

Briefing Note

NATO and The Geopolitical Future of the Arctic

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The future of the Arctic and NATO's role is likely to remain status quo for the next 5 years mainly because of Arctic governance institutions and agreements among the Arctic coastal states with few major challenges by others to date. However, four stressors, increasing in intensity, could undermine the Arctic governance architecture and brook opposition to the coastal states, increasing the risk of conflicts and miscalculation of intentions of other actors to NATO and by NATO toward others. By 2030, these stressors could upset the stability of the Arctic region.

Governance - Continued cooperation is vital

A common assumption is that a warming climate in the Arctic will necessarily engender geopolitical conflict in the region. This is not a fait accompli. The greatest defence against conflict in and about the Arctic are the existing governance structures driven by the Arctic coastal states. Precipitous or provocative actions by any actors, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), however, could upset the cooperative and productive governance structure that has been forged since the end of the Cold War. The Arctic Council remains the most important international forum for the discussion of Arctic issues. Its lack of hard power and refrain from tackling security issues directly has been a great strength rather than a weakness. Consensus decision-making, continued respect for the rules of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)¹ and the focus on scientific problem-solving have been the secrets to the Arctic Council's success in fostering cooperation and helping negotiate a number of agreements binding on the eight Arctic states and others.² Other important organizations with a NATO nexus include the Arctic Coast Guard Forum³ and the Arctic Security Forces' Roundtable (ASFR),⁴ although Russia has been excluded from the latter since 2014. Regular communication, contact and table top exercises among the Arctic states, both via the Arctic Council and these other fora, have maintained low tensions. They must continue and thought should be given to re-inviting Russia to the ASFR and beginning discussions with China via the civilian side of NATO.

Despite the cooperative governance environment to date, there are new stressors that are growing in intensity that could upend this cooperation and wrestle decision-making from the coastal and Arctic states. They include: 1) the growing nationalist/globalist divide in world politics; 2) emboldened states; 3) political churn; and 4) the growing requirement for deterrence. These stressors could accentuate, distort or unravel the current Arctic cooperation consensus that has persisted since the end of the Cold War.

1) Nationalist/globalist divide

The nationalist/globalist divide in world politics is separating states into two groups: those that want national interests to prevail and those that want global, international solutions to problems. This divide is present in the Arctic and manifests itself in the main question of the Arctic: who is in charge? Should it be just Arctic states or should it be many given the transnational issues facing it, such as climate change, increased likelihood of a shipping disaster, exploitation of resources or even which states can belong to Arctic-related fora? While the Arctic states, and especially the five coastal states, have desired to remain the lead decision-makers, other actors have insisted on playing a role. Now, with more and more actors, the compromises are becoming difficult. Nine of the 13 Arctic Observer states, which currently belong to the Arctic Council, are European and all but Switzerland are also NATO members (see Table 1). Europe, in general, has supported a globalist approach to the Arctic (indeed the EU has sought membership on the Arctic Council, but unsuccessfully). More institutions, rules, multilateral agreements and moratoria are a globalist's preferred course of action. The globalist view tends to promote a monolithic view of the Arctic (akin to treating the Arctic as a "park" to be preserved), negating stark differences in issues, concerns and culture across the Arctic. The globalist view can represent an affront to the Arctic states and especially Arctic coastal states' more heterogeneous view of the Arctic and nationalist ideas. Paramount for the coastal states is their continued lead on decision making. Four of the five coastal states are NATO members and the other is the most powerful Arctic actor (Russia) in this "A5" group (Charron et al., 2016).⁵ This sets up a potential divide between Arctic and non-Arctic states and also between Arctic NATO and non-Arctic NATO states on approaches to problems. While minor to date, it is a source of irritation. It is seen most starkly, for example, in NATO's lack of consensus on the extent and scope of NATO activity in the Arctic.

The remaining five Observer states are all Asian and include: China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Singapore. They represent the majority of the world's population. Indeed, the future of the Arctic could be entirely determined by Asian states. They are either very nationally inclined (read China), or have yet to fully articulate their preferences in Arctic policies. Differences in approaches on how to solve Arctic problems create potential political cleavages. China, for example, is always looking to have more influence in decision-making on the Arctic Council and is not always sensitive to the rights of the six Indigenous Permanent Participants (PP)⁶ who have a globalist perspective. Indeed, the PPs' notion of sovereignty in the Arctic transcends state boundaries. The PPs could lose patience should they be excluded from meaningful consultation. Russia too can be insensitive to the PPs on the Arctic Council, including barring the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) from attending Arctic Council meetings for 6 months in 2012. If the PPs were to walk away from the Arctic Council (especially given growing recognition of UNDRIP⁷ and Indigenous rights and their younger and growing population), it is expected that Canada, Norway and Denmark would have to follow suit for political

reasons. Should the PPs leave or be marginalized, or should several Arctic states walk away, or should Russia choose to leave (perhaps because a new Russian-aligned state applies for membership and is refused?) or is kicked out (as was contemplated in 2014), this would damage the Arctic Council, perhaps irreconcilably, damaging a very important temper to these myriad political differences.

Russia is set to assume the two-year rotating chair of the Arctic Council from Iceland in 2021. Russia is not expected to deviate wildly from the usual chair agendas which focus on environmental protection and sustainable development but the question of new members and budget allocations to particular Arctic Council projects against a background of increasing global power competition could make for a contentious chairship.

2) Emboldened states and the further erosion of a liberal world order (such as it was)

Related to the nationalism/globalism debate, is the growing frustration with the liberal world order that is lamented by many, exploited by others. China, for example, interprets the tenets of UNCLOS very differently from much of the world, especially in the South and East China seas. China's alternate interpretations of UNCLOS, especially as its Polar Silk route initiative expands into the Arctic, may be applied to the region creating divisions among states keen to use and benefit from China's infrastructure, economic might and markets and those who want the sea lines of communication to remain strictly internationally-controlled and enforced. Continued negotiations and reactions to final outcomes on the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS)⁸ process will be an important indicator of the governance health of the region. To date, parties have respected the final, negotiated announcements of the CLCS but what if non-Arctic states disagree with the process or outcomes? Or what if NATO allies disagree and fail to reach a compromise on overlapping claims? Or what if several NATO allies are pitted against Russia in a final outcome?

Additionally, emboldened states may court Arctic coastal states, especially if awarded favourable decisions by the CLCS, to curry favour with them and gain influence. China's financial and infrastructure projects in many parts of the world, including Greenland, and Iceland, have not gone unnoticed. At what point do economic necessities and promises of help by potential peer competitors to the United States create serious divisions within NATO? And given China's improving relationship with Russia, Beijing's growing interest in the Arctic should be monitored closely, particularly in the context of heightened tensions between Russia and the NATO alliance.

The other concern raised by emboldened states is their use of gray zone tactics. Violations to territorial integrity, for example, are often not flagrant – it can come in the form of territory 'infringement'. Intelligence is collected from research vessels, or badly needed 5G networks are provided as development. Rarely are there consequences which undermines Arctic governance norms established to date. In addition, military buildups by these states increase their ability to limit or deny access and control various parts of the region. Safeguarding the sea lines of communication, which now include greater portions of the Arctic, especially during a crisis or conflict, is vital for the security of the alliance.

3) Political churn

NATO may experience a lot of political churn in the next five years because of election cycles. Related to the nationalist/globalist argument, states around the world have very heated

disagreements about how to respond to migrants or how to respond to climate change; they are becoming very incendiary wedge issues. Only two NATO countries are not scheduled to have a major election between now and 2025.⁹ This means that all of the Arctic states except Russia (which has given up any pretense of democracy) will have new governments or mandates. On the one hand, few Arctic states are expected to move too far to the right or left from their current postures. On the other hand, some NATO member states are expected to continue to slide to the right, ideologically-speaking, making consensus on issues difficult and further fueling nationalist tensions making it harder for NATO to reach consensus on future courses of actions or priorities. For example, difficult decisions may need to be made in the future by NATO members vis-à-vis new memberships including about Finland and Sweden. Longer-term, an independent or quasi-independent Greenland's role in NATO (or perhaps it may join the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) or prefer to be nonaligned) will need to be discussed with sober consideration for the ramifications of any and all future NATO memberships.

Arctic Geopolitics

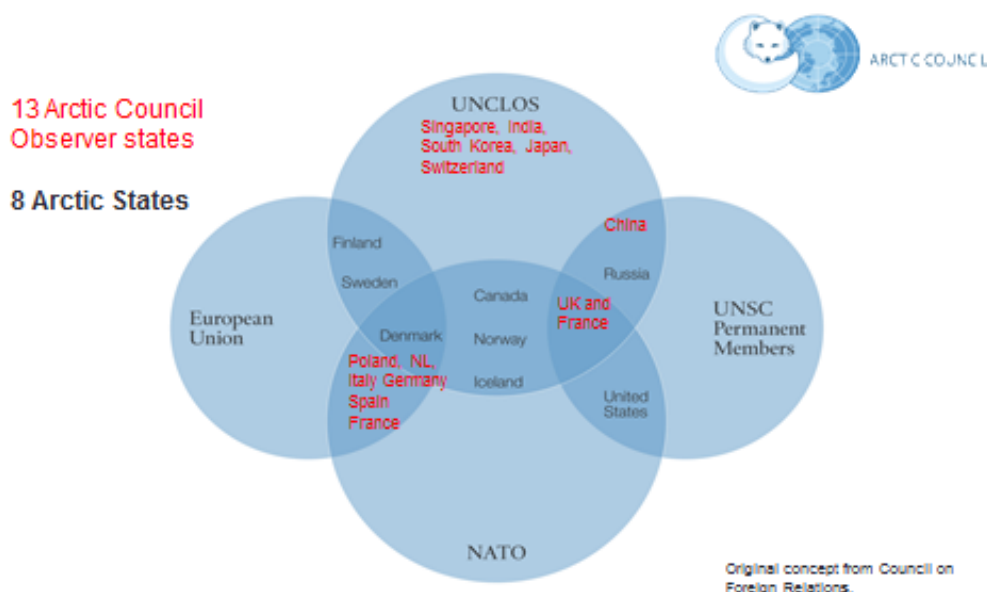


Table 1: Arctic Actors

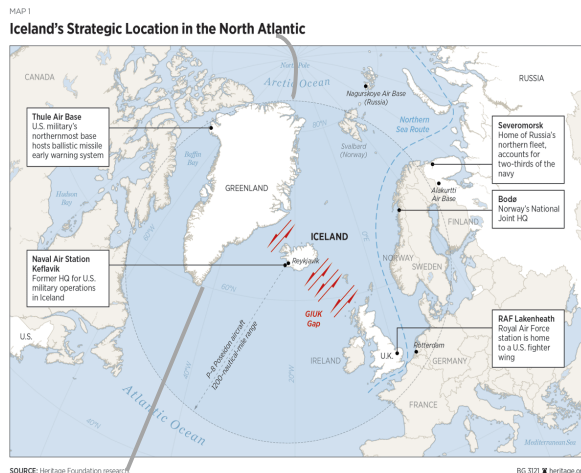
Arctic Coastal States (A5)	Decision making members of the Arctic Council	Arctic Observers (non- Arctic States)
Russia	Russia	United Kingdom (UK)
Canada	Canada	France
United States	United States	Germany
Denmark	Denmark	Italy
Norway	Norway	Poland
	Sweden	Spain
States in blue= NATO members	Finland	The Netherlands (NL)
	Iceland	Switzerland
	6 PPs – must be consulted	China
		India
		Singapore
		South Korea
		Japan

4) Achieving the “right” deterrence and all domain awareness

It is important to recognize that the Arctic, in and of itself, is a highly unlikely place for the beginnings of a major conflict with Russia (as well as China). In this regard, the Arctic is one component of an integrated NATO deterrence posture, in conjunction with NORAD and USNORTHCOM. With the likelihood that a future major conflict with Russia would originate on the central front in Eastern Europe, the seam between NATO (the North Atlantic) and North America (NORAD/USNORTHCOM) and the emerging capability gap relative to the new generation of advanced Russian delivery systems present a potential credibility problem that could be exploited politically by Russia. As such, closing these seams and gaps, and thereby communicating to Russia that the Arctic cannot be threatened and exploited relative to a conflict elsewhere, is vital.

At the same time, the process and manner in which seams and gaps are closed must be carefully managed in order to not appear to threaten vital Russian interests in its Arctic in a provocative manner. If this were to occur, Russia might walk away from the Arctic Council, other Arctic fora and/or defect from other areas of Arctic cooperation, such as the Search and Rescue Agreement, undermining the status quo. NATO’s deterrence posture must be carefully balanced with its interest in maintaining the political status quo, which in turn, could create the conditions for deeper and broader Arctic cooperation.

A major weakness for NATO, however, is that all Arctic states (and indeed NATO) desire but are challenged to achieve all domain situational awareness ideally with full access to the Arctic. The NATO trend toward domain specific component commanders tends to stove pipe resources, training and exercises. NATO exercises and scenarios have also been traditionally land focused¹⁰ which means that maritime, air, space and cyber domains, which are vital for the Arctic, require more attention. Russia is closest to achieving both all domain awareness and access faster than any of the other NATO state and China is reportedly training with all domain awareness fore of mind. Furthermore, the ability to plan, prepare and secure funds for very expensive deterrence infrastructure is proving uneven across NATO, which is related to the political churn and slides to the right and left and, not to mention, the world-wide recession as a result of the global pandemic. Russia and China are expected to exploit this advantage, which raises the possibility of miscalculating intentions because of a lack of situational awareness, over or under reaction to events in the Arctic and a disjointed NATO plan and coordination with North America.



Avenues of attack. The green line is approximate UCP boundaries between EUCOM and USNORTHCOM.

The future for NATO and the Arctic is fraught with potential fault lines both within and between NATO and non-NATO countries and Arctic and non-Arctic states that could undermine the cooperation forged to date in the Arctic. Cooperation has been a function of a governance structure orchestrated by particular actors, especially the coastal states, but there are signs that non-Arctic states seek more input and decision-making rights. The Arctic remains a vital strategic region for Euro-Atlantic security. Now is the time for NATO to consider its approach to the region while tensions still remain low.

Notes

1. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (signed 1982).
2. Including the Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic (signed 2011); Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic (signed 2013); Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation (signed 2017) and Central Arctic Ocean Fishing Moratorium (signed 2018) with the A5 + Iceland, Japan, South Korea, China and the European Union.
3. “The ACGF is an independent, informal, operationally-driven organization, not bound by treaty, to foster safe, secure, and environmentally responsible maritime activity in the Arctic.” Retrieved from <https://www.arcticcoastguardforum.com>
4. “The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) is a semi-annual gathering usually attended by twelve nations focused on improving communications and maritime domain awareness in the Arctic Circle. The twelve nations include: Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.” Retrieved from <https://www.apan.org/pages/case-study-asfr>
5. Measured by Arctic capabilities, reach, Arctic territory, population, or Arctic GDP, Russia is the regional hegemon.
6. Indigenous peoples’ organizations have been granted Permanent Participants status in the Arctic Council. The Permanent Participants have full consultation rights in connection with the Council’s negotiations and decisions. The Permanent Participants include: [Aleut International Association \(AIA\)](#) [Arctic Athabaskan Council \(AAC\)](#); [Gwich’in Council International \(GCI\)](#); [Inuit Circumpolar Council \(ICC\)](#); [Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North \(RAIPON\)](#); [Saami Council \(SC\)](#). This category is open equally to Arctic organizations of Indigenous peoples with a majority of Arctic Indigenous constituency representing: a single Indigenous people resident in more than one Arctic State; or more than one Arctic Indigenous people resident in a single Arctic State.
7. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).
8. Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (1997).

Greece and Poland will have executive branch elections in 2025. All of the other NATO states have elections scheduled for 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024.

9 NATO states have non-Army/land domain CDS at present. (Denmark and Spain – Air Force and Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, NL and Portugal - Navy). Iceland has a civilian female representative (Director General, Directorate of Security and Defence Ministry for Foreign Affairs)

9. as Iceland does not have a military. She is the only female representative among the 29 other Chiefs of Defence.. More diversity measured in many ways, including gender, and specialities (such as cyber and space) would help NATO to think in new and innovative ways. Albania's CDS, for example, is a physician.

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