

## SUGGESTED READINGS

# NATO and the Arctic

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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.

The Arctic region, or High North, occupied a high ranking on the NATO security agenda during the Cold War. Although the relative emphasis on defence in the region declined after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the disproportionate effects of climate change on the Arctic environment (and perceptions of easier access to resources) and the re-emergence of geopolitical competition between NATO and Russia has again elevated the region's importance in Alliance discussions. NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT) group noted in December 2023 that:

The strategic significance of the Arctic region, often referred to as the High North, has never been more pronounced. The vast expanse, once primarily known for its harsh climate and remote landscapes, now stands as a pivotal area for global interests encompassing geopolitics, climate conservation, resource accessibility, and security concerns. For NATO, the High North remains a critical focal point in safeguarding collective defence, fostering cooperation, and addressing emerging challenges in the Arctic region.<sup>1</sup>

The following readings provide insight into diverse expert opinions and key debates about NATO current and future roles in regional security, and the place of the Arctic and High North in NATO strategic concepts, deterrence, and preparedness.

Elizabeth Buchanan, "[Cool Change Ahead ? NATO's Strategic Concept and the High North,](#)" NATO Defense College *Policy Brief 7/22*, April 2022.

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine not only revived NATO unity, it also bolstered the case for NATO's enduring mission of deterrence and defence. In the High North, NATO's mission objectives are precariously balanced. For the Alliance, the High North is an enduring component of Cold War history, as well as a flank in

terms of NATO's 360-degree security thinking. Of course, the High North is also a strategic frontier for renewed NATO-Russia competition. This Policy Brief examines NATO's High North challenges and considers strategic priorities for the Alliance's forthcoming Strategic Concept.

**Heather Conley and Sophie Arts, "[NATO's Policy and Posture in the Arctic: Revisiting Allied Capabilities and Command Plans](#)," *GMF Insights*, 5 July 2023.**

Russian aggression and NATO's response highlight new pathways for NATO cooperation and provide an opportunity to build a stronger deterrence posture and an enhanced presence in the Arctic to meet existing and future challenges from Russia in the near term and China in the medium to long term. The United States, Canada, and European allies and partners must agree on appropriate responses to deliberate escalation by Russia and reach a consensus on the strategic implications of China's increased presence in the Arctic (both North Pacific and North Atlantic). Given the volatile threat landscape and NATO's strengthened Northern capacity, allies should streamline and strengthen NATO's deterrence posture and strengthen defenses in the Arctic against security challenges posed by Russia and Sino-Russian cooperation. Existing resources must be strategically allocated. Others will require further investment and research and development. The most important step will be for North American and European NATO allies to bridge threat assessments, share information, and coordinate activities. Around these efforts, NATO should initiate a coordinated strategic communications plan to optimize communications with allies and partners and signal its unity and resolve to secure and protect international legal norms in the Arctic.

**Andrea Charron, "[NATO and the Geopolitical Future of the Arctic](#)," *Arctic Yearbook 2020* Briefing Note.**

Charron predicts that the future of the Arctic and NATO's role is likely to remain status quo for the next five years due to Arctic governance institutions and agreements among the Arctic coastal states, with few major external challenges thus far. Four stressors, increasing in intensity, could undermine the Arctic governance architecture and brook opposition to the coastal states, increasing the risk of conflicts and miscalculation of intentions of other actors to NATO and by NATO toward others. By 2030, she predicts that these stressors could upset the stability of the Arctic region.

**Andrea Charron and James Fergusson, "[NATO is Not Needed in the North American Arctic](#)," *Institute for Peace and Diplomacy*, 28 December 2023.**

Although many commentators insist that the Arctic needs more NATO, and, as a NATO ally, Canada must shift its attention in the Arctic toward contributions to NATO, including in the North American Arctic. These Canadian political scientists argue that the best way for Canada to protect its Arctic from military threats is to ensure the investments in the North American Aerospace Defence Command

(NORAD) modernization are made irrespective of the pressure that Canada faces to contribute resources in other regions. Such insulation would represent a statement of strategic intent on the part of the Government of Canada and would address US government demands. Increasing defence investment in the Arctic beyond what is planned for NORAD modernization is simply unrealistic. As for the NATO side of the equation, the alliance's attention to the Arctic is not the North American part. For Canada's European allies, the Arctic remains primarily limited to the approaches to the North Atlantic, especially the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap rather than the Canadian Arctic.

**Duncan Depledge, "[NATO and the Arctic : The Need for a New Approach](#)," *RUSI Journal*, September 2020.**

With NATO activity increasing and great power competition building between the US, Russia and China across the Arctic, the Alliance needs to consider a new strategic approach to the region. Depledge examines how NATO's traditionally cautious approach to the Arctic is now outmoded given the recent pressures posed by Russian military activity, Chinese ambition and the renewal of US strategic interest in the region. In response, NATO must go beyond simply restating its interest in the Arctic and devise a new strategic approach that normalises Alliance engagement, keeps a weather eye on Chinese ambitions, and leaves scope for expanding Alliance activity still further as the region is transformed by environmental and geopolitical change.

**Alexander Gray, "[NATO's Northern Flank Has Too Many Weak Spots](#)," *Foreign Policy*, 7 August 2023.**

While Russia's invasion of Ukraine has revealed significant weaknesses in Moscow's military capacity, it has also shone an unflattering light on aspects of NATO's strategic posture. It is incumbent upon the United States and its NATO allies to take proactive measures to plug these gaps before they are exploited by Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime. The United States should work both multilaterally through NATO and bilaterally with the Danes, Norwegians, and Canadians to provide the intelligence support necessary to prevent ambiguous legal statuses from threatening the alliance's northern flank. Many on both sides of the Atlantic are rightly celebrating NATO's success in rallying to resist Moscow's aggression in Ukraine, as well as in the accession of Sweden and Finland. Yet there remains much work to be done in securing the alliance's northern flank and providing the security umbrella envisioned by the North Atlantic Treaty.

**Thomas Hughes, "[Arctic Defence in 2023: A Review](#)," *NAADSN Policy Brief*, January 2024.**

On the surface, Hughes argues, 2023 appeared simply to continue trends in military activity in the Arctic evident in the previous year, with consistent military exercises, interceptions of adversary aircraft, and protestations about the importance of the region by military decision-makers. He contends, however, that

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. Although regional military conflict remains likely (particularly in the North American context), Hughes highlights that Russian and NATO militaries are thinking carefully about how to win in the Arctic, and about the region's place in their defence, security, and broader economic policies.

**P. Whitney Lackenbauer et al, [Understanding The Future Arctic Security Environment: Applying NATO Strategic Foresight Analysis to Canadian Arctic Defence and Security](#), NAADSN, 2020.**

This report by the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN) applies NATO's Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA) 2017 Report, created to support NATO leadership's visualization of the future security environment, to Canada's Arctic security environment in its international, regional, and domestic contexts. Highlighting the rapid rate of change, complexity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness, it reinforces the need for creative and systematic thinking so that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) can anticipate potential threats to Canada and Canadian interests, act proactively to emerging challenges, and adapt with decisive military capability across the spectrum of operations to defend Canada, protect Canadian interests and values, and contribute to global stability.

**NATO Strategic Foresight Branch, [Regional Perspectives Report: The Arctic and High North](#), April 2021.**

The aim of the Regional Perspective Report on the Arctic is to identify regional trends and implications for the Alliance out to 2040 and beyond. This report supports decision-making by providing a common starting point from which to examine the consequences of change in the Arctic for future Alliance operations, in terms of both challenges and opportunities. The report assesses that the Arctic will increase in strategic significance for Euro-Atlantic security as the region transforms at an unprecedented rate and at a time when the international system is increasingly strained. Operational advantage will come to those that adapt to environmental change and are prepared for regional tensions to escalate even while working to maintain peace and stability. Accordingly, the report urges NATO to increase its focus on the region and consider a comprehensive approach using all instruments of power while tensions remain low.

**Andreas Østhagen, [The Arctic and the North Atlantic: From Cooperation to Conflict?](#), Atlantic Centre, 2023.**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a turning point in relations between the West and Russia, with potential implications for the Arctic. However, there is still hope that Arctic security relations can remain relatively unaffected by the conflict in Ukraine, despite increasing tensions in the region. These tensions have been fuelled by Russia's aggressive statements, Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, and concerns about hybrid operations in the North.

This chapter takes a look at the different political dynamics when it comes to state and military security in the Arctic, and how they have evolved since the beginning of 2022. It relies on a conceptual separation of the so-called levels of analysis in international affairs, and uses Norway as a case study. It also highlights that these concerns extend beyond the Arctic and have implications for the broader Euro-Atlantic maritime domain.

**Sergey Sukhankin, P. Whitney Lackenbauer, and Adam Lajeunesse, [Russian Reactions to NATO's "Nordic Expansion"](#), NAADSN, July 2023.**

This NAADSN Policy Primer provides an analytical overview of Russian responses to Finland's and Sweden's applications to join NATO, drawing upon Russian official statements, news media coverage, and intellectual and think tank commentators. We do not adopt a common framework for both sections, given the more modest Russian response to Sweden's application for NATO membership than to Finland's. Instead, we have taken a differed approach to describing Russia's reaction and respective information campaigns, although some of the narratives promoted by the Russian side relate to both countries. Furthermore, we have included a separate section on major themes from academic and think tank coverage which aim to unravel the complexity and multifaceted approach adopted in Russian propaganda.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.act.nato.int/article/evolving-dynamics-high-north/>.