

Commentary

NATO & the Arctic

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In the light of its already full plate of responsibilities it was not surprising that the Alliance did not react collectively to the territorial Arctic claims Russia deposited in August 2015. Faced i.a. with Putin's ongoing illegal action on the Alliance's eastern flank, the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan and threats to its southern member Turkey, finding a consensus in any way vis-à-vis High North issues is clearly not on NATO's forefront.

This taciturnity however sends a bad signal, both to Vladimir Putin as well as to the Arctic nations, as it could be interpreted as a lack of interest. Bad PR, so to speak.

Alliance silence on the matter unfortunately reflects a more engrained problem. Notwithstanding persistent efforts in the last decade, for instance by Norway, to get and keep the issue of High North security on the radar in Brussels, a collective decision to address the changing strategic situation remains elusive. Even Putin does not now trigger a NATO High North position. Individual nations have taken measures – e.g. the creation of a Danish Arctic Command – but a collective response is absent.

Leaving the legal merits of the ambitious Russian territorial claim to the experts, politically the announcement clearly fits in the aggressive expansionism that is Putin's hallmark. A collective Allied reaction to Moscow's attempted Polar territory grab requires the initiative by one or by a group of nations in the North Atlantic Council to discuss the matter followed by consensus on text and possible measures. No move in NATO HQ in that direction can as yet be discerned.

This lack of collective positioning on the High North, against a background of Russian sabre rattling, but also in the face of a growing understanding of the overall impact climate change has on the regional strategic situation in the High North, is not surprising. There is no NATO High North Security Strategy. The dearth of attention for the region was already evident at the launch of the NATO Strategic Concept in 2010, in which there is not a word about the Arctic. An absence of consensus between the editors of the Concept – i.e. member states – prevented the issue being incorporated in this guiding document.

NATO can of course not be blamed that in 2015 the Strategic Concept also in general terms looks outdated, especially considering Putin's continuing belligerent antics. But one expected that NATO declarations since Moscow's illegitimate acts started would not only focus on beefing up Baltic and eastern Alliance members' security but would also send a clear message regarding Russian polar posturing and preparation. Even so, an icy silence prevails.

The timely visit of NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg to NATO Founding Member Iceland in April 2015 raised hopes of High North Security experts of some tough language from Brussels. Disappointingly, nothing of substance was announced to manifest that in the northern region too, NATO is strengthening its guard to defend Alliance interests. A guard that is called for also because, as new maritime options develop, a range of opportunities appears for Russia to spoil – if not do worse to – Western interests.

Three potential measures of increased vigilance present themselves.

ONE: the current NATO air surveillance mission should become permanent, i.e. NATO nations should continue to mount a taskforce of aircraft for air policing and other tasks at Keflavik on a rotational scheme, but henceforth without gaps of months of absence as currently is the practice.

TWO: NATO should consider upgrading its liaison office in Iceland, maybe in an adapted variation on the model of the NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) recently installed in the Baltic States, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria as part of the Readiness Action Plan that is NATO's military response to Moscow's aggression. A small NFIU HQ with emphasis on support for NATO's regional air and maritime activities.

THREE: the budding initiative to create a regional Search and Rescue (SAR) Centre should now be materialised. This is not a NATO activity, but clearly one to be supported by all nations and organisations with Arctic activities. NATO can provide expertise. The requirement to be able to assist over long distance in case of incidents in or over Arctic waters is massively evident. The beauty of this proposal is that it could include an invitation to Russia, as member of the Arctic Council, to join, and hence have SAR become an instrument of détente.

Finally, all three measures should be supported by Alliance common funding as Iceland alone cannot be shouldered with the financial burden.

As winter approaches, one continues to hope NATO will get its polar act together soon.