate from Russia. It discusses the various forms of these threats, including intelligence and information gathering, influence operations, and sabotage, highlighting their intent to destabilize society without engaging in direct military confrontation. While Russia is unlikely to seek or engage in direct military confrontation in the European High North, evidence points to the use of “below the threshold” activities, which, short of war or a military attack, could serve to increase doubt and mistrust within society, with the intent to increase destabilization in the target country. Over time, such activities can combine to exacerbate insecurity in Norway, as well as influence developments in geopolitical power dynamics in the European Arctic. The paper calls for vigilant monitoring and policy development to counter the threats, which have the potential to influence the geopolitical power dynamics in the European Arctic.

Katarina Kertysova and Gabriella Gricius, [Countering Russia’s Hybrid Threats in the Arctic](#), European Leadership Network, 8 December 2023.

This report explores how hybrid threats manifest in the Arctic, areas that are susceptible to influence, potential targets, actors who wish to shape public opinions, as well as the objectives being pursued. It first examines the threat and vulnerability landscape in the Arctic and outlines individual country profiles of the seven Western Arctic states under investigation, namely Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the United States. It observes four key trends in the Arctic, all related to increases in 1) Russian cyber activity, 2) critical infrastructure interference, 3) espionage and intelligence operations, and 4) mounting information influence operations (including disinformation) in the Arctic. The report then uses Finland as a good example for other Western Arctic states to follow – highlighting best practices. Next, the report evaluates the viability of a regional joint response mechanism towards hybrid threats. Finally, it offers a series of recommendations to address hybrid interference in the Arctic.

Valery Konyshev, [“Is the Arctic on the Brink of Hybrid War?”](#), *Arctic and North* (2020).

The article by a Russian political scientist examines identifies what Western experts consider the main source of hybrid threats and the nature of these threats in the Arctic. He argues that military experts have not yet come up with a clear

definition of hybrid war, but political scientists employ an even more amorphous meaning. Through specific examples, Konyshhev argues that all Russian political action potentially falls under the Western concept of hybrid threats, “which is conducive to the creation of political mythology that covers up the political goals of Western opponents.” Although Konyshve sees “no consensus in the West regarding to the productivity of the hybrid threat/war concept,” he suggests a more popular, “radical point of view that reduces relations in the Arctic, and international politics in general, to confrontation.”

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Troy Bouffard and Adam Lajeunesse, “[Russia’s Information Operations: The Kremlin’s Competitive Narratives and Arctic Influence Objectives](#),” *Journal of Peace and War Studies* (October 2022).

Although the Arctic states share many common interests in the circumpolar region, resurgent strategic competition globally and the war in Ukraine have reinforced how Russia and the other seven Arctic states are not like-minded and are competing for international legitimacy. This article examines how Russia wages its perpetual adversarial competition in the information environment via state-funded media channels and proxy websites. These tools reinforce Russian strategies to legitimize its position as the major Arctic power and to frame its military investments as defensive in nature against potential North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) aggression. First, we frame Russia’s core Arctic goals, using its strategic plans unveiled in 2020 as the official framework guiding national action. Second, we describe Russian propaganda and disinformation ecosystem, with particular emphasis on two major state-funded media outlets and various proxy sites. Third, we provide an analysis of various themes in Russia’s anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives and how these align with that country’s strategic interests—including varied approaches that disseminate individual messages that appear contradictory but are mutually reinforcing in seeking to discredit others and legitimize Russian actions.

Bryan Millard and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, [Trojan Dragons? Normalizing China’s Presence in the Arctic](#), Canadian Global Affairs Institute, June 2021.

Many Arctic narratives cast suspicion on China, based on concern that the Asian power will seek to undermine the sovereignty of Arctic states and co-opt regional governance mechanisms to facilitate access to resources and new sea routes to fuel and connect its growing global empire. This paper focuses on China’s Arctic maritime capabilities to analyze and infer possible Arctic interests of this self-declared “near-Arctic” state. Do Chinese state officials mean what they say about the Arctic, or are they using the cover of polar scientific research and thinly veiled language in an attempt to normalize their presence and advantageously position themselves? Assuming that acceptance of China’s presence – or at least apathy to it – serves as a necessary precondition to access and exploit Arctic resources, the authors deduce how Chinese scientific research reflects and fits with the country’s regional interests and its global commercial, resource extraction, and power projection goals. After producing a timeline of key inflection points in Chinese

academic and official discourse, the authors analyze the activities of Chinese icebreaker *Xue Long* and eleven Chinese National Arctic Research Expeditions (CHINARE). They conclude that China has successfully used its scientific community as an instrument to normalize its presence in the region for skittish Arctic nations. This is consistent with China's "near-Arctic state" narrative, thus laying the foundation for the broader strategic goal of accessing the region and exploiting its resources.

Andreas Østhagen, [The Arctic After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: The Increased Risk of Conflict and Hybrid Threats](#), European Hybrid CoE, 10 May 2023.

Russia's military aggression in Europe has increased the importance of the Arctic – especially the European High North – on the international security agenda. This paper looks at how Russia's military aggression in Europe has increased the importance of the Arctic – especially the European High North – on the international security agenda. In the Arctic, the potential for conflict escalation relates to hybrid threat operations. NATO countries' presence and interest in the High North are likely to remain strong in the years to come. However, Russia is unlikely to engage in direct conflict in the region, and there are no large-scale disputes in the Arctic that might cause immediate concern. Instead, the potential for conflict escalation relates to unintended accidents or intentional small-scale actions below the threshold of plausible deniability – in other words, hybrid threat operations. In this regard, the maritime domain seems particularly challenging. Similarly, Arctic communities are particularly exposed to Russian subversive activities.

Camilla T. N. Sørensen, Elizabeth Buchanan, Emma Lappalainen, Gaëlle Rivard Piché, Patrick Cullen, Paul Dickson, [Security and Hybrid Threats in the Arctic: Challenges and Vulnerabilities of Securing the Transatlantic Arctic](#), European Hybrid CoE, 17 December 2021.

This report focuses on identifying the security and policy challenges that result from the idea of the Arctic as a global region with a unique character, intersecting with the competing realities and distinct political, strategic, cultural and economic characteristics of the Arctic nations. The report suggests that the consequent divergences and intersections of national interests in the Arctic give rise to vulnerabilities to hybrid threats and focuses on how the respective security issues are approached as regional challenges.

Bradley Sylvestre and Gaëlle Rivard Piché, [Vulnerabilities and Hybrid Threats in the Canadian Arctic: Resilience as Defence](#), European Hybrid CoE, 29 May 2023.

The Canadian Arctic presents unique geographical, social, political, economic, and military conditions that constitute significant drivers of vulnerability. This working paper examines vulnerabilities and how they interact to provide rival states with opportunities to advance their interests in the region to Canada's

detriment. Hybrid threats are likely to manifest at the gaps and seams of those vulnerabilities. Accordingly, defence against hybrid threats in the Canadian Arctic should start with greater integration of military and non-military discussions on Arctic vulnerabilities.

Colin Wall and Heather Conley, [Hybrid Threats in the Arctic: Scenarios and Policy Options in a Vulnerable Region](#), European Hybrid CoE, 26 August 2021.

The Arctic is not ungoverned space, but it is experiencing a profound transformation that will test its governance. It is in the seams between international and national laws, implementation, and enforceability, where malicious hybrid actors will exploit opportunities, aided by non-transparency and a lack of indications and warning. According to these two analysts from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), while Western Arctic nations have identified some governance gaps, it took nearly a decade to acknowledge the Arctic's militarization. They cannot afford to do the same for hybrid threats.

Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsvik is Professor of Security and Geopolitics (Critical Peace and Conflict Studies) at UiT – the Arctic University of Norway, and Arctic 5 Chair in Security Studies (arcticfive.org). Her research examines comprehensive security dynamics in the context of hybrid threats and warfare, civil-military interaction (including Norwegian total defence), and Arctic perceptions of security.

P. Whitney Lackenbauer is a Professor in the School for the Study of Canada and Canada Research Chair (Tier 1) in the Study of the Canadian North at Trent University, and network lead of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN).

Notes

¹ <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/coi-strategy-and-defence/>