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NATO in the Arctic

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Understanding NATO's role in the Arctic is complex, requiring careful consideration of a transatlantic perspective to Arctic security as well as a serious analysis of operational opportunities and challenges. However, the changing security environment in the Arctic demands such an undertaking, particularly given Finland and Sweden's recent accession to NATO. This policy primer briefly outlines a transatlantic approach to Arctic security before turning to three operational opportunities and one significant challenge that a newly expanded NATO offers the Arctic, paying close attention to Canada as a case in point. This has been adapted from comments given at the 2024 Arctic Circle Berlin Forum held in May.

A Transatlantic Approach to Arctic Security

The argument that the Arctic security environment has been changing due to increasing interest by outside actors in the region, the increasingly accessibility of Arctic waters, and multiplying threats is longstanding. As early as 2005, some – to use the language of Franklyn Griffiths – “purveyors of polar peril” suggested that the region was facing a scramble for territory and resources.¹ Such alarmism in those early days was indeed met with actors wishing to increase their influence in the Arctic, such as China's infamous 2018 “near-Arctic state” self-naming and subsequent attempts to purchase territory in Iceland and Greenland.² Since the mid 2010s, scholars and policymakers also similarly raised alarm bells about Russian Arctic dual-use capabilities.³ These shared concerns about great power rivalry in the Arctic have also been complicated by changing environmental realities as climate change has shifted how certain routes in the Arctic have become more accessible due to the melting of sea ice, although certainly not in a linear fashion.

That being said, there are clear differences across security realities in the North American and European Arctics.⁴ For European Arctic states, Russia is a proximate source of insecurity. Russia's military exercises and long-range bomber flights – while not necessarily increasing in their scope – represent examples of Russia's closeness to the European Arctic states. That being said, there is also recognition that there is no world in which the European Arctic is *not* close to Russia. Thus, there is a necessity of balancing with and maintaining long-standing security interactions with Russia.⁵ While these security interactions are mostly on pause today due to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, some Arctic states including Norway continue to have low-level cooperation on search and

rescue (SAR), for example. Shifts in the security environment are particularly clear in the European Arctic with Finland and Sweden's recent accession to NATO, changing the makeup of the Arctic to seven NATO Arctic states and Russia. Moreover, other European Arctic states such as Denmark are reinvigorating their northern defense strategies and postures due to heightened concern about Russian aggression.

The North American Arctic is a dramatically different theatre in terms of how these structural geopolitical forces play out. For example, while both Canada and the United States see Russia as a threat, the focus is primarily on China. While most acknowledge that China is not a peer competitor in the Arctic,⁶ Canadian and American officials focus on China as a primary international challenger. For the United States, for example, China is a pacing threat.⁷ Thus, this language and framing about China is extrapolated to the Arctic and how both states engage there. Due to the isolated and small nature of communities in the North American Arctic, so too are socio-ecological and human security challenges significantly more costly.⁸

A nuanced understanding of how global geopolitical shifts impact different parts of the Arctic in different ways draws attention to the importance of a streamlined transatlantic approach to Arctic security. A transatlantic perspective on Arctic security has two initial benefits that bear noting. First, while there are different threat perceptions across the Arctic, there are some cases in which there are shared threats. Hybrid threats are one such example where both regions could collaborate on lessons learned.⁹ Much of this is already happening when examining the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. However, a comprehensive analysis between transatlantic allies of what additional shared threats are would behoove increased cooperation. Second, a newly expanded NATO has particular advantages for rethinking Arctic security¹⁰ although many have been calling for such an approach for quite some time given the changing security environment in the Arctic.¹¹

NATO in the Arctic

Arctic states in NATO have long debated whether the Alliance should play a role in the Arctic, with some allies calling for increased NATO presence in the Arctic and others pushing back against what they perceived as unwise escalation of NATO-Russia tensions.¹² Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, however, quickly shifted the calculus within Finland and Sweden's domestic politics, backfiring on Russia when it led both to apply for NATO membership.¹³ Given Finland and Sweden's accession, three key operational opportunities should serve to NATO's advantage.

First, Finnish and Swedish expertise of operating in the Arctic should be a central point in discussions on NATO's approach to Arctic security. For example, Finnish and Swedish domain awareness could be better integrated into NATO's overall domain awareness picture on both sides of the Atlantic given that there has been a vast increase of the Alliance's land and airspace in the region.¹⁴ Better awareness comes alongside intelligence sharing, which will allow members of the Alliance to operate with more certainty in the Arctic to avoid miscalculation given the heightened tensions with Russia. Sweden and Finland have long cooperated in NATO exercises and missions,¹⁵ but formal accession into the Alliance brings a shift in perspective. For example, with the increasing number of hybrid and gray zone activities in the Arctic targeted towards critical maritime

infrastructure, Allies could focus on prioritizing and synchronizing responses to these threats via increased domain awareness and intelligence sharing. Moreover, Sweden has particular tangible strengths such as support from its defense industry, its high technological competence, and significant air force.¹⁶

Second, there is an opportunity to rethink and redo shared messaging towards Russian and Chinese behaviour in the region. There are many examples through which Russian disinformation campaigns in particular have focused on finding vulnerabilities to exploit between member states in the Arctic already. In Finland specifically, disinformation campaigns have preyed upon concerns that some Finnish citizens had of joining NATO to try and delay the accession process. While these attempts ultimately failed, strategic concepts (such as deterrence) would seriously benefit from an Alliance-wide understanding and application of such terms. Sharing experiences regarding hybrid threats such as GPS jamming across northern Europe would also come with benefits towards understanding Russian tactics and trends in testing Alliance defenses region-wide.

Third, although discussions of an increasing NATO presence in the Arctic are escalatory, a newly-expanded NATO presents an opportunity to seriously discuss what strategic burden-sharing could look like in the Arctic, as well as the trade-offs of increasing presence. Given the United States' turn to the Indo-Pacific, NATO allies should spend time discussing what burden sharing looks like, particularly in the European Arctic and what – if any – type of a multilateral force would look like. Such discussions will likely take time as they will inherently involve drastically different opinion from various Allies – those within the Arctic and outside.

What does this mean for Canada?

Although Canada long opposed an increased role for NATO in the Arctic, this position has shifted in the last decade.¹⁷ This is fortunate, given that Canada will significantly benefit from a newly evolved NATO and can offer real advantages to the Alliance. For example, Canada is vulnerable to hybrid threats. Limited critical infrastructure in the Canadian Arctic as well, as persistent socio-economic inequalities, may present cracks for adversaries seeking to exploit community cohesion.¹⁸ There are already examples of adversaries seeking to use hybrid tactics both in the Canadian Arctic and Canada writ large, including foreign interference in Canada's election processes alongside cyber campaigns against rare earth mining companies that operate in the Canadian Arctic.¹⁹ A newly expanded NATO provides more opportunities for Canada to draw upon Finland and Sweden's long history of dealing with hybrid threats in their Arctics, and to harmonize their responses alongside other NATO allies. By developed an Alliance protocol for addressing hybrid threats, it will be easier to signal to adversaries what behavior is acceptable and what is not. Developing these mechanisms of deterrence – while out of practice – is especially important in a newly competitive era of world politics where often attribution is difficult.

Canada can also offer real advantages to the Alliance. Its newly-created NATO Climate Change and Security Center of Excellence (CASCOE) holds out tremendous promise, as do investments in NORAD modernization that will improve all-domain awareness in the Arctic and beyond.²⁰ Interoperability with new NATO allies will be essential for creating stronger alliance cohesion in the Arctic, both in terms of shared deterrence messaging as well as domain awareness and intelligence sharing.

There are significant costs associated with an increased role for NATO in the Arctic, primarily in terms of escalating regional tensions. Increasing NATO's role by prepositioning multilateral forces or increasing exercising capacity has the potential to provoke Russian overreactions or substantiate Chinese narratives alleging NATO aggression.²¹ Finland and Sweden joining the Alliance has already vindicated Russia's strategic posture and encirclement hypothesis, shifting Russia's threat perceptions in the Arctic.²² Thus, avoiding escalation both in the Arctic and horizontal escalation to different theaters is key. That stated, the Arctic security environment has already changed, and we cannot ignore the realities that NATO is a primary actor in the region.

Endnotes

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