

A STRATEGIC TRIANGLE IN THE ARCTIC? IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA–RUSSIA–UNITED STATES POWER DYNAMICS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

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I. Introduction

Over the past decades, regional cooperation among the Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia and the United States) has advanced the Arctic as a region of low tension. The Arctic is generally well regulated. Oil and gas are extracted in territorial waters or on land where jurisdiction is not disputed, while the use of common assets such as fish stocks is subject to regional and bilateral agreements. Maritime boundary disputes between allies (Canada and the USA) will not escalate militarily.

However, the long-standing ambition to keep the Arctic as a region of low tension and high cooperation is being increasingly challenged in light of three developments.

The first factor is due to climate change. Rising temperatures and the melting of sea ice have increased accessibility for commercial shipping and made human access easier. An increase in commercial activity and the promise of further development of resources in the future has created new opportunities, but also new challenges.

A second factor is the increased interest and activity of states from outside the region in Arctic affairs. The Arctic has been managed by a regional governance regime, but a wider spectrum of states have become more active in commercial projects and seek greater access to the resources the region contains. This has triggered a discussion of who should design the rules that will apply.¹

A third factor is the spillover effect of growing geopolitical tensions between great powers. Military activity in the region is low compared to the cold war, but it is increasing. Growing concern about a military build-up in the Arctic has been fuelled by the significant increase in Russia's military presence in the Arctic. The USA has begun to invest more heavily into military capabilities needed for operations in the region, including new projects implemented together with North Atlantic Treaty Organization

SUMMARY

- This SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security paper examines security challenges arising from the Arctic activities of three actors with a substantial ‘footprint’—China, Russia and the United States—and how they might be addressed in existing and new frameworks.

Arctic and non-Arctic states want to exploit commercial opportunities created by a changing physical environment. Arctic states agree that climate-related challenges can be addressed through cooperation within existing institutions. However, to ensure that increasing human activity stays within acceptable environmental and human security risk levels, non-Arctic states need to be engaged.

The risk of unwanted escalation in military tension in the Arctic due to deteriorating relations among major powers over disputes arising elsewhere has grown to the point where it cannot be ignored. A steady increase in military investments in the Arctic, or Arctic operations, will continue, but there is no ready-made framework to address military security challenges.

Issues that occupy a ‘grey zone’ between military and non-military security will have to be addressed as digital and transport infrastructure expand in the Arctic. However, there is little experience in how diverse state and non-state actors can manage cooperation and competition simultaneously.

¹ See for instance, Koivurova, T., ‘The current and future role of non-Arctic states in Arctic governance, in Akiho Shibata’, eds L. Zou, N. Sellheim, and M. Scopelliti, *Emerging Legal Orders in the Arctic The Role of Non-Arctic Actors*, (Routledge 2019); and Young, O., ‘Is it time for a reset in Arctic governance?’, *Sustainability*, 20 Aug. 2019.



(NATO) allies. Escalating tensions between China and the USA may not be possible to contain.²

Facing sanctions imposed by the USA and the European Union (EU) in the wake of the Crimea annexation and conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, Russia has strengthened its partnership with China in Arctic development. China, for its part, has expanded its engagement with Nordic states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) in an attempt to promote commercial projects and to develop transport infrastructure. Chinese activity in the Arctic has, in turn, pulled the Arctic region into the wider deteriorating relationship between China and the USA.

This SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security looks at the developing geopolitical tensions between China, Russia and the USA and whether there is an emerging strategic triangle in the Arctic. The analysis is based on discussions that took place during the SIPRI Arctic Webinars series on ‘The Strategic Triangle in the Arctic’, and on select scientific, academic and media materials that complement discussions during the webinars.³

Section II outlines the key geopolitical interests of the strategic triangle, and how those interests have evolved. Section III investigates the influence of the geopolitical tensions on shipping and resource exploration in the Arctic. Section IV examines current developments and emerging trends of military security in the region. Section V explores the requirement for, and the feasibility of, a framework that can address the current political and security dynamics in the Arctic.

II. The evolution of Arctic and non-Arctic states’ interests and policies in the region

Russia and the USA are Arctic states, but the degree of interest each has taken in the region has varied significantly. The USA has paid less attention to the Arctic than Russia, which has had increasing economic and military ambitions in the region. None of China’s coasts border the Arctic and it does not claim sovereignty on under-continental shelves or Arctic waters, nevertheless, China has attempted to self-identify as a ‘near-Arctic state’ and a stakeholder in Arctic affairs.⁴

²Office of the Secretary of Defense, ‘Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019’, 2 May 2019; and Pincus, R., ‘Three-way power dynamics in the Arctic’, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2020).

³During 7–10 Sep. 2020, SIPRI organized a series of webinars on the ‘The Strategic Triangle in the Arctic’. The webinars were held under the Chatham House rule and were supported by funding from the Japanese Government. The webinars brought together 25 academic, diplomatic, legal and technical experts from China, Japan, Nordic countries, Russia and the United States, with more than 50 online observers, to provide a better understanding of recent developments in the Arctic under growing geopolitical competition on the global stage; see SIPRI, ‘Arctic Webinar Series’, 7–10 Sep. 2020.

⁴Wong, A., ‘China: We are a “near-arctic state” and we want a “Polar Silk Road”’, CNBC, 14 Feb. 2018.



Russia: Continuity rather than change

The Arctic is a zone of special interest for Russia because of its military, political, economic, technological and environmental significance.⁵ The Arctic hosts Russia's sea-based strategic nuclear forces and its largest navy fleet.⁶ The Arctic is also key to Russia's hydrocarbon sector with 80 per cent of its natural gas and 17 per cent of oil production taking place there.⁷

In 2020, Russia updated key strategic documents concerning the Arctic, specifically, it adopted the Basics of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Arctic until 2035 and Beyond (2020 Russian Basics) and the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security until 2035 (2020 Russian Strategy).⁸

The new documents are largely similar to previous iterations. Particularly, the Arctic remains to be seen as the main resource base for the future economic development of Russia. Developing the Northern Sea Route (NSR) also remains a priority, including financing at least five new ice-breaker ships.⁹ However, the strategic documents have revealed new elements to Russia's vision of the Arctic region, particularly when it comes to sovereignty and security.

Protection of sovereignty and security challenges in the region

A key change to 2020 Russian Basics is that it elevates the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity as top priorities. In addition the document identifies security challenges facing Russia. Although security concerns have been described before by Russian officials, their elevation in 2020 Russian Basics indicates a higher priority.

One security challenge identified in 2020 Russian Basics is the attempt by 'some countries' to revise provisions of international treaties regulating economic and other activities in the Arctic and 'establish national regulation systems without taking into account regional and international formats of cooperation'. Related to this is the obstruction by 'some countries' of Russian economic and other activities in the Arctic.¹⁰

These statements probably allude to Russia's disagreement with Norway regarding the interpretation of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty and its objections to the 200-mile Fisheries Protection Zone around Svalbard created by Norway as well as what Russia views as the artificial expansion of nature protection zones that limit its economic activity.¹¹

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⁵ President of Russia, 'Meeting of the Security Council on state policy in the Arctic', 22 Apr. 2014.

⁶ Boulègue, M., 'Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic. Managing Hard Power in a "Low Tension" Environment', Research Paper, Chatham House, 29 June 2019.

⁷ President of Russia, [The strategy for the development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and national security until 2035], 26 Oct. 2020 (in Russian); and Novyye Izvestiya, [Russia invests 86 billion USD into the Arctic], 28 Mar. 2019 (in Russian).

⁸ President of Russia (note 7); and President of Russia, [the Basics of the Russian Federation's state policy in the Arctic until 2035 and beyond], 5 Mar. 2020 (in Russian).

⁹ President of Russia (note 7).

¹⁰ President of Russia, [the Basics of the Russian Federation's state policy in the Arctic until 2035 and beyond] (note 8).

¹¹ Treaty between Norway, the United States, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Ireland and the British overseas possessions and Sweden concerning the Spitsbergen (Svalbard Treaty), opened for signature 9 Feb. 1920, entered into force 14 Aug. 1925, LOV-1920-02-09; and Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Industry, 'Fiskevernsonen ved Svalbard og



In February 2020, on the 100th anniversary of the Svalbard Treaty, Russia raised these issues in a letter to the Norwegian Foreign Ministry.¹²

According to 2020 Russian Basics, the increasing military presence by foreign countries is identified as a challenge for national security as it increases conflict potential in the Arctic. The 2020 Russian strategy also states that mounting conflict potential in the Arctic requires a constant increase of Russian military presence.¹³

The Arctic is increasingly seen by Russia as a crucial area to withstand the military pressure brought to bear by the USA and NATO. Over the past six years Russia has updated its military, maritime and naval doctrines.¹⁴

A key change to Russia's arctic strategy is that it elevates the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity as top priorities

Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine includes the task of 'protecting Russian interests in the Arctic' for the first time. Russia's 2015 Maritime Doctrine specifies 'lowering the threats in the Arctic region' as the main policy goal in the Arctic.¹⁵ Both documents highlight NATO and US global activities as the primary security concern for Russia. Moreover, Russia's 2017 Naval Doctrine

identified the USA's pursuit of maritime dominance, including in the Arctic, as one of the main security threats to Russia's national interests. It also underlined the economic, political and military pressure on Russia to loosen control over the NSR.¹⁶

The Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation

According to both 2020 Russian Basics, and the 2020 Russian Strategy, cooperation with Arctic and non-Arctic states is needed to maintain the Arctic as a zone of peace, cooperation and partnership.¹⁷ Both documents also state that Russia will continue to support cooperation on delimitation of the Arctic shelf, assist in search and rescue missions, prevent and respond to man-made and natural disasters, and conduct scientific cooperation.

At the same time, the new policies aim to strengthen Russia's bilateral relations with Arctic states and Russia's standing in the various regional cooperation formats, specifically the Arctic Council, the Arctic Five and the Barents Euro–Arctic Council.¹⁸ In this regard, one specific objective of 2020 Russian Basics is to secure the Arctic Council as the key regional institution coordinating international cooperation in the Arctic. This could imply that Russia still supports the Arctic Council as the main regional cooperation platform and does not support moving functions from the Arctic Council into other forums.

fiskerisonen ved Jan Mayen' [The fishery protection zone off Svalbard and the fishing zone off Jan Mayen], 11 Mar. 2014.

¹² Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's message to Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soreide on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Spitsbergen Treaty', Press Release 180-04-02-2020, 4 Feb. 2020.

¹³ President of Russia (note 7).

¹⁴ Russian Government, [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020], 12 May 2009 (in Russian); Rossiyskaya Gazeta, [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, adopted 30 Dec. 2014], 30 Dec. 2014 (in Russian); and President of Russia, [Basics of the state policy of the Russian Federation in the field of naval activities for the period up to 2030], no. 327, 20 July 2017 (in Russian).

¹⁵ President of Russia (note 14).

¹⁶ President of Russia (note 14).

¹⁷ President of Russia (note 7); and President of Russia (note 8).

¹⁸ The Arctic Five are Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the USA.



Promoting economic partnerships with Arctic and non-Arctic states, primarily but not only with China, can be understood as a way for Russia to reduce the impact of economic sanctions.

United States: Arctic awakening

The USA paid relatively little attention to the Arctic for almost two decades after the cold war. However from 2009, the USA's policy priorities were updated.¹⁹ The main US focus was on promoting environmental protection and sustainable commercial activities against the background of accelerating climate change. Military factors were not featured prominently in the May 2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region.²⁰ An expanded role for the US Coast Guard (USACG) was expected given the increasing level human activity in the region, but tasks such as maritime law enforcement and search and rescue—should vessels be in distress—were seen as collaborative efforts to be undertaken jointly by Arctic states.²¹

The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the conflict in and around Ukraine in 2014 were turning points in the international military security environment and are reflected in the Arctic. The 2014 Navy Roadmap pointed out that tensions may increase due to ‘misperception and rhetoric, as well as to the unforeseen dynamics of economic interests in the region’.²² However, by 2016 the US Department of Defense (DOD) called for an increase in the frequency and complexity of military exercises in the region as well as additional infrastructure to sustain a spectrum of potential operations ‘in light of the Russian violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, and Russia’s efforts to intimidate its neighbors’.²³

Arctic policy under the Trump administration: Return of great power competition

The 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy elevated strategic competition with China and Russia—designated as revisionist powers—above climate change as a national priority. Additionally, President Donald J. Trump’s administration promoted achieving energy dominance as a national objective over environmental protection.²⁴

The Trump administration raised the question of great power competition into the regional governance framework. This was done most notably when US secretary of state, Michael R. Pompeo, stated to his Arctic Council

The Trump administration raised the question of great power competition into the Arctic governance framework

¹⁹ White House, Office of the Press Secretary, ‘National Security Presidential Directive and Homeland Security Presidential Directive’, Press release, 9 Jan. 2009.

²⁰ White House, ‘National Strategy for the Arctic Region’, 10 May 2013.

²¹ US Coast Guard, US Department of Homeland Security, ‘The US Coast Guard’s Vision for Operating in the Arctic Region’, May 2013.

²² US Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, ‘United States Navy Arctic Roadmap for 2014 to 2030’, Feb. 2014.

²³ US Department of Defense, ‘Report to Congress on Strategy to Protect United States National Security Interests in the Arctic Region’, Dec. 2016, p. 10.

²⁴ Paul, M., ‘Polar power USA: Full steam ahead into the Arctic’, SWP Comment 2019/C 42, Nov. 2019; and White House, ‘President Donald J. Trump Is Unleashing American Energy Dominance’, Factsheet, 14 May 2019.



colleagues that China's aggressive behaviour threatens the Arctic, while Russia's illegitimate claims over the NSR and threats of using military force destabilize the situation in the Arctic and threaten US interests.²⁵

In 2019–20 the USA developed military guidance documents based on the more confrontational approach in the National Security and National Defense strategies. A tri-service maritime strategy, *Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power*, was released in December 2020.²⁶ The maritime strategy is global in scope, but in relation to the Arctic, it concludes that the USA cannot cede influence in a region with an increasing impact on the global economy and a growing strategic importance.

In the near-term, the USA has given a priority to equipping the USACG to operate in Arctic waters.²⁷ Funding for a fleet of new ice-breaker ships for the USACG to be operationally tested and fully deployable by 2029 was approved in 2019–20.²⁸

The need for enhanced military cooperation with allies and partners has also been stressed.²⁹ The number and complexity of bilateral and multilateral training and exercises to enhance interoperability and common tactics, techniques, and procedures for extreme cold weather operations has grown and also incorporates Finland and Sweden in planning although they are not allies of the USA.³⁰

President Joe Biden has inherited a situation where US military activities in the Barents and the Bering Sea have increased, discussed further below.³¹ At the same time, the US Navy's 'Strategic Outlook for the Arctic' still characterizes the Arctic as a low-tension area.³² The plans for future naval forces to implement the tri-service maritime strategy have potentially far-reaching consequences globally, not least the possible increase in the US Navy from 300 combat ships to 500.³³ However, the main driver of change is competition with China in the South China Sea and the Western Pacific. Consequently it is difficult to say to what extent the view of the Arctic as an area of geopolitical tension will be revised.

The USA is closely monitoring the modernization of China's military, including the development of strategic nuclear forces and the expanding operational radius of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The US Defense Intelligence Agency has drawn attention to the expanding Chinese submarine-based nuclear forces 'with a capability to strike targets in the

²⁵ Donald Trump and Greenland: Why would he want to buy it?, BBC, 21 Aug. 2019.

²⁶ US Department of Defense, 'Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power', Dec. 2020.

²⁷ US Coast Guard, US Department of Homeland Security, 'Arctic Strategic Outlook', Apr. 2019.

²⁸ Werner, B., 'Coast Guard Secures \$655 Million for Polar Security Cutters in New Budget Deal', USNI News, 15 Feb. 2019; White House, 'Memorandum on Safeguarding U.S. National Interests in the Arctic and Antarctic Regions', Presidential memorandum, 9 June 2020.

²⁹ US Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 'Report to Congress Department of Defense Arctic Strategy', (DOD: Washington, DC, June 2019).

³⁰ Hagström Frisell, E. (ed.) et al., Deterrence by Reinforcement: The Strengths and Weaknesses of NATO's Evolving Defence Strategy, Swedish Defence Research Agency, FOI-R--4843--SE, Nov. 2019.

³¹ Snow, S., 'US Navy surface ships enter the Barents Sea for the first time since mid-1980s', Navy Times, 4 May 2020; and Stancy, D. C., 'Destroyer Ross treks into the Barents Sea's Arctic waters—again', Navy Times, 21 Oct. 2020.

³² Chief of Naval Operations, US Navy, 'Strategic Outlook for the Arctic', Jan. 2019.

³³ O'Rourke, R. 'Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress', Congressional Research Service RL32665, 26 Jan. 2021.



continental United States from some patrol areas.³⁴ Should the Arctic become crucial to China's strategic deterrence, as suggested by some non-governmental analysts, it would create a new scenario for US military planners.³⁵

China: Changing the rhetoric

In January 2018, China published its first white paper on Arctic policy. Interests in the region were enumerated as: (a) continued interest in conducting scientific research and activities; (b) securing the ecological environment and addressing climate change; (c) developing the NSR as a transport artery and commercial projects in energy, fisheries and tourism; (d) political interests in participating in Arctic governance; and (e) security interests in safeguarding maritime security and safety.³⁶

The white paper largely presents information previously stated by Chinese officials as almost all of the principles outlined in the white paper had been previously mentioned in a presentation by Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming at the Third Arctic Circle Assembly in 2015.³⁷ The main purpose of the white paper was to clarify China's position on the Arctic, offset concerns about a 'China threat' and shape a positive narrative about China in the Arctic.³⁸

Arctic governance and economic interests

The white paper reinforced China's persistent efforts to reposition itself as an 'Arctic stakeholder' and a 'near-Arctic' state.³⁹ As a non-Arctic state China has very limited influence over Arctic governance. However, by asserting itself as an Arctic stakeholder, China contends that it has a legitimate claim to help shape the Arctic agenda.⁴⁰

The economic interests in the NSR and exploration of natural resources remain China's primary interests in the region, and most its activities are conducted in cooperation with Russia. The inclusion of the 'Polar Silk Road' into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) resulted in a mixed response. While local communities have welcomed the prospect of investment, in general, Western states have been cautious about Chinese projects that could help China gain political leverage and in response have begun to develop legal frameworks to address their worries.⁴¹

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³⁴ US Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power 2019: Modernizing a force to fight and win*, Nov. 2018, p. 73.

³⁵ Brady, A., 'Facing up to China's military interests in the Arctic', *China Brief*, 10 Dec. 2019.

³⁶ Chinese State Council, *China's Arctic Policy*, Defence White Paper, (Information Office of the State Council: Beijing, 26 Jan. 2019).

³⁷ Zhang, M., 'China in the Arctic: Practices and policies', Keynote speech, China Country Session of the Third Arctic Circle Assembly, 17 Oct. 2015.

³⁸ Chinese State Council Information Office, '新闻办就《中国的北极政策》白皮书和北极政策情况举行发布会' [Press conference for launching China's white paper on Arctic], 26 Jan. 2018.

³⁹ SIPRI, 'China defines itself as a "near-arctic state"', Press release, 10 May 2012; and Chinese State Council Information Office, '新闻办就《中国的北极政策》白皮书和北极政策情况举行发布会' [Press conference for launching China's white paper on Arctic], 26 Jan. 2018; and Dong, L., '中国"北极利益攸关者"身份建构' [The construction of China's arctic identity of arctic stakeholder], *Pacific Journal*, vol. 2, no. 6 (June 2017), pp. 65–77.

⁴⁰ Dong (note 39).

⁴¹ Gisela, G., 'China's Arctic policy: How China aligns rights and interests', European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2018; and Pulkkinen, K., 'The Arctic Council and the



As geopolitical tensions increase, some Chinese arctic scholars are concerned that China's approach in pursuing its interests with Nordic countries through bilateral cooperation is too aggressive. The scholars stress that an original approach that reflects new geopolitical circumstances is needed.⁴² It was also noted that a modification of China's approach, or even a temporary retreat from the region, should be considered if the tensions intensify and the atmosphere for cooperation in the Arctic worsens.⁴³

Emerging security interests

China's security interests in the Arctic are not explicitly expressed in the white paper, however, there are a number of developments that indicate their presence.⁴⁴ In 2015, for instance, China's National Security Law included an article on a need to secure China's activities, assets and other interests in the polar regions.⁴⁵

While there is little evidence of current Chinese military engagement in the Arctic region, China's increasing maritime power and references to the potential development of nuclear-powered ice-breakers raises concern.⁴⁶

In September 2015, five PLAN ships were—for the first time—observed in the Bering Sea after completing a joint military exercise with Russia.⁴⁷ One month later, PLAN Fleet 152 visited the Baltic Sea for the first time. This was perceived as a demonstration of China's capabilities in power projection.

China's security interests in the Arctic should be considered as part of its broader maritime interests that have been rising on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) agenda since 2012. In 2012, during the 18th National Congress of the CCP, Chinese President Hu Jintao, declared China's ambition to become a strong maritime power.⁴⁸ This ambition was repeated in China's 2013 and 2014 defence white papers.⁴⁹ Over this period, the PLAN has shifted its focus from defending waters under the cover of land-based naval aircraft to operating on the high seas, capable of protracted operations in the open oceans and able to project power in distant waters. During the multinational naval events that marked the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PLAN in April 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed to build a 'maritime community with a shared future' that aims to promote

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Northeast Asian observers', UI Brief no. 23, Nov. 2013; Anthony, I., Zhou, J. and Su F., 'EU security perspectives in an era of connectivity: Implications for relations with China', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2020/3, Feb. 2020.

⁴² SIPRI (note 3).

⁴³ SIPRI (note 3).

⁴⁴ Brady, A., 'Facing up to China's military interests in the arctic', *China Brief*, vol. 19, no. 21, 10 Dec. 2019.

⁴⁵ Chinese State Council, '中华人民共和国国家安全法(主席令第二十九号)' [China's National Security Law], 1 July 2015.

⁴⁶ Martinson, R., 'The Role of the arctic in Chinese naval strategy', *China Brief*, vol. 19, no. 22, 20 Dec. 2019; and Havnes, H. and Selan, J., 'The increasing security focus in China's arctic policy', The Arctic Institute, 16 July 2020.

⁴⁷ Guoyuan, D., '阅兵之际中国海军首次现身北极附近海域' [Chinese navy appeared in the waters near to the Arctic for the first time during the military parade], *Huanqiu*, 3 Sep. 2015.

⁴⁸ Xinhua, '中共八大代表强烈支持中国海洋强国' [Representatives of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China strongly support China's decision to become a strong maritime power], 10 Nov. 2012.

⁴⁹ Chinese State Council, *The diversified employment of China's Armed Forces*, White Paper (Information Office of the State Council: Beijing, Apr. 2013).



cooperation among navies and contribute to maritime peace and prosperity.⁵⁰ Although the Arctic was not explicitly mentioned during the speech, many Chinese scholars have emphasized the important strategic value in China playing a more prominent role in Arctic governance. They argue that China's engagement in the Arctic can lay a solid foundation for its broader global ambitions in maritime governance in other maritime spaces.⁵¹

III. Geopolitical tensions: Impact on maritime transportation and energy resource exploration in the Arctic

Growing tensions between Russia and the West outside the Arctic have already had an impact in the region, particularly on energy resource exploration and shipping. Canada, the EU, Norway and the USA all imposed sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.⁵² As a result, China became Russia's main partner in hydrocarbon resource development. Over the past five years Russia has introduced tougher regulations on commercial shipping in the NSR, discussed further below, which in turn required a response from Arctic states.

Sanctions and Russian oil and gas development in the Arctic

In 2014 the USA placed sanctions on Russia. These sanctions included a ban on providing technology or services that could be used to support exploration or production for deep-water, Arctic offshore or shale projects that have the potential to produce oil or gas in Russia or maritime areas claimed by Russia.⁵³ The EU placed very similar sanctions on Russia; however, they mostly concern the oil industry, while US sanctions include both the oil and gas industries.⁵⁴ The EU's sanctions also introduced financial restrictions on loan funds for more than 30 days on Russia's largest banks and corporations, including Gazprom, Gazprom Neft, Lukoil, Novatek, Rosneft, Surgutneftegaz and Transneft.⁵⁵

The sanctions effectively ended cooperation between the Russian state-owned companies Gazprom and Rosneft and their Western partners on the Arctic shelf. Without foreign partners to share the risks and costs of geological exploration in the Arctic, Gazprom and Rosneft were forced to

⁵⁰ Zhang, Z., 'Xi proposes building maritime community with shared future', *China Daily*, 23 Apr. 2019.

⁵¹ Yang, Z., Wang, M. and Zheng Z., 'The relationship and impact between the development of the arctic channel and the construction of the "Ice Silk Road"', *Maritime Economy in China*, no. 2, 2019; and Li, Z. et al., 'Research on the construction of "Polar Silk Road" and arctic destiny community', *Advances in Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 8, Aug. 2019.

⁵² Welt, C., et al., 'U.S. Sanctions on Russia', Congressional Research Service Report R45415, 17 Jan. 2020.

⁵³ US Department of Treasury, Office of Foreign Asset Control, 'Ukraine/Russia-related Sanctions Program', 16 June 2016.

⁵⁴ Makhmutov, T., Polosina, D. and Kosivets, A., 'Sanctions Activity of the US and the EU in Regard to Russia: Consequences for Arctic Projects', Russian International Affairs Council, 15 Oct. 2015.

⁵⁵ Klishas, A. A., [Political and legal analysis of restrictive measures imposed on the Russian Federation, its citizens and legal entities by foreign states], RUDN Bulletin, no. 1, 2016 (in Russian).



postpone their plans to develop Arctic resources.⁵⁶ There have been efforts by the Russian government to stimulate import substitution and encourage the continuation of resource projects. Despite these efforts, the development of hydrocarbon extraction in the Arctic shelf has been delayed and reduced in scope.⁵⁷ Domestic technological solutions are at least 5–10 years away and the combination of sanctions and low oil and gas prices mean that achieving progress will remain a difficult task.⁵⁸

Onshore production, particularly the Yamal liquid natural gas (LNG) project, has also been affected by sanctions and the Russian company, Novatek, was forced to seek new investment in Asia. Chinese investors now own 30 per cent of the Yamal LNG project and 20 per cent of a second project: Arctic LNG-2.⁵⁹

Growing China–Russia cooperation in the Arctic

In spite of sanctions, cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic has helped Russia to continue to develop the NSR and energy projects. This development is beneficial to China since it has helped to diversify China’s oil imports and reduce Chinese dependence on Middle Eastern oil.⁶⁰

Cooperation between China and Russia also has a strategic dimension. Most Chinese transit routes for oil from the Middle East and Africa pass through the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait—areas where China is concerned about the ability of the US Navy to interdict energy supplies.⁶¹ The NSR allows China to bypass this route.

Russian support would be essential if China wants to legitimatize its status as a non-Arctic state.⁶² China nevertheless has concerns about cooperating with Russia.⁶³ From a financial perspective, China may see low returns on investments in expensive resource exploration in Arctic conditions. On a political level, cooperation in developing the NSR with Russia might be perceived as Chinese support for Russia’s tightening national regulatory control over the NSR.

Engagement in shipping and transportation is less dynamic than cooperation on energy projects. The only Chinese company that is

⁵⁶ Kutuzova, M. and Matveeva, O., [Arctic question], *Kommersant*, 20 Dec. 2019 (in Russian).

⁵⁷ Sergey Tikhonov, [The President expanded the benefits for oil and gas projects in the Arctic and offshore], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 18 Mar. 2020 (in Russian); and [Sanctions prevent Russia from exploring the Arctic shelf, but other countries have not succeeded either], *Prime*, 23 July 2019 (in Russian).

⁵⁸ Kutuzova and Matveeva (note 56).

⁵⁹ [NOVATEK invited the Chinese to the plant], *RBC News*, 25 Apr. 2019 (in Russian).

⁶⁰ Li, Z., ‘浅析中俄北极合作：框架背景、利益、政策与机遇’ [Analysis of Chinese–Russian Arctic cooperation: Background, benefits, policies and opportunities], Статьи на актуальные темы, vol. 4, 2019; and Zhao, L., ‘经北冰洋连接欧洲的蓝色经济通道对接俄罗斯北方航道复兴——从认同到趋同的路径研究’ [Aligning the Blue Economic Passage leading up to Europe via the Arctic ocean with Russia’s reviving Northern Sea Route: From identification to harmonization], *Pacific Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2018, pp. 82–91.

⁶¹ Wang, L., ‘Sea lanes and Chinese national energy security’, *Journal of Coastal Research*, no. 73 (2015); and Tan, A., *Security Strategies in the Asia-Pacific: The United States’ “Second Front” in Southeast Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2011); and Xu, Q. and Wang, S., ‘俄属北极地区油气资源与中俄油气合作’ [Oil and Gas Resources in the Russian Arctic Region and Chinese–Russian oil and gas cooperation], *Russian, East European & Central Asian Studies*, vol. 4 (2019), pp. 111–26.

⁶² Li (note 60) and Goodman, S. and Sun, Y., ‘What you may not know about Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic and why it matters’, *The Diplomat*, 13 Aug. 2020.

⁶³ Xu and Wang (note 61); Li (note 60); and SIPRI (note 3).



still carrying out shipments in the NSR is the state-owned China Ocean Shipping Company, while other Chinese shipping companies are waiting to see whether the demand for transportation and the profitability of Arctic operations will increase.⁶⁴

Increasing control of the Northern Sea Route

As Russia's strategic thinking has increasingly emphasized sovereignty, its national regulations related to shipping along the NSR have been revised.⁶⁵ In 2013 an authorization procedure for ships to pass through the NSR was introduced, and in 2017–19 Russia proposed further limitations. In December 2017, the Amendments to Merchant Shipping Code of Russia introduced changes which granted an exclusive right to vessels sailing under the Russian state flag to transport hydrocarbon resources produced in Russia and loaded onto vessels located in the NSR area.⁶⁶ In 2018 Russia banned the use of ships built outside of Russia to transport oil and gas extracted in the Russian Arctic.⁶⁷ Both of these regulations have now entered into force. Although this legislation does not affect transit shipments and allows for introducing certain exemptions for cabotage shipping, it sends a strong signal that commercial shipping along the NSR may become more tightly regulated in the future.⁶⁸

In 2019 Russia suggested a new notification procedure for foreign warships passing through the territorial sea of the NSR. The new procedure means that a foreign state needs to submit a notification concerning the planned passage through the Russian territorial sea in the territorial sea of the NSR no later than 45 days prior to the start of the proposed passage. It also (under specific circumstances) requires mandatory ice and ice-breaker piloting by Russian-appointed personnel in the territorial sea and inland seas in the NSR water area.⁶⁹ This regulation has not yet entered into force and it will not directly affect the commercial traffic using the NSR. However, the proposal has been negatively perceived by foreign companies and Russia's Arctic neighbours.⁷⁰

IV. Military security developments and challenges in the Arctic

During the cold war, the Arctic region was one of the most important—and contested—spaces for military activity. US national security strategy endorsed by President Ronald Reagan included a significant change in

⁶⁴ Huang, L., Lasserre, F. and Alexeeva, O., ‘Arctic shipping and China’s shipping firms: Strategic positioning in the frame of climate change?’, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, 2014; Zhao, L., ‘中俄北极可持续发展合作:挑战与路径’ [China–Russia sustainable development cooperation in the Arctic: Challenges and approaches], *China International Studies*, no. 73 (Nov. 2018).

⁶⁵ This idea was discussed during the SIPRI Arctic Webinar Series; see SIPRI (note 3).

⁶⁶ President of Russia, ‘Amendments to merchant shipping code of Russia’, 29 Dec. 2017.

⁶⁷ Staalesen, A., ‘Deputy Prime Minister supports foreign sailing restrictions on Northern Sea Route’, *The Barents Observer*, 17 Sep. 2018.

⁶⁸ Moe, A., ‘A new Russian policy for the Northern sea route? State interests, key stakeholders and economic opportunities in changing times’, *The Polar Journal*, vol. 10, no. 2 (19 Aug. 2020).

⁶⁹ Nagayev, K., [The authorities have drawn up requirements for foreign military to pass along the Northern Sea Route], RBC, 6 Mar. 2019 (in Russian).

⁷⁰ This idea was discussed during the SIPRI Arctic Webinar Series. See SIPRI (note 3).



approach to the Arctic. The emphasis on a passive barrier defence of the North Atlantic and the Pacific based on intercepting Soviet submarines ships and aircraft as they advanced was replaced with a more assertive strategy targeting Soviet naval forces as they left their homeports and airfields.⁷¹

Military preparations were subject to a pervasive secrecy, and exercises included strategic deception manoeuvres, to achieve the maximum element of surprise. As the cold war ended, the approach to transparency in military affairs changed, and a breakthrough achieved at the 1986 Stockholm Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe reduced secrecy and promoted confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs).⁷²

After the cold war, the Arctic has not become a highly militarized region or a heavily contested space. However, there are some indications that this situation is changing even if the levels of militarization remain far short of cold war conditions.

Russian military investment and other changes

In 2014 many Euro-Atlantic states began to pay closer attention to Russian military modernization programmes, including in the Arctic and developments have been mapped in several studies.⁷³

These studies concluded that in 2007 Russia began to refocus on its military capabilities in the Arctic having wound them down after the cold war. In the following decade, Russia established or re-established its presence in the Arctic with a dedicated military command, four new Arctic brigades, 14 operational airfields, 16 deep-water ports and an ice-breaker fleet.⁷⁴ Russia began to conduct long-range air patrols at a tempo not seen since the cold war and organized a variety of military exercises within the Arctic.

In 2013, Russian President Vladimir V. Putin, ordered the armed forces to restart the practice of conducting large-scale short- or no-notice military

After the cold war, the Arctic has not become a highly militarized region, however, there are some indications that this situation is changing

exercises to test the readiness of troops. A snap exercise conducted in 2015 started with the mobilization of forces in the Arctic, including the entire Northern Fleet, and expanded to include 45 000 troops, 3400 military vehicles, 41 ships, 15 submarines, and 110 aircraft.⁷⁵ Russia organizes major strategic exercises on a four-year rotational basis in the eastern, western, central and southern parts of the country. In 2019, an exercise named 'Tsentr-19' also included an Arctic dimension.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Lehman, J., *Oceans Ventured: Winning the Cold War at Sea*, (WW Norton: New York, 2018).

⁷² Grinevsky, O., and Hansen, L. M., *Making Peace: Confidence and Security in a New Europe*, (Eloquent Books: New York, 2009).

⁷³ Devyatkin, P., 'Russia's Arctic strategy: Military and security', The Arctic Institute, 13 Feb. 2018; Aliyev, N., 'Russia's military capabilities in the Arctic', International Centre for Defence and Security, 25 June 2019; and Melino, M., and Conley, H. A., 'The ice curtain: Russia's military capabilities in the Arctic', CSIS, 26 Mar. 2020.

⁷⁴ Sullivan, D., Senator, Statement during the confirmation hearing on the expected nomination of James N. Mattis to be Secretary of Defense, Committee on Armed Services, US Senate, 12 Jan. 2017, p. 96.

⁷⁵ Stiberg, E., 'Russian snap military exercise in March of 2015: What implications did this exercise have?', Unpublished Master's thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2017.

⁷⁶ Sukhankin, S., 'What did Russia's strategic military exercise Tsentr-2019 reveal?', International Centre for Defence and Security, 24 Oct. 2019.



Analysts have pointed to three main factors that drive Russia's military investment in the Arctic.⁷⁷ First, to defend a part of the Russian homeland that is essential to national security because it houses the naval element of Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent. This task applies first and foremost to the complex of Northern Fleet naval bases in Northwest Russia.

Second, to defend land and sea spaces that are critical to Russia's economy today. These areas contain the main extractive industries on which Russia depends today, and a large share of resources that may be developed in future.

Third, to challenge the free use of ocean spaces by the USA and its allies, who have assumed for three decades that sea lines of communication in the Atlantic Ocean will be unchallenged. Similarly, the USA and Japan have assumed that they will control the North Pacific, the south of the Bering Sea and the Aleutian Island chain.⁷⁸ Russia has invested in forces to challenge the USA's ability to reinforce its allies in a military crisis.

In August 2020, Russia carried out one part of the strategic Ocean Shield exercise in the Bering Sea.⁷⁹ This was the largest military exercise at sea since the Soviet period and it also incorporated major activities around Northwest Russia. However, the north eastern dimension of the exercise involved more than 50 warships and about 40 aircraft as well as land-based cruise missiles fired at targets in the exercise area with the aim to test the capability to integrate different weapons in a networked manner.⁸⁰ The exercise took place in international waters, but included activities inside the USA's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Western military investment and other changes

The reactivation of the Arctic dimension in Western military plans appears to be at an early stage. Plans that are now being finalized will probably lead to much more significant investments and programmes in the future. The USA has developed military plans for the Arctic in the policy framework established in the national security and national defence strategy documents. These frameworks emphasize preparing for an era of strategic competition in which China and Russia pose the main challenges to the USA.

The reactivation of the Arctic dimension in Western military plans appears to be at an early stage

The infrastructure and forces in the Arctic region play an important role in signalling an early warning of an attack on the USA by air and the emerging architecture of missile defence.⁸¹ The approaches to the Arctic Ocean are described as 'strategic corridors for maritime traffic' in the Department of Defense Arctic Strategy.⁸² The Bering Strait separates the USA and Russia, while the Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom, Norwegian (GIUK-N) gap

⁷⁷ British House of Commons, Defence Committee, *On Thin Ice: UK Defence in the Arctic*, 12th report of 2017/19, HC388, 19 July 2018, pp. 19–23.

⁷⁸ Rubel, R. C., 'Talking about sea control', *US Naval War College Review*, vol. 63, no. 4, (2010).

⁷⁹ Isachenkov, V., 'Russian navy conducts major maneuvers near Alaska', *Military Times*, 30 Aug. 2020.

⁸⁰ Stiberg (note 75).

⁸¹ Two of the eight radar facilities that form an integrated early warning system are located in the Arctic; one at the Thule Air Base in Greenland, Denmark, and the second at the Clear Air Force Station in Alaska, USA.

⁸² US Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 'Department of Defense Arctic Strategy', (DOD: Washington, DC, June 2019).



directly impacts US naval operations in Europe, Africa and the Middle East.⁸³ US military posture is changing in ways that reflect differences in the strategic conditions in various parts of the Arctic region.

Nordic area

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 the possibility of a major conflict in Europe once again became a planning assumption for NATO. NATO has developed a tailored response to cover contingencies ranging from small, local operations to full-scale conflict against a sophisticated peer adversary. NATO's planned response does not reproduce the cold war model of large forces permanently deployed in the places considered most vulnerable to attack.⁸⁴ Planning involves the rapid reinforcement of relatively small forward-deployed forces, including the movement of large numbers of troops and equipment from the USA to Europe.

In 2018 the USA decided to return the US Navy 2nd Fleet to full combat status, a process that was completed in 2020.⁸⁵ One key task of the US Navy 2nd Fleet is to protect shipping lanes in the Atlantic, but the Navy underlined that it will also be able to employ 'combat ready naval forces in the Atlantic and Arctic'.⁸⁶

The primary military focus of the USA in Greenland is maintaining the radars that play a key role in early warning of missile attack, command and control of US military satellites and improving awareness of objects in outer space.⁸⁷ After the end of the cold war military engagement involving Greenland mainly fluctuated in line with US decisions related to missile defence. Equipment at the US Thule Air Force base was upgraded between 2006–11 as part of the modernization of the US long-range radar network.⁸⁸ In 2016 an offer by China to buy a disused naval base in Greenland was rejected by the responsible authorities.⁸⁹ In 2018 Denmark denied permission to a Chinese construction company to bid for a contract to build a new airfield in Greenland.⁹⁰

In September 2018 the Government of Greenland welcomed a US Statement of Intent on Defense Investments in Greenland.⁹¹ The new defence investments appear to be devoted mainly to upgrading facilities to improve the living conditions of stationed personnel, but also to facilitate

⁸³ US Department of Defense (note 29).

⁸⁴ Hagström Frisell (note 30).

⁸⁵ 'Navy's Atlantic-based 2nd Fleet command now fully operational', *Stars and Stripes*, 2 Jan. 2020.

⁸⁶ 'Navy's Atlantic-based 2nd Fleet command now fully operational', *Stars and Stripes*, 2 Jan. 2020.

⁸⁷ Dickstein, C., 'Air Force seeks increased training, infrastructure investment in changing Arctic region', *Stars and Stripes*, 21 July 2020.

⁸⁸ Kristensen, K., S., 'Greenland, Denmark and the debate on missile defense: A window of opportunity for increased autonomy', Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) Working Paper no. 14 (2004); and Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, 'Upgraded Early Warning Radars (UEWR)', Dec. 2018.

⁸⁹ Lucht, H., 'Strictly business? Chinese investments in Greenland raise US concerns', DIIS Policy Brief, Nov. (2018).

⁹⁰ Sørensen, C. T. N., 'China is in the Arctic to stay as a great power: How China's increasingly confident, proactive and sophisticated arctic diplomacy plays into Kingdom of Denmark tensions', *Arctic Yearbook 2018*, pp. 1–15.

⁹¹ Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The Kingdom of Denmark, including Greenland, welcomes the United States "statement of intent on defense investments in Greenland"', 17 Sep. 2018.



joint surveys to identify natural resources such as minerals of strategic importance believed to be abundant in Greenland.⁹²

Denmark is significantly increasing military spending devoted to Greenland. The investment will enhance Denmark's capacity to conduct air surveillance and to detect submarine activity.⁹³ In addition, Denmark will expand the number of regular forces based in Greenland and also establish a home guard and encourage Greenlandic recruitment to Danish defence forces.⁹⁴

The US Navy 2nd Fleet will also work more closely with NATO allies and a Maritime Operations Centre was established in Keflavik, Iceland in 2019. A series of projects have modernized the infrastructure at Keflavik to allow long-range maritime patrol aircraft, large transport aircraft and advanced fighter aircraft from NATO members to use the airbase.⁹⁵ The British Defence Minister explained the expansion of British military activities in Iceland by noting a sharp increase in Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic and in the number of Russian vessels approaching British territorial waters.⁹⁶

The coastal geography of Norway was a significant cold war asset to NATO because it could house well-protected infrastructure close to sea and air spaces where allied navies planned to conduct operations. Recent projects to refurbish and modernize military bases in the north of Norway are now being translated into new kinds of regional force deployments. In 2016 Norway began to prepare existing naval bases at Olavsern and Tromsø to provide well protected facilities from which US nuclear-powered attack submarines could operate.⁹⁷

The navies of NATO member states have begun to make more frequent visits to the Barents Sea to learn more about how to operate efficiently in Arctic weather and local sea conditions. In May 2020 the navies of the UK and the USA conducted a joint visit to the Arctic.⁹⁸ In September 2020 the forces of Denmark, Norway, the UK and the USA conducted a larger military exercise in international waters, but sometimes entering Russia's EEZ. Russia was informed about the May 2020 naval exercises but, reportedly, not of the September 2020 naval exercises.⁹⁹

Until recently, Sweden had avoided large-scale military exercises in its Arctic region but this has now changed. In addition to participating in naval exercises Sweden also hosted the Northern Wind military exercise in 2019, meant to practice a scenario where 'Sweden defends itself from a fictitious

⁹² 'US, Greenland partner to survey some of the island for resources', *Reuters*, 10 Oct. 2019.

⁹³ McGwin, K., 'Denmark will triple Arctic defense spending', *Arctic Today*, 3 Dec. 2019.

⁹⁴ McGwin, K., 'The Danish military plans a Greenlandic militia to help close its Arctic capacity gap', *Arctic Today*, 17 Aug. 2020.

⁹⁵ McLeary, P., 'US expands Icelandic airfield for tankers, big cargo lift', *Breaking Defense*, 18 July 2019.

⁹⁶ Allison, G., 'Iceland and NATO—the reluctant north?', *UK Defence Journal*, 3 Mar. 2020.

⁹⁷ 'Submarines: Norway militarizes its ports', *StrategyPage*, 3 Oct. 2020; and Waterfield, B., 'Arctic submarine base reopens to help US', *The Australian*, 12 Oct. 2020.

⁹⁸ Woody, C., 'The US Navy sent surface ships deep into the Arctic, and close to Russia, for the first time in over 30 years', *Business Insider*, 4 May 2020; and 'America and Britain play cold-war games with Russia in the Arctic', *The Economist*, 10 May 2020.

⁹⁹ Nilsen, T., 'London calling to the faraway north, leads largest NATO task force into the Barents Sea since last Cold War', *The Barents Observer*, 11 Sep. 2020; and Sevunts, L., 'Experts warn of potentially "deadly" great power games in the Arctic', *The Barents Observer*, 16 Sep. 2020.



adversary who attacks northern Sweden'.¹⁰⁰ The exercise included several NATO member states, and became the largest military exercise on Swedish soil since the cold war.¹⁰¹ Finland and the USA have expanded their joint military activities since signing a Statement of Intent to strengthen security cooperation in 2016.¹⁰² The Bold Quest multinational exercise, meant to test interoperability between NATO and its partner states, took place in Finland for the first time in 2019.¹⁰³

Military investment in Alaska

The greater attention that the USA is paying to strategic issues in the Arctic is reflected in enhancements to US forces based in Alaska. Plans to upgrade US military capabilities in the Arctic are now being implemented.

A visible sign of the importance attached to facilities in Alaska is the decision to make the Eielson Air Force Base a permanent location housing the F-35 fighter aircraft, the most modern in the USA's inventory. Alaska is also expected to become a main training area for US allies that are purchasing the F-35.¹⁰⁴

The Fort Greely military base in Alaska is part of the evolving architecture of US missile defence. The Trump administration argued in favour of expanding the number of ground-based missile interceptors at the base from 20 interceptors to 40 interceptors.¹⁰⁵ While the construction of silos to house the additional interceptor missiles has been authorized, funding for the missiles themselves has not. However, the infrastructure needed for a subsequent missile deployment will go ahead.¹⁰⁶

The US Navy does not have any permanent bases in the Arctic. However the potential reopening of the Adak Island base in the Aleutian island chain has been under discussion since at least 2018, in the first instance to provide a permanent base from which long-range maritime patrol aircraft could operate.¹⁰⁷ The base could support assistance to US allies in the Pacific region as well as playing an important role in supporting operations in the Bering Sea.¹⁰⁸

Planning for Arctic operations requires integration by geographical combatant commands (Northern Command, European Command and Indo-Pacific Command) and functional commands (Cyber Command, Space Command, Special Operations Command, Strategic Command and

¹⁰⁰ Swedish Armed Forces, 'Northern Wind: Scenario och målsättningar' [Northern Wind: Scenario and objectives], accessed 11 Dec. 2020.

¹⁰¹ '10 000 soldater intar Norrbotten' [10,000 soldiers occupy Norrbotten], *Aftonbladet*, 22 Mar. 2020.

¹⁰² US Embassy in Finland, 'The United States and Finland sign statement of intent', 7 Oct. 2016.

¹⁰³ The Bold Quest exercise usually takes place in the USA, see Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'Bold Quest 19.1 coalition demonstration commences in Finland', accessed 27 Nov. 2020.

¹⁰⁴ 'Alaska communities prepare for incoming F-35 squadrons at Eielson Air Force Base', *Air Force Times*, 2 June 2019; and Guerrisky, A. L., 'Range Squadron to manage 77,000 square miles of airspace, Pacific Air Forces, 13 May 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Ellis, T., 'Missile Defense Agency: "Kill vehicle" contract cancellation won't affect Greely expansion', *Alaska Public Media*, 30 Aug. 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Karako, T., and Rumbaugh, W., 'Inflection point: Missile defense and defeat in the 2021 budget', *CSIS Briefs*, 22 Mar. 2020.

¹⁰⁷ McLeary, P., 'Navy looking to fly P-8s from cold war-era base in Alaska', *Breaking Defense*, 14 Dec. 2018.

¹⁰⁸ 'Alaskan islanders yearn for the Navy to build a Bering Sea base', *Navy Times*, 27 Sep. 2019.

The greater attention that the USA is paying to the Arctic is reflected in enhancements to US forces in Alaska



Transportation Command). As important as the investment in infrastructure and capabilities is, the Arctic is being integrated into the future design for joint command and control to prepare the US military to conduct ‘all domain’ warfare.¹⁰⁹

Russia’s Ocean Shield exercise described above caused confusion and alarm to a commercial fishing fleet working inside the USA’s EEZ who were unaware of the activity.¹¹⁰ The exercise and the panic it caused illustrate the need to find a response to contingencies in the ‘grey zone’ short of conflict. During the exercise, fishing vessels reported being harassed by Russian military aircraft and being ordered to leave a sea space where they were fishing legally.¹¹¹ The commercial fishers contacted the USACG to ask for information and protection, but the points of contact within the USACG were apparently unaware of the Russian exercise themselves. A representative from the US commercial fishing industry subsequently requested a change in procedure to task the USACG with informing fishing fleets of military activities taking place in the USA’s EEZ, and to mandate an at-sea USACG presence to protect fishing vessels against harassment.¹¹²

Naval presence

As described above, the USA’s military infrastructure in the Arctic region is evolving, but for diplomatic as well as operational reasons the approach to military matters in the Arctic does not involve a large permanent presence. Some of the key requirements, such as enhanced awareness of Russian military activities in the Arctic and creating secure communications, can be accomplished in other ways. For example, the US Air Force Arctic Strategy, released in July 2020 emphasized the future role of satellites.¹¹³

The creation of a significant and permanent US presence in the Arctic would be expensive—given inhospitable conditions—and highly visible. This may create a potential political problem for Arctic states where public opinion is concerned with activities that may deteriorate relations with Russia. At the same time, because a surge capacity is needed for certain contingencies, an expeditionary capability is being created.

Exercises are being organized by the US Navy to ensure that ‘allied and partner navies must remain proficient in all operating environments to ensure the continued security and access to the seas. This is especially critical in the Arctic, where the austere weather environment demands constant vigilance and practice.’¹¹⁴

The forward presence of combat-credible naval forces is an element of military assurance to allies and friends and deterrence of potential adversaries. The forward presence needs to be visible in order to achieve the

The USA’s military infrastructure in the Arctic is evolving, however, it does not involve a large permanent presence

¹⁰⁹ Hitchens, T., ‘All-domain ops require rethinking combatant commands: Goldfein’, *Breaking Defense*, 10 Mar. 2020.

¹¹⁰ Madsen, S., Executive Director, Sea Processors Association, Statement before the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, US Senate, Subcommittee on Security, 22 Sep. 2020.

¹¹¹ Madsen (note 110).

¹¹² Madsen (note 110).

¹¹³ US Department of the Air Force, ‘Arctic Strategy’, July 2020.

¹¹⁴ Spaziano, L., ‘US, UK ships operate in the Barents Sea’, US European Command, 4 May 2020.



deterrence and assurance objective, but also needs to take account of the risk to itself and the risk of escalation should it come under attack. Russia's recent deployment of new military capabilities, based on precision weapons that are effective at longer ranges, is changing calculations around forward presence missions.¹¹⁵ For example, in 2020 the US Marine Corps ended their practice of keeping permanent rotational forces in Norway.¹¹⁶ In January 2021 the USA sent four B-1B bombers to Norway for the first time to demonstrate how quickly a significant conventional strike force could be deployed without the need for forward-based forces that would be exposed to a pre-emptive attack.¹¹⁷

Plans for Arctic Freedom of Navigation Operations

Freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) are carried out by the USA 'to maintain the global mobility of US forces and unimpeded commerce by protesting and challenging attempts by coastal States to unlawfully restrict access to the seas'.¹¹⁸ FONOPs are deliberate acts by the USA in locations where coastal states are considered to make excessive maritime claims and, by definition, are likely to be contested.

The USA has considered conducting FONOPs in the Arctic for some time. In 2016 plans for a FONOP through the NSR, along Russia's northern coast, were shelved on the advice of the USACG.¹¹⁹ In January 2019 the US Secretary of the Navy said that 'freedom of navigation should be plied up there. We're going to try to do it'.¹²⁰ During 2020 a limited FONOP off the Aleutian Islands was planned.¹²¹

In May 2019, Pompeo used a speech to the Arctic Council to draw attention to concerns over recent Russian regulations affecting passage along the Northern Sea Route.¹²² Pompeo's remarks indicate that the timetable for organizing FONOPs in the Arctic has been accelerated, in future FONOPs will be designed to challenge any future Russian claim that sovereign control over the NSR is customary law.

¹¹⁵ For example ,the USA conducted more than 200 bomber task force sorties in 2018–20, including B1B Lancer and B52H Stratofortresses flights over the Nordic region and the Arctic Ocean; see US Air Forces in Europe, 'US Air Force B-52s return to Europe for ally, partner training', 22 Aug. 2020.

¹¹⁶ Athey, P., 'Marine Corps announces end to year-round deployment to Norway', Marine Corps Times, 13 Aug. 2020.

¹¹⁷ Mizokami, K., 'The Air Force is sending B-1B bombers to Norway for a not-so-subtle reason', Popular Mechanics, 12 Feb. 2021.

¹¹⁸ Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, DOD Annual Freedom of Navigation Report, Fiscal Year 2017, Report to Congress, 31 Dec. 2017.

¹¹⁹ Zukunft, P., 'Navigating the Fourth Coast', *Shifting Currents in the Arctic*, CSIS, May 2019; and Auerswald, D., 'Now is not the time for a FONOP in the Arctic', War on the Rocks, 11 Oct. 2019.

¹²⁰ Spencer, R., Secretary of the Navy, Speech at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), 8 Jan. 2019. Also quoted in Pincus, R., 'Rushing Navy ships into the Arctic for a FONOP is dangerous', US Naval Institute, *Proceedings*, vol. 145, no. 1 (Jan. 2019).

¹²¹ Schreiber, M., 'How geopolitics complicate the US Navy's plans for major Arctic operations', Arctic Today, 24 July 2019.

¹²² Pompeo, M., US Secretary of State, 'Looking north: Sharpening America's Arctic focus', Speech in Rovaniemi, Finland, 6 May 2019.



V. Containing military security risks for the Arctic region

The Arctic is warming more quickly than climate change models suggest and impacts are already being seen in forest fires, melting permafrost, the arrival of invasive animal and plant species and worsening sea conditions including drifting ice, freezing fog and ice storms.¹²³ Another consequence of this warming is increased human activity. Arctic states recognize climate-related risks, which are essentially safety concerns, and have a well-functioning dialogue on how to mitigate them.

The security discourse among Arctic states is active, but focused on non-military issues. The main security challenges arise from the scale and pace of change rather than lack of cooperation. However, the long-standing ambition to keep the Arctic as a region of low tension and high cooperation is coming under pressure. Military activity in the region is still low compared to the cold war, but it is increasing.

After a long period of infrequent and small military activities in the Arctic region, the armed forces of Russia and Western states are re-learning how to conduct sustained operations at scale. Increasingly complex military exercises are being carried out to reveal how equipment works in Arctic conditions, the impact of sustained operations on personnel, what items can be brought into the region, what needs to be permanently in theatre and other aspects of planning and conducting operations.¹²⁴

The periodic deployment of British, French and US naval forces to demonstrate forward presence is being tailored to the prevailing security environment. More force packages capable of meeting high-end military contingencies are increasingly present. Russia has expressed a general concern about the increasing tempo of Western naval activities in Arctic waters—particularly when conducted by non-Arctic navies—and monitors them closely.¹²⁵ FONOPs conducted by the US Navy perhaps carry the greatest risk because they are designed to challenge Russia.

Security governance in and for the Arctic

Today there is no obvious ‘landing place’ for an Arctic dialogue on military security. The existing governance system in the region built on inclusive dialogue between Arctic states was not designed to address military security problems, and it is difficult to adapt for that purpose without putting the benefits of cooperation at risk.

In spite of growing tensions between the USA, China and Russia, the work of the Arctic Council and its six working groups continued without interruptions under the Chairmanship of Iceland (2019–present). Russia is assuming the Chairmanship in May 2021 and, according to the statements

Today there is no obvious ‘landing place’ for an Arctic dialogue on military security

¹²³ Meredith, M. et al., ‘Polar regions’, eds H.-O. Pörtner et al., *Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, (IPCC: Geneva, 2019).

¹²⁴ Sevunts, L., ‘Experts warn of potentially “deadly” great power games in the Arctic’, Radio Canada International, 16 Sep. 2020.

¹²⁵ See for instance, Stepanov, A., [Alliance is pulled into the Arctic] *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 8 Sep. 2020 (in Russian); and Interfax, [Russian military says NATO military activity in the Arctic is growing], 11 Nov. 2020 (in Russian).



from Russian officials, Russia will continue to work along the same lines.¹²⁶ Raising military security issues by, for example, creating a specific security working group would inevitably bring serious disagreements into the work of the Arctic Council at a time when cooperation is badly needed to address the effects of the climate change, sustainable development and improving the lives of the Arctic's indigenous peoples.¹²⁷

Other forums exist but are limited in their capacity to address the security issues emerging in the Arctic. In line with the break in Western relations with Russia after the annexation of Crimea, military-to-military contacts and cooperation with Russia in the Arctic has been suspended. Meetings of Chiefs of Defence were put on hold in 2014. The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFRT) is a joint US–Norwegian initiative to bring together senior military officers from the eight Arctic states plus France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. Russia was excluded from meetings after 2014. The Arctic Coast Guards Forum is limited to the discussion of maritime safety and law enforcement.

NATO is the main forum for coordinating Western military cooperation, and there has been a progressive increase in the attention paid to Arctic issues in NATO discussions.¹²⁸ However, NATO does not currently have an Arctic strategy describing the collective approach to providing assurance to allies without further raising tensions in the region.¹²⁹

Bringing Arctic security to the pan-European Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or NATO–Russia Council as a separate topic also faces resistance. The OSCE has generally been reluctant to create sub-regional tables, while Russia would probably oppose a dedicated focus in any future talks with NATO to avoid legitimizing a role for NATO in the Arctic. Reviving the Chiefs of Defence meeting, inviting Russia to the ASFRT or establishing meetings among Ministries of Defence could be viable alternatives only if all Arctic states consent.

Apart from the dialogue among Arctic states themselves, actions by a wider group of states are relevant to the military dimension of regional security.

Non-Arctic states such as France, the Netherlands and the UK now participate in Arctic military exercises, for example, while transport and telecommunications infrastructure have civilian and military applications.¹³⁰ Two Icelandic mobile telecommunications companies, Nova and Syn, have partnered with Chinese companies to develop 5G digital networks.¹³¹

Bringing modern digital communications to the region also engages other actors, including South Korea and the EU, into the discussion of who can be accepted as trusted partners in infrastructure development.¹³²

¹²⁶ Chernenko, E., [There are no problems requiring a military solution in the Arctic], *Kommersant*, 15 Jan. 2021 (in Russian).

¹²⁷ Chernenko, E., [Theory and the Arctic of International Relations. Russia prepares to lead the Arctic Council], *Kommersant*, 26 Nov. 2020 (in Russian).

¹²⁸ Sebastian Sprenger, 'NATO's Camille Grand on the alliance's Arctic tack', *Defense News*, 12 May 2020.

¹²⁹ Charron, A., 'NATO and the geopolitical future of the Arctic', *Arctic Yearbook 2020*.

¹³⁰ Zandee, D., Kruijver, K., Stoetman, A., 'The future of Arctic security: The geopolitical pressure cooker and the consequences for the Netherlands', Clingendael Report, Apr. 2020.

¹³¹ Elliott, A., '5G comes to Iceland', RÚV, 22 Feb. 2019.

¹³² Hafstad, V., 'Two telecom companies in Iceland use huawei products', *Iceland Monitor*, 22 Oct. 2020. In 2019 a European Union (EU) Arctic Forum focused on building infrastructure to

**Despite increasing rhetoric over
geopolitical competition in the Arctic
there is still low probability for a
military conflict**



Despite increasing rhetoric over geopolitical competition in the Arctic it is still largely agreed that there is low probability for a military conflict in the Arctic. At the same time, one cannot ignore the rising concerns over military security dynamics and their impact on the region. Failure to address these concerns increases the likelihood that relations among Arctic states and with non-Arctic states will further deteriorate.

Military risk reduction measures for the Arctic region

Durable improvements in geopolitical relations requires a new political framework that can only be created by the most senior leaders, something that seems improbable today. However, there are measures that can contain if not reduce emerging military risks.

Establish a stand-alone naval notification system

The increase in military activity in the Arctic introduces several risks. When military forces from different states operate in proximity with one another there is a risk of accidental collisions or misjudgements that can lead to a loss of life or serious damage to very expensive equipment. Military activities can increase the risk to civilian activities, such as the confusion caused in a commercial fishing fleet on the sudden arrival of a large Russian naval force conducting an exercise in the Bering Sea noted above.

Whenever possible, military exercises to develop professional competence should be carried out in uncontested spaces, ideally in locations where sovereign control is undisputed. Arctic states could do a lot to develop professional competence without ever moving beyond their own territory.

It is nevertheless inevitable that some military activities will take place in more sensitive locations. If such activities are without prior notification, or if notification provides partial information at a late stage, it would be a step back to the secrecy that promoted military planning based on worst case scenarios. Worst-case planning might in turn promote an action/reaction dynamic that could accelerate the militarization of the Arctic. The tendency for worst-case planning might be fostered in the absence of organized frameworks for security dialogue and military-to-military contacts.

A prior notification system to increase transparency could be established as a politically binding stand-alone confidence- and security-building measure open to all states that plan military activities in the Arctic region. Submarine operations and the military use of space are of growing importance to Arctic operations, but they are invisible by their nature. Therefore, the contours of a notification system for the Arctic would require a focused peer-to-peer military dialogue to establish tailored reporting requirements based on realistic expectations of what can be revealed.

Establish a dialogue on military dimensions of environmental risk

The increased number of military activities, and their larger scale, inevitably increases the probability of accidents or misjudgements. There is a human cost to such incidents. In August 2019 an accident at a military facility

connect the Arctic region to the EU, including the use of space platforms and digital networks. See Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 'The European Union's longstanding commitment to enhance sustainable international cooperation in the Arctic', Joint press statement, Stockholm, 3 Oct. 2019.



near the White Sea killed 19 Russian citizens.¹³³ Furthermore, serious environmental damage could arise from an incident involving, for example, the nuclear reactors that power some naval vessels.

The Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP) works to improve the ecology of the space covering north-west Europe from the Arctic and Sub-Arctic areas, including the Barents and White Seas, to the southern shores of the Baltic Sea. A dialogue in the framework of NDEP could build on the work already being carried out by that grouping in the so-called ‘nuclear window’.¹³⁴

Moderate military activities to signal intentions while avoiding unnecessary provocation

In a deteriorating security environment states will continue to invest in the capabilities they feel they need to safeguard themselves and their allies. However, the potential for military actions to trigger a reaction from potential adversaries should be factored into their planning.

A weak force that is not seen as combat credible might not deliver the intended assurance and deterrence signal, while deploying a robust force that could compete militarily against a sophisticated adversary may be seen as a provocation—particularly if it is deployed forward in a crisis.

A trans-Atlantic dialogue on the appropriate balance between, for example, permanent or continuous forward presence, on the one hand, and what can be termed ‘offshore balancing’, on the other, is needed. This kind of dialogue can address the question of what Europeans are willing and able to do militarily as the centre of gravity as US thinking refocuses on China.

In 2018 NATO leaders endorsed a ‘Package for the South’ to address security issues in the Middle East and North Africa coherently, and established a ‘Hub for the South’ within NATO’s Allied Joint Force Command in Naples to act as a focal point for the southern dimension, including cooperation with partners.¹³⁵ A ‘Package for the North’ might be timely, along with a dedicated Hub to provide the necessary support to implementation.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has developed frameworks that might act as an inspiration for Arctic Council initiatives. The ASEAN states continue to organize a wide range of forums and working groups in which only members participate. However, they have supplemented their internal work with an ASEAN Regional Forum where 17 non-members come together with the ASEAN member states to discuss security issues. ASEAN Plus Three is a forum where ASEAN member states come together with China, Japan and South Korea to discuss issues of mutual interest.¹³⁶

A more inclusive dialogue could be also organized in the framework of an established event such as the bi-annual Regional Seapower Symposium (RSS) organized by the Italian Navy. The RSS has evolved from a meeting of Chiefs of Staff of Black Sea and Mediterranean navies into a high-level event with global participation to discuss public order of the oceans. How existing

¹³³ Norwegian Intelligence Service, *Focus 2020*, 28 July 2020, p. 10.

¹³⁴ See Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP), ‘History’, 2019.

¹³⁵ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), ‘NATO Brussels Summit Key Decisions 11–12 July 2018’, Fact sheet, Nov. 2018.

¹³⁶ See Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ‘ASEAN Plus Three’, accessed 25 Mar. 2021.



rules apply in the Arctic could be discussed in a working group convened under the auspices of the Symposium.

Managing the strategic triangle

One conclusion of this paper is that a China–Russia–USA strategic triangle does exist. The awareness that each point of this triangle can cause immense damage to the other two creates a shared interest in what Thomas Schelling named the ‘diplomacy of violence’ and it is also what prompted the Trump Administration to explore the feasibility of a trilateral arms limitation agreement.¹³⁷ As one former US official has noted, ‘although the Trump administration mishandled its diplomatic proposal to include China in US–Russian nuclear arms control negotiations, its overarching objective of seeking to include China was strategically sound.’¹³⁸

Of three sides of the strategic triangle—China–USA, China–Russia and USA–Russia—detailed consultations only take place along the China–Russia vector. Discussions among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council have been proposed as a platform to discuss all issues that affect global strategic stability. These five states have met multiple times to discuss nuclear matters, but discussions mainly appear to focus on technical risk reduction measures. Such measures may be necessary and useful, but they cannot unlock the political agreement that is a precondition to reversing the step-by-step increase in the influence of military factors in global politics.

A trilateral strategic dialogue between the three major military powers could help achieve a better understanding of future plans. A willingness to explain to the outcome of their deliberations in different regional settings, including the Arctic, could be a valuable first step towards maintaining the region as one of low tension and effective cooperation.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

A China–Russia–USA triangle exists, and it is beginning to have a significant impact on Arctic security. Each of the three major powers now regards the other two points of the triangle as central points of reference in security policy. However, they each have separate interests, including China and Russia even as they build a closer partnership. Perspectives on Arctic developments and Arctic governance may be a point of China–Russia disagreement in spite of cooperation on specific projects.

The relationship within this strategic triangle is already affecting the security dynamics in the Arctic through an increase in military activities but also in the strategic aspects of non-military activities related to digital networks, shipping and transportation infrastructure.

The impact of the strategic triangle is now spreading into Arctic institutions, including the Arctic Council, where tensions and disagreements are being brought to the table in meetings normally reserved for cooperation.

A China–Russia–USA triangle exists, and it is beginning to have a significant impact on Arctic security

¹³⁷ Schelling, T., *Arms and Influence*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1966).

¹³⁸ Rose, F. A., ‘Starting off on the right foot: Biden’s near-term arms control and strategic policy challenge’, Brookings Institution, 4 Dec. 2020.



The situation is likely to deteriorate in the future if nothing is done about it, and so some form of action is required to address security challenges.

At the same time, it is important not to exaggerate the scale of military security problems in the Arctic today. The militarization of the region remains very low compared with cold war levels even if it is steadily increasing. There are few, if any, issues internal to the Arctic that could be a cause for conflict and the region remains generally well regulated. Safety, as opposed to security, challenges are being addressed through cooperation.

A number of steps could be taken to mitigate the steady increase in military security challenges:

- An Arctic security dialogue could be modelled on the ASEAN Regional Forum or ASEAN Plus Three format without disrupting the cooperation among Arctic Council states.
- An inclusive dialogue on naval risk reduction could be organized using, for example, the bi-annual RSS as a platform.
- A dialogue on the environmental risks associated with military activities could be organized under the nuclear window of the NDEP.
- A stand-alone notification system could be created to inform civilian users of the scale and location of naval exercises to avoid disruption of commercial fishing and scientific investigations.

Arctic states cannot bring China, Russia and the USA together to discuss their triangular strategic relationship at high level. However, there is a compelling case for such a discussion to take place and the Arctic states should encourage it. In advance of a trilateral strategic dialogue between the three major military powers Arctic states could invite each of China, Russia and the USA to explain their future plans in a regional framework such as the security forum referred to above.



Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CSBM	confidence- and security-building measure
DOD	US Department of Defense
EEZ	Exclusive economic zone
EU	European Union
FONOP	Freedom of navigation operations
GIUK-N	Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom, Norwegian
LNG	Liquid natural gas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDEP	Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership
NSR	North Sea Route
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
RSS	Regional Seapower Symposium
USACG	United States Coast Guard



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