



The militarization of the Arctic is not certain

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Executive Summary

While concern about renewed international competition in the Arctic has attracted significant attention, the continuation of cooperation and adherence to international rules and norms of behavior is a far more likely outcome. The magnitude of activity in the region remains below historic Cold War levels and accounts for a very small percentage of overall global military activity. Further, stakeholders have thus far exhibited adherence to international law, and venues for dialogue offer an alternative to an Arctic security dilemma. Sound adherence to the principles of deterrence, international norms, and continued cooperation in forums such as the Arctic Council will ensure the region remains stable into the future.

“Only in the last few months has the world begun to be conscious of Russia’s energetic efforts to push open her frozen window in the North and develop a Polar Empire.”¹
British Journalist H.P. Smolka, 1938

The Arctic has long been a region of geostrategic importance, with a robust history of cooperation as well as traditional great power competition. Diminishing ice coverage, improved technologies, natural resource discoveries, and geopolitical trends are prompting global stakeholders to reexamine the vast economic and strategic potential of the region. Yet the Arctic remains unique in that all actors—including Russia and China—are largely abiding by international law. Thus far in a changing arctic, cooperation has dominated, with dialogue still occurring through multilateral venues like the Arctic Council and Arctic Coast Guard Forum. These venues—and others, such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable—provide critical opportunities to build relationships while diminishing the potential for misunderstandings and misperceptions. While concern about renewed international competition in the Arctic has attracted significant attention, the continuation of cooperation and adherence to international

¹ Smolka, H.P. “Soviet Strategy in the Arctic.” *Foreign Affairs*. January 1938. Accessed 9 November 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1938-01-01/soviet-strategy-arctic>

rules and norms of behavior is a far more likely outcome—and one that should be encouraged, not undermined.

Recent geostrategic trends – and robust Russian and NATO Arctic exercises – have sparked concerns of Arctic militarization. NATO has established a new Atlantic Command, while the United States re-established its Second Fleet. Initial funding has been approved by the U.S. Congress for a new class of icebreakers – recently named Polar Security Cutters – at a cost of \$2.1 billion for three heavy icebreakers.² Assessments are being made to determine suitability of a deep-water port in Alaska, whilst the Russian government has announced its northern ports are flourishing with increased trade. Two months ago, the British announced a new Defence Arctic Strategy that identifies the High North as central to the security of the United Kingdom. Calling itself a “near-Arctic” state, China has also become increasingly active, releasing an Arctic White Paper, launching a second icebreaker, and investigating investment opportunities under its “Polar Silk Road” initiative. Japan, South Korea, and the European Union have all issued Arctic strategies in recent years as well. Clearly, the warming trends are sparking greater interest in the contested Arctic region.

Claims that this increased Arctic activity is militarizing the region, however, are often made without a clear definition of militarization or an understanding of the significant military presence that has long characterized the Arctic. While there has been a resumption of Arctic military activity, the magnitude of activity remains below historic Cold War levels and accounts for a very small percentage of overall global military activity. Further, stakeholders have thus far exhibited adherence to international law, and venues for dialogue offer an alternative to an Arctic security dilemma. Sound adherence to the principles of deterrence, international norms, and continued cooperation in forums such as the Arctic Council will ensure the region remains stable into the future.

After the Cold War ended, international cooperation characterized the region as Arctic states worked together to protect the fragile environment and indigenous communities. The year 2007 marked a new era of competition in the region, with the bold Russian act of planting a flag on the seabed under the North Pole. Reminiscent of the 1926 Soviet claim to all territory extending from its coastline to the North Pole, the move was likely reflective of Putin’s strategic and economic vision for the Arctic. In 2008, the U.S. Geologic Survey Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal highlighted tremendous oil and gas reserves, piquing global interest.³

Recent warming trends are further heightening economic interest in the Arctic at a time when geopolitical trends are witnessing rising tensions between regional and global powers. The eight Arctic states and other global stakeholders—including the European Union, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, China, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea—are all examining their Arctic policies and presence.

³ “Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle.” *US Geological Survey (USGS Fact Sheet 2008:3049)*, 2008. Accessed 8 November 2018. <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/fs2008-3049.pdf>

While the adage “High North, low tension” has long characterized the Arctic, there are justifiable concerns that the region will instead be colored by the evolving economic, environmental, military, and geopolitical global environment. Russia has enacted a robust Arctic policy that reflects both Putin’s revanchist policies as well as the country’s significant Arctic interests. With about half of the Arctic’s population and coastline, Russia sees the region as increasingly vital to its interests. The Arctic Zone yields about 10 percent of Russia’s GDP and accounts for 20 percent of its exports.⁴ The country is pursuing the construction of new icebreakers and maintains approximately 40 icebreakers, seven of which are nuclear. While these numbers dramatically dwarf other icebreaker fleets, it must also be noted that Russia requires a robust icebreaker fleet to escort commercial vessels along the Northern Sea Route (NSR)—a maritime route established in 1936. The NSR is becoming increasingly important to the Russian economy, though passage is still limited during much of the year.

Congruent with its Arctic economic interests—and its geographic limitations for fleet basing—Russia’s Northern Fleet is its largest, with reportedly forty-one submarines and thirty-seven surface ships.⁵ The reopening of Soviet-era Arctic bases, establishment of an Arctic Command, and conduct of regional military exercises are prompting concerns over Arctic militarization. Indeed, the 2015 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation devotes an entire chapter to “The Arctic Regional Priority Zone.”⁶ In June, the Northern Fleet completed a no-notice snap exercise that involved 36 ships, submarines, and support vessels—its largest in 10 years.⁷ The Arctic forces further played a role in Russia’s Vostok 2018 exercise, with Northern Fleet and Russian Marine units conducting a mock amphibious assault on the coast of the Chukchi Sea. The Northern Fleet warships sailed more than 4,000 nautical miles along the NSR to participate in the largest military drills—totaling nearly 300,000 personnel—that Russia has held since the end of the Cold War.⁸

Responding to heightened Russian activities in the contested and thawing Arctic waters, NATO partners are increasing their High North presence as part of a deter and defend strategy that prompted the reestablishment of the NATO Atlantic Command. In early September, the French support ship FS Rhône became the first vessel of a NATO ally to transit the North-East passage, departing from Tromsø, Norway and arriving in Dutch Harbor, Alaska.⁹ The voyage was

⁴ Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. “Statement by Mr. Sergey Kononuchenko, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, at the Event “The 2030 Agenda and the Arctic: Towards a Sustainable and Resilient Arctic through Cooperation.” 17 July 2018. http://russiaun.ru/en/news/hlpfarctic_sbk.

⁵ “Arctic stronghold: Might of Russia’s Northern Fleet shown in anniversary video” RT.com, <https://www.rt.com/news/428510-russian-northern-fleet-anniversary/>

⁶ Russian Federation. “Russian National Security Strategy.” 20 December 2015. <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>

⁷ Nilsen, Thomas. “Alarm-drill: 36 Russian warships sail out to Barents Sea.” *The Barents Observer*. 13 June 2018. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2018/06/36-russian-warships-sails-out-barents-sea>

⁸ Sevunts, Levon. “Russia flexes its military muscles with Arctic Component of Vostok 2018 war games.” *Eye on the Arctic*. 12 September 2018. <http://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2018/09/12/vostok-2018-war-games-arctic-chukotka-russia-military/>

⁹ “FS Rhône Transits Northeast Passage.” *SeaWaves*. 18 September 2018. <https://seawaves.com/2018/09/18/fs-rhone-transits-northeast-passage/>

undertaken to test the cold-water capabilities of the new vessel—and also to increase knowledge of the region, with the ship’s commanding officer, Philippe Guéna, noting that “the strategic interest has been growing steadily for France, in addition to having large mineral reserves and hydrocarbons.”¹⁰

NATO recently completed its largest Arctic exercise since the end of the Cold War. Trident Juncture 2018 brought together more than 50,000 personnel, 275 aircraft, and 65 ships from all NATO Allies as well as Sweden and Finland. For the first time since 1992, a U.S. carrier strike group operated in the High North, conducting high-end warfare training with partners. These activities have caused tensions to rise with Russia, a potentially dangerous predicament given that channels for dialogue and deconfliction are limited following the 2014 Crimea annexation. Russian warships monitored the Trident Juncture exercise—as did dozens of invited observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as NATO sought exceptional transparency.

Russian responses to the exercise included notice of missile exercises off the Norwegian coast and the overflight of NATO warships. Yet the Russian operations were in accordance with international law that affords all ships and aircraft equal rights to conduct exercises in international waters. NATO forces responded professionally and calmly to provocative Russian military responses and media assertions, while repeatedly emphasizing that the purpose of Trident Juncture was for deterrence. The exercise undoubtedly improved the interoperability and cold-weather skills of the Alliance, but it also sought to establish a credible deterrence in the High North. Admiral Foggo, Commander of Allied Joint Force Command Naples, has repeatedly stressed the importance of the Alliance’s ability to deter and defend, but also the value of dialogue.

Looking to the Future

Although there has been an increase in military activity in the Arctic, it remains significantly lower than levels seen during the Cold War. When examining Arctic trends, it is important to appropriately characterize militarization in terms of historical norms. The Arctic has been contested for centuries as early explorers, miners, and whalers traversed the treacherous region. In the interwar years, the Soviet Union looked northward to their “Polar Empire” while the High North played a small but vital role in World War II. The Cold War, however, witnessed an increased presence of militaries, particularly in the undersea and air domains as early warning became a critical mission for the polar region. There is a difference in the type of military activity that will be prevalent in the future Arctic. While traditional security concerns for a potential missile or bomber attack remain, surface activity and the space domain are becoming increasingly important.

The Arctic security environment now includes more domains and stakeholders than ever before. The region will see greater commercial maritime activity as vessels transit the Northern Sea Route to load natural resources—such as LNG from the Russian Yamal facilities—and return to

¹⁰ Antonopoulos, Paul. “French NATO Ship Violates Russian Waters Near Arctic.” 4 October 2018. <https://www.fort-russ.com/2018/10/french-nato-ship-violates-russian-waters-near-arctic/>

markets. There will also be a rise in cruise ship activity and vessels resupplying remote villages that are increasingly accessible from the sea. Illicit trafficking is also likely to rise as the region becomes more accessible. Yet it must be understood that Arctic maritime activity will remain low compared to global activity; in 2017, barely 2 percent of global traffic transited the Bering Strait and only one-tenth of 1 percent of global traffic transited the entire NSR. Trends indicate that Arctic maritime traffic will remain a very small fraction of global activity.

The Arctic remains challenging to operate in due to the unpredictable weather and hostile environment—regardless of ice coverage.¹¹ Likewise, military operations in the region will remain limited, as Arctic operations are challenging and costly. Following a congressionally mandated review, the U.S. Government Accountability Office recently reported that the Navy’s June 2018 report on capabilities in the Arctic aligned with Department of Defense assessments that “the Arctic is at low risk for conflict.”¹² Yet the overall increase in activity will require greater maritime domain awareness, search and rescue capacity, and security presence. It will also require greater cooperation amongst Arctic stakeholders to protect the natural resources and environment, as well as sovereignty of the Arctic States.

Employment of forces in the region must be made with consideration of competing global priorities—fiscal constraints and force sizes demand judicious allocation of resources. Arctic states will continue to expand the range of Arctic military operations, shifting from the predominantly air and undersea domains that characterized the Cold War to greater maritime presence as the seas open. Global powers will operate forces in the Arctic to test capabilities and demonstrate resolve.

If stakeholders maintain transparency, this increased activity can have a valuable deterrent effect—increasing overall regional stability. While military activity will rise, it is encouraging that Arctic stakeholders are thus far abiding by international law. Leaders should seek further opportunities to open dialogue in the region to reduce the chance of a misunderstanding or misperception as the Arctic re-establishes patterns of *normal* military activity amongst stakeholders.

About the author

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¹¹ Based upon US Coast Guard Bering Strait statistics. In 2017 there were 430 Bering Strait transits as compared to 17,600 Suez Canal transits, yielding 2.4% of global traffic through the Bering Strait. Of the 430 transits, only 177 were unique vessels. Transit along the NSR is even less, with only 24 transits in 2017 according to the Northern Sea Route Administration.

¹² Government Accountability Office. “Arctic Planning: Navy Report to Congress Aligns with Current Assessments of Arctic Threat Level and Capabilities Required to Execute DOD’s Strategy.” *GAO-19-42*. November 2018. P, 2. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/695312.pdf>

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