



Forum: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

Issue: The situation in the Arctic region [ocean and neighbouring countries]

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Introduction

All eyes are on Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan. From time to time an article will cover another breach of NATO airspace in the East of Europe and the news will tell a story of drones over a train station in Germany. No one hears about the bear up north, growing stronger and becoming each year a greater challenge for the Alliance.

A potential armed conflict between Russia and the European members of NATO is of large concern. Breaches of NATO airspace in 2025 and the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine,^{1 2} have led to immediate responses, like greater numbers of air patrols and an increased militarisation of NATO's eastern flank.³ Although the landborder in Eastern-Europe is the largest one NATO has with Russia, another direct confrontation between the Alliance and the aggressor in Ukraine is up-north.

This confrontation is created by the seven NATO members and Russia who have territories in the Arctic Circle.⁴ This gives the Arctic region a massive importance for the security of the alliance, as also the Arctic has undergone large scale militarisations from Russia,⁵ as well as the Arctic region being of vital strategic and technological importance and home of many precious natural resources, which also lead to an increase of Chinese interest in the region over the past 20 years.^{6 7}

The situation regarding the Arctic region is imperative for the Alliance, as it could easily turn into a tipping point, into a “second Crimea” with all its destructive effects on the rules-based order as a whole and immense suffering it brought to thousands of humans.⁸ Russia, observed to be, as already in other cases, very hostile regarding militarisation and security increase in the region, makes this topic one requiring strong diplomatic reassurances and communication with Russia, not only military action, in order to stabilise the situation in the Arctic region in the long run.⁹

Definition of Key Terms

Arctic Circle:

The Arctic Circle refers to a line of latitude, which encircles an area in which for one day a year or more the sun does not set.¹⁰ Countries with territory north of this line (the Arctic region) are members of the Arctic Council.¹¹

North Pole:

The North Pole is in the centre of the Arctic Circle and the place where the different lines of longitude meet. It has six months of straight sunlight and six straight nights.¹²

Arctic Countries:

Arctic countries are those with territories in the Arctic region and thus also the permanent members of the Arctic Council. These countries are Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland,

Norway, Sweden, United States, all members of NATO, and Russia.¹³

Arctic Sea Routes:

Throughout the Arctic region there are several major shipping routes, also used for commercial shipping, referred to as the Arctic sea routes. The three that are mainly used and of greatest importance are the Northeast Passage, Northwest Passage, and the theoretical Transpolar Route. The Northeast Passage is the most developed route going along the borders of Russia and Finland, connecting the North Atlantic and the North Pacific through the Bering straight.¹⁴ The Northwest Passage runs along Canada and the Transpolar route through the central part of the Arctic ocean due to the variable ice conditions.¹⁵

Polar Silk Road

The Polar Silk Road is a term coined for an initiative of the government of China to gain access to the polar transportation routes. The Northeast Passage is of interest for China, as through further melting of ice it becomes a faster and easier shipping route for Chinese goods.^{16 17}

Dual Use Infrastructure

Dual use infrastructure is a broad term referring to all kinds of infrastructure with both a civilian and a military purpose. Examples for this may be radar, airports, satellite stations etc. This becomes problematic in active cases of war where the targeting of purely civilian infrastructure is forbidden by the Additional Protocol I, Article 48 of the Geneva Convention,¹⁸ while dual use infrastructure can be targeted as a military objective. This leads to states, like Russia, to define certain targets as dual use infrastructure and therefore using that as justification for military destruction of them.¹⁹

Background Information:

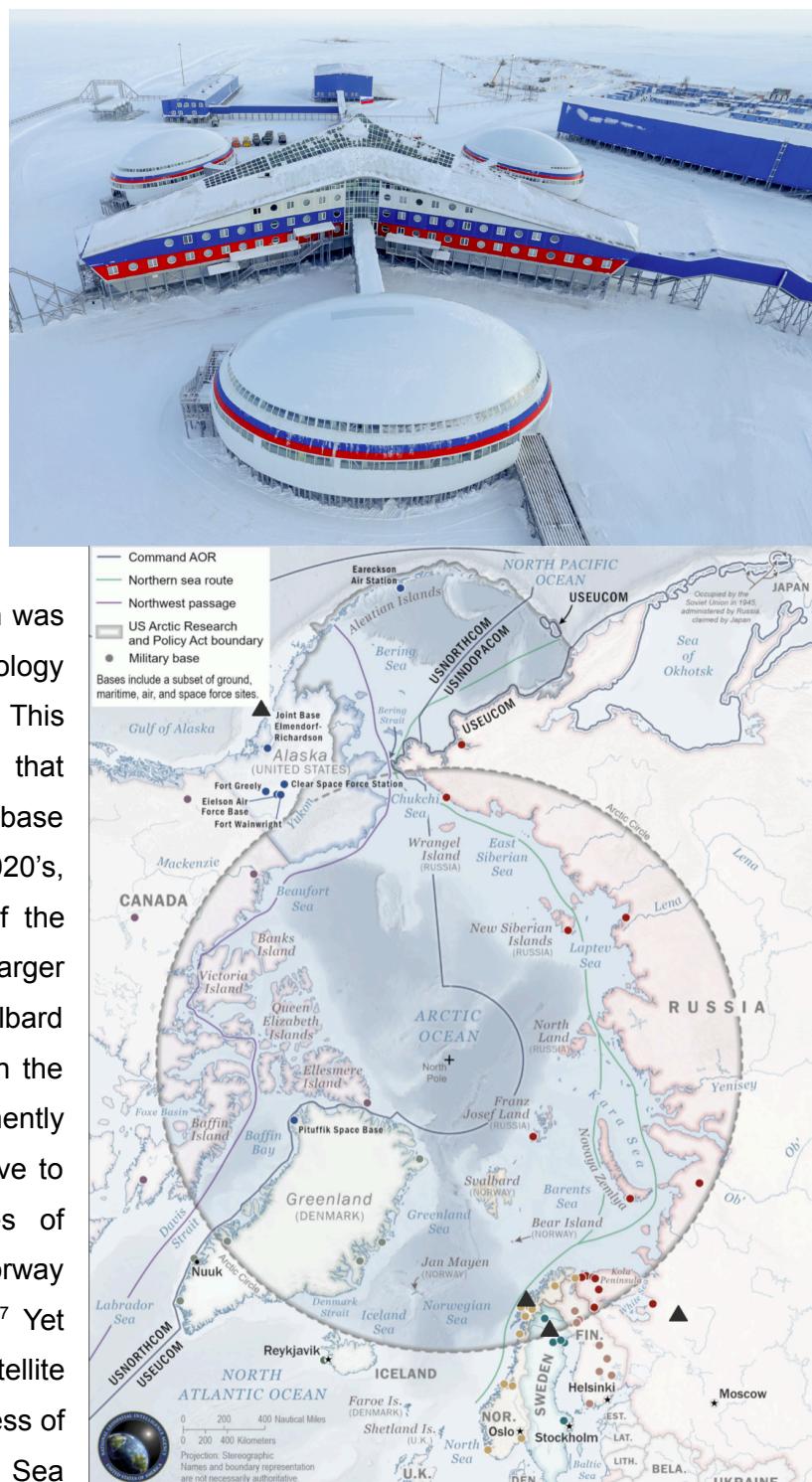
Besides its rich natural resources the Arctic region also holds several key characteristics making it attractive for countries to have influence over the area. One could argue that Russia already has enough land and resources, and thus would not be inclined to risk a confrontation with NATO over that land. This would not be fundamentally wrong yet, Russia's expansionist rhetoric and military provocations towards the Baltic states, Finland, and NATO as a whole make one question if Russia's interest isn't also to expand its sphere of influence whilst deterring the West. Part of the reason for the growing dispute around northern territories of NATO is the claim of Russia in Arctic territories being based on historic claims.²⁰

Satellite Infrastructure:

One way the region is important are the several arctic satellite communication stations, which are widely considered as so called “dual use infrastructure”, meaning it serves a civilian and also a military purpose.²¹ Because all satellites in the polar orbits, which are often used for surveillance, pass the North Pole, several major satellite communication stations were established in the Arctic region.²² With the current, often as “new space race” described, increase in investment into satellite infrastructure the satellite stations operated in the Arctic rise in significance, with one of the most crucial satellite bases being the Svalbard Satellite Station, taking a vital role in the launch processes of European satellites and satellite communication.²³ This is one of the reasons why Svalbard is of particular interest to the nearby stationed Russians.

Naryn Air Base and Svalbard:

Svalbard is located near the Russian Franz-Josef Land, which is an island group off the coast of Russia. These two island groups are only separated by roughly 400km of Barents Sea,²⁴ with the Franz Josef Land hosting the strategic Naryuskoye air base, which was recently equipped with new technology including an anti-drone missile system.²⁵ This follows a long history of militarisation in that region, with major improvements in the base infrastructure being made in the early 2020's, notably the expansion of the runway of the base to now accommodate newer and larger aircrafts like the A50 Mainstay.²⁶ The Svalbard archipelago was disputed historically with the Svalbard treaty of 1920, making it permanently territory of the Norwegian state, who have to ensure equal commercial opportunities of signatories in the region, as well as Norway not being able to militarise the region.²⁷ Yet Svalbard's importance exceeds the satellite infrastructure, as it also controls the access of Russia's northern fleet from the Barents Sea.



to the Atlantic Ocean.²⁸ Experts warn that the Svalbard archipelago can soon turn into a Crimea similar situation, with tensions between different population groups on the island rising and the nearest NATO base capable of responding being over twice as far away as Narguskoye Air base, which would be fully able to launch an attack on Svalbard.²⁹ (Image 1: Narguskoye Air Base, 2017. Source: Russian Ministry of Defense), (Image 2: Arctic Region, Franz Josef Islands and Svalbard archipelago included. Source: Wilsoncenter).

The Russian Northern Fleet:

The northern fleet of Russia's navy is of another great concern for NATO when regarding the Arctic region. Reports about the condition of the fleet differ, yet it is considered the largest of the four navy branches of the Russian military, with the Arctic force consisting of over 20 surface vessels and even more submarines,³⁰ with other reports considering the number more than double of that. According to retired U.S. Captain Bott in 2021, a nearly two decade long investment and development of the northern fleet has led to a great improvement in its might and in its offensive capabilities.³¹ Yet this improvement could not be sustained, shows a recent report by the Norwegian Intelligence, as the resources and labour is scarce since the costly and destructive war in Ukraine, with ships taking significantly longer time to repair and the fleet being in worse shape than before the war.³² Still the northern fleet remains a significant threat to the region and one vital in any Russian led large scale naval altercation.

Russian Nuclear Activities in the Region:

Connected to the strong fleet of the north the Russians also have submarines able to fire nuclear ballistic missiles which have been delivered tested in the Arctic region, with some also coming from nearby land stations.³³ These submarines were loaded in nearby ports in the Barents Sea, with tests in 2022 expanding to also include cruise missiles being released airborne.³⁴ The tests being conducted very closely after the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine have also been seen as a warning for the West before great involvement in the Ukraine conflict. A few months ago the Russian Federation again tested long-range nuclear-powered, nuclear capable cruise missiles, as well as its underwater counterpart, and nuclear submarines.³⁵ These exercises all serve the purpose of western intimidation, while overshadowing the significant problems in the Russian army, especially also in nuclear security with pure strength. (Image: Russian nuclear-capable missile, launching from a test site in the Arctic region, Source: Russian Ministry of Defence).



In addition to the nuclear weapon programmes, nuclear energy infrastructure and nuclear

powered sea vessels also pose a threat to neighbouring countries with concerns of nuclear pollution rising after recent leakages and the continuous disallowance of international observatory bodies to create unbiased assessments of the nuclear situation present.³⁶

China's Interest:

As of recently two new potential conflicts of interests with the Alliance have arisen. China, although remaining diplomatic and pragmatic, has expressed interest in expanding their trading sphere and making it more effective through using the, through the melting ice, faster and easier to navigate Northeastern Sea Route. Furthermore, China has an active interest in different raw materials located in the Arctic region. This does not directly pose a threat to NATO security, however, there have been concerns of possible dual use infrastructure being built by China in the region in form of research facility and satellite related infrastructure, their strong cooperation with Russia, as well as a growing concern over military advancements, shifting power balances in the region through innovative technologies, for example, China's icebreakers being the largest in the world.³⁷

Major Parties Involved:

Arctic Council:

The Arctic Council is considered the most influential intergovernmental forum in the Arctic region which serves as a dialogue between the eight Arctic states. Due to major differences in policy between Russia and the other members the main focus of the Arctic Council is the preservation of the Arctic region and environment as well as communication and cooperation between the different states and indigenous groups inhabiting the area.^{38 39}

Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR):

The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) was founded in 2010 to enhance cooperation amongst the Arctic states except Russia which over the course of the past 15 years have all become part of the NATO Alliance. The underlying idea of the ASFR is to serve as a forum to discuss security policies relating to the Arctic region to overcome regional challenges and present a unified front. It is the only military forum to discuss active measures to enhance the defense of the northern border, with the whole ASFR being organised in a military manner, without direct political participation.^{40 41}

United States (U.S.):

The U.S. maintains arguably the strongest military in the world.⁴² The U.S. state of Alaska has regions in the Arctic region and the U.S. has massively contributed and led initiatives establishing satellite and radar infrastructure in different Arctic countries as well as having military bases in Europe and also in Greenland. In 2025 President Donald Trump created an uproar after stating the wish to

purchase Greenland and after that was declined threatening to take it by force. This hurt the trust and the face of the NATO Alliance. Although Trump did not follow through with his plans this episode hurt the trust in the U.S. as a reliable international partner and raised questions regarding the sustainability of the alliance. In the winter of 2025 President D. Trump reiterated a U.S. claim over Greenland appointing Gov. Jeff Landry as a Special Envoy to Greenland.

Norway:

Norway being like all other Arctic states of great significance due to research, satellite, and military facilities existing in the region as well as rich in natural resources, is still to be differentiated from the other Nordic states. After the Svalbard treaty Norway has full sovereignty over the Svalbard island group, which is considered to be a possible tipping point into open confrontation with Russia. Svalbard is one of the nearest areas of land to the North Pole, making it interesting for science, surveillance, and satellite infrastructure. In the treaty it is decided that Svalbard can not be militarised leaving it fairly exposed to Russian aggression.^{43 44}

Denmark (Greenland):

Denmark itself is too far south to be considered part of the Arctic region, but it does have territorial sovereignty over, self-governing Greenland, the largest island in the world. Greenland is of strong geopolitical and military importance, being also a major reason for the renowned interest of President D. Trump in acquiring the island, hosting the U.S. Pituffik Space Base, essential for space surveillance and early warning systems, as well as being part of the GIUK Gap (Greenland, Iceland and, the U.K.), which was a key anti-submarine warfare checkpoint, remaining to be essential to monitor the Russian naval movements in the Atlantic and Arctic Ocean.⁴⁵

Russian Federation:

Although Russia is one of the key territorial influences of that region, its position exceeds its amount of territory. Russia is considered the major threat to Europe at the current time period as well as able to invade major NATO positions in the Arctic region like Svalbard, through their strong military presence in the region.⁴⁶ They're the only Arctic country not to be part of NATO and known for their hostile behaviour and rhetoric towards member states of the Alliance. During the conflict in Ukraine they have drawn extensive criticism for disregard for international law.⁴⁷ In the case of the Arctic region, they have conducted intense military maneuvers and tried to manifest their position as well.⁴⁸ The Russian army is the most well trained and equipped for the Arctic environment.⁴⁹

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1917	The Russian imperial navy establishes the Northern fleet. ⁵⁰
1920	The Svalbard treaty is signed, deciding on the territorial belonging of the Svalbard archipelago. ⁵¹
1939 - 1940	The USSR heavily fortified the Arctic region during the time period of the Winter War against Finland. ⁵²
1960's and 1970's	The U.S. and Soviet Union established extensive surveillance systems and installations over the Arctic region. ⁵³
2014	Russia reorganised its Northern fleet and made it a modernly equipped military unit. ⁵⁴
2022 - 2023	Sweden and Finland joined the Alliance after growing concern of an imminent Russian threat following the invasion of Ukraine, increasing the land border to Russia in the east and north. ⁵⁵

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

“NATO will defend Allied interests in the Arctic”, stated the Chair of NATO’s Military Committee Admiral Rob Bauer at the Arctic Circle Assembly a year ago.^{56 57} Clear words, yet a less clearer strategy. Throughout recent history, the Arctic strategy has been changing with shifts of different political situations and consensus as well as becoming significantly more relevant for the Alliance with the joining of Sweden and Finland as NATO member states over the last two years.

Over the past years, specifically in 2022, NATO has answered to the shows of military presence of the Russian Federation with its own military maneuvers and activities in the region, with two of the largest maneuvers since the cold war taking place in the last couple of years. Also NATO acknowledges the need to display their power in this region, stating that a lack of activity would lead to a power vacuum that Russia would try to fill. To these exercises with the name of Cold Response exercises Russia was invited, however, declined the invitation, with NATO officials stressing the purely defensive sentiment behind the exercise.^{58 59} Newer exercises, like one in 2025 simulated war-like situations on a larger scale, like bombing with an aircraft carrier being relocated to the region for the duration of the exercise.⁶⁰

Additionally to deterrence, NATO has also tried to have strong unity in the Arctic region, which of course was also partially undermined by Donald Trump's threats to their ally Denmark regarding their territory of Greenland. Despite this, unity is not only displayed through joint military operations, but also through multinational infrastructure projects of potential dual use, like radars and satellite communication to inform members of the alliance of long term changes in the Arctic region as well as ensuring a fast military response could follow potential escalations of the region.⁶¹ Also there is strong communication

about Arctic policy between the respective member states.

December 4th, 2025 there was also a restructure announced of the NATO command, putting the Nordic countries under the command of the Joint Forces Command, in Norfolk, U.S. to ensure an easier and clearer distribution of responsibilities to strengthen NATO's arctic flank.⁶²

Possible Solutions

Solutions concerning the problems in the region often require a high level of delicacy and diplomacy. Given the need for swift decisions and existence of red lines which would be unfathomable to cross. Yet a long-term Arctic policy needs to also be created taking account of climate change, economic interests, and the growing military presence of Russia.⁶³

A further militarisation of the Arctic region by NATO is not unfathomable and in large places already happening. It is imperative however to take into account pre-existing laws and treaties preventing militarisation, like the Svalbard one, as a non-delicate approach might lead to further escalation of the conflict. A point of criticism for militarisation is also that just larger quantities of military expenditures and a new arms race will not create long lasting peace but rather put greater stress on the situation and increase the probability of full out war.⁶⁴ There is not an insignificant faction in different governments of NATO states calling for an increase of dialogue and proliferation instead of further militarisation. One needs to consider however that large parts of the international significance of Russia is directly linked to their military, thus raising questions if they would have an interest in demilitarisation.⁶⁵

Furthermore it is essential to establish red lines and decide on immediate responses if these lines are crossed to work against the image that NATO does not react to violations which gives states threatening the Alliance the confidence to further violate the sovereignty of member states. Essentially NATO has to display strength and unity. Russia will otherwise further their aggressive behaviour displayed at the alliance's eastern and northern border with an open military altercation becoming evermore likely. Still strength should not be confined as a term to military means. Strong diplomatic unity is of equal importance to achieve long-term stability in the region including further dialogue with China. Still, the Russian disregard for international law and a rules based order is evident. The conflict in the Arctic region is one requiring immediate action as longer waiting will not lead to the problem melting away but has the potential to cause catastrophic outcomes.

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Appendix or Appendices

Useful Links for Further Research

1. www.thearcticinstitute.org/natos-polar-pressure-point-svalbard-archipelago-russian-challenge/
2. [https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10262/](http://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10262/)
3. [https://www.act.nato.int/article/evolving-dynamics-high-north/](http://www.act.nato.int/article/evolving-dynamics-high-north/)

4. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/massive-nato-show-of-force-in-nordic-region-sends-message-to-russia/437892>