

# Security and the Arctic: navigating between cooperation and competition

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Nick Childs

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# Introduction

The Arctic region is undergoing particularly dramatic change, driven chiefly by environmental factors resulting from climate change. This is affecting the Arctic to a greater extent than any other region of the globe, with the region warming twice as fast as other parts of the planet. Consequently, the Arctic has become a region of growing strategic interest and concern. New geostrategic frictions are emerging as a result of increased military activities and the prospect of new maritime routes and greater access to resources; the increased focus on how to respond to the threat to the environment; and the impact of all this on Arctic populations and especially indigenous peoples. This is adding to the complexities of relations between different players and creating new dynamics of cooperation and competition in and around the region, with the increasing interest and potential influence of China one of the most significant developments in play.

This is stimulating interest in the region and a perceived requirement for new thinking about how to preserve Arctic stability and mitigate risks, while protecting economic, political and diplomatic opportunities.

For much of its recent history, the region has traded on a notion of 'Arctic exceptionalism', meaning that it has been uniquely shielded from many of the world's strategic issues and frictions, and that the states and peoples which inhabit it have been largely able to organise themselves and coexist in peace, with a few general tenets and instruments of the rules-based international order to act as frameworks and guides.

However, as the Arctic has become somewhat less inhospitable, both climatically and physically, it has also become less benign in a geostrategic sense. It can be argued that, compared with other regions, the Arctic remains an arena of relatively low tension overall. Nevertheless, the increasing elements of competition of various kinds are raising concern about the defence and security risks, particularly given the absence of a

The Arctic has become a region of increased strategic interest and military activity



(Peter Hermes Furian/Alamy Stock Photo)

mechanism or framework to even discuss defence and security issues in the region that includes all the key players. This paper analyses these risks and considers options for managing or mitigating them, both by using existing frameworks, adapted and reinforced as needed, and by looking at the possibilities for and potential of new structures and approaches.

In all this, it should be remembered that the Arctic region is large and diverse, and should not be considered as a unitary space. This paper focuses predominantly on the issues and dynamics centred on what is often referred to as 'the European Arctic' or 'the High North', broadly north of the Atlantic Ocean, including the Barents Sea and encompassing the associated land masses. At the same time, it acknowledges that there are links to other parts of the Arctic, whether North American or Pacific, and regions beyond, which inevitably influence the analysis of the defence and security issues at hand.

## Cross-currents in the Arctic

For much of the Arctic region's history, its harsh and difficult conditions meant its role as an arena for at least large-scale military activity was limited. During the twentieth century, however, there was significant military and, particularly, naval activity in the Arctic during both world wars, especially during the Second World War when the region grew in strategic significance, even if these activities underscored the challenges of operating in such a harsh environment, especially during the winter months.

After 1945, with the onset of the Cold War and the development of new military technologies, the region's strategic significance only grew. The route over the northern polar region provided the shortest distance of travel for nuclear-armed strategic bombers and ballistic missiles between the United States and the Soviet Union, and therefore it also became a key location for strategic early warning and air-defence sites. The Kola Peninsula was also the home to the Soviet Union's most powerful naval formation, which included most of Moscow's ballistic-missile submarines, at the time both conventionally powered (SSBs) and nuclear-powered (SSBNs).

As a result, the region, via what came to be dubbed the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap, became intimately connected with the naval balance in the North Atlantic, and therefore crucial for the coherence of NATO and the potential reinforcement of its European members from North America. On top of that, of course, with Norway a founding NATO member, the defence of this 'Northern Flank' became a key Alliance task. However, the strategic dynamics of all this and the role of the Arctic and the GIUK Gap also evolved as the ranges of submarine-launched ballistic missiles extended and Soviet strategic submarines no longer had to sortie out of the region into the Atlantic to reach the US, but could instead be sheltered in Arctic 'bastions'.

With the end of the Cold War, however, the military significance of the Arctic fell away, not least because the focus of chiefly Western defence and security attention shifted elsewhere. Moreover, Soviet and subsequently Russian military capabilities in the region fell rapidly and dramatically into disrepair.

This ushered in a new cooperative spirit in the region, which led, among other things, to the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996, bringing together the eight states

The Arctic Council is widely seen as a model forum for cooperative governance and discussion in certain areas, but is excluded from dealing with 'matters related to military security'



(Anton Novoderezhkin/Getty Images)

with territory within the Arctic Circle—Canada, Denmark (through Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia and the US. The Ottawa Declaration of 19 September 1996 set up the Arctic Council as ‘a high-level forum’ to provide a means for ‘promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues’. Its particular focus was on sustainable development and environmental protection and the declaration included a critical footnote stating that the council ‘should not deal with matters related to military security’.<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, the Arctic states have maintained an approach of pragmatic cooperation in the above areas, some of it codified in collaborative initiatives. In addition, in May 2008, representatives from the five states with Arctic Ocean coastlines (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the US) met in Ilulissat, Greenland, to agree the Ilulissat Declaration. Under it, they affirmed a commitment to ‘the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims’ in the Arctic Ocean and also to the extensive international framework centred on what was described as ‘the law of the sea’, in other words the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>2</sup>

Other cooperative mechanisms of note include the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, set up in 2015 by the eight

Arctic states to foster safe, secure and environmentally friendly maritime activity in the region. Another is the Barents Euro-Arctic Council for intergovernmental cooperation in the Barents region.

While the immediate post-Cold War years were characterised by a collaborative political and diplomatic atmosphere in the Arctic, by the early years of the twenty-first century there were already the stirrings of factors that would begin a shift back to something more uncertain and discordant, and put the more cooperative institutions and intentions under strain. First was the dawning realisation of the impact of the profound environmental changes that were being observed, and particularly the potential opening of the sea routes and increased access to untapped resources, a key driver in what some have referred to as the ‘globalisation’ of the Arctic. This fuelled discussion of the prospect of an ‘Arctic great game’ for control of the region.<sup>3</sup>

As an accompaniment, not long after, came stirrings from Moscow in multiple waves. These included the quick appreciation that the changing conditions could make Russia’s Arctic region an even more important engine of the country’s economy, but also a heightened awareness that the melting ice would bring new vulnerabilities for that territory.

The revival of Russia’s economy at the time also began to provide the funding for a significant and sustained

**Ilulissat, Greenland, was the location in 2008 of an important declaration by the Arctic coastal states on approaching overlapping Arctic Ocean claims**



(Sharpshooters/VWPics/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)



(US Department of Defense)

reform and modernisation of Russia's armed forces, which included a regeneration and reinforcement of Russia's Arctic military infrastructure and capabilities, as well as its submarine-based strategic nuclear forces and its general naval forces based in the Arctic.<sup>4</sup> The other key factor helping drive Russia's revived interest and reinforced posture has been the presence of President Vladimir Putin at the pinnacle of political power in Russia, presiding over a revived nationalism in the country and a revisionist Moscow with a government determined to reassert Russia's great-power status.

The modernisation programme began from a low capability baseline and has not recreated forces on the same scale as those of the Soviet era. Nevertheless, Russian forces are equipped with potent new long-range precision strike, coastal anti-ship missiles and air-defence capabilities. What is more, NATO capabilities, particularly those able to operate in the Arctic, had atrophied in the aftermath of the Cold War. NATO allies were for the most part also preoccupied elsewhere and there was initially a limited response to Russian actions in the Arctic. After all, Russia has legitimate defence and security concerns in the region, with by far the longest Arctic coastline and the majority of the Arctic's citizens. Nevertheless, questions arose about the increased military presence and activity in the region, chiefly Russian, whether this represented a case of increased 'militarisation' or 'securitisation' of the region,<sup>5</sup> and, in particular, if Russia's new military preparations could credibly be viewed as purely defensive.

Against this backdrop, in 2010 Norway and the US took the initiative to establish the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR), which brought together representatives from Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany,

Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Sweden, the UK and the US. The aim was to promote Arctic cooperation among military forces that operate in and around the Arctic region. In addition, at Canada's initiative, a first Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff forum took place at Goose Bay in April 2012. It brought together the chiefs of defence staff and other relevant senior commanders from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the US. The official agenda was to discuss search-and-rescue issues and to enhance communication and relationships between the parties, but the wider aim was to try to enhance stability in the region through defence diplomacy.<sup>6</sup> A second meeting took place in Greenland in June 2013.

However, following the crisis in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia was excluded from the ASFR and meetings of the chiefs' forum were suspended. The other 11 members of the ASFR have continued to meet, but the impact of these gatherings has been limited. At this stage it is a moot point whether these nascent security frameworks were undermined before they had a chance to prove themselves, or whether they were simply found wanting at the first test.

NATO's initial response to Russia's annexation of Crimea was to focus reassurance and increased-readiness efforts – essentially a return to a force posture centred on collective defence – on its member states in Central Europe and the Baltic region. However, not least because of the revival of Russia's naval, aerospace and even nuclear capabilities around the Kola Peninsula and in the High North, the Alliance turned to this region as well and to its defence posture in the North Atlantic which, particularly in the maritime domain, is linked to the potential threat from the High North.

As a result, NATO created a Joint Force Command based in Norfolk, Virginia, and focused on the Atlantic. Associated with this, the US Navy revived its 2nd Fleet, also based in Norfolk, with an area of responsibility stretching up to the High North. In 2018, the US Navy deployed an aircraft carrier, the USS *Harry S. Truman*, into the Arctic Circle for the first time since 1991. The

carrier also took part in the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War, *Trident Juncture 2018*, conducted in and around northern Norway. As well as the close presence of Russian warships in the exercise area, there were reports of Russian attempts to jam GPS signals in the vicinity at the same time, only adding to the impression of an increasingly tense military atmosphere.<sup>7</sup> In early

## Territorial claims

In August 2007, with much public fanfare, a Russian expedition placed a Russian national flag made of titanium on the seabed 4,200 metres below the sea surface at the North Pole using two small submersibles. Russian officials argued that this was meant as a mark of Russian national achievement, in similar fashion to the US planting its flag on the moon, rather than as staking a territorial claim. Nevertheless, it was this one act that probably did the most to ignite fears of a modern struggle over territory in the Arctic.

In fact, there are virtually no unresolved land-boundary disputes in the Arctic. The exception is that between Canada and Denmark over the tiny and uninhabited Hans Island. Canada and the US also have a maritime-boundary dispute in the Beaufort Sea. In addition, there are frictions over the provisions of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, which recognises Norwegian sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago but with certain stipulations, including over demilitarisation and access by citizens from the signatory states to fisheries and mineral resources on the islands and in their territorial waters.

For the most part, the fact that these have all been managed amicably has helped maintain a stable platform of governance. This has been further assisted by undertakings such as the Ilulissat Declaration on the orderly pursuit of overlapping claims in the Arctic Ocean.

In light of all this, many commentators have dismissed talk of a struggle for the Arctic as over-hyped. Nevertheless, the fear remains and may be increasing now that growing geopolitical competition is putting this atmosphere and these arrangements

under strain, and one of these friction points could become a flashpoint.

There are two main focuses of concern: extended continental shelf claims; and sea routes and navigation. UNCLOS stipulates that a state may claim a territorial sea up to 12 nautical miles from its baselines, and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) – where it has sovereign rights over the exploration and exploitation of living and non-living resources – up to a further 200 nautical miles.

Beyond this, a state may make claims to an extended continental shelf within ten years of having ratified UNCLOS. Geological evidence must be submitted to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to show that a shelf extends beyond the 200 nautical mile EEZ limit.

Canada, Denmark (through Greenland) and Russia claim an extended continental shelf through the Lomonosov Ridge. Canada claims that the ridge is an extension of Ellesmere Island, while Denmark argues that the ridge is an extension of Greenland. Russia argues it is an extension of the Eurasian continent (and its 2007 expedition was in part to collect data to support this). What is more, in an addendum to its submission, Russia in March 2021 significantly extended its geographic claim.

On sea routes and navigation, Canada and Russia claim parts of the Northwest Passage and Northern Sea Route respectively as their internal waters and rights of regulation under UNCLOS Article 234 on ice-covered sea areas. Russia has also expressed a desire to regulate transit at certain points on the Northern Sea Route, including that naval vessels must give 45 days' notice of transits. However, the US and others dispute these positions.

2019, a US exercise, *Northern Edge*, based in Alaska, also included a carrier-strike group for the first time in a decade. This dynamic of elevated and more pointed military activity continues to unfold, adding to the concerns about where it might lead.

In addition, there are the risks of sub-threshold or grey-zone threats, the cyber domain and information operations, for all of which the Arctic represents a potentially fertile arena. The advent of new weapons technologies such as hypersonic weapons (the Barents Sea has been the preferred testing range for Russia's *Tsirkon* hypersonic missile system) also promises to affect the military balance in the region, as does the potential role of the space domain.

### **Perspectives on Arctic defence and security dynamics**

The dual phenomena of dramatic climate upheaval, and its impact not only on the Arctic but the potential ripple effects emanating from this region on the rest of the planet, plus the fallout in the Arctic from the revival of great-power or state-on-state competition, the centre of gravity of which lies elsewhere, have wrought a sea change in the strategic context for the Arctic. As it has been put by others, what happens in the Arctic no longer stays in the Arctic, but the activities and interests of both Arctic and non-Arctic actors are increasingly intruding on the region itself.

Adding to the complexity, the geographical characteristics of the Arctic give Russia both an in-built dominance and cause for anxiety at the same time. They also mean that the region affects and concerns the different inhabitants of the European neighbourhood in different ways, and inevitably result in distinct perspectives, such as those between Europe and North America. The impact of the looming arrival of the major new extra-regional actor that is China also adds a further, complicating perspective.

These complexities are prompting some commentators to compartmentalise the different types of interaction on the grounds that the drivers of relationships in each case allow a different tone of engagement to be maintained depending on the issue or issues at hand, and that this is overall helping to damp down tensions.<sup>8</sup> Hence, despite the strategic shock of 2014, the limited

friction among the Arctic states about inter-Arctic matters has sustained a level of significant cooperation that has confounded earlier speculation about a prospective Arctic territorial grab. Meanwhile, the international competition in evidence in the Arctic represents a spillover from a deterioration in relations that is more global and is not to do with Arctic-specific issues.

In this analysis, there is a third level of interaction involving the different defence and security perspectives of individual Arctic nations, which are dependent to a large degree on their geographical outlook. Hence Canada and Norway, both NATO members, have rather different viewpoints on the issue of Alliance involvement in the Arctic. Moreover, there are divergent views more generally between Arctic states on how to deal with greater extra-regional interest in the Arctic, with Canada and Russia, and to a degree Denmark, tending towards a more exclusive stance.

### **Russia**

Russia is currently following a twin-track path, reflected in Moscow's latest Arctic strategy document to 2035 – which covers both development and defence and security – and which Putin endorsed in October 2020.<sup>9</sup> In May 2021, Russia took over the chair of the Arctic Council from Iceland, declaring that the themes for its two years in the role would be maintaining the spirit of cooperation and promoting sustainable development.<sup>10</sup> What is more, Russia clearly has a stake in sustainable development in the region. However, it also has a particular view of how that goal should be framed, which may put it at odds with others, for example on the future of hydrocarbons exploitation in the region.

On the military front, Russia by virtue of its territorial extent must look both to the Pacific and to the European Arctic. Having said that, its military posture should not be perceived as Arctic-specific in the sense that it reflects only Arctic-centred disputes.<sup>11</sup> In Moscow, the military posture is portrayed as defensive in the sense of protecting newly exposed frontiers and reflecting the expectation of increased presence and activity by others, specifically 'more NATO' in the sense of greater presence of and activity by Alliance members. The importance of the Russian Arctic to Moscow is reflected in the upgrading of the Northern Fleet to the status of a

military district on 1 January 2021.<sup>12</sup> However, this is all driven chiefly by the effects of climate change and wider geopolitical tensions. In addition, there is still the nuclear equation, and the Arctic's role as home and sanctuary for the bulk of the Russian submarine-launched strategic nuclear forces.

In the context of calibrating threats, while it is necessary to be cautious about Russian capacity, for example, to interdict NATO sea lines of communication from the Arctic on the scale of the Cold War, Moscow now possesses significant long-range strike and layered defence capabilities that may constitute at the very least an 'active' defence, but which certainly challenge NATO on a broad front.

In March 2021, the Russian Navy performed a capability demonstration with three nuclear-powered submarines (two SSBNs and a converted SSBN special-mission submarine) breaking through the ice near the North Pole, appearing to 'outgun' recent US Navy submarine ice exercises (although in 2018 two US submarines and one UK submarine surfaced through the ice together inside the Arctic Circle). Accordingly, there are perceptions in the Alliance that Russia's posture, plus its assertiveness and revisionism, amount to preparations for something more than purely defence. The threat of confrontation being sparked in the Arctic may be low, but the risk of horizontal escalation as the result of a flashpoint elsewhere, for example in or around the Black Sea, is a key consideration.

As it prepared to assume the chair of the Arctic Council, Russia itself called for the resumption of the

**Three Russian nuclear-powered submarines surfaced through ice near the North Pole in March 2021 as part of a major capability demonstration**



(SecureWatch)

**Then US secretary of state Mike Pompeo in Finland for an Arctic Council meeting in 2019, during which he issued a warning about Chinese and Russian activity in the region**



(Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images)

Arctic chiefs of staff meetings, initially at least at expert level.<sup>13</sup> However, the very fact that it is a declared ambition of Moscow makes it an even more problematic proposition for the US and others, given a determination not to let Russia 'off the hook' in the absence of an easing of tensions elsewhere.

## The United States

From the viewpoint of the United States, matters have appeared to be in limbo following the change of administration. It was notable that the word 'Arctic' did not appear once in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance issued by President Joe Biden in March 2021.<sup>14</sup> The shift in position on climate change by the Biden administration from the Trump administration at least opened the prospect of the resumption of a more collaborative relationship with the rest of the Arctic Council in this area.

However, while the stridently combative tone taken by then US secretary of state Mike Pompeo at the 2019 Arctic Council meeting in Finland may not be repeated, on the defence and security front the focus on the Arctic through the primary lens of strategic competition with both Russia and China seems likely to persist. The US also perceives the Arctic as a homeland defence mission. The most recent operative US arctic strategy document, from the Pentagon in 2019, emphasised the aim of a peaceful and stable Arctic, but also declared an



(LPhoto Dan Rosenbaum/Royal Navy)

objective 'to compete when necessary to maintain favorable regional balances of power'.<sup>15</sup>

Strikingly, each of the US armed forces has individually published Arctic strategies recently as well. That of the US Navy (and Coast Guard), which emerged in January 2021, adopted a distinctly competitive tone. Entitled 'A Blue Arctic', it emphasises the need for US naval forces to operate more assertively in the region, and cooperatively with like-minded nations, in response to the challenges from Russia and China.<sup>16</sup>

The US has notably raised the profile of its presence and activities in the Arctic since the carrier deployment in 2018. In 2020, the US Navy conducted two forays into the Barents Sea with surface warship groups, for the first time since the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> On each occasion, they were accompanied by the Royal Navy and on the second occasion by the Norwegian Navy and a Danish patrol aircraft.

While Washington has been raising its game in terms of presence, to the predictable dissatisfaction of Moscow, efforts to increase the US inventory of specific Arctic-capable assets have faced challenges. In particular, the US has the ambition to procure for the US Coast Guard a new generation of three heavy icebreakers (officially known as Polar Security Cutters) and at least three

medium vessels of this type, with the aim for the first to be delivered by 2025 to replace its two ageing and unreliable vessels. However, at the time of writing, the start of full construction of the initial hull has yet to be confirmed.<sup>18</sup> There may be a debate over the direct value of icebreakers in terms of military capability in the Arctic, but they still represent a significant enabler (despite, or even because of, the sea-ice melt) for both presence and sustainment in the region. Hence the periodic discussion in the US of an 'icebreaker gap' with Russia, which has a fleet of 50 or so main icebreakers, including nuclear-powered versions (although Russia, with its vastly long Arctic coastal 'frontage', also has major operational requirements).

This inevitably raises the question of the extent to which US operational options in the Arctic, particularly in a grey-zone scenario, may be constrained. In January 2019, the then US Navy secretary, Richard Spencer, raised the possibility of the US conducting a freedom-of-navigation operation (FONOP) in the Arctic, with the inference that it would be directed particularly towards Russia. This sparked significant debate about the advisability (or lack thereof) of such a mission, both because of the degree of provocation, and therefore the raising of tensions that it could generate, and also because

of the risk of operational embarrassment due to amongst other things, the lack of reliable icebreaker and other support capacity.<sup>19</sup> As it turned out, the operation did not proceed under the Trump administration, and the prospect of such a mission is currently uncertain.

Overall, there is a general alignment between Washington and most of its major transatlantic allies over ambitions for the Arctic. This could be said to be true at least in terms of maintaining it as a low-tension region, promoting cooperation where possible and attempting to maintain a broadly credible defence and deterrence posture without fuelling increased tensions, plus a greater coming together than under the previous administration on climate change.

However, a question mark remains over where the Arctic sits on the Biden administration's league table of strategic priorities. In addition, there was the discord with allies provoked by the process and collateral impact of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. On top of that, the surprise announcement in September 2021 of the strategic-defence arrangement between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS), centred on the plan to help Australia build a class of nuclear-power attack submarines, fuelled further doubts (chiefly as a result of French indignation) about Washington's reliability and commitment as an ally in a European context. The AUKUS arrangement therefore appeared to add ammunition to the case for an increased need for some form of European strategic autonomy. Indeed, the effect of these two incidents could be seen as another instance in which the strategic balance in the Arctic could be potentially affected by the spillover from events elsewhere.

## China

The other main, if relatively new, actor on the scene is China, whose most talked-about stance towards the region emerged in a White Paper entitled 'China's Arctic Policy' published in January 2018, in which Beijing declared itself a 'Near-Arctic State', despite the actual physical distance of its territory from the region.<sup>20</sup> Another reference in the document to China's advocacy of a 'multi-level' approach to cooperation in the region further raised eyebrows as to what it revealed about Beijing's ambition to engage in the Arctic. This could be of considerable significance when weighing up the

pros and cons of potential proposals that may emerge on future frameworks of governance and management, particularly of defence and security issues.

For now, China's penetration into the region remains limited but is increasing (and the very fact of its growing interest has already had an outsize impact on the calculations of others). One major strand of its involvement is scientific engagement, and there is an obvious stake for Beijing in what the direct impact will be of climate change in the Arctic on China's own weather patterns, pollution levels, and the development issues associated with sea-level rise and China's significant low-lying littoral regions. However, the question is whether this interest goes further. So, while Chinese scientific interest has generally been accepted quite favourably, questions have been raised about the extent to which some of these activities may be 'dual-use', in other words civilian and military.

The other main strand is Beijing's ambition to be an economic actor in the Arctic, particularly regarding extractive industries, energy and shipping. This was seen most clearly in the creation in 2017 of the Polar Silk Road, an outgrowth of the much broader Belt and Road Initiative. However, so far its main partner in this has been Russia, with other regional players displaying a much greater wariness to engage. In broad terms, Beijing has seen a range of investment ambitions thwarted. Also, notably, in 2016 Denmark prevented China from buying an old military base in Greenland.<sup>21</sup>

However, connected with a Chinese desire to diversify its energy supplies with access to Arctic resources, the potential for China surrounding the opening of the sea routes and the prospect for shipping has raised the greatest number of questions regarding the extent of Beijing's ambitions and their implications, particularly in connection with the possible future for China as a defence and security player in the Arctic.

It certainly looks like more than an economic equation. To some, it would also reduce Beijing's reliance (and admittedly that of other Asian capitals as well) on the maritime strategic chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca as a conduit for its vital sea lines of communication for both general trade and energy.

The potential attractiveness to Beijing of northern sea routes prompts other calculations as well. A debate

simmers on whether China's assertive approach to its interests in the South China Sea may provide a warning sign as to its likely approach in the Arctic. Some commentators dismiss this on the grounds that China is not a territorial claimant in the Arctic in the same way as it is in the South China Sea, that it is indeed territorially remote and that there are two other big players – the US and Russia – who do have territorial stakes in the Arctic.

Nevertheless, China faces a potential chokepoint issue here as well in the shape of the Bering Strait. What is more, its long-term view of what its rights of access and influence in the region are may not sit well with some of the Arctic states. In addition, the very fact that its maritime power-projection capacity is still relatively limited in general terms but certainly in respect of the Arctic means that the jury is still out on its strategic behaviour, while at the same time there is little doubt that it continues to build the capability to project a long-range military reach.

In October 2020, the then First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff of the UK, Admiral Tony Radakin, portrayed the potential opening of Arctic sea routes in the context of additional strategic options for Chinese maritime power.<sup>22</sup> In September, an encounter by the US Coast Guard off Alaska's Aleutian Islands with four People's Liberation Army Navy vessels, including two of its most modern and powerful surface combatants, looked at least in part like a signal of Beijing's concern about access to Arctic waters. A similar deployment had taken place in 2015.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly the extent of China's ambitions in the Arctic remains to be seen, as does the extent to which it will increasingly impose itself in the region, or whether – as some argue – it is somehow being 'dragged' into the debates and calculations on future defence and security in the Arctic by the vested interests of others. Beijing's desired Arctic trajectory also has ramifications for the Russo-Chinese strategic relationship. At the moment, the two countries see the virtues and benefits of close strategic ties. However, as was hinted earlier, what Russia might perceive as 'too much China' in the Arctic may not be deemed in its long-term interest and it might even seek ways to mitigate this with other partners.

In other words, will China's and Russia's approaches to the Arctic, and their respective roles as supplier and customer for vital Arctic energy resources, be the factors that transform what many have characterised as a 'marriage of convenience' into something more binding, or quite the reverse? In the longer term, particularly with the potential further opening up of a polar sea route that could result in China being even more present but rather less dependent on Russia, this might not be at all welcomed by Moscow. In this context, in any deliberations on new frameworks for defence and security arrangements in the Arctic, Western powers and other Arctic states should bear in mind what options might be more likely to draw Moscow and Beijing closer together as rejectionists or separate their strategic paths and perspectives.

**A US Coast Guard cutter shadows Chinese naval vessels off Alaska in August 2021**



(Ensign Bridget Boyle/US Coast Guard District 17)

## Europe's 'big three'

Of the 'big three' European actors, all of them non-Arctic states, the UK perhaps remains closest to the US in terms of seeking to demonstrate a continuing (or at least renewed) capability to operate credibly in the Arctic. This is coupled with a particularly close relationship with the more robust northern European states, notably Norway, in defence terms. The government's overall Arctic strategy, published in 2018, affirms the UK's intention to contribute to Arctic prosperity and security, including through science and innovation.<sup>24</sup>

The UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR), published in March, contained only one paragraph on the Arctic, describing the UK as 'the nearest neighbour to the Arctic region' and stating that, as a state observer to the Arctic Council, it 'will contribute to maintaining the region as one of high cooperation and low tension'.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the IR identifies Russia as posing 'the most acute threat' to UK security, no doubt with its military build-up in the Arctic prominent in that calculation.<sup>26</sup> China is referred to as a systemic competitor. Notably, in the context of future posture on the Arctic, the IR states that while the UK has been focused on defending the rules-based international order, defending the status quo is no longer sufficient and the UK needs to be engaged with others in actively shaping the international order of the future.

The associated Defence Command Paper is more expansive in terms of security, highlighting chiefly maritime capability investments for the North Atlantic, which will also enable the UK to project forces into NATO's flanks and particularly the High North and Arctic, while continuing to say that the High North remains of great importance. It also highlights the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, which has a significant northern European focus and five of whose nine partner nations are Arctic states.<sup>27</sup>

The UK is also thought to be in the final stages of drafting an Arctic defence strategy with an aim to publish it in 2022. In broad terms, though, the UK in its 'Global Britain' guise also sees the Arctic as a potential new conduit for global trade. From a defence perspective, UK interest relates to its focus on the defence challenges of NATO and its allies in the High North, and

the prospect of China's arrival in a security sense in the region. As in the Cold War, a major preoccupation for the UK is the issue of threats emerging *from* the Arctic, including the need to protect the UK's own submarine-based strategic nuclear force.

Given its robust approach to the rules-based international order and especially the free use of the seas, it would be right to expect that the UK would seek to have one of the more prominent non-Arctic roles and voices in contributing to security in the region. Its engagement has been seen in regular deployments into the region. Key questions for its allies and partners, though, will continue to be how the UK balances its declared commitments in the Euro-Atlantic area, including the High North, with the 'Global Britain' agenda and the 'Indo-Pacific tilt' heralded in the IR, as well as how it relates to its European neighbours on general Arctic matters in the aftermath of its departure from the European Union.

France, meanwhile, shares several similar impulses with the UK when it comes to its approach to the security dynamic in, or emanating from, the Arctic, including the protection of its submarine-based nuclear force. However, its stance is likely to be more embedded in a broader European perspective due to its continuing leading roles in both NATO and the EU. France's geography may give it a slightly more detached viewpoint in terms of direct threats to itself. Having said that, the French Navy carried out a FONOP in September 2018, which included the Northern Sea Route, albeit deploying a naval support vessel, FS *Rhone*, rather than a major surface combatant to avoid being overly provocative.

The French Ministry of the Armed Forces published an Arctic strategy in 2019, which echoed a strategic review from 2017 that spoke of the region potentially becoming an area of confrontation. This was linked, it said, to 'the new commercial, maritime and air routes in the Arctic' plus an appetite to exploit its resources that heralded 'increased competition between different States'.<sup>28</sup> It stated that among French defence objectives in the region is 'developing a comprehensive knowledge of the Arctic environment' including 'maritime security'.<sup>29</sup> France has been deepening its defence relations with Canada, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, while also having close relations with Iceland and Norway.

Meanwhile, Germany has adjusted its sights on Arctic policy to take account of the changed security atmosphere. Berlin's 2019 Arctic Policy Guidelines include a chapter on security, which states that cooperation in the Arctic is under strain and highlights increased military preparations in the region that it says could lead to an arms race. It calls for preserving the Arctic as a largely conflict-free region, advocates a clearly defensive character to any military measures in order to counteract an intensified militarisation of the Arctic region, and urges more intensive involvement in the security policy implications of the Arctic on the part of the EU and NATO – a potentially significant if not entirely surprising twin-track approach.<sup>30</sup> Among the risk factors, it also notably highlights that 'technological progress and strategies for external interference are blurring the boundaries between offensive and defensive courses of action'.<sup>31</sup>

An issue for Germany may be that, in order to enhance NATO's defence and deterrence posture in the nexus that is the High North, the North Atlantic and the Baltic, key capabilities will likely include submarines, anti-submarine forces and maritime-patrol aircraft, all capabilities in which Germany has been challenged lately in terms of either readiness or capacity. The decision in June to order five Boeing P-8A *Poseidon* maritime-patrol aircraft as essentially an urgent force-modernisation measure was a significant statement of intent. This was not least the case because it risked the ire of Paris, as it called into question Berlin's commitment to the Franco-German Maritime Airborne Weapons System programme, due for operation from the mid-2030s.

## Nordic perspectives

It is worth taking a closer look at the Nordic countries specifically. Some have argued that the renewed focus on security concerns in the Arctic should lead the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – to cooperate more closely, or even to consider a level of integration.

In fact, there are considerable distinctions among the outlooks of the different states, not least including their approaches to deterrence and to balancing a relationship with Moscow. There are, of course, divergences to an extent regarding membership of the EU and NATO: Iceland and Norway have stood firmly outside the former; Finland and Sweden are not members of NATO, although they have edged closer to the Alliance in their posture and cooperation; and Denmark is a member of both. There had also until now been a somewhat different focus in terms of their security priorities, with Norway looking towards its north, the Barents Sea and the North Atlantic; Iceland the High North and the Atlantic; Denmark the Atlantic (and Greenland), plus some out-of-area missions; and Finland and Sweden more focused on the Baltic region.

Nevertheless, there have been moves towards greater cooperation over the years, a milestone being the establishment in 2009 of the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF). In 2018, NORDEF's Vision 2025 was adopted, aiming at increased cooperation not just in peacetime but in wartime as well.<sup>32</sup>

It has been argued that something of a 'Nordic reassessment' came about after 2014, along with Russia's

A US Navy P-8A *Poseidon* maritime-patrol aircraft at Keflavik in Iceland in 2017



(Lt. j.g. Grade Matthew Skoglund/US Navy)



(Operation 2021/Alamy Stock Photo)

continuing build-up in the High North and its more assertive operational and exercise patterns. A watershed moment may have occurred in September 2020 when the governments of Finland, Norway and Sweden decided to enhance their trilateral military cooperation with a statement of intent outlining the ambition to conduct coordinated military operations, supported by trilateral strategic planning. In some cases, common operational plans will be considered for a common concern – specifically the northern parts of these countries, in other words the High North.<sup>33</sup> The three countries also undertook to keep the other two Nordic countries informed.

This is an example of a minilateral cooperative initiative to enhance defence security preparations that may add to both deterrence and stability in the region. Other initiatives to improve operational cooperation include that between the Finnish and Swedish armies, as well as regular joint training conducted by the air forces of the three countries. Since 2015, the three countries have also mounted the biennial *Arctic Challenge* exercise, involving several other countries. Notwithstanding this or the general drawing down of relations, these countries like to balance these initiatives with retaining certain important bilateral contacts with Russia on specific topics.

Even Norway, which has been most forward-leaning in recent years when it comes to trying to

galvanise NATO allies to refocus on the North Atlantic and High North theatres – and has invested heavily in recapitalising its own defence capabilities, including the purchase of F-35A *Lightning* II fifth-generation combat aircraft and P-8A *Poseidon* maritime-patrol aircraft – has also made a point of keeping certain channels of military contact with Russia open in order to minimise the risks of misunderstandings and miscalculation.

### The EU and NATO

The EU is in a problematic and paradoxical position as regards the Arctic. Its efforts since 2008 to secure observer status at the Arctic Council have been variously blocked by different parties. Only a handful of its members strongly support a greater EU role in Arctic governance while most others are ambivalent at best.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, as EU officials are quick to point out, the organisation is very actively involved in the Arctic in various scientific, environmental and development initiatives. This and its particular understanding of its international role and its broad and soft-power-centred conception of security (although both may be evolving) potentially put it in a good position to participate in future Arctic solutions, albeit with some attendant diplomatic baggage.

Indeed, on 13 October 2021, the EU published its long-awaited Arctic policy in the form of a communication

European Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius launched the new EU Arctic strategy in Brussels, Belgium, on 13 October 2021



(Alexandros Michailidis/Alamy Live News)

from the European Commission entitled 'A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic'.<sup>35</sup> Like many others, the Brussels paper sets out a vision to foster international cooperation, confront climate change and ensure the prosperity of indigenous groups within the Arctic. However, it also includes some important 'security' elements.

The policy declares that the EU's full engagement in Arctic matters is a 'geopolitical necessity' and that the potential for the region to turn into an arena of competition and possible tensions could threaten the EU's interests. It identifies climate change as the most comprehensive threat that the Arctic is facing, but in that context also notes Russia's military build-up, the monitoring of it, and potential responses from several other states and NATO, plus increased interest and activity from others, including China. While it frames security in part in environmental and economic terms, it also adds the political-military element. It talks of enhancing strategic foresight, including cooperating with NATO, and suggests possibly utilising EU satellite capacity including *Galileo* for such things as enabling confidence-building measures, preventing unforeseen incidents and other 'security-related measures'.

NATO is also in a problematic and paradoxical position as regards the Arctic, but in rather different ways than the EU. It has significant strategic interests in the High North and the Arctic, and Arctic states as members. It has adjusted how it is organised, and how it exercises and deploys in order to be able to, if necessary to,

operate better in that region so that it can more effectively counter the challenge posed particularly by Russia. Its formal area of responsibility indeed covers the High North. The recent NATO 2030 report by an advisory group to the secretary-general on strengthening NATO's political-military posture called for NATO to 'enhance its situational awareness across the High North and the Arctic', and to develop a strategy for the European areas of the High North based on broader deterrence and defence plans.<sup>36</sup>

Yet there is not consensus within the Alliance on what the extent of its role should be, or how much of a priority the Arctic should be. What is more, three NATO members are pitted against each other in two admittedly amicable and polite disputes over Arctic claims (Canada and Denmark in one, and Canada and the US in the other). This has hamstrung NATO on the prospect of reaching an agreed policy on the Arctic. In the communiqué following its latest summit in Brussels in June 2021, it confined itself to stating that, in the High North, the Alliance 'will continue to undertake necessary, calibrated, and coordinated activities in support of the Alliance's security interests'.<sup>37</sup>

Alliance members may agree on the need to develop a credible defence and deterrence posture for this theatre, while recognising legitimate Russian interests and not being too provocative, but not necessarily how that translates into an operational plan, let alone a policy. Notably, recent activities dubbed in some quarters as 'NATO deployments' were not undertaken by NATO as such but by particular NATO allies working together (for example, the Barents Sea naval deployments in 2020 were chiefly at the initiative of the US and UK). The chances of progress towards a consensus on NATO's role or a NATO Arctic policy by the time the next Alliance Strategic Concept is due to be agreed and adopted at the 2022 NATO summit seem quite slim. All this tends to the conclusion that NATO will continue to tread a fine line in order both to maintain internal cohesion in this area and to deliver positive strategic effect.

### Lowering the temperature

In view of this tapestry of issues and challenges, IISS analysis suggests that a twin-track, multi-layered and phased approach is required for the delivery of the



(Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP Images)

necessary framework for managing and mitigating risk in and around the Arctic, while providing the conditions to benefit from opportunities. This takes account of the complexities of the region, the issues and the players involved.

There are many 'Arctics', so there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the challenges involved. There are the European, North American and Pacific Arctics; the Arctics of the regional and the extra-regional actors; and the Arctics of the great powers and of the smaller, more vulnerable states.

This analysis is also based on the judgement that the key issues at stake are primarily those that relate to competition emanating from beyond the Arctic, rather than from within the Arctic alone. In this respect there has been something of an inversion of priorities from a period when there were the first stirrings of post-Cold War rising frictions regarding the region and fears of a 'scramble for the Arctic'. It is not to say that this danger has completely disappeared, but governance of the Arctic by the Arctic states has continued to prove quite resilient in the face of the strains placed on it, and the chief drivers of those strains originate from the broader geopolitical dynamics at play that intrude on the Arctic. Put another way, this is about the issues of US and Western policy towards Russia and China writ large, with what happens between the players in the Arctic essentially a symptom of the bigger problem, which only adds to the complexity. Many of the questions surrounding issues related directly

to the Arctic may still be confined to and addressed by the Arctic states, while the broader geopolitical issues inevitably involve a wider cast of actors. A positive element to this equation is that, up to now, it had been possible for an element of continuing cooperative spirit about certain aspects of Arctic development to continue to coexist alongside the rising diplomatic temperature spurred by military build-up.

The analysis is also based on the understanding that the Arctic itself represents a primary existential threat on a planetary scale in terms of the environmental change under way and its potential impact globally. This is another factor, along with the geopolitical aspect, chipping away at the notion of Arctic exceptionalism. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the potentially cataclysmic effects of climate change outweigh all other considerations. However, there is an argument over whether the actions required to tackle the issue of climate change represent a 'zero-sum game' in relation to what is required to address the geopolitical questions and strategic ambitions of the major players.

A further factor to be considered is that there has been an implicit assumption in much of the debate on these issues that the competing agendas of the major players can be reconciled, and that all that is required is constructive engagement and dialogue. This may not be the case, at least in the short term, reinforcing the case for a phased approach to the challenges, starting perhaps with a cooling-off period focused on limited objectives to reduce

what is clearly an increasingly pervasive unease, fuelled in large part by a lack of mechanisms and processes to address the challenges. As far as the West is concerned, this may also need to be combined with a measured further pursuit of defence and deterrence provisions to contain and counter both Russian ambitions and developments, and potentially also the arrival of China.

In this sense, the question of time is more complicated. The changing salience and value of the Arctic itself derive from anticipated dividends from increased access. However, for all the melting ice alarms, exactly when the rewards will really begin to accrue is uncertain and may be some way into the future. While shipping activity on particularly the Northern Sea Route has certainly increased, it remains low by global standards. Moreover, melting sea ice certainly opens up the maritime routes, but it also adds hazards in the shape of floating ice. As a result, a debate continues particularly in the global shipping industry over when the sea route 'bonanza' might materialise. For the moment, reduced distance does not translate into either increased speed or acceptable reliability and therefore cost-effectiveness.<sup>38</sup>

The time question also relates to the issue of priorities, and whether the focus is about countering and managing Russia, or grappling with the reality of China's arrival, at least in a military sense, which may allow a somewhat longer lens. That sequencing – with Russia the immediate issue and China the longer-term one – may be of value since the China question may in the end represent the real sea change and one that requires time to adjust to and to understand.

However, time is pressing in another respect. Military developments are continuing among all the major players. This includes levels of activity. Russia's Arctic military bolstering, in the context of its wider 'misbehaviour' in Western eyes, will continue to generate reactions from NATO allies in terms of presence, capability and posture, creating a spiral of escalating militarisation swirling around and in the Arctic. That, in turn, will likely generate further Russian moves.

All this will inevitably generate the risk of increased close encounters and potential unintended consequences and accidents. The risk factor rises further as military developments add further elements of potential instability in the shape of new technologies, such as hypersonic

weapons with reduced warning times and increased defensive challenges, to which may be added a potential nuclear dimension.

Having said all that, how might a proposed twin-track, multi-layered, phased approach to the peace and stability conundrum of the Arctic unfold?

- **Twin track:** priority engagement in environmental and development issues to address one of the existential threats, and in so doing provide one pillar of confidence and a means to engage with Russia and China. This would naturally fall to the competency of the EU, which could also act as something of a bridge to address some of the softer elements of security (monitoring and surveillance) in conjunction possibly with NATO, which would itself seek to address harder security issues.
- **Multi-layered:** focus on Arctic governance issues and support for Arctic states, including potentially added funding support, to maintain cooperative engagement; encourage and support bilateral and minilateral dialogues as required on specific development and security issues; and sustain multilateral engagement to address transnational questions on the environment, development, safety and the defence dynamic.
- **Phased:** initial focus on the most destabilising, but also potentially most negotiable, questions of operational activity, with a focus on confidence-building measures. A subsequent focus could be on substantive arms control and capability issues.

One general consensus is that trying to load security questions onto the Arctic Council is not advisable. In the first instance it risks derailing the other work of the council, as the controversial intervention by Pompeo at the 2019 Arctic Council illustrated. The US rejectionist position on climate change at the time, plus the rhetorical hostility to Russian and Chinese ambitions, contributed to a failure to reach an agreed summit statement. The other challenge is the political and diplomatic one for most EU and NATO members of not wanting to appear to let Moscow 'off the hook' over Ukraine and Crimea in particular. For this reason, readmitting Russia to the ASFR or reviving the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff

forum may not be advisable, both because these moves would smack too much of a reward for Russia, and also because neither of these instruments has proven value. Adopting a novel architect could ease the protocol challenges of involving both the EU and NATO, as well as Russia and China, in a potential broader framework of interested parties.

Nevertheless, one aim for the EU and NATO should be to agree milestones of behaviour that would be required from Moscow before certain dialogue would be initiated. That in itself would be a challenge, as would maintaining alignment both within the EU and NATO, and between Europe and the US on these questions.

The aim of a new security dialogue would be to relieve some of the intrinsic pressures imposed on the Arctic by wider geopolitical tensions with initially simpler and less demanding steps that would likely focus on confidence-building measures. One proposal that has been made is for an Arctic military code of conduct to address 'rules of the road' of behaviour and transparency.<sup>39</sup>

One question is whether such mechanisms should be Arctic-specific or whether the Arctic should adopt or adapt more general codes that exist or are in the works. Certainly, there are some very particular challenges of operating in the Arctic that may be conducive to codifying; this has been seen already in the non-military sphere. However, being able to apply global standards in an Arctic context may have greater resonance and value. In the maritime sphere, this might include incorporation of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea model, adopted to try to manage potential tensions in the western Pacific. A slightly different, less formal, but perhaps more achievable initial model might simply be the maritime-domain-awareness model Shared Awareness and De-confliction (SHADE), which was developed for the Gulf and northern Indian Ocean in response to the threat of piracy.

These mechanisms, of course, all have limits in terms of utility. There has been advocacy for the wider adoption of the Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA) frameworks, first introduced during the Cold War and still maintained by some of those involved. However, the UK and Russia finalised an updated INCSEA in June 2021, and only days later the Royal Navy destroyer HMS *Defender* appeared to be harassed by Russian ships and aircraft while transiting

Ukrainian waters claimed by Russia, with Russia accusing the British vessel of dangerous behaviour. The incident was also a reminder of the risk of horizontal escalation, of some similar incident possibly in the Black Sea leading to spillover into the Arctic.

Nevertheless, as potential mechanisms for maintaining a low-tension atmosphere, such arrangements do have value. In addition to focusing on new mechanisms, another ambition should be to incorporate new and potentially problematic capabilities, such as cyber; sub-threshold activities including information operations; undersea cables; and even new weapons technologies such as hypersonics and uninhabited systems, at least in the context of codes of conduct and transparency.

Challenges remain, not least regarding the sensitivity of significant areas of military activity in the Arctic that Russia simply would not want to be either transparent or regulated. For NATO, too, there would be the question of what to offer in return.

## Conclusion

The Arctic is a large region and should not be regarded in a unitary way. Nevertheless, geopolitics are reasserting themselves across the Arctic region, although most manifest and perhaps most intense for now in the High North or European Arctic. This development is driven by climate change and increasing great-power competition, the latter including not only the two resident great powers, Russia and the US, but now to a growing extent also China. To be sure, a situation where the Arctic becomes a battleground for intense competition, including in the military domain, is far from inevitable. At present, cooperation coexists with relatively constrained competition. This is good news for European security. However, for geopolitical and geostrategic reasons, a turn towards greater competition is a distinct, perhaps even likely, possibility.

There is, of course, the challenge of grappling with climate change and its impact, which one might call the geo-environmental challenge, and the extent to which this may conflict with the preoccupations particularly of the major powers in the geopolitical sphere.

Geopolitically, the Arctic might well become an arena for strategic competition between the great powers, driven to a greater or lesser extent also by

geo-economics. As the ice melts, new maritime trade routes and avenues for resource extraction will potentially open. Russia is likely to perceive this situation as a challenge to its 'Arctic hinterland' and sphere of influence. China might seek to exploit opportunities to underwrite its 'near Arctic state' claim through an enhanced maritime presence in the region. The US, meanwhile, is already increasing preparations to meet what it sees as an increasing joint Sino-Russian strategic challenge in the Arctic, a trend likely to continue.

Consequently, we should expect increased military activities in the Arctic. One particularly significant and sensitive area of such activities is submarine operations, specifically nuclear-powered ones and, even more significantly, those that are also nuclear-armed, as well as the counters to these in the realm of anti-submarine warfare.

For instance, the retreating ice could diminish Russia's capacity to employ a 'bastion' strategy for its SSBNs – or, as some have suggested, it could actually aid SSBN commanders by enabling them to hide in the 'noise' created in the underwater environment by increased fields of floating sea ice. It could also provide the Russian submarine and surface naval forces with an expanded set of options for power projection, of concern not only to other Arctic powers but to those further afield as well. At the same time, contingent on sufficient investment, the US Navy and other services are also likely to expand their operational preparation for and reach into the High North and the Arctic. Further into the future, Chinese naval forces, including potentially nuclear-powered submarines, might also make an appearance in the region, given the long-term drivers of Beijing's great-power ambitions. Consequently, the scenario of a growing, less benign strategic-military competition in the Arctic is not as far-fetched as it might seem today.

From the perspectives of European powers, specifically resident powers, this prospect raises some difficult issues. On the one hand, they have a major interest in avoiding increased strategic competition and militarisation in the Arctic. This is also important as their strategic capabilities alone are insufficient to safeguard their interests against a power such as Russia and, further into the future, China.

They would thus want to avoid sending signals that could exacerbate tensions. On the other hand, however, they must prepare for and respond to the possibility of a new reality in the Arctic where cooperation is increasingly overshadowed by competition and arms build-ups. Even in the broader context of the Western alliance, steering a course between a goal of increasing preparedness, and thus deterrence and reassurance, and minimising the risk of fuelling tensions and particularly friction points will inevitably continue to be difficult.

We should therefore expect increased strategic preparation by Nordic states, particularly Norway but also Denmark, Finland and Sweden, even though each is also grappling with internal balancing acts over the right strategies to adopt. Iceland is also already showing signs of regaining importance as a base for US and NATO operations in the Arctic, at least in terms of the revived rotational presence of forces. In addition, the defence engagement of other key European powers such as France, Germany and the UK in the Arctic and the High North – including possibly in flexible security multilateral arrangements within and outside the EU and NATO – could be key to the future evolution of the Arctic as a strategic space. Key to this will be how their perceptions do or do not align in terms of approaches to the challenges.

In this context also, how perceptions about the Arctic will evolve across the full spectrum of members within both the EU and NATO will be a major element of the future strategic equation. The EU has already given an important set of indicators as to the extent – and limits – of its realistic ambitions in its recent strategy statement. For NATO, this remains somewhat more of an open, and crucial, question. Given all these moving elements – from melting sea ice to the tapestry of potential strategic alignments, as well as the sometimes discordant national ambitions and preoccupations of the different actors – the pursuit of at least some new frameworks for limited security dialogue and engagement involving all the key players could ease at least some of the growing fears, and serve as a potentially valuable additional safety valve. Ultimately, gradually but steadily, Arctic security is likely to become much more relevant to European security.

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### The International Institute for Strategic Studies – UK

Arundel House | 6 Temple Place | London | WC2R 2PG | UK

**t.** +44 (0) 20 7379 7676 **f.** +44 (0) 20 7836 3108 **e.** [iiss@iiss.org](mailto:iiss@iiss.org) [www.iiss.org](http://www.iiss.org)

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### The International Institute for Strategic Studies – Asia

9 Raffles Place | #49-01 Republic Plaza | Singapore 048619

**t.** +65 6499 0055 **f.** +65 6499 0059 **e.** [iiss-asia@iiss.org](mailto:iiss-asia@iiss.org)

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**t.** +49 30 311 99 300 **e.** [iiss-europe@iiss.org](mailto:iiss-europe@iiss.org)

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14th floor, GBCORP Tower | Bahrain Financial Harbour | Manama | Kingdom of Bahrain

**t.** +973 1718 1155 **f.** +973 1710 0155 **e.** [iiss-middleeast@iiss.org](mailto:iiss-middleeast@iiss.org)

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