

FROM EAST TO NORTH: NEW FRONTIERS FOR THE EU-NATO ARCTIC DEFENCE

After a geopolitical phase of peace and international cooperation, the Arctic is witnessing renewed military tensions, particularly between Russia, NATO, and European Union (EU) member countries. The multilateral governance that has so far governed the fate of the Arctic is being challenged by the confrontation between Russia and the West. In addition, climate warming opens up new trade routes. It provides access to immense deposits of raw materials, accelerating competition among actors partly by including external players such as China. To assess the future trajectory of European defense governance on the northern flank, it is necessary to view the Arctic and Baltic as a single region in light of common critical factors.

Luca Cinciripini*

Keywords: Arctic Politics, Arctic Region, China's Arctic Policies, European Defense Governance, Russia's Arctic Policies.



* Luca Cinciripini is a Ph.D. candidate at Catholic University of Milan and Research Fellow at ITSTIME.

During the Cold War, the Arctic was one of the crucial hubs of confrontation between the two blocs and was, therefore the scene of heavy militarization. The Arctic security agenda was thus declined in initially strictly military terms, and political, economic, and cultural interests were subordinated to the interests of the great powers.¹ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, there was a gradual shift from military to environmental and economic issues in Arctic politics, with a loss of the region's centrality in geopolitical terms. Beginning in the mid-1990s, therefore, a process of international cooperation was initiated to demilitarize the Arctic by instead promoting scientific research, respect for indigenous peoples' rights, and environmental protection. The Arctic region was thus gradually established as a peaceful zone with satisfactory international cooperation.

Nowadays, however, the increasing return of competition between powers, aggravated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has had a significant impact on the security environment of the High North. In this context, the Arctic represents a crucial junction for European security in light of the importance of the North Atlantic Sea Line of Communication (SLOC), which is vital for ensuring European defense.² The Arctic can now be defined as a region of strategic competition, partly due to its failure to consolidate as a security community held together by common and shared values.³

This process turns out to be inextricably linked with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has shifted the center of gravity of political and academic interest to the eastern flank of NATO and the European Union (EU), at the expense of other hot theaters crucial to European security and defense governance. However, the now open conflict between Russia and the West is likely to open a high front of tension in the northernmost portion of the European continent, from the Baltic Sea to the Arctic lands. This scenario involves the leading international organizations dedicated to European defense, namely the EU and NATO, and Russia and China. Persistent climate change, which on the one hand poses a severe threat to not only local environmental security but also offers important opportunities in terms of trade and energy that can further accelerate competition between major powers, further complicates the scenario and heightens military tensions.

¹ Teemu Palosaari and Nina Tynkkynen, "Chapter 5: Arctic Securitization and Climate Change," in *Handbook of the Politics of the Arctic* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015).

² Harri Mikkola, "The Geostrategic Arctic: Hard Security in the High North," FIIA Briefing Paper, 259 (April 2019): p. 8. <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/the-geostrategic-arctic>

³ Heather Exner-Pirot, "Between Militarization and Disarmament: Challenges for Arctic Security in the Twenty-First Century," in: L. Heininen and H. Exner-Pirot (eds), *Climate Change and Arctic Security* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2020).

The Security Shifts in the Arctic Region

The shift to the east of the security and defense center of gravity also affects European governance in this area in the northernmost portion that includes the Arctic but not only. Indeed, the Arctic region has peculiar characteristics that make it a crucial junction of the future European security and defense architecture. This is in light, first and foremost, of the co-presence of countries belonging to both NATO and the EU, as well as the substantial Russian presence. Moscow has been engaged in heavy military and commercial investment in the region for years now. Second, the strong impact of climate change is having far more significant effects in the Arctic than in the rest of the planet, producing consequences for local populations and generating significant new business opportunities.

“Already since the 2014 crisis following the occupation of Crimea and Donbas, however, there has been a process of slowing down the multilateral dialogue, in parallel with an increasing militarization of the region.”

These have for years now been attracting the interests of even an external player such as China, which is increasingly committed to carving out an Arctic role for itself while accelerating competition among regional powers. In this sense, the deterioration of relations between Moscow and the West is likely to produce, in the near future, an acceleration of Arctic tensions, fostered precisely by the elements just mentioned. Until recently, coexistence between Western powers and Russia in the region had been considered sufficiently peaceful and moderately cooperative.⁴

For quite some time, the Arctic region had been home to several EU and NATO members, which, along with Russia, gave rise to increasingly institutionalized multilateral governance aimed not only at ensuring peaceful coexistence but also at promoting forms of cooperation in the scientific and security spheres.⁵ The institutionalization of relations through the Arctic Council has helped normalize the region by making it a theater of cooperation, especially in the scientific sphere.

⁴ Ilya Kramnik, “The Cold War in the Cold Region: A Return,” in: A. Likhacheva (eds), *Arctic Fever* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022): p. 31. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-9616-9_2

⁵ Eremina Gadal Lagutina, “European Arctic Policy,” in: E. V. Pak, A. I. Krivtsov, N. S. Zagrebelnaya (eds), *The Handbook of the Arctic* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-9250-5_5-1

Already since the 2014 crisis following the occupation of Crimea and Donbas, however, there has been a process of slowing down the multilateral dialogue, in parallel with an increasing militarization of the region. Russia's gradual estrangement from the West and its multilateral organizations has prompted some of the most relevant actors in the region to increase their defense budgets, as in the case of Sweden, Canada, and the US. In the same time frame, there has been an increase in Russian military investments in the region, justified by the Kremlin as defensive investments, although accompanied by clear offensive and disruptive maneuvers against, for example, Norway and Finland.⁶ Moscow has implemented a series of hybrid measures for these countries, ranging from airspace incursions to cyber activities to energy retaliation.⁷ Even well before the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, therefore, the Arctic scenario was already showing signs of increasing tension, which was also the result of the co-presence of rival actors with each other, bearers of competing interests. However, tensions have been rising slowly but steadily over the past few months due to skirmishes and provocations from Moscow, as evidenced by the recent alarm raised by Norwegian security forces about the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Arctic waters, an episode that, if confirmed, would represent a first since the end of the Cold War.⁸ Moscow's activism has inevitably produced a greater involvement of NATO in the Arctic context, which as early as 2020 in the "NATO 2030 report" document expressed among its final recommendations a call to increase in:

“situational awareness across the High North and the Arctic’ as well as for the creation of a proper Arctic strategy [...] and should develop a strategy that takes into account broader deterrence and defense plans.”⁹

While greater NATO activism in the Arctic was viewed with extreme caution before the final outbreak of the Ukrainian conflict out of fear of Moscow's possible reaction, the current scenario seems to be inevitably pushing toward greater involvement of the Atlantic Alliance, especially following Sweden's and Finland's applications for membership.¹⁰ Therefore, if NATO's engagement in the Arctic security and defense policy framework seems inescapable, it is essential to identify appropriate policy

⁶ Katarzyna Zysk, "Myth 8: Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic is Defensive," Chatham House, 14 July 2022. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/myths-and-misconceptions-around-russian-military-intent/myth-8-russias-military-build>

⁷ Mikkola (2019): p. 8.

⁸ Wilhelmine Preussen, "Norway Warns of Growing Importance of Russian Nuclear Deterrence in Arctic," Politico.eu, 14 February 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-nuclear-ships-norway-ukraine-war/>

⁹ NATO, "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," Analysis and Recommendations of the reflection group appointed by the NATO Secretary General (Brussels, 25 November 2020). Available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf

¹⁰ Depledge Boulegue, "New Military Security Architecture Needed in the Arctic", Chatham House, 4 May 2021. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/new-military-security-architecture-needed-arctic>

recommendations in good time.¹¹ These, in fact, would be aimed at directing its actions as effectively as possible considering the Alliance's limited knowledge of a region once considered "low tension".¹² This process comes in the wake of a gradual strengthening of the Atlantic Alliance's presence in the region, partly as a result of intense political pressure from Norway over the years. While not explicitly mentioning the Arctic, NATO's Brussels Summit in 2018 signaled the relevance of the High North through the strengthening of the maritime presence in the region through measures to protect sea lanes of communication, amphibious operations, and measures to counter submarine warfare.¹³

“Greenland has been the primary target of China's activity thus far; in 2018, China began discussions with Greenland to build one of the world's largest uranium and rare earth mines, which would be added to the zinc already extracted and would be part of a complex of five projects dealing largely with mining of iron ore, ore, rare earth metals, uranium, and oil.”

The Nexus Between Climate Change, Security, and Commercial Exploitation

Affecting the Arctic security and defense scenario is not only the contiguity of rival actors and their military activities, but a plurality of factors linked together reciprocally. This is due to the coexistence of natural, military, and economic factors and geography. Indeed, the gradual melting of ice opens up new trade routes and provides access to immense deposits of raw materials, accelerating competition between powers and increasing friction between them. The effects of climate change in the Arctic region have so far produced environmental disruptions at a much higher rate than in the rest of the Planet.¹⁴

The progressive melting of the polar ice caps produces serious consequences, first, for local populations' food, water, and physical security. Second, it opens new horizons for commercial and economic exploitation. Indeed, thanks to the disappearance of

¹¹ Maddy Bennet, "NATO's Role in Securing a Changing Arctic," The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, 6 May 2020. <https://jisis.washington.edu/news/natos-role-in-securing-a-changing-arctic/>

¹² Marc Lanteigne, "The Changing Shape of Arctic Security," *NATO Review*, No. 28 (28 June 2019). <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/06/28/the-changing-shape-of-arctic-security/index.html>

¹³ Mikkola (2019): p. 6.

¹⁴ Hall & Webber, "Maritime Security in the North Atlantic," in R-L. Boşilcă, S. Ferreira, & B. J. Ryan (Eds.) (Routledge Handbook of Maritime Security, 2022).

glaciers, it is easier to access the immense deposits of raw materials that were once inaccessible to humans. Some estimates predict that between 2030 and 2050 Arctic summers will be ice-free at the surface, making the waters more easily navigable and making existing natural gas and oil deposits attractive to major powers.¹⁵ In addition, the disappearance of the fields also allows for the opening of invaluable new maritime trade routes, such as the Northwest Passage (NWP) and the Northern Sea Route (NSR).¹⁶ In fact, according to data from the U.S. Geological Survey, the Arctic region would contain an estimated \$20 trillion in wealth, the result of 40 percent of global hydrocarbon reserves, and 30 percent of all global resources. It would also be one of the global areas of greatest economic growth, with GDP growing at an average rate of around 10-11 percent per year over the past few years.¹⁷ The Arctic represents an essential building block for Russian expansionist aims, especially in the wake of economic sanctions imposed by the West. Control of the NSR, in particular, is crucial to guarantee Moscow an outlet to China and India that will allow it to continue exporting oil from Russia's Arctic fields, which alone is worth 10 percent of the national GDP.¹⁸

Chinese Activism in the Arctic Policies

The enormous resources in the region and the possibility of access to new and unexplored sea lanes contribute to attracting the sights of external players around the Arctic, making the regional security scenario more intricate. China is among the players most interested in carving out a role in Arctic politics. Although it does not appear to be an Arctic country, Beijing has long expressed a willingness to participate in regional developments actively and the race for allocated raw materials.¹⁹ Beijing was granted observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013, gradually increasing its activism in the region, particularly in the areas of science, economics and governance.²⁰ In this sense, suspending the Arctic Council's work following the Russian invasion of Ukraine poses substantial problems regarding the region's security. Indeed, it weakens Russia economically, which had so far supported heavy infrastructure investments in the region by focusing precisely on raw material deposits and new trade routes, investments that so far have not yet

¹⁵ Alexander Drivas, "The Polar Silk Road and the U.S. Strategy in the Arctic Ocean," *RIEAS*, 19 February 2023. <https://www.rieas.gr/researchareas/editorial/4770-the-polar-silk-road-and-the-u-s-strategy-in-the-arctic-ocean>

¹⁶ Frederic Lasserre, "The Future of the Arctic Route for Maritime Trade: A Geopolitical Revolution?", ISPI, 20 October 2021. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/future-arctic-route-maritime-trade-geopolitical-revolution-32054>

¹⁷ Marzio Mian, "Why the Arctic Matters," ISPI, 27 June 2018. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/why-arctic-matters-20882>

¹⁸ Cosimo Palleschi, "Nuove rotte, materie prime, terre rare: perché l'Artico è al centro delle strategie di Usa, Russia e Cina," *Forbes*, 13 February 2023. <https://forbes.it/2023/02/13/artico-centro-geopolitica-usa-russia-cina/>

¹⁹ Liselotte Odgaard, "Russia's Arctic Designs and NATO," *Survival*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (2022): p. 89-104.

²⁰ Yitong Chen, "China's Arctic Policy and Engagement: Review and Prospects," *Asia Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2023).

yielded considerable profits. This risks bringing Russia ever closer to the Chinese orbit. In fact, Beijing is also directly affected by the halt to multilateral confrontation in the region, pushing it more and more to take an interest in the Arctic as a kind of “near-arctic country.”²¹

Since at least 2018, when a report from the Arctic Council confirmed this definition, Beijing’s policies have been seen as an attempt to establish a full-fledged “Polar Silk Road” to support and complement Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, causing friction with Moscow over fears of an encroachment on Moscow’s sphere of influence.²² In the same year, China published a white paper to articulate its Arctic Policy, aimed at justifying the country’s self-definition as a “near-Arctic State” partly based on climate change, which Beijing said would cause a direct impact on Chinese interests in strategic economic sectors such as agriculture, fisheries and forests.²³ Such a definition would signal China’s elastic conception of borders, tending to be shaped based on the economic interests at stake. In addition, the interest in the Arctic would not only be about the possibility of appropriating the massive raw materials, but also about the control of the NSR, which provides China with a journey that is about 40 percent shorter than the traditional routes between Asia and Europe.²⁴

Beijing stated in the white paper that it would adhere to scrupulous compliance with the conventions and international law accrued under current Arctic governance to achieve these goals.²⁵ Greenland has been the primary target of China’s activity thus far; in 2018, China began discussions with Greenland to build one of the world’s largest uranium and rare earth mines, which would be added to the zinc already extracted and would be part of a complex of five projects dealing largely with mining of iron ore, ore, rare earth metals, uranium, and oil. The significance of Greenland, formally dependent on Denmark in foreign and defense policy but substantially subsidized by Copenhagen, to the EU as its main and only Arctic access should also be mentioned. In addition, there are U.S. and NATO military interests through the Thule Military Base. Iceland is also a key piece in China’s hegemonic expansion in the Arctic, having been the first country to sign a Free Trade Agreement with Beijing in 2013 partly to cope with the harsh economic consequences of the financial crisis gripping the island.

²¹ Maud Descamps, “The Ice Silk Road: is China a “near-Arctic State”?”, Institute for Security and Development Policy, February 2019. <https://isdsp.eu/publication/the-ice-silk-road-is-china-a-near-arctic-state/#:~:text=Factually%20speaking%2C%20China%20is%20not,its%20attention%20toward%20the%20region>

²² Boulegue, “The Militarization of Russian Polar Politics,” Chatham House, 6 June 2022. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/06/militarization-russian-polar-politics>

²³ Kobzeva Mariia, “China’s Arctic Policy: Present and Future,” *The Polar Journal*, Vol. 9, Issue 1 (2019): p. 94-112.

²⁴ Ferreira-Pereira, Duarte, Santos, “Why Is China Going Polar? Understanding Engagement and Implications for the Arctic and Antarctica,” in: P. A. B. Duarte, F.J.B.S. Leandro, E.M. Galán (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Globalization with Chinese Characteristics* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

²⁵ State Council Information Office of People’s Republic of China, “China’s Arctic Policy,” 2018. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/26/c_136926498.htm

Towards the Future: An Enlarged Arctic Region

Regarding the possible evolutions of Arctic security and defense governance, and its effects on the European security architecture, it is necessary to broaden the geographical space considered by going beyond just the Arctic coastal states. Indeed, the decision of Finland and Sweden to abandon their historic policy of neutrality to formally apply for membership in the Atlantic Alliance, although the process is still ongoing and not without obstacles,²⁶ is bound to produce lasting effects over time.²⁷ First among them is the welding of the Arctic region and the Baltic Sea into a single Great North with common security flashpoints. In addition, the energy dependence of a major part of Europe on Russian energy sources, with the crisis that is severely afflicting households and businesses, has made the pipelines that carry essential energy supplies across the Baltic Sea crucial in the run-up to winter. The massive presence of Atlantic Alliance member countries bordering the Baltic Sea has led some observers to call this sea basin a “NATO lake.”²⁸ Such a definition seems apt to summarize the consistent shift in the strategic center of gravity in the regional context, resulting from a deep integration of means and strategic cultures between Nordic and Baltic countries. However, it has so far puzzled some analysts.²⁹

The trajectory of the Baltic Sea seems to have shifted from what was termed a “sea of peace”³⁰ by the Soviet Union and an example of region-building, to an area of intense military, political and strategic confrontation and tension. The shift of the strategic center of gravity northward also intersects with the uncertainties and ambiguities of individual European countries’ choices. While the UK, Poland and the Baltic republics support the strengthening of the northern flank, far more skeptical seem to be France and the southern countries, which fear losing the EU centrality on defense policies and the downsizing of the Mediterranean as a strategic area. The weld between the Arctic and the Baltic Sea allows a joint observation of the challenges the two contexts pose to international security and a complete understanding of the need to broaden the geographic horizon. In this sense, Scotland plays a crucial role in the future of Arctic policies.³¹ Already long engaged in defining its own role in the

²⁶ Helmi Pillai, “Finland Should Prepare to Join NATO on Its Own,” Centre for European Reform, 16 February 2023. <https://www.cer.eu/insights/finland-should-prepare-join-nato-its-own>

²⁷ Albuquerque & Schreer, “Finland, Sweden and NATO Membership,” *Survival*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2022): p. 67-72.

²⁸ Michael Jonsson & Robin Haggblom, “Cooperation can make the NATO lake a reality,” War on the Rocks, 29 August 2022. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/cooperation-can-make-the-nato-lake-a-reality/>

²⁹ Julian Pawlak, “No, Don’t Call the Baltic a NATO Lake,” RUSI, 5 September 2022. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/no-dont-call-baltic-nato-lake>

³⁰ Klaus Wittmann, “NATO and Security in The Baltic Sea Region,” BSR Policy Briefing Series (July 2022): https://www.centrumbalticum.org/files/5320/BSR_Policy_Briefing_7_2022.pdf

³¹ Depledge, Dodds & Kennedy-Pipe, “The UK’s Arctic Defence Strategy: Negotiating the Slippery Geopolitics of the UK and the Arctic,” RUSI, 25 April 2019. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-journal/uks-arctic-defence-strategy-negotiating-slippery-geopolitics-uk-and-arctic>

region, including in opposition to London and instrumentally concerning the cause of independence, Edinburgh is relevant because of its geographical proximity to the Arctic, its close relationship with most Arctic countries, and because it is home to British nuclear weapons, which are decisive in the NATO framework.³² Including Scotland as well in the Arctic security governance framework, therefore, allows for an even greater appreciation of the close interconnectedness that characterizes the region and the need for a broad framing that combines not only the European Arctic but also the Baltic and the North Atlantic region.

Finally, the suspension of multilateral forms of cooperation, such as the Arctic Council, makes peaceful coexistence in the region more difficult. This makes it all the more necessary to jointly observe the contiguous contexts just mentioned, coming to understand the northern part of the European continent as a kind of macro-region. It is no coincidence that we have been witnessing for some time now a dynamization of forms of cooperation in the military field in response to Moscow's assertiveness, as in the case of NORDEFECO (Nordic Defense Cooperation) encompassing Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Norway, which is increasingly active in the dialogue with the U.S. and in the process of possible enlargement.³³ This is stated in the official document as the following:

*“the aim and purpose of NORDEFECO is to strengthen the participating nations’ national defense, explore common synergies and facilitate efficient common solutions.”*³⁴

The substantial presence of NORDEFECO and the deployment of forces occurring in both the Arctic region and the Baltic Sea confirms the need to view the region as unique in terms of local security threats but with apparent international spillovers intended to affect the European defense architecture as well.³⁵ In this sense, NORDEFECO could prove to be a successful model in terms of defense cooperation, the results of which are the result of cooperation between countries with similar strategic cultures and a flexible structure, although under present circumstances, there is a limit to how far defense cooperation can go considering different security doctrines. But extending regional defense cooperation to include other Allied

³² Depledge & Østhagen, “Scotland: A Touchstone for Security in the High North?”, *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 166, No. 6-7 (2022): p. 46-62.

³³ Minna Ålander and Michael Paul, “Moscow Threatens The Balance In The High North: In Light Of Russia’s War in Ukraine, Finland and Sweden are Moving Closer to NATO”, *SWP Comment*, No. 24 (2022), Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/256747/1/2022C24.pdf>

³⁴ “Memorandum of Understanding between the Governments of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden on Nordic Defence Cooperation,” signed in Helsinki on 4 November 2009. Available at: <https://www.nordefeco.org/Files/nordefeco-mou.pdf>

³⁵ Ann-Sofie Dahl, “NORDEFECO and NATO: ‘Smart Defence’ in the North?”, *NATO Defense College* (2014). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10416>.

countries (including a broader group such as Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) could bring added value to NATO and boost cooperation between Western actors in the Arctic policies.