

# The Arctic after Russia's invasion of Ukraine: The increased risk of conflict and hybrid threats



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# Summary

Russia's military aggression in Europe has increased the importance of the Arctic – especially the European High North – on the international security agenda. NATO countries' presence and interest in the High North are likely to remain strong in the years to come. However, Russia is unlikely to engage in direct conflict in the region, and there are no large-scale disputes in the Arctic that might cause immediate concern. Instead, the potential for conflict escalation relates to unintended accidents or intentional small-scale actions below the threshold of plausible deniability – in other words, hybrid threat operations. In this regard, the maritime domain seems particularly challenging. Similarly, Arctic communities are particularly exposed to Russian subversive activities.

# Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed in relations between the West and Russia. This includes the Arctic, where cooperation has come to a halt. Further sanctions have been imposed on Russia, and perceptions of possible Russian behaviour have changed radically. Although the growing tensions between NATO/the West and Russia did not originate in the High North (i.e., the European parts of the Arctic) or in the Arctic more generally, the contours of the consequences are already visible along several axes.

First, Russia's strategic presence in the region means that the High North<sup>1</sup> would become central in the event of any further escalation of the current conflict. Second, the NATO membership of all Nordic countries draws a further line between Russia and the West, including the

Arctic. Finally, Russia might view the Arctic as an arena in which to test the ability of specific NATO members to monitor and detect security breaches and hybrid threat operations, while testing the boundaries of Western cohesion.

This Hybrid CoE Paper examines these three dimensions in terms of their implications for Arctic security and the understanding of hybrid threat operations going forward. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, certain aspects of security developments in the Arctic make hybrid threats especially relevant. At the same time, the fear of hostile hybrid threat activity in the region must be seen as an inherent product of the growing tension between the seven Arctic NATO countries and Russia and China.

<sup>1</sup> Note that the terms "Arctic" and "High North" are not used interchangeably. The former refers to the whole circumpolar area, often defined as everything above the Arctic Circle (although some countries, like Canada, the US, and Denmark/Greenland, often include areas below the Arctic Circle). The High North, on the other hand, refers specifically to the European Arctic, which includes the Barents Sea, North Norway, Svalbard, North Finland, North Sweden, and north-western parts of Russia.

# Increased strategic importance of the Arctic

Over the last two decades, the Arctic region has gained in strategic importance. Russia's greater military focus on the Arctic is a consequence of the increased shipping and other activities associated with the melting sea ice and the region's importance to Putin's overall strategic plans and ambitions.<sup>2</sup>

As was the case during the Cold War, the region's strategic importance has grown primarily because Russia is committed to revamping its global militaristic intent and political positioning. Russia's Northern Fleet includes submarines that are capable of launching ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads, and the north-western Russian Arctic is critical to its nuclear deterrence strategy vis-à-vis NATO.

In turn, Russia's increased military focus on the Arctic has prompted NATO countries to look north, especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, but starting already in 2005–6. To counter the Russian military expansion and resumption of Cold War strategic patterns, NATO has increased its military presence in the Arctic by engaging in maritime security operations and exercises in the Barents Sea.<sup>3</sup>

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the security environment in the Arctic has become more tense. Any hopes that

emerged around 2019–2020 of restarting the security dialogue with Russia in the Arctic have been dashed by the imposition of sanctions on Russia and the ongoing disruption of talks. In 2022, Finland and Sweden decided to join NATO, further deepening divisions and the spillover of tensions in the region, as seven of the eight Arctic countries will be NATO members. At the same time, Finnish and Swedish NATO membership might also have a stabilizing effect, depriving Russia of perceiving a grey zone that could be subject to possible security challenges.

China has also emerged as an actor in the Arctic.<sup>4</sup> Beijing's presence and interactions in the Arctic and elsewhere are one component of its expansion of power on the world stage, asserting its influence through scientific research and investment in Russia's fossil fuel industries.<sup>5</sup> Questions about Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic and the potential effects on regional tensions have increasingly informed the global agenda following the imposition of sanctions on Russia in 2022.

In essence, tensions or global power struggles arising from issues in other parts of the world tend to have a spillover effect in the Arctic. At a rhetorical level, this takes the form of bellicose statements; at an operational

2 Alexander Sergunin and Valery Konyshov, 'Russian Military Strategies in the Arctic: Change or Continuity?', *European Security*, Volume 26, Issue 2, (2017): 171–89; Andrey Todorov, 'Russia in Maritime Areas off Spitsbergen (Svalbard): Is it Worth Opening the Pandora's Box?', *Marine Policy*, Volume 122, December (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104264>; Geir Hønneland, *Russia and the Arctic: Environment, Identity and Foreign Policy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

3 Duncan Depledge, 'Train Where You Expect to Fight: Why Military Exercises Have Increased in the High North', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 1 (2020): 288–301.

4 For a Nordic-focused analysis, see e.g., Timo Koivurova and Sanna Kopra, eds., *Chinese Policy and Presence in the Arctic* (Leiden, NLD: Brill Nijhoff, 2020).

5 Ling Guo and Steven Lloyd Wilson, 'China, Russia, and Arctic Geopolitics', *The Diplomat*, 29 March, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/china-russia-and-arctic-geopolitics/>; Anders Christoffer Edstrøm, Iselin Stensdal, and Gørild Heggelund, 'Den "nye Supermakten": Hva Vil Kina i Arktis?', *Internasjonal Politikk*, Volume 78, Issue 4 (2020): 523–34.

level, it means that both NATO and Russia have increased their military presence, including exercises, in the Arctic.

The Arctic will continue to inform the global political agenda because of its importance for Russia's strategic thinking and because of China's increasing interest in the region, engendering rivalry with the US and the West. As relationships among these actors worsen globally or as a result of regional conflicts (e.g., Ukraine, East Asia), tensions in the Arctic will also escalate in the form of challenging statements, sanctions, and occasional military exercises and operations.



# The increasing centrality of the High North

Until 2022, the Arctic states frequently repeated their mantra of “cooperation” as articulated in relatively streamlined Arctic policy and/or strategy papers.<sup>6</sup> These countries have shown a preference for a stable political environment that allows them to maintain their dominance in the region through regional cooperation and shared economic interests. In particular, Russia’s ambitions for the Northeast Passage and industrial activity on the Yamal Peninsula demand both stability and a countering presence in the North.<sup>7</sup>

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 interrupted cooperation in forums like the Arctic Council and Barents Cooperation. At the time of writing, political cooperation or dialogue with Russia is impossible and seems likely to remain very limited. The question is to what extent the events of 2022 will alter the long-term fundamentals of the Arctic states’ shared interests. The Arctic is unlikely to figure less prominently in Russian economic development agendas. However, security concerns related to the Arctic’s increased strategic importance vis-à-vis NATO/the US are taking primacy. Although the reason for tension does not emerge from the Arctic, the Arctic is undoubtedly important for Russian military doctrines and thus also in a larger deterrence perspective as seen from NATO headquarters.

In short, the European Arctic or High North is likely to become increasingly central to operational defence and security policy thinking in the Nordic countries and more generally across NATO members. This would have been the case even if Finland and Sweden had not applied to join NATO; the greater the tension between NATO and Russia, the more relevant the High North becomes for the purposes of deterrence and surveillance and denial of Russian access to the Atlantic at large.

These trends have been further amplified since Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership. Russia’s security focus has shifted further north in response to the new 1340 km Finnish NATO border. The Baltic Sea will be surrounded by NATO countries, and the combined forces of Finland, Norway, and Sweden represent a considerable presence. This in turn raises two questions: What force posture will the two new members adhere to vis-à-vis Russia? Will Russia feel threatened or use this as an excuse for more military belligerence in the Nordic region?

Some commentators anticipate that feeling more “insecure” in the North may prompt Russia to strengthen its capacity to deter both land-based and seaborne threats in the Barents region.<sup>8</sup> In any event, there will likely be an increase in military exercises as both Russia

6 Svein Vigeland Rottem, ‘Klima og Sikkerhet i Arktis’ [Climate and Security in the Arctic], *Internasjonal Politikk*, Volume 68, Issue 2, (2010): 183–204; Lassi Heininen et al., *Arctic Policies and Strategies – Analysis, Synthesis, and Trends* (Laxenburg, Austria, 2020), [http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/16175/1/ArcticReport\\_WEB\\_new.pdf](http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/16175/1/ArcticReport_WEB_new.pdf).

7 Dag H. Claes and Arild Moe, ‘Arctic Offshore Petroleum: Resources and Political Fundamentals’, in *Arctic Governance: Energy, Living Marine Resources and Shipping*, eds. Svein Vigeland Rottem, Ida Folkestad Soltvedt, and Geir Hønneland (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 9–26f; Anne-Kristin Jørgensen and Andreas Østhagen, ‘Norges vern av suverene rettigheter rundt Svalbard: Russiske persepsjoner og reaksjoner’ [Norway’s Defence of Sovereign Rights Around Svalbard: Russian Perceptions and Reactions], *Internasjonal Politikk*, Volume 78, Issue 2 (2020): 167–92, <https://doi.org/10.23865/intpol.v78.1838>.

8 Sverre Diesen, ‘Norsk og Nordisk Forsvar etter Ukraina’ [Norwegian and Nordic Defence after Ukraine], Stratagem, 2022.

and NATO signal their willingness and ability to operate in the region in order to protect their vital interests. For Russia, this relates to the Northern Fleet and access to the North Atlantic; for NATO, the key concerns are Nordic territories in the High North and control over the GIUK Gap and the North Atlantic.

# The US remains the ultimate security guarantor

The US's security posture and capability make it the central actor in the Nordic NATO context. Examples of the increased US willingness to engage in security issues in the Arctic include the reactivation of the US Second Fleet out of Norfolk in 2018, with responsibility for the North Atlantic and the High North; the activity of the US Sixth Fleet in the Barents Sea; and the increased US participation in NATO exercises in Norway since 2014, including the biannual Cold Response exercises *and* Trident Juncture 2018.<sup>9</sup>

The goals of these US actions are to reassure its Nordic NATO allies and to keep a close eye on Russian strategic capabilities. In particular, the US High North presence is about controlling the movements of Russia's strategic assets out of the Kola Peninsula, as these could pose a threat not just to Norway or other Nordic countries but to the entire North Atlantic seaboard. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO means that European and US interest in and engagement with security concerns in the North are unlikely to diminish. This is inherently beneficial for Norway, Finland, and Sweden, as long as there is also an effort to control tensions and avoid further escalation in the region.

However, the US also plays a central role beyond the European Arctic. It is crucial here to distinguish between the security dynamic involving Russia that dominates the North Atlantic/European High North, and the dynamic involving Russia and China that increasingly informs the agenda in the North Pacific-adjacent Arctic.<sup>10</sup> For the US, the shared

boundary along the Bering Strait means proximity to Russian strategic forces in Russia's Far East. In particular, tense relations with Russia intensify the US need for control and response capabilities in respect of Russian airborne activity over the Bering Strait and Bering Sea.

Russia increasingly sees the entire Arctic coastline from Kirkenes to the Aleutians in the Pacific as a continuous strategic domain. With ice melting north of the Bering Strait and the prospect of more civilian and military traffic in the area, Russia has stepped up military exercises in maritime areas off Alaska. This has caused problems for American fishermen and is attracting attention from US federal politicians.<sup>11</sup> The joint operation just off Alaska in September 2022 involving Chinese and Russian naval forces is a further example of how the security environment has changed in the Bering Sea and the North Pacific, driven by Russian ambitions and Chinese interests in the region.

In the Barents Sea and the Bering Sea, NATO countries must strike a balance between deterring Russian aggression and minimizing the risk of further military tensions. Beyond the immediate show of force and alliance solidarity, this includes other interactions with Russia; for example, "soft" Arctic challenges such as fisheries co-management and emergency response require Russia's involvement as a neighbour of the US and Norway. For this reason, both US and Norwegian Coast Guards have maintained contact with their Russian counterparts post-2022.

9 Andreas Østhagen, 'Getting US Arctic Security Right', The Arctic Institute, 2022, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/getting-us-arctic-security-right/>.

10 Andreas Østhagen, 'The Arctic Security Region: Misconceptions and Contradictions', *Polar Geography*, Volume 44, Issue 1, (2021): 55–74.

11 Francesca Ebel, 'Putin and Xi Highlight Russia-China Cooperation against Backdrop of War', *The Washington Post*, 30 December 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/30/putin-xi-call-cooperation-ukraine/>.

# The increasing relevance of Arctic hybrid threats

In the context of the geopolitical and security developments described above, hybrid threat operations have become more relevant in the Arctic region. Examples include sabotage of critical infrastructure, much of which is difficult to surveil; gathering of intelligence data through subversion or illegal monitoring; and small-scale Arctic incidents that serve to divert attention away from escalating issues in other parts of the world.

The Arctic maritime domain is particularly difficult to monitor and control. In this context, relevant issues include minor disputes over sovereign rights at sea, the legal status of passageways or maritime zones, and (un)intended mishaps during military exercises and Arctic operations that can escalate beyond immediate control, potentially dragging the region (or parts thereof) into an outright conflict between Russia and NATO members.

However, as some form of rationality or logic must guide the Kremlin's actions, one must assume that Russia is not interested in outright conflict with NATO or any of its members in light of the likely consequences for Russia. NATO's response to Russian aggression in 2014, and more specifically in 2022, indicates a willingness and increasing ability to defend all NATO territories and deter Russian aggression.

For this reason, any deliberate Russian action against any of the other Arctic states is more likely to be hybrid in form, and remain below

the threshold of outright warfare or direct conflict. Rather than seeking to initiate large-scale conflict or acquire and control territory (as in Ukraine), Russia's likely goal would be to undermine the policies and activities of other Arctic states or to test the ability of individual states to detect and respond to small-scale challenges while maintaining some level of plausible deniability.

**In the Norwegian context**, a range of hybrid threats came to light after February 2022, including Russian tourists using drones, vulnerabilities related to cooperation with Russian academics, and certain maritime activities by Russian researchers and fishing vessels. A key example is the tension between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea, especially in the waters around Svalbard, where questions are being asked about the activities of Russian vessels at large in Norwegian waters.<sup>12</sup>

In January 2022, one of two crucial subsea IT cables serving Svalbard was cut at a time when Russian fishing vessels were operating extensively in the vicinity. Although Norwegian authorities have drawn no conclusions about the perpetrator, the incident has been widely linked to Russian intelligence-gathering and other operations in the Norwegian Arctic.<sup>13</sup> Following the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea in September 2022, this issue gained new urgency in the debate around Norwegian security and defence.<sup>14</sup>

12 Osman Kibar, Alexander Prestmo, and Emma Rokseth Kenny, 'OPERASJON LAZAREV: Slår Alarm Om Kartlegging Av Norges Kritiske Infrastruktur' [Sounding the alarm about mapping Norway's critical infrastructure], *Dagens Næringsliv*, 22 October 2021.

13 Benjamin Fredriksen et al., 'Kabelmysteriene' [The cable mysteries], NRK, 26 June 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/nordland/xl/russiske-tralere-krysset-kabler-i-vesteralen-og-svalbard-for-brudd-1.16007084#intro-authors--expand>.

14 Thomas Olsen et al., 'Russiske "forskningsskip" Har Trålet Den Norske Kysten Siden i Sommer – Økende Bekymring' [Russian "research ships" have been trawling the Norwegian coast since this summer – increasing concern], *Aftenposten*, 1 October 2022, <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/JQEPmb/russiske-forskningskip-har-traalet-den-norske-kysten-siden-i-sommer-oekende-bekymring>.

Russian fishing and research vessels have rights of access to Norwegian waters that are difficult to curtail. Fishers' ability to disregard zonal boundaries in the Barents Sea is a core pillar of the successful co-management of fisheries cooperation between Norway and Russia.<sup>15</sup> Research vessels' access to the Norwegian exclusive economic zone, the fisheries protection zone around Svalbard, and the continental shelf rests on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea Article 246, which states that "the coastal State should normally grant its consent" other than in a few specific circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

To that extent, the burden of proof regarding illegal activities by Russian vessels in Norwegian waters (including the maritime area around Svalbard) is borne by the Norwegian authorities. Svalbard's maritime zones is a particularly sensitive case in light of Russia's refusal to acknowledge Norway's jurisdiction to inspect and arrest vessels in that area. By asserting that these are international waters, Russia can claim that any such inspection or subsequent arrest would exceed Norway's authority in the area. Russia could choose to respond by threatening to use military force, as in the early 2000s when Russian fishing vessels were arrested by the Norwegian Coast Guard in the fisheries protection zone.<sup>17</sup>

In such scenarios, concerns also arise about NATO support and the various legal interpretations of the Svalbard Treaty, again highlighting the increasing importance of maritime security in the High North. While this refers to the active pursuit of military purposes, everyday issues are more likely to involve lower-level activities that promote social discord, disruption, and instability.

The question, then, is whether certain characteristics of Arctic states, regions, or communities make them more vulnerable to such activities. In this context, the primary issues are proximity to and relations with Russia. The very factor that has been touted as a strength of Arctic international relations – the ability to interact and cooperate with Russian actors in the North – can also be perceived as a liability.

For example, the complexity of local and regional interests related to trade and cultural cooperation across the border between Finnmark and North-West Russia has at times proved challenging for the Norwegian authorities.<sup>18</sup> Although these interactions are mostly benign, the increased strain on local relations with Russian actors and the Russian authorities from 2012 onward has prompted fears of the scope for hybrid operations within this complexity.

15 Anne-Kristin Jørgensen, 'Stock-Shifts and Regime Resilience in the Barents Sea', in *Marine Resources, Climate Change and International Management Regimes*, eds. Olav Schram Stokke, Andreas Østhagen, and Andreas Raspotnik (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 153–178.

16 See Hilde Woker et al., 'The Law of the Sea and Current Practices of Marine Scientific Research in the Arctic', *Marine Policy*, Volume 115, May 2020: 2.

17 Andreas Østhagen, *Coast Guards and Ocean Politics in the Arctic* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 52–53.

18 Geir Hønneland and Anne-Kristin Jørgensen, 'Kompromisskulturen i Barentshavet' [The Culture of Compromise in the Barents Sea], in *Norge Og Russland: Sikkerhetspolitiske Utfordringer i Nordområdene* [Norway and Russia: Security Challenges in the High North], eds. Tormod Heier and Anders Kjølberg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2015), 57–68.

Immediate weak points include discord around sensitive Arctic-specific issues such as economic activity linked to climate change and indigenous peoples' rights, or the possibility of re-engaging with Russian scientists and organizations in the region. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the issues have ranged from resident Russians supporting the war<sup>19</sup> to the possible securitization of migrants across the Norwegian-Russian border.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, local knowledge of Russia and the history and experience of dealing with Russian actors for decades might be seen as a valuable asset in the current state of affairs.

19 Bård Wormdal, 'Russere i Finnmark Støtter Krigføringen: Skaper Strid i Det Russiske Miljøet' [Russians in Finnmark Support the War: Creating Divisions among Russians], NRK, 26 March 2022.

20 Tormod Strand and Mohammed Alayoubi, '5000 Migranter over Storskog: – Russland Ville Teste Norge' [5000 Migrants across Storskog: – Russia Wanted to Test Norway], NRK, 29 January 2023; Lars Rowe, 'Fra Unntakstilstand Til En Ny Normal' [From State of Emergency to New Normalcy], in *Naboer i Frykt Og Forventning: Norge Og Russland 1917–2014* [Neighbours in Fear and Expectation: Norway and Russia 1917–2014], ed. Sven G. Holtsmark (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2015), 628–632.

# Conclusions

A number of key points can be gleaned from the detailed material discussed here. First, the Arctic – especially the European parts or High North – is likely to feature higher on European and international security agendas in the future. Russian vulnerabilities and sensitivities, and ultimately military investment and activity, centre on the Kola Peninsula, the Barents Sea, and the 1538 km NATO-Russia border in Fennoscandia.<sup>21</sup> In turn, the interest and presence of NATO countries in the High North is likely to remain strong in the years to come.

Second, Russia is unlikely to engage in direct conflict with NATO countries in the Arctic or High North, and there are few disputes in the Arctic regarding territory or resources that might escalate or drive further conflict. Instead, concerns about conflict escalation relate to two dimensions: (1) possible mishaps and unintended incidents due to increased military activity in the region or risk-taking by Russian actors; and (2) intended actions and escalation (i.e., hybrid threat operations) that remain below the threshold of outright conflict and/or plausible deniability.

In respect of the latter concern, the maritime domain is particularly relevant and challenging in the High North context because of the potential dual use of seaborne actors and the inherent challenges of monitoring and domain awareness at sea. Moreover, although the potential for conflict in Arctic disputes in and of themselves is limited, there are areas of disagreement between Norway and Russia, such as jurisdiction in waters around Svalbard. Given Russia's apparent willingness to take risks and engage in conflict escalation, small-scale disagreements involving the Russian state must now be viewed in a new light.

Similarly, Arctic communities are particularly exposed to discord in light of their proximity to Russia and the difficult issue of how best to continue dealing with Russia in the north. This is especially relevant for the states that border Russia: Norway, Finland, and the US. However, the continued attention devoted to both hybrid and non-hybrid security challenges in the Arctic and the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO should help to mitigate these vulnerabilities.

<sup>21</sup> Norway's border with Russia is 197.7 km, Finland's border is 1,340 km.









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