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Defence in the Arctic in 2024

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Introduction

It is said every year and is in danger of becoming a cliché, but once more it is indisputable that the past twelve months have seen fascinating and significant changes in Arctic defence. Sweden's accession to NATO, even if it was expected, represented a shift in the balance of capability in Europe's High North and strong emphasis has been put on the connection between North America and Europe in Arctic defence. Canada's Our North, Strong and Free, in addition to the U.S. Arctic Strategy, NATO's NORDIC RESPONSE exercise, and the rapid enhancement in Nordic defence spending and collaboration all point to a perception that the Arctic is of considerable defence concern.

Reflecting this, Russia has continued to strengthen and develop its Northern Fleet, which has been broadly insulated from the substantial losses suffered by Russian forces in Ukraine. The change in NATO membership has also resulted in Russian commitment to strengthening its military deployments in its North-west, as well as engaging in demonstrations of capability in close proximity to Nordic states. The trend of "growing co-operation" between Russia and China in the Arctic continued "across multiple instruments of national power" (Reuters, 2024a). Both countries characterise this closeness as an effort to "contribute to an atmosphere of stability and predictability in the Arctic" (Ibid.), and collaboration on the development of the Northern Sea Route as "defending their mutual sovereignty" (Xie, 2024).

Most remarkably, 2024 saw deliberate kinetic attacks against military infrastructure in the Arctic: Olenya airbase on the Kola Peninsula housed Russian aircraft that deployed missiles against Ukraine, and in return was struck by Ukrainian UAVs. In Norway, the seemingly deliberate sabotage of cables to military facilities came very close to crossing the line between 'grey zone' activities and the threshold to armed conflict. Overall, in both policy creation and in action, the activities of Russia, China, Ukraine, and NATO's Arctic members in 2024 have reconfirmed the importance of the Arctic as a site of deep military significance. In a change from previous iterations of this report, the first section covers changes and events particularly pertinent to Russian and Chinese military activity related to the Arctic, the second covers the European 'High North', and the third the North American Arctic.

Russia and China

The October visit of Russian Defence Minister Andrei Belousov to Sputnik, the base for the 61st Naval Infantry Brigade, and the announcement of the future development of storage facilities and personnel accommodation (The Barents Observer, 2024a), represented a public response to Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO, while inadvertently highlighting the weakness of the land-based units in the area. Sputnik base is close to the Russia-Finland border, but the 61st Naval Infantry Brigade and its neighbouring Brigade, are thought to have "lost about 80 percent of their former capacities" fighting in Ukraine (Ibid.), while former

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Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced the need to “strengthen the groupings of troops” in north-west Russia due to Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO and a perception of U.S. aggression (Reuters 2024b). No detail about the extent of this strengthening has been forthcoming, but the timeline of 2030 for the construction of new facilities speaks to the logistical challenges facing the Russian armed forces. Continuing the theme of reacting to Finland’s accession to NATO, a seeming attempt to threaten Finland by hinting at the formation a missile brigade deploying Iskander-M in the Republic of Karelia backfired spectacularly: Maj-Gen. Ohra-ago, former director of the Finnish Military Intelligence, channelled Dienekes13 and responded by suggesting that such a deployment would simply provide Finland with an easier ability to destroy the launchers (Nilsen, 2024a).

Russia’s exercise program for its Northern Fleet continued at pace. There is little surprising about this, given the importance that Russia places on the Arctic and Russia’s northern areas, and the fifth Yasen-class submarine starting its sea trials in June highlights the ongoing efforts to enhance its capability (Staalesen, 2024a). The long-planned OCEAN exercise in September was a clear indication of this importance. The scope and composition of the exercise demonstrated Russia’s ability to deploy a large quantity of naval assets across its North, despite the challenges that the Russian Black Sea Fleet has encountered. OCEAN 2024 was framed in Russian discourse as being extremely large-scale, the largest for over thirty years, involving over “over 400 warships, submarines, and auxiliary fleet support vessels, 120 airplanes and helicopters of the Navy and the Aerospace Forces, about 7,000 weapon systems and military and special equipment, as well as over 90,000 troops”, and included Chinese participation (Kremlin, 2024). The exercise, which took place across “the Pacific and

Arctic Oceans, as well as in the Mediterranean, Caspian and Baltic seas” (Ibid.), included some components that were very close to Norway’s Exclusive Economic Zone. Most notably, a test launch included deployment of Oniks missiles from the Rybachi Peninsula, just 80km from Norway’s border (Staalesen, 2024b), and a Norwegian fishing vessel had a close encounter with a Russian warship within Norway’s Exclusive Economic Zone, accusing the Russian crew of firing a live round towards their boat (this was not confirmed by the Norwegian Coast Guard) (Nilsen, 2024b).

These actions were not interfering with Norway’s territorial integrity per se, and Russia had announced both the rough timing and location of live firing exercises. Nevertheless, the decision to conduct them so close to Norway and impacting Norwegian commercial activity, given the available expanses of water to the North and East, emphasises the signalling component of the exercise. Further highlighting this signalling, however, open-source investigators suggested that the numbers of vessels involved in OCEAN 2024 was artificially inflated by including up to two hundred boats that were very small or not of particular naval significance (van Brugen, 2024). This probable exaggeration of numbers involved in a naval exercise is not new for Russia, and stands in distinction to the accusations of under-reporting numbers involved in land-based exercises (the presumed rationale in this case is to avoid obligations to invite observers to the land-based exercises per the 2011 Vienna Document, while no such conditions are associated with exercises taking place solely at sea). Nevertheless, the efforts to demonstrate (or exaggerate) capability is a further indication that Russia wants to signal its strength and focus on its Northern waters.

The potential for miscalculation resulting in an unwanted and unanticipated escalation remains

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dangerously present as such significant attention is paid to the Arctic. The publicization of the Admiral Gorshkov training its multiple weapons systems on (likely) Norwegian aircraft is indicative of the risks that are being taken. It is unsurprising that the Russian crew would use the opportunity of potential adversary aircraft to practise their anti-aircraft procedures, and it is unlikely that this was the first time that it had happened. Publicising the behaviour, however, was an overt demonstration of an antagonistic relationship, and the indication from the ship's commander that "three enemy aircraft approached the ship from different directions and altitudes" suggests that the aircrews were engaging in their own operational training (Staalesen, 2024c). Nevertheless, each such incident serves as a reminder of the close proximity of military equipment engaging in 'normal' activities that could be construed as dangerously threatening. It is also notable that since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine Russian naval training in its Northwest has broadly reverted to taking place in the Barents Sea, rather than the Norwegian Sea, with the emphasis on "bolstering Russia's bastion defence." (Åtland, Nilsen, and Pedersen, 2024). This adaptation to a new political and military-technological reality was reflected by the Admiral Golovko training with the new Polimet-Redut counter-air system to intercept cruise and ballistic missiles and "training to repel attacks by UAVs" – a task made more significant due to the rapid evolution of UAV technology across multiple domains in the Russo-Ukraine war (Nilsen, 2024c).

In contradiction to these demonstrations of strength, the vulnerability of Russia to attacks on their Arctic infrastructure was made very clear by the Ukrainian attacks on Olenya airfield. Olenya had been identified as a possible target due to the base hosting long-range bombers used against Ukraine (Nilsen, 2024d). Ukraine deployed long-range UAVs

to strike the airfield, and initial unconfirmed reports suggested that at least one Russian bomber was damaged (Nilsen, 2024e). Regardless of the exact extent of the damage, the fact that Russia has been hardening "key industrial installations" on the Kola Peninsula is indicative of the threat that they perceive Ukrainian UAVs to represent in this strategically significant region of the Arctic (Staalesen, 2024d).

In the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine it is hardly surprising that Ukraine would seek to strike back at Olenya. In the context of Arctic defence (quite aside from the technical feat that the strike represented), this was an extraordinary development: a military facility inside the Arctic Circle was subjected to an overt kinetic attack. It seems unlikely that this strike in isolation will result in escalation within the Arctic, but it should nevertheless serve as a reminder of the development and use of military infrastructure in the region. The defence-related connection between Russia and China in the Arctic has also been strengthened over the past year. The most disruptive demonstration of this was a joint flight of Chinese and Russian long-range bombers that approached North American airspace in July. While interceptions of Russian long-range bombers on the fringes of NATO airspace is a common occurrence, and Russian and Chinese naval vessels have been operating alongside each other close to the Arctic, the combination of Chinese and Russian aircraft marked a jarring point of disjuncture. Long-range bombers are an unequivocally offensive tool, and both their flightpath and the grouping of Russian and Chinese aircraft was an overt indication of a joint position and their combined offensive potential. Correctly interpreting nuanced signals can be challenging, but in this case the implication is clear: China is overtly aligning itself with Russia in

framing the Arctic as a feasible avenue for attack against North America.

2024 has also seen China's Coast Guard increasing its presence in the Arctic, operating in conjunction with its Russian counterpart. Notably, while this first visit of China's Coast Guard to the Arctic was in part an effort to "expand the coast guard's navigational range and test their ability in unfamiliar waters", it was also intended to serve a practical purpose beyond training, "supporting an active Chinese role in regional and international ocean governance" in which these vessels were, according to the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, "patrolling the waters jointly with Russian ships" (De Cuyper, 2024; Thorsson, 2024a).

Chinese military vessels, sometimes in conjunction with the Russian navy, have also continued to engage in "Freedom of Navigation" operations around the Aleutian Islands. These operations have brought Chinese ships within the Exclusive Economic Zone of the U.S., but not into U.S. territorial waters, and reflects similar manoeuvres made by U.S. naval vessels in disputed territory in the South China Sea. As with the interceptions of Russian long-range bombers, the U.S. Coast Guard characterised them as normal and emphasised the adherence to "international rules and norms". Nevertheless, although it is apparent that Russia and China are operating more closely, interpreting the nuances of signals and intent of some of their actions is more difficult. As Mead Treadwell, former Alaskan Lieutenant Governor, noted "are they simply flying the flag [near the Aleutian Islands], because we fly the flag [in the South China Sea]?...[Or] are they preparing, learning what our response would be if they came in?" (Hez, 2024).

In addition, despite the Pentagon characterising the "growing alignment" between Russia and China in the Arctic as being "of concern" (Papachristou,

2024), the nuances of the military relationship in the Arctic are an ongoing point of interest. While Chinese ships were involved in OCEAN 2024, and the Commander of the Russian Navy, Admiral Moiseev, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China on Search and Rescue co-operation in April (Nilsen, 2024f), there is not yet any indication that the respective navies have agreed to a program of "formal joint Arctic voyages or exercises in the Euro-Arctic waters" (Ibid.).

Europe's High North

Defence in the European Arctic in 2024 has been characterised by three trends: the increasing closeness of Nordic engagement, the reconfiguration of NATO due to Sweden's accession in March, and a troubling increase in 'grey zone' activities. This all occurs in the context of Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the tension between the claim that "in the short term...Russia does not pose a conventional military threat" (Bye, 2024) and "an armed attack [by Russia] cannot be excluded" (Staalesen, 2024e).

Highlighting the reality that a simple dichotomy of this type does not fully capture the nature of Arctic threats, it is appropriate to start by noting the seemingly deliberate destruction of infrastructure in the Arctic. In April, a "key communication cable" to Evenes Air Station in Norway was deliberately cut (Staalesen, 2024f), while a cable that enabled a jamming device used in an exercise in Andøya, an island in Northern Norway, was similarly damaged (Staalesen, 2024g). There has been no public indication of who was responsible, but the actions occur in the context of intelligence warning against sabotage by "Russian-backed actors" in Europe (Staalesen, 2024f).

The vulnerability of underwater cables and pipelines has also been made very obvious in the past – the

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fibre-optic cable linking Svalbard to Norway was broken in 2022 (Gulldahl and Eriksen, 2022), for example - and it is notable that Norway and Germany have been prominent this year in pushing NATO to enhance the protection of underwater infrastructure (Thorsson, 2024b). A significant challenge in these cases is proving not only what (or who) caused the damage but also whether it was deliberate. The comments from the Chief of the Norwegian Intelligence Service in February that expressed a belief that Russia is willing and able to disrupt “socially critical infrastructure” through “various measures under the level of military conflict” emphasises the high level of concern about this form of conflict.

Commitment to defence spending in the European Arctic has grown considerably in 2024. Norway has announced a marked increase in defence spending in 2024, enhancing its own armed forces and providing a high level of support to Ukraine. Although criticised as being insufficient by some commentators, the \$1.89bn CAD that Norway has pledged to give to Ukraine in 2025 represents a significant outlay and, in total, Norway expects to spend \$13.88bn, a twenty-one percent year on year increase and 2.16% of the country’s GDP (Staalesen, 2024h). This funding will cover a broad array of projects and procurement, including deploying long-range UAVs at the Northern Andøya air base. This base had been slated for closure until Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but now has “growing military-strategic significance” with the Norwegian government having “big ambitions” for the base, with a satellite monitoring station built in conjunction with the U.S. also being planned (Staalesen, 2024i; Staalesen, 2024j). This engagement with the U.S. military was further consolidated with the Norwegian Parliament agreeing to expand the 2021 Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement to allow U.S.

forces to access an additional eight sites (bringing the total to twelve) to “exercise and train, deploy forces, and store materiel – jointly with Norway (or the other respective countries) as well as other allies” (Edvardsen, 2024). The U.S. military “can also gain exclusive access and right of use to parts of these areas by special agreement... [and] within and in the immediate proximity of agreed areas, American forces can exercise authority over citizens of the country in question for security reasons” (Ibid.).

This change mirrored an expansion of similar rights for U.S. forces in Sweden and Finland in December 2023. Norway’s approach to defence has also highlighted the challenges of defending against both ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ threats, announcing the procurement of new “long-range defence systems” to counter Russian missiles (Nilsen, 2024g), as well as continuing investment in new Coast Guard ships (Staalesen, 2024k) and working with Germany to protect energy infrastructure (Buli and Adomatis, 2024; The Barents Observer, 2024b). Of greater immediate concern, GPS jamming in eastern Finnmark is a daily occurrence, with potentially catastrophic consequences for civilian transport (especially aircraft) in the region. It seems likely that this is a “side-effect of Russia’s self-protection of Kola bases” (Nilsen, 2024h), rather than a deliberate attack, but it emphasises the breadth of potential threats that could be used against targets in Northern Europe, as well as the possibility of misunderstanding resulting in escalation.

The strengthening connection between Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark has been seen on multiple levels, with an announcement that the four countries have begun the process of jointly procuring a new Infantry Fighting Vehicle (Nilsen, 2024i), a Norway-Denmark bilateral agreement on “education and training, drones and air defence”

(Staalesen, 2024l), a “military transport corridor across North Norway, North Sweden, and North Finland” (Staalesen, 2024m), and alongside Iceland have signed a new “Vision for Nordic Defence Cooperation” “committed to strengthening the deterrence and defence of the Nordic region and the Euro-Atlantic Area” (NORDEFECO, 2024). This has been further supported in Norway by the new Security and Defence Partnership between Norway and the EU (Staalesen, 2024n), agreed in May. Finland and Sweden have been similarly active and are developing their position and expertise within NATO, and U.S. F-35s landing on Finnish highways for the first time, along with a German Typhoon, demonstrates the “growing relationship and close interoperability” with Finland, as well as an ability to rapidly deploy high-tech weapons systems to the High North (Losey, 2024). The continued frequent interception of Russian aircraft operating in international airspace but coming close to controlled areas in the High North underlines the need for robust air defence. While these flights should not be ‘normalised’ (and it is important to recognize that surveillance aircraft from NATO members are also operating in a similar manner), it also needs to be stressed that they are not seen as dramatic and, in most cases, the Russian crews operate “safely and professionally” (NRK, 2024).

Aside from their geographic location and military personnel with cold weather experience, the technological expertise around space and UAVs (particularly for Sweden) represents a new point of difference that will be extremely valuable for NATO in the future (Gosselin-Malo, 2024). The Swedish Total Defence Resolution, published in October, highlights the perception of the increased threat that Russia poses, and commits to increasing defence spending by \$21.83bn CAD over the next six years, prioritising the North of the country, with defence expenditures expected to reach 2.6 percent

of GDP by 2028 (Staalesen, 2024e). Sweden will also be the “Framework Nation” for a NATO force that will be deployed in Northern Finland in the coming years (Ibid.; Pollard and Solsvik, 2024).

NATO’s NORDIC RESPONSE exercise was a high-profile juncture in European Arctic defence. Involving 20,000 personnel in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, it formed part of the large STEADFAST DEFENDER series of exercises that took place across Europe. The exercise involved around 10,000 troops on the ground, as well as more than 100 aircraft and 50 ships and followed closely from the JOINT WARRIOR naval exercise that occurred in the “sea between Scotland, Norway, and Iceland” (Forsvarset, 2024). Although it is important not to see exercises as an indication of expected future conflict, the extent of this training, following relatively closely on the heels of TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2018, is further evidence of the concern within NATO about potential conflict in the Arctic and the perceived need to be prepared. However, despite this training and the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, the alliance still faces questions about its material capacity and its overarching Arctic strategy (Odgaard, 2024).

The presence of U.S. long-range bombers and surveillance aircraft in the European Arctic in 2024 is also worth noting, not least because Finland’s accession to NATO has changed the scope of locations in which these aircraft can operate. Although Norway remains reluctant to allow NATO members’ aircraft in its East-Finmark region due to concerns over escalation (Nilsen, 2024j), B-1B bombers flying out of the UK were intercepted by Russian jets over the Barents Sea after transiting through Norwegian airspace (with the approval of the Norwegian Ministry of Defence) (Nilsen, 2024k). Two B-1Bs from the U.S. 28th Bomb Wing were also deployed to Sweden in February. Although this was not the first time that U.S. long-range bombers have

operated in Northern Europe in the past two years, the most recent visit was the first “multi-day deployment” (Edvardsen, 2024b), and in July two U.S. B-52 bombers operated in Finnish airspace for the first time, closer to Russia’s Olenya airbase than U.S. strategic bombers have been before (Nilsen, 2024l). Although this was a simple flight, and frequently occurs within the airspace of NATO members, it nevertheless marks a new period of tension in the European Arctic, showing a willingness to bring military equipment into increasingly close proximity.

The North American Arctic

In terms of action, the North American Arctic was comparatively quiet. But this is not to say that little was happening. Of particular note was the publication of Canada’s new defence policy, *Our North, Strong and Free*, and the U.S. *Department of Defence Arctic Strategy*. This is not the place for a deep analysis of these documents, but their broad terms provide insight into the increased importance of the Arctic in thinking about North American defence. Canada’s *Our North, Strong and Free* is heavily focused on Arctic defence.

While Canada’s 2017 defence policy statement *Strong, Secure, Engaged* brought the Arctic to greater prominence, this update puts the Arctic front and centre of Canadian defence policy – even to the title of the document. While promises on paper do not necessarily translate to actual spending, the investment outlined represents an extraordinary outlay for Canada across multiple facets of defence (albeit not reaching 2% of GDP by 2029- 30). This includes “additional funding of \$8.1 billion over the next five years and \$73 billion over the next 20 years” and although not all of this will be spent on directly Arctic-focused projects, a significant proportion will be (Canadian Department of National Defence, 2024a, pp.30-31). The

proposed development of “Northern Operational Support Hubs” is an interesting proposal. The hubs will include “airstrips, logistics facilities and equipment and stockpiles of spare parts...[to] enable the military to better assert Canadian sovereignty by establishing a greater year-round military presence across the Arctic” (Ibid., pp.23-29). There are considerable logistical challenges in this development, and their operational utility raises some questions in comparison to completing the necessary upgrades to Forward Operating Locations. Nevertheless, this would represent a fascinating new dynamic in the structure of Canadian Arctic defence, and potentially generate significant infrastructure benefits for local communities (Lohead, 2024). As more concrete development, the 5th Arctic Offshore Patrol Ship HMCS *Frédéric Rolette* delivered to the Canadian navy in August (Irving Shipbuilding), and the annual NANOOK exercises saw participation from a broad array of Canada’s partners, including an observer from the Australian Air Force, Commander Christie (Tredinnick, 2024).

There is recognition that the threat facing Canada in relation to the Arctic is not a hypothetical future, but a current reality. Concerns about Russian and Chinese diplomats engaging in “espionage and surveillance” have led to Canadian security personnel paying closer attention to who is accessing the Canadian north, and discussions between Canada and its European partners about countering ‘grey zone’ threats shows the transnational complexity and non-traditional nature of many of these threats (Thorsson, 2024c; Kane, 2024). In August, Defence Minister Bill Blair and Minister of Northern Affairs Dan Vandal went to Inuvik in August to inspect the recently-purchased “Green Hanger” (a \$8.6m investment to provide “the RCAF with greater ability to operate aircraft in the Arctic”) and discuss the investments outlined in

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Our North with the local community (Canadian Department of National Defence, 2024b; Thorsson, 2024c). The fact that the individuals with these two portfolios travelled together highlights both the importance of Canada's North in its national defence, and the necessity of including the local population in the process if it is to be effective.

In line with its new Arctic strategy, the U.S. has continued to develop its cold-weather capability. As outlined above, especially striking this year has been the emphasis on partnerships and operations in the European High North. The publication in July of the 2024 Arctic Strategy (the first since 2019) shed greater light on how the U.S. Department of Defense understands its role in the Arctic. Continuing the trend of urgency seen in the past few years, the "action oriented" nature of the document emphasises that the U.S. has moved from seeing the Arctic as a possible future region of concern to one in which threats must be addressed immediately (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024a). Predictably, Russia expressed concerns that the document was "clearly aimed at escalating military and political tensions in the region" (Reuters, 2024c), but it is difficult to imagine a realistic strategy that would not have elicited this response given the geopolitical context. The strategy emphasises three key components: "enhancing our domain awareness and Arctic capabilities; engaging with Allies, partners, and key stakeholders; and exercising tailored presence" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024b, p.11). The priorities of enhancing surveillance capability, and doing so in conjunction with partners, hints at a U.S. that perceives its current capabilities to be lacking, and a need to 'catch up' with the changing physical and political reality.

Alongside regular acknowledgement of Chinese and Russian vessels operating in international waters close to the Aleutian Islands and the Bering Sea

(including Chinese Coast Guard vessels operating in more northerly latitudes than previously) (Nelson, 2024), interception of Russian aircraft approaching North American airspace has continued. NORAD has issued Press Releases about ten of these interceptions between January and October (potentially an under-representation of the number of intercepts which occurred), consistently stressing that this is "regular" and "not seen as a threat" (North American Aerospace Defense Command, 2024a). Nevertheless, two incidents stand out. First, as discussed above, was the July interception of a flight of Russian and Chinese long-range bombers (North American Aerospace Defense Command, 2024b). The second occurred in September when, during a routine interception of a Tu-95, a Su-35 that was escorting the bomber performed a dangerous manoeuvre in extremely close proximity to a U.S. F-16 (Rogoway, 2024). This is not the first time that such an incident has occurred, but it is more unusual due to its location. In recent years, Russian military in the Arctic have demonstrated a degree of professionalism in their contact with NATO forces that is not always seen elsewhere. We will find out whether this is an isolated incident by an over-enthusiastic pilot, or if it marks a change in the way in which the Russian military acts in the region more broadly.

Linking North America and Europe operationally remains a key point of focus. The indication from Gen. Hecker, U.S. Air Forces Europe and NATO Allied Air Command, that a dedicated Combined Air Operations Centre for the Arctic has been discussed hints at a tightening of the trans-Atlantic operating capability. There is no indication of where this centre would be located or whether it would link NORAD to European air operations, but it will be interesting to see the concept develop. In addition, the conversations between Canada, Germany, and Norway about "a potential trilateral defence and

security partnership that would focus on the North Atlantic and the Arctic” is another indication of the desire to create further institutional ties to close the seam between the two continents (Blackman, 2024). It is also notable that Arctic allies and partners on both sides of the Atlantic have stressed the need for better situational awareness and have discussed the acceleration of technology testing and

adoption of long-range UAVs (Thorsson, 2024d) and via satellites through the NATO NORTHLINK programme (NATO, 2024). As a more niche but practical example of trans-Atlantic connections, in March U.S. troops flew over the North Pole from Alaska to “parachute onto a frozen lake in Bardufoss, Northern Norway” as part of the ARCTIC SHOCK exercise (Bye, 2024b).

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