

### Dealing with Russia in the Arctic: Between Exceptionalism and Militarization

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# Dealing with Russia in the Arctic

## Between Exceptionalism and Militarization



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While Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council emphasizes peaceful cooperation, the country's military buildup in the region continues. Due to climate change and great-power rivalry, the Arctic is no longer a remote and exceptional place, but part of a complex security environment. To deal with Russia in the Arctic, NATO allies need a double-sided strategy combining credible deterrence with dialogue. Regional actors like Norway are well placed to shape this approach, but the EU, including Germany, should do more.

– Considering Russia's military buildup and increasing great-power rivalry, the concept of "Arctic exceptionalism" – the idea that the region would be exempted from geopolitical tensions elsewhere – is no longer sustainable.

– Russia's Arctic Council chairmanship, which emphasizes regional cooperation, runs parallel to a long-term militarization of its northern territories. While the chairmanship ends in 2024, effects of the militarization will prevail.

– Western countries need a double-sided strategy in the Arctic that ensures security in the face of Russia's military buildup and at the same time preserves regional stability through cooperation along shared interests.

– As regional stakeholders are unwilling to change the institutional architecture of the Arctic, centered around the Arctic Council, increased military activity in the region may make the West rely increasingly on NATO in providing security.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Arctic presents deep strategic ambiguity: it has a history of peaceful cooperation and great-power competition, often occurring in parallel. This applies particularly to European Arctic, the area known as the “High North,” stretching from the North Atlantic to the Barents Sea. Rich in resources but also a strategically important point of access to other parts of the northern hemisphere, it has always been of particular significance for Russia and the US-led West.<sup>1</sup> This DGAP analysis examines developments in the Arctic against the backdrop of increasing great-power rivalry in Europe – between NATO and Russia – and globally – between the US and China. It examines the extent to which the Arctic’s dual character as a region marked by cooperation and competition between Western countries and Russia can be maintained despite a deteriorating security climate.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first examines the argument for regarding the Arctic as exceptional, based on shared interests in combating the effects of climate change, developing the region, and maintaining robust bilateral and multilateral frameworks for cooperation. The second part assesses how the Arctic is affected by Russia’s military buildup and the deterioration of Russia-NATO relations since the mid-2000s and, more recently, the US-China global competition. The concluding section assesses the likelihood of maintaining some of the features that make the Arctic an exceptional region even in today’s complex and interwoven geopolitical landscape, and it presents some suggestions, including a double-sided Western strategy for the way ahead.

### The Arctic’s Dual Character

During the Cold War, challenging natural conditions made access to the Arctic difficult but did not keep the antagonists from operating there. Following the end of the Cold War, increased cooperation between Russia and NATO countries led to optimism about the region’s development. In this period, the idea of the Arctic as being “exceptional” gained momentum, grounded in ideas of it as a “vast desert-like area” with unique “physical, biological and human sys-

tems.”<sup>2</sup> Today, this exceptionalism is still embodied in a narrative that characterizes the Arctic as prone to peaceful cooperation and somehow immune to geopolitics – a “territory of dialogue” evolving on the basis of “regional governance.”<sup>3</sup> The expansion of regional frameworks and stakeholders’ persisting commitment to peaceful cooperation and development nourish the idea of an “Arctic international society.”<sup>4</sup> In recent years, the consequences of climate change have made cooperation among Arctic nations (and the growing ranks of interested outsiders) necessary. And yet it is not inevitable.

The West’s optimism about the Arctic’s peaceful development faded when relations with Russia deteriorated during the 2000s. For Russia, the return of economic growth and stability after the chaotic and economically depressed 1990s brought new confidence.<sup>5</sup> It embarked on a military modernization and strove to regain its great-power status.<sup>6</sup> As NATO-Russia relations grew more and more tense, reaching a low point in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and interference in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, Western countries first suspended military cooperation, limited political contacts and imposed sanctions before they embarked on a reform program to modernize and strengthen their own defense and deterrence posture. This has left a mark on the Arctic, where existing militarization, and the risk of more, compromises the idea of an area detached from the international security environment.

Arctic great powers like the United States and Russia, key regional actors like Norway, and interested outside players like the EU and its non-Arctic member states continue to express an interest in stability and willingness to cooperate and to develop the region peacefully. They all subscribe to the role of international law and play a constructive role in maintaining the institutional framework centered around the Arctic Council and the Barents Cooperation. However, geopolitical tensions elsewhere in the world, as well as the gradual militarization of the Arctic, hamper communication and lead the West and Russia to emphasize deterrence over dialogue. While there are

1 Rolf Tamnes, Sven G. Holtsmark, “The geopolitics of the Arctic in historical perspective,” in: Rolf Tamnes, Kristine Offerdal (eds.), *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic. Regional dynamics in a global world* (London: Routledge, 2014), 12–48.

2 Juha Käpylä, Harri Mikkola, “On Arctic Exceptionalism: Critical reflections in the light of the Arctic Sunrise case and the crisis in Ukraine,” *The Finnish Institute of International Affairs* (Working paper 85) (2015), 5.

3 *ibid.*, 5.

4 Heather Exner-Pirot, Robert W. Murray, “Regional order in the Arctic: Negotiated exceptionalism”, *Politik*, 20.3 (2017), 52, 55–56.

5 Robert Service, *The Penguin History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-first Century* (Penguin 2015), 557–558; F. N., Yurlov, “Russia—A Lost Decade,” *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* (1999), 80–95.

6 Bettina Renz, “Russian responses to the changing character of war,” *International affairs* (2019), 95(4).

few reasons why a conflict would break out in the Arctic, there is an increasing awareness that great-power competition is projected on the Arctic too. A crisis or conflict could spill over from elsewhere to the region.

The Arctic's strategic importance and the dynamics of great-power rivalry make it a potentially difficult arena of European security. The region is integral to Russia's military planning, and it is subject to increasing attention in US security strategies. China's interest in the Arctic's resources and communication lines drives the region even higher on Washington's security agenda. This all creates a dilemma for European countries – Arctic and non-Arctic – regarding their relations with Russia in the High North. On the one hand, Russia's military buildup, deteriorating NATO-Russia relations, and concerns over an assertive China and the prospect of deepened Sino-Russian cooperation increase the pressure to strengthen their defense and deterrence posture in the region. On the other hand, an increase in military activity carries the risk of incidents and complicates dialogue and confidence building. Either way, even European countries that see the threats to the Arctic's environmental rather than military balance as the overarching challenge have to realize that it is not remote or insulated from broader developments in the international security environment.

### The Need for a Double-sided Strategy

Western policies and strategies should avoid an alarmist understanding of the Arctic as the next hot spot of great-power rivalry. European strategies for security there should instead emphasize predictability and transparency, focusing on showing presence and gaining situational awareness while keeping military activity to the minimum necessary for countering Russia's military buildup in the region. Therefore, the West should follow a double-sided strategy, in which credible military defense in NATO frameworks is combined with active civilian development cooperation conducted within existing Arctic frameworks. Regarding structures of governance that cover security and development, the focus should be on strengthening the existing framework of regional and bilateral agreements, allowing Arctic and non-Arctic states to address the consequences of climate change and to advance sustainable regional development.

## THE ARCTIC AS A ZONE OF SHARED INTERESTS

When Arctic Council member states, indigenous peoples, and observer countries as well as international organizations and NGOs convened in Iceland's capital, Reykjavik, for their biannual meeting in May 2021, a spirit of cooperation and even optimism seemed to reign.<sup>7</sup> Two years earlier, in Rovaniemi, Finland, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had predicted that “the world's most powerful countries” would fight “an open battle about what future direction the Arctic Council is to take.”<sup>8</sup> In Reykjavik, where Russia started its two-year term of the rotating council chairmanship (2021-2023), the tone was different. On the agenda were not security issues and great-power rivalry, but “shared values and joint aspirations [...] to advance sustainable development, environmental protection, and good governance.”<sup>9</sup>

The Arctic is a very special zone in the relations between Russia and Europe due to several overlapping geographical and political factors. At first sight, it seems like *the* zone where East meets West. Five of the eight members of the Arctic Council – the United States, Canada, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland – are members of NATO, while Sweden and Finland are increasingly bound to Western political, economic, and security structures through their EU membership, their anchoring in Nordic cooperation, and their ever-closer partnership with NATO and the United States. Meanwhile, Russia is the most powerful Arctic state in terms of territory, population size, and resource potential.

Yet, politics in and over the region have consistently defied “bloc thinking” and they continue to do so even after the deterioration of NATO-Russia relations since 2014. Notions of the Arctic as the potential battleground of a new Cold War seem alarmist. While conflicts elsewhere and a general lack of trust will impact on the situation in the High North, the shared interest of the eight Arctic nations in regional stability have so far proven to be a resilient basis for keeping tension between Russia and the others from encroaching. At the Reykjavik meeting, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke glowingly of a “willingness to work out best solutions for the Arctic

<sup>7</sup> Eilís Quinn, “Return to form for Arctic Council as Russia assumes leadership role from Iceland,” *The Barents Observer* (May 20, 2021): <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2021/05/return-form-arctic-council-russia-assumes-leadership-iceland> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>8</sup> Arne O. Holm, “Verbal Thunderstorm from Mike Pompeo,” *High North News* (May 7, 2019): <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/verbal-thunderstorm-mike-pompeo> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>9</sup> All quotes from: Quinn, *ibid.*

## MAP OF THE ARCTIC ADMINISTRATIVE AREAS



Source: Map: Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, <https://www.arcticcentre.org/EN/arcticregion/Maps/Administrative-areas> (accessed August 17, 2021).  
Credit for the border data: Runfola D, Anderson A, Baier H, Crittenden M, Dowker E, Fuhrig S, et al. (2020) geoBoundaries: A global database of political administrative boundaries. PLoS ONE 15(4): e0231866. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0231866> (accessed August 17, 2021).

and its inhabitants” and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken presented the new Biden administration as a “team player.”

### Shared Interests

Russia and Europe have shared interests in developing the Arctic and managing its resources in a sustainable way. This necessitates “interest-based international cooperation” – that is, cooperation based on international law and within regional institutional structures in areas such as resource extraction, climate change, and the environment.<sup>10</sup> The same logic pertains in Russia.

Russia has an intense interest in the sustainable development of the Arctic’s resources: of all littoral states, it has the most at stake in terms of population and territory.<sup>11</sup> Approximately half of the Arctic’s population of 4 million lives in Russia,<sup>12</sup> and the Russian parts of the region have the largest resource potential, particularly in oil, gas, and minerals. The Russian North – which is considerably larger than what Western analysts call the Arctic – may be very sparsely populated with only some 10 million inhabitants,<sup>13</sup> but several large Russian cities sit north of the Arctic Circle, as do 20 percent of Russia’s land territories. The Russian North is seriously underdeveloped and suffers from depopulation, depleting infrastructure, a shortage of labor, and other hardships.<sup>14</sup>

During its Arctic Council chairmanship, Russia says it will continue to place particular emphasis on developing the region’s plentiful natural resources, primarily oil and gas, as well as on improving transport accessibility and connectivity.<sup>15</sup> All these aims require close and well-coordinated cooperation with its Arctic neighbors as well as non-Arctic countries – such as China<sup>16</sup>, the EU and EU member states like Germany – that have a declared policy to develop the region in a cooperative, peaceful way.<sup>17</sup>

Many core motives for Western cooperation with Russia thus remain largely unaffected by geopolitical upheavals. To ensure the Arctic’s sustainable development and management, Russia must be onboard. At the same time, climate change is rapidly shaping the situation and is arguably the region’s biggest and most complex challenge. Withdrawing ice opens up new shipping routes and provides easier access to energy, minerals, fishing, and tourism. Increased activity in a vulnerable ecosystem can cause environmental damage, and it demands better search and rescue facilities. Melting permafrost poses important challenges particularly for Russia,<sup>18</sup> where key energy infrastructure and major settlements are built in the potentially affected area. These fields are not immune from power politics.

Take cross-border cooperation on people-to-people relations – a vital dimension of cooperation in the region, especially in times of increased tension. Fin-

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Government of Norway, “The Norwegian Government’s Arctic Policy” (2021), No. 2, 2, 8, [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/arctic\\_policy/id2830120/](https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/arctic_policy/id2830120/) (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>11</sup> “Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for the Congress,” Congressional Research Service (August 4, 2021), p. 25. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41153.pdf> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>12</sup> “Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for the Congress,” p. 3-4, 24

<sup>13</sup> Yu. A., Avdeev, Z.I., Sidorkina, and V.L., Ushakova, “Tendentsii demograficheskovo razvitiya v rayonakh rossiyской vostochnoy Arktiki” (Tendencies of demographic developments in regions of the Russian Eastern Arctic), *Narodonaselenie*, 2020, Vol. 23, No.3., 131, [http://www.isesp-ras.ru/images/narodonaselenie/2020\\_3.pdf](http://www.isesp-ras.ru/images/narodonaselenie/2020_3.pdf) (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>14</sup> Described already in the 2008 strategy “Fundamentals of state policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the period up to 2020 and beyond” and a 2013 strategy on the development of the Arctic zone. A similar development-oriented logic is reflected also in the newest (March 2021) Russian strategic document on the Arctic, which lays out state policies until 2035. Government of Russia, *Ob osnovakh gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossii v Arktike na period do 2020 goda i dalneshnyuyu perspektivu* (On the fundamentals of Russia’s state policy in the Arctic in the period until 2020 and further perspectives), (September 18, 2008): <http://government.ru/info/18359/> (accessed August 17, 2021); Government of Russia, *Strategiya razvitiya arkticheskoy zoni Rossiyskoy Federatsii i obespecheniya natsionalnoy bezopasnosti na period do 2020 goda* (Strategy for the development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation and for ensuring national security in the period until 2020) (February 20, 2013), <http://static.government.ru/media/files/2RpSA3sctElhAGn4RN9dHrtzk0A3wZm8.pdf> (accessed August 17, 2021); President of Russia, *Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2035 goda* (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on the Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the period until 2035), (March 5, 2020): <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/f8ZpjhpAaQ0WB1zjwN04OgKil1mAvaM.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2021) As most problems are of a long-term and structural nature, already in 2012 a separate ministry was set up to tackle the development problems of the Russian Far East and the Arctic region: Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic, “Otkritie Dannii” (Open data): <https://minvr.gov.ru/opendata/> (accessed August 20, 2021)

<sup>15</sup> Janis Kluge, Michael Paul, “Russia’s Arctic Strategy through 2035,” *SWP Comment* (November 26, 2020), 2020/57: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C57/> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>16</sup> John Grady, “Beijing Wants Arctic to Remain Peaceful, Chinese Diplomat Says,” *USNI News* (February 11, 2021): <https://news.usni.org/2021/02/11/beijing-wants-arctic-to-remain-peaceful-chinese-diplomat-says> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>17</sup> The Federal Government, “Germany’s Arctic Policy Guidelines. Assuming Responsibility, Creating Trust, Shaping the Future” (August 2019), 24, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2240002/eb0b681be9415118ca87bc8e215c0c4/arktisleitlinien-data.pdf> (accessed August 17, 2021); Tobias Etzold, “Influence Through Cooperation? Nordic, German and EU Interests in the Arctic,” *Perspective*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (August 2020), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/16586.pdf> (accessed September 29, 2021); Andreas Østhage, Andreas Raspotnik (eds.), “Looking North: The European Union and Arctic Security from a Nordic and German Perspective”, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Fridtjof Nansen Institute (2021), <https://www.kas.de/documents/272774/272823/Looking+North.pdf/b26c2789-c097-16b9-ffc3-8e51be096123?version=1.0&t=1630920796762> (accessed September 29, 2021);

<sup>18</sup> “Russian Cities at Risk as Climate Change Accelerates Permafrost Thaw – Report,” *The Moscow Times* (October 3, 2019): <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/03/russian-cities-at-risk-as-climate-change-accelerates-permafrost-thaw-report-a67576> (accessed August 17, 2021)

land and Norway have laid much emphasis on cooperation with Russia on this issue.<sup>19</sup> In 2015–2016, however, Moscow allegedly exploited that dimension by organizing the trafficking of a significant number of illegal migrants across the border with both countries, along what the European Borders and Coast Guard Agency has called the “Arctic Route.”<sup>20</sup> This brief incident, which has not been repeated, tested the resilience of Finland and Norway. It also illustrated the challenges of maintaining cooperative structures built during periods of low tension in international relations when tension grows.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the present tensions between Belarus and Lithuania, Poland and Latvia related to the influx of migrants organized by Minsk illustrate that the weaponization of migration might be a recurrent problem.<sup>22</sup>

### A Complex and Still Functioning Institutional Framework

The other factor that may justify labeling the Arctic as exceptional is the resilience of its structures of governance. Mostly developed during the era of enhanced cooperation in the immediate post-Cold War period, the regional institutional architecture centered on the Arctic Council (founded in 1996) and the Barents Cooperation (launched in 1993) has largely managed to preserve its efficiency even in times of geopolitical tension.<sup>23</sup>

In May 2008, the five member states of the Arctic Council that are littoral states (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States) signed the Ilulissat Declaration, committing themselves to the existing legal frameworks regulating the use of the Arctic Ocean and to the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping territorial and economic claims.<sup>24</sup> This helped sustain relations as NATO and

Russia clashed over the war in Georgia in 2008. Following Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014, however, questions arose in Europe as to whether and to what extent cooperation with Russia in the Arctic could continue. Nonetheless, other than the cancellation of the scheduled meetings, engagement in the Arctic Council and the Barents Cooperation continued.<sup>25</sup> This was also the case with legally binding agreements involving Russia, the United States, and the Nordic countries, like the Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue Agreement signed in 2011 by all eight members of the Arctic Council.<sup>26</sup>

The regional architecture not only involves different levels, from state-to-state relations and programs for cooperation to people-to-people contacts and cross-border relations. It also extends beyond the Arctic. The Council of Baltic Sea States, the Northern Dimension between the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland, the EU’s many cross-border programs, and the Nordic Council are additional structures and formats that tie the Arctic to the wider Nordic region and beyond.

All Arctic countries – including Russia – seem generally satisfied with the existing regional order that ties together aspects of governance and international law. For example, Norway repeatedly underlines that the Arctic is not a “no man’s land” or in some kind of a “legal vacuum” but governed by “an extensive national and international legal framework” with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as its centerpiece.<sup>27</sup> There is military posturing but it usually stops short of violating international law. The occasional questioning of existing treaties – such as Russia’s attempts to discuss Norway’s sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago – remains at the rhe-

19 Boris Kuznetsov, Alexander Sergunin, “EU-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation,” in Kristi Raik, András Rácz (eds), *Post-Crimea Shift in EU-Russia Relations: From Fostering Interdependence to Managing Vulnerabilities* (2019), International Centre for Defense and Security, Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 228–229, [https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EURUS\\_book\\_EVI\\_May\\_2019-web.pdf](https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EURUS_book_EVI_May_2019-web.pdf) (accessed August 17, 2021)

20 FRONTEx, “Migratory routes,” <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-routes/eastern-borders-route/> (accessed August 17, 2021)

21 Piotr Szymański, Piotr Zochowski, Witold Rodkiewicz, “Enforced cooperation: the Finnish-Russian migration crisis,” *OSW Analyses* (April 6, 2016), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-06/enforced-cooperation-finnish-russian-migration-crisis> (accessed August 17, 2021)

22 Tomasz Grzywaczewski, “Russia and Belarus Are Using Migrants as a Weapon Against the EU,” *Foreign Policy*, (September 18, 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/18/russia-belarus-poland-lithuania-migrants-eu-weapon/> (accessed September 29, 2021)

23 Alf Håkon Hoel, “The legal-political regime in the Arctic,” in: Tamnes and Offerdal (eds.), *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic*, 49–72.

24 Government of Norway, “The Ilulissat Declaration” (May 27–29, 2008), [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/ud/080525\\_arctic\\_ocean\\_conference-\\_outcome.pdf?id=2170349](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/ud/080525_arctic_ocean_conference-_outcome.pdf?id=2170349) (accessed August 17, 2021)

25 Andreas Østhagen, “Ukraine Crisis and the Arctic: Penalties or Reconciliation?” (April 29, 2014), The Arctic Institute: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/ukraine-crisis-arctic-penalties-reconciliation/> (accessed August 17, 2021)

26 The agreement entered into force in 2013. Arctic Council, “Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic” (2011): <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/531> (accessed August 17, 2021). For an overview over all agreements, see Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, “A Governance and Risk Inventory for a Changing Arctic. Background Paper for the Arctic Security Roundtable at the Munich Security Conference 2020” (2020), 5–6, <https://www.nupi.no/Publikasjoner/CRIStin-Pub/A-Governance-and-Risk-Inventory-for-a-Changing-Arctic> (accessed August 17, 2021)

27 “The Norwegian Government’s Arctic Policy,” *ibid*, 2.



torical level.<sup>28</sup> In addition to multilateral structures and regional programs, the Arctic countries rely on bilateral relations to address regional challenges and to solve such conflicts.

Unsolved territorial disputes, including among Western countries, are sometimes mentioned as a potential source of conflict in a new “scramble for the Arctic,”<sup>29</sup> but they are unlikely to generate conflict. Due to its “delineated maritime spaces,” its “functioning rules of the game,” and its many overlapping treaties and agreements, the region cannot be compared to the more conflictual South China Sea.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the peaceful resolution of border issues is a fundamental feature of the governance structures of the Arctic. Norway and Russia, which share a short land border and a long border between their exclusive economic zones in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean, have a long history of reaching bilateral agreements. In 2010, they concluded 40 years of negotiations, eventually agreeing on a Treaty on Maritime Delimitation and Cooperation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean.<sup>31</sup>

### Renewing Cooperation under Russia's Arctic Council Chairmanship

Russia's Arctic Council chairmanship, which started in May, illustrates that there remain plenty of shared interests in the fields of combating climate change, fostering sustainable regional development, and

maintaining the unique, complex, and still functioning institutional frameworks of cooperation.<sup>32</sup>

In the run-up to its chairmanship, officials declared Russia's intent to take a comprehensive and inclusive approach with a strong focus on tackling climate change, sustainable development, environmental protection, and new technologies to safeguard the development of the Arctic.<sup>33</sup> Russia's ambassador-at-large for the Arctic Council, Nikolay Korchunov, repeatedly underlined the need to keep the region as a zone of peace and cooperation. Pointing to the passage in the 1996 Ottawa Declaration, which prescribes that the Arctic Council should not deal with matters related to military security,<sup>34</sup> Korchunov stated that the militarization of the region will not be raised during the Russian chairmanship. Referring to the Ilulissat Declaration, he stressed that all problems have to be solved through diplomatic means.<sup>35</sup>

The chairmanship program approved by the Russian government in May 2021<sup>36</sup> envisages a balance between social, economic, environmental, and institutional elements.<sup>37</sup> It outlines four main priorities: a strong focus on the people of the Arctic, including the situation of indigenous people; environmental protection, with particular attention to climate change; socioeconomic development of the region; and strengthening the Arctic

<sup>28</sup> On the occasion of the Svalbard Treaty centenary in February 2020, Norway's ministers of foreign affairs and justice rejected Russian complaints about discrimination in a joint op ed, stating that Norwegian sovereignty of the archipelago was “undisputed” and that “it is not natural that we consult with other countries about the execution of powers in our own areas.” Quoted in: Atle Staalesen, “Norway's celebration of Svalbard Treaty was followed by ardent and coordinated response from Moscow media,” *The Barents Observer* (July 2, 2020): <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2020/07/norways-celebration-svalbard-treaty-was-followed-ardent-and-coordinated-response-moscow> (accessed August 17, 2021). The status of Svalbard is not discussed in the government's Arctic policy but is to be outlined in a separate white paper.

<sup>29</sup> Joanna Hosa, “Strategy on ice: Has Russian already won the scramble for the Arctic?” European Council on Foreign Relations (October 226, 2018): [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_strategy\\_on\\_ice\\_has\\_russia\\_already\\_won\\_the\\_arctic/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_strategy_on_ice_has_russia_already_won_the_arctic/) (accessed August 17, 2021); Steven Lee Myers, “U.S. Is Playing Catch-Up With Russia in Scramble for the Arctic.” *The New York Times* (August 29, 2015): <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/world/united-states-russia-arctic-exploration.html> (accessed August 17, 2021); Majid Sattar, Friedrich Schmidt, Matthias Wyssuwa, “Die Sicherheit wird in der Arktis verteidigt” (Security in the Arctic will be defended), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (May 20, 2020): <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/klimawandel-weckt-interessen-an-der-arktis-konflikt-mit-russland-17349132.html?GEP=s5> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Buchanan, Bec Starting, “Why the Arctic is Not the ‘Next’ South China Sea?” *War on the Rocks* (November 5, 2020): <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/why-the-arctic-is-not-the-next-south-china-sea/> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>31</sup> Norway and Russia thus became the first Arctic states to resolve a bilateral territorial issue under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Since then, the treaty, which also contains provisions on fisheries cooperation and the exploitation of transboundary hydrocarbon deposits, has been extended and updated. See: *A Governance and Risk Inventory for a Changing Arctic. Background Paper for the Arctic Security Roundtable at the Munich Security Conference 2020*, 5; Government of Norway: “Delelinjeavtalen med Russland” (Delimitation agreement with Russia) (October 30, 2014): <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/utenrikssaker/folkerett/delelinjeavtalen-med-russland/id2008645/> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>32</sup> Alina Bykova, “Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: ‘Will Welcome More Active Engagement of the Observer States’,” *High North News* (March 8, 2021): <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russian-arctic-council-chairmanship-will-welcome-more-active-engagement-observer-states> (accessed August 18, 2021); Arctic Council, *The Russian Federation*, <https://arctic-council.org/en/about/states/russian-federation/> (accessed August 18, 2021)

<sup>33</sup> Arctic Council, Interview with Nikola Korchunov, Russia's Senior Arctic Official (March 30, 2021): <https://arctic-council.org/en/news/interview-with-nikolay-korchunov-russias-senior-arctic-official/> (accessed August 18, 2021)

<sup>34</sup> Arctic Council, *Ottawa Declaration* (1996): <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/85> (accessed August 18, 2021)

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Intervyu Posla po osobim poruchenniyam MID Rossii N.V. Korchunova gazete «Kommersant», 15 yanvara 2021 goda” (Interview with Ambassador-at-Large of the MFA of Russia N.V. Korchunov in the «Kommersant» newspaper, 15 January 2021), (January 18, 2021): [https://www.mid.ru/ru/arkticskij-sovet/-/asset\\_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/4525318](https://www.mid.ru/ru/arkticskij-sovet/-/asset_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/4525318) (accessed August 18, 2021)

<sup>36</sup> Arctic Council, “Russia's Chairmanship Priorities for the Arctic Council 2021-2023” (May 2021): [https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/2646/%d0%90%d1%80%d0%ba%d1%82%d0%b8%d0%ba%d0%b0%20%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b8%d0%be%d1%80%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%82%d1%8b\\_%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b3%d0%bb\\_21.06.2021.pdf?sequence=11&isAllowed=y](https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/2646/%d0%90%d1%80%d0%ba%d1%82%d0%b8%d0%ba%d0%b0%20%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b8%d0%be%d1%80%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%82%d1%8b_%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b3%d0%bb_21.06.2021.pdf?sequence=11&isAllowed=y) (accessed August 18, 2021)

<sup>37</sup> “Experts speak about the upcoming program of Russia's Arctic Council chairmanship,” *Arctic.ru* (November 25, 2020): <https://arctic.ru/international/20201125/988468.html> (accessed August 18, 2021); Anton Vassiliev, “Priorities of the Russian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council 2021-2023,” *Arctic Circle Journal* (March 29, 2021): <http://www.arcticcircle.org/Media/arctic-circle-journal06vassiliev.pdf> (accessed August 18, 2021)

Council. Much attention will be dedicated to the future of the Northern Sea Route, including navigation, logistics, and emergency prevention. That three major Russian state corporations – Rosatom, Sovkomflot, and Nor Nickel<sup>38</sup> – are assigned a role in the chairmanship indicates that nuclear energy and raw-material exploitation will be also on the agenda.

Taken by its word, Russia's Arctic Council chairmanship could indeed offer an opportunity for issue-based cooperation at a time when improvement of its relations overall with the West seem out of reach.<sup>39</sup> Pragmatically cooperating with Russia on less “geopoliticized” issues, such as environmental protection and climate change, would benefit regional stability and might help to rebuild trust. The other Arctic states thus welcome Russia's intent to use its chairmanship to address common challenges and shared interests. According to senior officials from Western Arctic nations, including the United States, cooperation with Russia in the council's working groups has been successful in the past. This work could further profit from the recent change of US administration, with President Joe Biden having made combating climate change a priority.<sup>40</sup>

However, it would probably be too optimistic, if not naïve, to believe that regional cooperation alone can stop or reverse the negative trend that has taken Russia's relations with the West from one low point to another over the past years. This trend also affects the security situation in the Arctic as Russia and the US-led West sees the need to increase their military presence in the region, to invest in new defense capabilities.

### Exceptionalism Under Pressure

In June 2014, a few months after Russia's illegal annexation of Ukraine, a study published by the Ger-

man Bundeswehr's planning office asked if there was a future for a peaceful and cooperative Arctic policy. It concluded that, despite questions about Russia's foreign policy ambitions, the cooperative spirit among Arctic countries was likely to continue.<sup>41</sup> Seven years later, the assessment is different.

The German government's Arctic guidelines published in 2019 continue to emphasize regional cooperation as in many ways more necessary than ever. However, the chapter on security policy notes that pressure on “multilateral standards and norms, codes of conduct and conflict resolution mechanisms [...] is also putting international cooperation in the Arctic region under strain.”<sup>42</sup> A 2018 paper by a think tank close to the Bundeswehr on the impact of climate change on the Arctic noted that “the freedom of sea routes, the use of maritime resources and the exploitation of these resources on the sea bed and the possible militarization of the Arctic will affect German and European economic and security interests.” It argued that non-Arctic countries like Germany “should prepare for political, legal, economic, ecological and military challenges in concert with its European and international partners.”<sup>43</sup> Other Arctic and non-Arctic players, including the EU and some of its member states, have developed similar assessments. Finland's new Arctic strategy sees “the rapid and dramatic acceleration of climate change” as the principal security challenge, but it also notes that “turmoil in international policy and military tensions in the rest of the world are also reflected on the Arctic region, where the political interests of great powers may result in confrontations.”<sup>44</sup>

Against that backdrop, Arctic experts and officials involved in regional security policy seem to agree<sup>45</sup> that the concept of exceptionalism – if it ever had meaning – is now “insufficient for understanding

<sup>38</sup> “About 90 events to be held during Russia's Arctic Council Chairmanship,” Arctic.ru (February 18, 2021): <https://arctic.ru/international/20210218/991125.html> (accessed August 18, 2021)

<sup>39</sup> Andras Racz, Milan Nic (eds.), “Russian Foreign Policy in 2020. Strengthening Multi-vectorialism,” DGAP Report, No. 5. (January 27, 2021): [https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article\\_pdfs/210125\\_report-2021-5-en.pdf](https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/210125_report-2021-5-en.pdf) (accessed August 18, 2021)

<sup>40</sup> Larry Luxner, Katarzyna Zysk, “The Arctic is a place of unusual international cooperation. Can that last?” *Atlantic Council blog* (March 23, 2021): <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-arctic-is-a-place-of-unusual-international-cooperation-can-that-last/> (accessed August 18, 2021)

<sup>41</sup> Planungsamt der Bundeswehr, *Klimawandel und Sicherheit in der Arktis nach 2014* (Juni 2014): <https://www.bundeswehr.de/resource/blob/140496/ee8dedd2c7039991f0c6adb60c10ab51/arktis-data.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2021)

<sup>42</sup> Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines. Assuming Responsibility, Creating Trust, Shaping the Future, *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> “The impact of climate change on the Arctic,” Metis, Study No. 2., Institute for Strategy & Foresight (March 2018): [https://metis.unibw.de/assets/pdf/metis-study02-2018\\_03-the\\_impact\\_of\\_climate\\_change\\_on\\_the\\_arctic.pdf](https://metis.unibw.de/assets/pdf/metis-study02-2018_03-the_impact_of_climate_change_on_the_arctic.pdf) (accessed August 20, 2021)

<sup>44</sup> Finnish Government, “Finland's Strategy for Arctic Policy,” Publications of the Finnish Government, 2021:55, 16-18 (2021): [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163247/VN\\_2021\\_55.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163247/VN_2021_55.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) Finland's Strategy for Arctic Policy (valtioneuvosto.fi) (accessed August 20, 2021)

<sup>45</sup> Mathieu Bouléque, “Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic Managing Hard Power in a ‘Low Tension’ Environment,” *Chatham House Research Paper*, (June 2019): [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-28-Russia-Military-Arctic\\_0.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-28-Russia-Military-Arctic_0.pdf) (accessed August 21, 2021); Gunhild Hoogensen Gjorv, Kara K. Hodgson, “Comprehensive Security in the Arctic: Beyond ‘Arctic Exceptionalism,’” in: Duncan Depledge, P. Whitney Lackenbauer (eds.), *On Thin Ice. Perspectives on Arctic Security* (Peterborough, Ca: NAADSN Engage Series no. 5, 2021), p. 1-11. Scepticism towards the notion of exceptionalism was a recurrent theme in two workshops organized in the framework of the research project of which this paper is part of.

contemporary Arctic security conditions.<sup>46</sup> This is for three reasons. First, the challenges facing the region, especially those linked to climate change, go beyond the region and require global solutions. Second, for the great powers in particular, the Arctic is part of wider strategic interests and linked to other theatres of operation, and it thus constitutes an integral part of their military planning. Third, developments in the Arctic are not static – the region has seen change from a more confrontational to a more cooperative era before, and over the last decades climate change has considerably changed the region and its place in international relations.

This is not to deny that the Arctic has geographic, demographic, and geopolitical features that set it apart and call for specific policies. Nor does it exclude that Arctic states and outside players continue to acknowledge the necessity to cooperate and to maintain the region's low-tension status. However, a lack of trust and an emphasis on deterrence over dialogue make increasingly difficult the efforts to promote cooperation and to safeguard the peaceful use of the Arctic based on recognized norms and rules.

## MILITARIZATION TRENDS IN THE ARCTIC

Many observers have come to fear a militarization of the Arctic based on two trends. First, Russia's military buildup in combination with its revisionism, assertiveness, and willingness to use military means forces Western nations to consider strengthening their own military readiness and to rely on US support. The second trend is Western concerns over China's presence in the region. While China so far plays by the rules and is not a security threat in the proper sense, its interest in being an Arctic player is interpreted in the light of its broader efforts to gain global influence. Although highly uncertain at the moment, the prospect of enhanced Sino-Russian coordination in

Arctic affairs is seen as a potential game changer that requires close monitoring.

In this ambiguous context, Western nations are struggling to balance their interest in cooperation with a credible deterrence and defense posture. European countries find themselves in a particularly uncomfortable position, squeezed between the United States' effort to coopt them into pushing back against Russia and China and their own efforts to balance between all the big players, which are grounded in regional interests. European debates on how to develop firm but measured Arctic strategies also extend to the question of whether NATO is the best framework to coordinate the West's approach to the region and whether new structures, alongside the Arctic Council, are needed to communicate with Russia on security issues.

### Russia's Complex Challenge to Arctic Security

If this situation is ambiguous, it is because Russia's policies are also characterized by a duality. While Moscow keeps emphasizing the need to keep the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation, it has been enhancing its military presence there since 2008.<sup>47</sup> It has put particular emphasis on strengthening its coastal and air defense capabilities.<sup>48</sup> The 2020 Russian strategic document on the Arctic reiterates the dominance of non-military concerns.<sup>49</sup> But it also openly admits that Russia perceives a growing conflict potential in the region.<sup>50</sup> It argues that this demands a continuing strengthening of Russia's military and other armed forces, such as border guards units, in the Arctic.<sup>51</sup>

The Arctic constitutes an integral part of Russia's military planning, closely linked to other theatres. The upgrade of its Northern Fleet to the status of a military district from January 1, 2021 indicates the growing military importance of the Arctic.<sup>52</sup> The new military district is responsible for Russia's north and northwest, its islands in the Arctic, and the Northern Sea Route. As stated in January by its commander, Admiral Aleksei Moiseev, the Northern Fleet's primary responsibilities include ensuring the military

<sup>46</sup> Cjorv, Hodgson, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Katarzyna Zysk, "Russia's Military Build-up in the Arctic: to What End?", *CNA Occasional Paper* (September 2020): [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/IOP-2020-U-027998-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2020-U-027998-Final.pdf) (accessed August 20, 2021)

<sup>48</sup> Siemon T. Wezeman, "Military Capabilities in the Arctic," SIPRI Background Paper (March 2012): <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/misc/SIPRIBP1203.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2021)

<sup>49</sup> President of Russia, *Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2035 goda*, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021* (2021): 167.

security of the Russia<sup>53</sup> and the readiness of the strategic nuclear forces at sea.<sup>54</sup> Last year the fleet was the recipient of the first nuclear submarine of the Borey-A class, armed with ballistic missiles. Four other Borey-A class ships are under construction for it (albeit with delay).<sup>55</sup>

The general trend resembles the Cold War: the Arctic again constitutes a key theatre for deploying and using naval nuclear deterrence capabilities. Its strategic importance is due to the perception in Moscow that it is a possible route for a US attack. Thus, most elements of the ongoing Russian military buildup are of a predominantly defensive nature. Russia has responded with the deployment of anti-access and area denial capabilities and MiG-31 interceptors, and with the upgrading of Soviet-era military infrastructure in the region, such as radar stations and barracks for land troops to secure the borders. Russia also intends to improve the overall operability of its Arctic forces. For example, it practices air-to-air refueling with its Tu-142 anti-submarine aircrafts<sup>56</sup> and exercises night flights with Ka-27 anti-submarine/search and rescue and Ka-29 attack helicopters.<sup>57</sup> The latter is highly needed due to the long polar-night period.

Although defensive in their roots, some of Russia's ongoing military activities and projects may lead to the establishment of substantial offensive capabilities. In 2007 it restarted long-range bomber and reconnaissance flights over and near Arctic territory.<sup>58</sup> As of 2021, nuclear-capable bombers regu-

larly fly sorties over the High North and frequently approach the borders of other Arctic countries.<sup>59</sup> Russia has also upgraded the Nagurskoye air base in Franz Josef Land, which by 2020 made the facility operational all-year round<sup>60</sup> and capable of hosting Il-76 heavy airlifters, suitable for airborne operations. The runway is being extended, which will enable even strategic bombers to use the base.<sup>61</sup> When Norway voiced concerns over the upgrade of the Nagurskoye base in February 2021, Russia accused it of contributing to the militarization of the Arctic by permitting US bombers to land on its territory.<sup>62</sup>

A recent demonstration of the extent of integration of the Arctic with Russia's overall military thinking was the surfacing of three Russian nuclear-powered submarines through thick ice in March 2021. The operation – almost an exhibition in military prowess – took place only one day after Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy chairman of the National Security Council, accused the United States of trying to weaken Russia's position in the Arctic. But, as if to illustrate Russia's double-sided policy, he also stressed that Russia intends to preserve the Arctic as a region of peace.<sup>63</sup> This messaging was widely promoted by the state media and was arguably aimed as much at a domestic audience as to the outside world.<sup>64</sup>

If Western countries view Russia's military buildup in the Arctic with growing concern, it is not because they perceive a direct threat of any offensive kinetic military actions. Regardless of its growing offensive capabilities, Western experts and officials acknowl-

53 Ministerstvo oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation), *Prioritetnim napravleniem deyatelnosti Severnogo flota v 2021 godu stanet obespecheniyu voyennoy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (The priority direction of the activities of the Northern Fleet is ensuring the military security of the Russian Federation) (January 6, 2021): <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/north/news/more.htm?id=12333467@egNews> (accessed August 21, 2021)

54 Ministerstvo oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation), *Podderzhanie boegotovnosti yadernikh sil – zadacha Severnogo flota na 2021-i god* (Maintaining combat readiness of the nuclear forces is the task of the Northern Fleet for 2021) (January 4, 2021): <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/north/news/more.htm?id=12333212@egNews> (accessed August 21, 2021)

55 Maxim Starchak, "The Borei-A SSBN: How Effective Is Russia's New Nuclear Submarine?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, Issue 86. (June 16, 2020): <https://jamestown.org/program/the-borei-a-ssbn-how-effective-is-russias-new-nuclear-submarine/> (accessed August 21, 2021)

56 Ministerstvo oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation), *Ekipazhi dalney protivolodochnoy aviatsii Severnogo flota otrabotayut dozapravku v vozdukh* (Crews of the long-range anti-submarine aviation of the Northern Fleet elaborate refueling in the air) (February 19, 2021): <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/north/news/more.htm?id=12345064@egNews> (accessed August 21, 2021)

57 Ministerstvo oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation), *Vertalotchiki Severnogo flota otrabotali nochnie polyoti* (Helicopter crews of the Northern Fleet completed night flights) (February 13, 2021): <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/north/news/more.htm?id=12343945@egNews> (accessed August 21, 2021)

58 Wezeman, *ibid.* p.9.

59 "Tu-160 sovershil planoviy polyot na Barentsevym i Norvezhskim moryam" (The Tu-160 conducted a planned flight over the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea), *RIA* (March 29, 2021): <https://ria.ru/20210329/polet-1603339043.html> (accessed August 21, 2021)

60 Atle Staalesen, "Northernmost Arctic airfield now operational all-year, says Russian Military," *The Barents Observer* (April 28, 2020): <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2020/04/northernmost-arctic-airfield-now-operational-all-year-says-russian-military> (accessed August 21, 2021)

61 *The Military Balance 2021*, *ibid.* 170.

62 Peter B. Danilov, "The Russian armed forces have started using the new runway at Nagurskoye in Franz Josef Land, the Russian Arctic, according to the Norwegian intelligence services' report Fokus 2021" (February 16, 2021): <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-using-new-franz-josef-land-air-base> (accessed August 21, 2021)

63 CMedvedev rasskazal o popitkakh nekotorykh stran oslabit' Rossiyu v Arktike" (Medvedev spoke about the efforts of some countries to weaken Russia in the Arctic), *RIA* (March 25, 2021): <https://ria.ru/20210325/arktika-1602838172.html> (accessed August 21, 2021)

64 "Rossiyskie podlodki v perviye v istorii vspitli vo l'dakh Arktiki" (Russian submarines first time in history surfaced from the ice of the Arctic), *Radio Sputnik* (March 26, 2021): <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20210326/arktika-1603030497.html> (accessed August 21, 2021)

edge that Russia's buildup in the region is largely defensive and that its menacing military activities stop short of violating international law. They do not foresee a conflict being sparked in the Arctic. They do, however, see Russia's military expansion and behavior in the region in relation to its assertive actions elsewhere. Against that backdrop, what happens if a conflict in another region risks spilling over to the Arctic or if an incident in the region escalates?

Russia's use of hybrid warfare tactics elsewhere – cyberattacks and information warfare in the West – have brought a new dimension to Arctic security relations.<sup>65</sup> Intelligence gathering, including by cyber means, has always been an element of NATO–Russia relations in the High North. However, such activities currently happen in a steadily worsening security situation and must be seen together with the Putin regime's assertive rhetoric, military investments, and willingness to use military power, as demonstrated in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. Moreover, interference in domestic affairs risks to further sour relations among Arctic countries, undermining their willingness to formulate cooperation-oriented policies. In 2020, Norway and Germany publicly attributed cyberattacks on their respective parliaments to Russia.<sup>66</sup> Recently Canada and the United States accused Russian military intelligence of malicious cyber activities.<sup>67</sup>

Together with the Kremlin's policy of targeting regime opponents abroad (the Tiergarten murder in Berlin, the Skripal attack in Salisbury), its uncompromising stance against domestic opposition (as expressed in the attempted murder and subsequent detention of opposition politician Alexei Navalny), and its support for autocratic regimes in Belarus

and Syria further undermine what is left of trust. Even in Germany, where there is traditionally broad bipartisan support for a balanced approach towards Russia, calls for a tougher stance grow louder.<sup>68</sup> Russia's military buildup in the Arctic may be defensive in its conception, but in combination with its efforts to undermine Western cohesion, it is perceived as a threat to European and international security.

### China in the Arctic and Russia–China Cooperation

In 2018, China declared itself to be a “near-Arctic power,” causing much debate about its interests and motives in the region.<sup>69</sup> Western countries have taken note of China's attention to the Arctic and some analysts have argued that it has great but not fully stated ambitions in the region.<sup>70</sup> Somewhat cautiously, the Norwegian authorities note that “the Arctic has risen on China's foreign policy agenda,” while Finland's new strategy observes that China “has shown increasing economic and strategic interest in the region and especially in its natural resources, infrastructure and transport routes.”<sup>71</sup> So far, this attention has not produced a consensus as to China's activities and ambitions in the Arctic. Nor is there a clear picture to what extent its presence presents a security problem.

Western governments acknowledge that Chinese activity in the region, although growing, is relatively limited and mainly focused on scientific research. China may have an ambition to develop a regional extension to its Belt and Road Initiative, dubbed the Arctic Silk Road, ultimately seeking to exploit the region's resources. But decision-makers in Beijing seem to have realized that this can only be achieved by acting “as a ‘responsible power’, which intends to take an active part in the study and develop-

65 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Jeffrey Edmonds, “The Evolution of the Russian Threat to NATO,” in: John Andreas Olsen (ed.), *Future NATO. Adapting to New Realities* (London: RUSI Whitehall Papers 95, 2020), 59.

66 Norwegian Intelligence Service, *Focus 2021. The Norwegian Intelligence Service's assessment of current security challenges*, 21. (February 2021): [https://www.forsvaret.no/aktuelt-og-presse/publikasjoner/fokus/rapporter/Focus2021-english.pdf/\\_attachment/inline/450b1ed0-1983-4e6b-bc65-4aa7631aa36f:21c5241a06c489fa1608472c3c8ab855c0ac3511/Focus2021-english.pdf](https://www.forsvaret.no/aktuelt-og-presse/publikasjoner/fokus/rapporter/Focus2021-english.pdf/_attachment/inline/450b1ed0-1983-4e6b-bc65-4aa7631aa36f:21c5241a06c489fa1608472c3c8ab855c0ac3511/Focus2021-english.pdf) (accessed August 21, 2021); Hans von der Burchard, “Merkel blames Russia for ‘outrageous’ cyberattack on German parliament,” *Politico.eu* (May 13, 2020): <https://www.politico.eu/article/merkel-blames-russia-for-outrageous-cyber-attack-on-german-parliament/> (accessed August 21, 2021)

67 Hannah Jackson, “Canada concerned by ‘pattern of malicious cyber activity’ by Russian military, GAC says,” *Global News* (October 19, 2020): <https://globalnews.ca/news/7406404/canada-concerned-by-pattern-of-malicious-cyber-activity/> (accessed August 21, 2021); David E. Sanger, Julian E. Barnes, Nicola Perloth, “Preparing for Retaliation Against Russia, U.S. Confronts Hacking by China,” *The New York Times*, (March 7, 2021): <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/07/us/politics/microsoft-solarwinds-hack-russia-china.html> (accessed August 21, 2021)

68 Stefan Meister, “The End of German Ostpolitik. What a Change in Germany's Russia Strategy Might Look Like,” *DGAP Policy Brief*, No. 22 (September 2020): [https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article\\_pdfs/dgap-policy\\_brief-2020-22-en.pdf](https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/dgap-policy_brief-2020-22-en.pdf) (accessed August 21, 2021); Stefan Meister, “A Pragmatic Policy Towards Russia. Germany Should Strengthen Its Negotiating Position,” *DGAP Memo* (September 8, 2021): <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/pragmatic-policy-toward-russia> (accessed September 29, 2021);

69 David Auerswald, “China's Multifaceted Arctic Strategy,” *War on the Rocks* (May 24, 2019): <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/chinas-multifaceted-arctic-strategy/> (accessed August 21, 2021)

70 Rush Doshi, Alexis Dashe-Huang, Gaoqi Zhang, Northern expeditions: China's Arctic activities and ambitions,” *Foreign Policy at Brookings* (April 2021): [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/FP\\_20210412\\_china\\_arctic.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/FP_20210412_china_arctic.pdf) (accessed August 21, 2021). For alternative assessments, see: Øystein Tunsjø, “The Great Hype: False Visions of Conflict and Opportunity in the Arctic,” *Survival*, Volume 62, Issue 5, 145. (2020): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00396338.2020.1819649> (accessed August 21, 2021)

71 *Focus 2021*, *ibid*, 77.; *Finland's Strategy for Arctic Policy*, *ibid*, 18.

ment of the Arctic, as well as in the governance in the region.<sup>72</sup> The other Arctic nations laud China's constructive work in the Arctic Council where it is an observer since 2013. Norway's Arctic white paper underlines the importance of involving China – a major emitter of greenhouse gases – in climate-related issues.<sup>73</sup>

At the same time, however, European countries have become more receptive to US concerns about China's long-term goals and ambitions of an enhanced presence in the Arctic. They may not agree with Washington's tendency to interpret Beijing's actions through the angle of global competition, but – as with Russia – they perceive its Arctic activities and ambitions in light of its actions elsewhere. In particular, European countries take note that China's economic expansion, as manifested in the Belt and Road Initiative, is accompanied by a policy of interfering into other countries' domestic affairs. According to Norway's intelligence service, Chinese and Russian "intelligence and influence activities aimed at both the public and the private sector" are already "a considerable threat to Norway and Norwegian interests."<sup>74</sup> By contrast, China's Arctic presence has, so far, no obvious security dimension. Even US representatives admit that there is "no meaningful Chinese military presence at the moment in the Arctic."<sup>75</sup> This leaves hard-security concerns connected to the country's military buildup more generally, and to its naval development programs in particular.<sup>76</sup> The ramifications for the region of a potential conflict between the United States and China in the Pacific also worry NATO Arctic countries.

A concern among Western countries is the potential of a deepened and broadened China-Russia relationship.<sup>77</sup> Globally, Beijing and Moscow frequently work together in countering the United States. In

the Arctic, they have simultaneously conflicting and aligning interests.<sup>78</sup> China needs Russia's support for operating in the Arctic. Russia is dependent on Chinese investments. Both have an interest in contesting any Western dominance in the region. And, although Russia was at first reluctant to accept China's observer status in the Arctic Council, it has gradually come to cooperate with China regarding the Northern Sea Route and on energy and security. Yet there are obvious issues that stand in the way of closer cooperation. Russia remains reluctant to let another major player have a say in regional affairs. China has little interest in stirring up tensions that would endanger its gradual expansion into the region through economic and scientific activity. According to Pavel Baev, US analyses often do not understand that Beijing prefers that Moscow would demilitarize the region.<sup>79</sup> All this suggests that Sino-Russian cooperation on Arctic security will be kept within bounds.<sup>80</sup> Western analysts and decision-makers are nevertheless watching the prospect of an increased understanding in the region between the two countries with some concern, as it would represent a potential game changer in the Arctic power balance. A particular focus will be on the development of their cooperation on defense technologies.<sup>81</sup>

China not having a military presence in the Arctic makes it hard for Western countries to devise and to agree upon strategies to counter its influence. From the US point of view, the region is but one arena in a global competition, and China's and Russia's potential advantages there need to be checked. Washington's European allies, including Arctic countries, only partly share the US perception of China's presence in the region. Considering their economic cooperation with China, most of them seem willing not to risk increased tensions. For now, the common denominator among Western allies is to be "vigilant" and to

72 Kobzeva Mariia, "China's Arctic policy: present and future," *The Polar Journal* 9:1, 97. (2019): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/2154896X.2019.1618558> (accessed August 21, 2021)

73 *The Norwegian Government's Arctic Policy*, *ibid.*

74 *Focus 2021*, *ibid.*, 16.

75 James DeHart, the US State Department's coordinator for the Arctic quoted in Larry Luxner, Katarzyna Zysk, *ibid.*; see also Øystein Tunsjø, *ibid.*

76 Congressional Research Service, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities – Issues for Congress* (April 2021): <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2021)

77 Jim Townsend – Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "Partners, Competitors, or a Little of Both? Russia and China in the Arctic," Center for a New American Strategy (March 30, 2021): <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/partners-competitors-or-a-little-of-both> (accessed August 21, 2021)

78 For a comprehensive overview, see Hsiung, C. W., Røseth, T., "The Arctic Dimension in Sino-Russian Relations." In Jo Inge Bekkevold, Bobo Lo (eds.), *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 167-187; Andrew Foxall, "The Sino-Russian Partnership in the Arctic," in: Duncan Depledge and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (eds.) *On Thin Ice. Perspectives on Arctic Security*, Peterborough, Ca: NAADSN Engage Series no. 5, 2021, 82-90.

79 Pavel Baev, "The White Whale Chooses Freedom: Hard Choices in Opposing Russian Dominance in the Arctic," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memos*, (October 29, 2019): <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-white-whale-chooses-freedom-hard-choices-in-opposing-russian-dominance-in-the-arctic/> (accessed August 21, 2021)

80 Hsiung, C. W., Røseth, T., *ibid.* 167-187, 171-178.

81 Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "Missile defense and early warning missile attack system cooperation: Enhancing the Sino-Russian defense partnership," *IFS Insights*, 7/2020: <https://ifs.brange.unit.no/ifs-xmlui/handle/11250/2675322?locale-attribute=en> (accessed August 21, 2021)

“monitor” Chinese activities as well as Sino–Russian cooperation.<sup>82</sup>

### Finding the Right Balance: Western Responses

Western countries largely agree that Russia’s military buildup in the Arctic must be countered, and that their defense and deterrence posture there needs to be strengthened.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, there is increased awareness that strengthening deterrence might lead to an arms race and that an increase in military activity might undermine the Arctic’s stability. However, the region’s stability is already negatively affected by Russia’s military buildup and Western inaction could soon result in its military superiority in the region. Hence, Western countermeasures are necessary to restore stability, albeit with a higher level of tension.

Following this logic, recent US Arctic strategies promote a more active presence of allied forces in the region.<sup>84</sup> The Biden administration has yet to produce its assessment of the region. However, the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance and speeches by President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken underline countering Russian assertiveness and Chinese expansion – in day-to-day competition and in a more long-term strategic view.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, the administration has signaled a willingness to seek cooperation on issues of mutual interest, such as combating climate change.<sup>86</sup> This

is very much in line with the declared priorities of Russia’s Arctic Council chairmanship. How Biden’s approach to dealing with Putin turns out will have an impact on whether the general security environment becomes more confrontational or more cooperative. For the United States’ European allies, the Biden administration’s commitment to multilateralism and consultation is equally important. Regarding relations with Russia and China in the Arctic, Biden may insist on support for building a position of strength, but he and his team may also give their allies more room to advocate for a balanced approach, grounded in regional sensitivities.

For Norway, the push for more military activity in the High North highlights a traditional dilemma. It welcomes and encourages a NATO presence in the region. Whatever capabilities Norway’s armed forces can bring to the table, it will always be dependent on alliance support to mount a credible defense. It also wants US and other allied forces to be familiar with the region’s often treacherous conditions, and therefore encourages them to train and exercise there.<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, Norway – like most Arctic nations – emphasizes stability and predictability in the High North. A substantial increase in allied military activity carries a risk of heightened tension, especially when the main purpose is “status projection.”<sup>88</sup> Therefore, its response to proposals to deploy multinational

<sup>82</sup> The Reflection Group (NATO, *NATO 2030: United for a New Era*, 25, (November 25, 2020): [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf) (accessed August 21, 2021). This document recommends that “NATO should designate a special unit within the JISD to monitor and assess how Russia–China cooperation in the military, technological and political fields, including coordination in disinformation and hybrid warfare, impacts Euro-Atlantic security, and provide regular updates to the NAC.”

<sup>83</sup> “Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for the Congress,” *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Arctic Strategy* (June 2019): <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF> (accessed August 21, 2021); The Department of the Air Force, *Arctic Strategy* (July 2020): <https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2020SAF/July/ArcticStrategy.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2021); U.S. Marine Corps, Department of the Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, *Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power* (December 2020): <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/16/2002553074/-1/-1/1/TRISERVICESTRATEGY.PDF> (accessed August 21, 2021); Department of the Navy, *A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic January 2021* (January 2021): <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/05/2002560338/-1/-1/0/ARCTIC%20BLUEPRINT%202021%20FINAL.PDF> (accessed August 21, 2021); U.S. Army, *Regaining Dominance in the Arctic* (January 19, 2021): <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2021/03/15/9944046e/regaining-arctic-dominance-us-army-in-the-arctic-19-january-2021-unclassified.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2021). For a comprehensive assessment see Katarzyna Zysk, “Predictable Unpredictability? U.S. Arctic Strategy and Ways of Doing Business in the Region,” *War on the Rocks* (March 11, 2021): <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/predictable-unpredictability-u-s-arctic-strategy-and-ways-of-doing-business-in-the-region/> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>85</sup> The White House, *Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference* (February 19, 2021): <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/> (accessed August 21, 2021); The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, (March 2021): <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2021); U.S. Department of State, *A Foreign Policy for the American People. Speech of Anthony J. Blinken* (March 3, 2021): <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/> (accessed August 21, 2021) For a first analysis see Rachel Ellehuus et al., “Security in Northern Europe in the Biden Era,” *Report*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (April 2021): [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210430\\_Ellehuus\\_Security\\_NorthernEurope.pdf?kF7goasTSfbW\\_iPzS7WT72D5h3QrH5kr](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210430_Ellehuus_Security_NorthernEurope.pdf?kF7goasTSfbW_iPzS7WT72D5h3QrH5kr) (accessed August 21, 2021).

<sup>86</sup> Angela Stent, “US–Russia relations in a Biden administration,” in: Andras Racz, Milan Nic (eds.), *Russian Foreign Policy in 2020*, *ibid.* According to Matthew Rojansky’s analysis of the Biden–Putin summit, “Biden is likely to bring what Washington sees as pressing transnational priorities to the summit table, including climate change in the rapidly warming and melting Arctic. Despite its dependency on fossil fuel exports, Moscow has real concerns about Arctic climate change, suggesting that Russia’s current two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council could be an opportunity to identify common ground on both mitigation and adaptation strategies. The broader global climate change challenge intersects with migration, proliferation, radicalization, and even the pandemic in a cocktail of crises that no one country can address alone.” Matthew Rojansky, “The Biden–Putin Summit: Nothing to Reset but Expectations,” *War on the Rocks* (June 10, 2021): <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/the-biden-putin-summit-nothing-to-reset-but-expectations/> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>87</sup> Frank Bakke-Jensen, “Norway’s defense minister: We must ensure strategic stability in the High North,” *Defense News* (January 11, 2021): <https://www.defensenews.com/outlook/2021/01/11/norways-defense-minister-we-must-ensure-strategic-stability-in-the-high-north/> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>88</sup> Ralph Clem, “Risky Encounters with Russia: Time to Talk About Real Deconfliction,” *War on the Rocks* (February 18, 2021): <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/risky-encounters-with-russia-time-to-talk-about-real-deconfliction/> (accessed August 21, 2021)

forces to the Barents Sea has remained ambivalent. Critical voices argue that too much dependence on the United States limits Norway's ability to stabilize the region and provokes Russia, a view rejected by the government. However, some within the defense establishment are also skeptical about the way US and allied forces act in the region.<sup>89</sup>

Among the non-Arctic European countries, the United Kingdom's approach approximates the US one the most. It is determined to mark its presence and demonstrate its ability to operate in the region.<sup>90</sup> Its contribution to NATO's defense and deterrence posture in the High North is highly welcomed by others, especially by Norway, which values their deep defense relationship.<sup>91</sup> However, the United Kingdom's forward-leaning approach, combined with its uncompromising stance towards Russia, does not necessarily fit well with Norway's interest in a stable Arctic environment. For Norway and other Arctic nations, avoiding incidents like the British and Russian navies' recent clash in the Black Sea is a priority.<sup>92</sup> Other European NATO members tend to continue emphasizing the Arctic as an area of cooperation, but note that increased competition might force them to pay more attention to security aspects.<sup>93</sup> Non-Arctic countries like Germany and France also see the need to engage in military training and exercises in the Arctic.<sup>94</sup>

### The Question of New Structures

The deterioration of NATO-Russia relations since 2014, the recent increase in military activity in the Arctic, and the potential of more great-power rivalry

there have led some to ask whether the existing regional institutional framework is sufficient to deal with the risk of incidents and escalation.<sup>95</sup> A recent report by naval experts notes that the

notable rise in military exercises, demonstrations, capability advancements, and basing [...] has contributed to rising tension in the region. [...] here is increasing military activity not only from Russian, but from British, French, Canadian, American, and other NATO units exercising in the High North and Arctic. Lack of dialogue on national security interests related to Arctic military activity, driven primarily by the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, exacerbates the situation.<sup>96</sup>

None of the region's stakeholders seem eager to include security issues on the agenda of the Arctic Council. They do not regard NATO either as a suitable arena for a security dialogue with Russia when it comes to the region. Moscow, for its part, knows that discussions on security matters risk alienating it from the other Arctic Council members<sup>97</sup> and prefers these to be "conducted among the five littoral states directly."<sup>98</sup> Western nations, although wary towards Russian attempts for "bilateralization," increasingly understand that though bloc thinking is not helpful to solve regional issues, at least in the field of security it is becoming increasingly necessary

Still, US Secretary of State Pompeo's unusually offensive speech at the Arctic Council's 2019 meeting in Finland came as a shock for the other states

<sup>89</sup> Rachel Ellehuus, Johannes G. Rø, Robin Allers, Ingeborg Bjur, "Surprise and Stability in the High North," *CSIS Commentary* (December 14, 2020): <https://www.csis.org/analysis/surprise-and-stability-high-north> (accessed August 21, 2021); Captain Christopher Bott, "Responding to Russia's Northern Fleet," *Proceedings*, Vol. 147/3/1, 417 (March 2021): <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/march/responding-russias-northern-fleet> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>90</sup> "Royal Navy deploys warship to the Arctic Circle as quest to bar Russia from dominating 'high north' intensifies," *The News* (November 17, 2020): <https://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/defense/royal-navy-deploys-warship-arctic-circle-quest-bar-russia-dominating-high-north-intensifies-3038825> (accessed August 21, 2021). The Economist quotes the UK Commander of Joint Operations, saying that "we are doing things at a time and place which we would not normally have done, to see whether it evinces a reaction." "White heat – Britain's foreign and defense policy shake-up focuses on technology," *The Economist* (March 20, 2021): <https://www.economist.com/britain/2021/03/20/britains-foreign-and-defense-policy-shake-up-focuses-on-technology> (accessed August 21, 2021); Thomas Nielsen, "Royal Navy to sail Barents Sea with multinational task force," *The Barents Observer* (March 11, 2021): <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/03/royal-navy-sail-barents-sea-multinational-task-force> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>91</sup> Anna Knack, James Black, Ruth Harris, "Standing Together on NATO's North Flank: UK-Norwegian Defense Cooperation," *The RAND Blog* (December 9, 2020): <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/12/standing-together-on-natos-north-flank-uk-norwegian.html> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>92</sup> "Britain acknowledges surprise at speed of Russian reaction to warship," *The Guardian* (June 24, 2021):

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jun/24/british-warships-might-enter-crimean-waters-again-says-minister> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>93</sup> "The impact of climate change on the Arctic," *Metis*, Study No. 2.

<sup>94</sup> *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines*, *ibid.*; Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, *Strategische Vorausschau: Der Arktisdialog* (June 29, 2018): <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/strategische-vorausschau-der-arktisdialoog-25808> (accessed August 21, 2021); "The impact of climate change on the Arctic," *Metis*, Study No. 2.; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et du Développement International, *The Great Challenge of the Arctic – National Roadmap for the Arctic* (2016): [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/frna\\_-\\_eng\\_-\\_interne\\_-\\_prepa\\_-\\_17-06-pm-bd-pdf\\_cle02695b.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/frna_-_eng_-_interne_-_prepa_-_17-06-pm-bd-pdf_cle02695b.pdf) (accessed August 21, 2021); Ministère des Armées, *France and the New Strategic Challenges in the Arctic* (2019): [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/layout/set/print/content/download/565142/9742558/version/3/file/France+and+the+New+Strategic+Challenges+in+the+Arctic+-+DGRIS\\_2019.pdf](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/layout/set/print/content/download/565142/9742558/version/3/file/France+and+the+New+Strategic+Challenges+in+the+Arctic+-+DGRIS_2019.pdf) (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>95</sup> *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*, *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Walter Berbrick, Lars Saunes, *Conflict prevention and security cooperation in the Arctic Region: frameworks of the future*, U.S. Naval War College, p. 21, (2020): <https://usnwc.edu/Portals/0/News%20and%20Events/Arctic/Conflict%20Prevention%20and%20Security%20Cooperation%20in%20the%20Arctic%20Region-Frameworks%20of%20the%20Future%20C2%A0Report.pdf> (accessed August 23, 2021)

<sup>97</sup> Atle Staalesen, "Russia will not talk militarization during its chairmanship in Arctic Council," *The Barents Observer* (May 13, 2021): <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2021/05/russia-will-not-address-militarization-during-its-chairmanship-arctic-council> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>98</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, Andrey Kortunov, "UK-Russia Security Dialogue. European Security," *RUSI Conference Report*, 7. (March 2021): [https://static.rusi.org/280\\_cr\\_uk-russia\\_dialogue\\_web\\_version\\_0.pdf](https://static.rusi.org/280_cr_uk-russia_dialogue_web_version_0.pdf) (accessed August 21, 2021)



due to its language and its content.<sup>99</sup> He accused China of using civilian infrastructure projects to establish a permanent military presence, and Russia of contributing to the militarization of the Arctic and of making illegal territorial claims.<sup>100</sup> This episode showed that bringing up security related issues risks creating more tensions rather than helping to resolve them.

As new attempts to “reset” relations with Russia seem nowhere on the Western agenda, the focus is on managing risk and creating mechanisms to avoid conflict escalation in the Arctic. Think tanks such as the European Leadership Network have pointed to the danger of military encounters and hazardous incidents, and have called for establishing mechanisms for deconfliction, de-escalation, and confidence building.<sup>101</sup> Some have called for the revitalization of structures, such as the Arctic Chiefs of Defense forum, that were suspended after 2014 or a return of Russia to the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable. New initiatives to include Russia in Arctic security deliberations are considered.<sup>102</sup> Rather vaguely, Finland proposes the “possibility of convening an Arctic Summit, which could on one hand enable lifting the environmental issues on the Arctic Council’s agenda at the highest level and on the other hand create a possible forum for addressing security policy matters, which are outside of the Arctic Council’s mandate.”<sup>103</sup> Other proposals include the transformation of existing consultancy mechanisms like the bilateral Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA) into a military code of conduct for the High North.<sup>104</sup>

Such proposals receive mixed responses from Western nations and Russia.<sup>105</sup> The Norwegian government, for example, is skeptical of establishing new structures and prefers to strengthen existing institutions. For matters of maritime security, it points to several bilateral channels and agreements.<sup>106</sup> When Norway, like other NATO nations, suspended its military-to-military relations with Russia in 2014, it spared areas of particular importance for maritime and airspace safety, such as search and rescue, coast guard cooperation, and the INCSEA agreement, which is currently being renegotiated. Reflecting the importance that both countries attach to predictability and stability, a direct Skype connection between the Norwegian Joint forces Command and the Command of the Northern Fleet is maintained and regularly tested. In 2019, bilateral consultations led to the establishment of a channel of communication between senior defense officials in Oslo and Moscow.<sup>107</sup>

Those who want NATO to play a bigger role in the Arctic are not primarily concerned with dialogue and cooperation with Russia. They ask instead for better coordination of allied activity in the region and putting hard security on the agenda of the Arctic Council.<sup>108</sup> They argue that a more united Western approach would send a strong signal to Russia and China that the Arctic is not “up for grabs.”<sup>109</sup> While European countries worry that the United States’ attention might turn away from the High North, its Arctic strategies emphasize the importance of allies. The Biden administration has signaled a turn

<sup>99</sup> Arctic Council, *Speech by Secretary of State of the United States of America* (May 6-7, 2019): <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/2409> (accessed August 21, 2021); Arne O. Holm, “Verbal Thunderstorm from Mike Pompeo,” *High North News* (May 7, 2019): <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/verbal-thunderstorm-mike-pompeo> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>100</sup> “USA Launches Head-On Verbal Attack on Russia and China,” *High North News* (7 May 2019): <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/usa-launches-head-verbal-attack-russia-and-china> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>101</sup> Thomas Frear, “Lessons Learned? Success and Failure in Managing Russia-West Incidents 2014-2018”, European Leadership Network (April 2018): <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/11042018-Incidents-Management-Review-Tom-Frear.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2021); Katarzyna Kubiak (ed), *Towards a more stable Russia-NATO relationship*, European Leadership Network (February 2019): <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/31012019-Towards-a-more-stable-Russia-NATO-relationship.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2021); See also Ralph Clem, *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Walter Berbrick, Lars Saunes, *ibid.* p. 57; “Arctic Council, EU, NATO on Agenda as Military Leaders Addressed Arctic Security Issues,” *High North News* (May 12, 2021): <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-eu-nato-agenda-military-leaders-addressed-arctic-security-issues> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>103</sup> *Finland’s Strategy for Arctic Policy*, *ibid.*, 19.

<sup>104</sup> Boulègue, *ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>105</sup> “Russia will not talk militarization during its chairmanship in Arctic Council”, *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> See also Norwegian government representatives at the online conference Looking North, organized by the Atlantic council or in the podcast: Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Jim Townsend, “Nordic Defense Policy and Arctic Security, with Janne Kuusela and Svein Efstjed,” *Brussels Sprouts Podcast*, Center for a New American Security (April 23, 2021): <https://www.cnas.org/publications/podcast/nordic-defense-policy-and-arctic-security-with-janne-kuusela-and-svein-efstjed> (accessed August 21, 2021)

<sup>107</sup> “The Norwegian Government’s Arctic Policy”, *ibid.* 3.5. In addition to these mechanisms that are primarily meant “to help prevent misunderstandings and undesirable incidents in connection with military activity” comes the comprehensive net of civilian cooperation in the field of fisheries, science, and people-to-people cooperation mentioned above.

<sup>108</sup> Anna Wieslander, “NATO Must Engage in the Arctic,” *Defense One* (September 16, 2019): <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/09/its-time-nato-arctic/159887/> (accessed August 21, 2021); Luke Coffey, Daniel Kochis, “NATO Summit 2021: The Arctic Can No Longer Be an Afterthought,” *Issue Brief*, The Heritage Foundation, No. 66. (June 10, 2021): <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/IB6086.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2021).

<sup>109</sup> Simon Tisdall, “Trump’s bid to buy Greenland shows that the ‘scramble for the Arctic’ is truly upon us,” *The Guardian* (August 24, 2019): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/24/trump-greenland-gambit-sad-sign-arctic-up-for-grabs> (accessed August 17, 2021)

towards more allied consultation and emphasized the need to tackle challenges related to the climate change together.<sup>110</sup> It remains to be seen whether increased the United States' attention and presence in the Arctic will be accompanied by more such consultation with allies. However, even if there is, this does not necessarily mean that hard security should be put on the agenda of the Arctic Council as defense-related consultations can take place outside the regional structures too. The main impetus for Washington's interest in the region is to contain Russia's growing military ambitions and efforts to project its power in the Arctic – changing existing structures is not necessary for doing so.

Calls for a specific NATO strategy for the Arctic have so far been met with little enthusiasm.<sup>111</sup> This is not to say that the alliance does not have a role in the region or that developments there are not of any concern for it. Since 2014 it has updated its military strategy, reformed its command structure and increasingly turned its attention to the High North. Arctic nations like Norway have lobbied NATO to look north since the mid-2000s and invited allies to train and exercise there as a means of deterrence. Yet reforms like the establishment of an Atlantic command at Norfolk in the United States concern primarily the protection of sea lines of communication in the North Atlantic.<sup>112</sup> When it comes to operating in the Arctic, Western nations tend to rely on the flexibility of bilateral agreements and multinational formations, rather than acting in a NATO framework. This attitude is reflected in the conclusions of the most recent NATO summit in June 2021, which do not mention the Arctic and merely call for “necessary, calibrated, and coordinated activities” in the High North.<sup>113</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The latest meeting of the Arctic Council in Reykjavik on May 20 and the program of the current Russian chairmanship again illustrated the ambiguity of the region's security situation, as outlined in this analy-

sis. On the one hand, the Arctic offers and necessitates close cooperation, particularly in the context of climate change, and Arctic countries share an interest in maintaining good, cooperative relations among themselves. The Russian chairmanship program is also committed to cooperation on issues of mutual interests, such as countering climate change and developing the region. On the other hand, the region is not isolated from developments in the international security environment and the deterioration of NATO-Russia relations affects it.

Russia's militarization projects run parallel to rhetoric and, to a considerable extent, a policy that underline cooperation. Its Arctic Council chairmanship program is an example of the latter. However, while its chairmanship will come to an end in 2023, the results of Moscow's military buildup will be lasting. Consequently, the West needs a strategy that is not only able to preserve regional stability through cooperation but also ensures security against Russia's growing military presence in the region. Mirroring Russia's double-sided policy by relying more on NATO's presence in the region but keeping Arctic structures unchanged to preserve stability through cooperation could be a feasible option.

### Continued Arctic Exceptionalism is Unrealistic

Due to geopolitical developments over the past decade, the concept of Arctic exceptionalism – the idea that the region is somehow exempted from geopolitical tensions elsewhere – has become unsustainable. Two developments in particular challenge this notion. First, the revival of Russia's great-power ambitions and ensuing military buildup have altered the situation in the Arctic and are forcing NATO countries into countermeasures. This dynamic leads to a militarization of the region that enhances the level of tension and implies a risk of escalation. Second, the accelerating global great-power competition involving not only US-dominated NATO and Russia but increasingly also China leaves its mark on the Arctic. The United States – and to some degree its allies – see China's interest and increased presence in the region through the prism of its rise as an economic and military power. As unlikely as it looks

<sup>110</sup> Paul Stronski, Grace Kier, “A Fresh Start on U.S. Arctic Policy Under Biden,” Carnegie Moscow center, (May 17, 2021): <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84543> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>111</sup> David Auerswald, “NATO in the Arctic: Keep Its Role Limited, For Now,” *War on the Rocks*, (October 12, 2020): <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/nato-in-the-arctic-keep-its-role-limited-for-now/> (accessed August 17, 2021)

<sup>112</sup> John Andreas Olsen (ed.), “NATO in the North Atlantic. Revitalising collective defense,” *RUSI Whitehall Paper* (2017), 87.

<sup>113</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Brussels Summit Communiqué” (June 14, 2021): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm) (accessed August 17, 2021). The complete paragraph states: “In the High North, we will continue to undertake necessary, calibrated, and coordinated activities in support of the Alliance's security interests. We will seek to strengthen cooperation with relevant and like-minded partners in the interests of NATO's agreed deterrence and defense objectives, in line with NATO's decisions, policies and procedures, as appropriate, and with consideration of political implications.”

today, an extension of Russia's cooperation with China in the Arctic to include military affairs would be a game changer as it would alter the regional power balance significantly.

Western countries can do little to prevent Russia from militarizing its own Arctic regions, even when it deploys capabilities that allow it to project power well beyond its borders. In this regard, Russia has been moving forces within its own territory, thereby not violating any arms control agreements. The Arctic is an integral part of Russia's military planning. Many of its deployments are not about the region itself but elements of a broader military strategy to counter a perceived Western supremacy. In that context, it is likely that Western measures to respond to Russia's militarization will create additional impetus for its military activities, not least by creating a sense of domestic legitimacy for continued military buildup.

#### **Towards a Double-sided Strategy in the Arctic**

Western countries need a strategy in the Arctic region that ensures security in the face of Russia's military buildup and preserves regional stability through cooperation. A priority should be to prevent getting tied into a spiraling arms race with Russia to keep tensions there as low as possible. Russia's deployment of military capabilities cannot be left unanswered, but by insisting on transparency, showing restraint, and emphasizing the defensive nature of their own deployments, Western countries can avoid pushing Russia towards further militarization. In other words, the West needs to counterbalance Russia's growing military presence in the region, but without appearing as a threat.

The West should not be fazed by Russia's double-sided Arctic policy of emphasizing peaceful development and cooperation while simultaneously militarizing the region. Rather, the EU and NATO should follow a similar strategy of showing military strength and engaging in civilian development projects at the same time. Given the urgency of finding joint solutions for the region's sustainable development, it should not be a taboo for Western countries to extend their cooperation with Russia on Arctic infrastructure, logistics, environmental issues, and other civilian projects while at the same time enhancing their security cooperation bilaterally and in the framework of NATO.

While NATO remains the most important forum for coordinating Western security policy – includ-

ing measures to counter Russia in the Arctic – it is not the best forum or channel for a regional dialogue with Russia. The Arctic has its own structures, in which nations deal with each other not as blocs. Trying to institutionally involve NATO might even endanger the functioning of existing channels and institutions on which Arctic cooperation relies. In fact, in light of deteriorating West-Russia relations, the regional institutional frameworks have so far fared surprisingly well. This is due to genuinely shared interests and a degree of trust through contact. It seems that narratives envisioning a "territory of dialogue" and "zone of peace" play an important role.

Still, as the two geopolitical macro trends noted above are unlikely to be reversed in the short term, continuing efforts at sustaining regional cooperation and keeping up regional institutional structures are ever more important to keep tensions relatively low. The West should, like Russia, employ a double-sided approach that simultaneously focuses on countering Russia's military buildup, employing also bloc-logic to the necessary extent, and on cooperating with all Arctic nations on issues of shared interest. Meanwhile, the West needs to conduct the necessary security and defense cooperation in the High North outside of the existing Arctic institutional structures, in order not to hamper their functioning.

As the United States is likely to focus on countering Russia's military activity and on limiting China's presence in the Arctic, European nations might fill a gap. A European emphasis on low tensions and pragmatic, peaceful cooperation on shared interests – conducted in cooperation with the United States – might contribute to reassure Russia in the Arctic and possibly even ease NATO-Russia tensions more generally. In addition, such a European focus on less geopolitical, civilian aspects could complement the US approach and thus strengthen transatlantic cohesion. The Biden administration's openness to including allies represents a window of opportunity.

#### **Russia's Arctic Council Chairmanship as an Opportunity**

As an integral part of this approach, the West has an interest in helping to make Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council a success. The next two years not only offer an opportunity to make progress on important regional affairs; they can also be a chance to steer NATO-Russia relations into less conflictual waters. Successful pragmatic cooperation with Mos-

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cow on issues such as environmental protection, climate change, and infrastructure development in the Arctic could serve as vehicles for building trust and positively impact NATO-Russia relations with regard to more sensitive geopolitical issues. In that sense, the Russian chairmanship of the Arctic Council is the immediate litmus test of the extent to which Arctic governance institutions preserve their efficiency despite geopolitical tensions.

This does not mean that the West should lower its guard with regard to Russia's intentions. Cross-topic concessions and package deals, a negotiation tactic frequently used by Moscow should be avoided, and cooperation in the region should not be bound to geopolitical or other concessions made elsewhere.

The West should consider the revitalization of existing joint structures aimed at incident prevention together with Russia. This is necessitated by the increasing civilian presence in the Arctic (particularly shipping and tourism), the growing mutual militarization, the extreme climatic conditions, and the scarce infrastructure. Taken together, these factors constitute a uniquely complicated situation in which NATO and Russian interests rub against each other. While NATO countries can rely on existing alliance frameworks and on bilateral channels for managing potential military incidents, at present the equivalent ties with Russia are much weaker. Ultimately, revitalizing the existing structures with Russia might help build confidence and trust too, without endangering the core security and stability-related interest of the West in the Arctic.

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