

The new northern flank in an Integrated Deterrence Concept

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Introduction

Deterrence as the desired outcome of affecting an adversary's real and potential choices through defence and security activities. It is premised on communicating credibility and will, where a significant proportion of the credibility and will is capability. Deterrence is the elemental defence policy objective of NATO and NORAD. Deterrence must also be a deliberate choice, informing other decisions, not an assumption or incidental.

The current threat environment warrants a more deliberate and integrated approach to deterrence planning. Conventional threats to sovereignty and security are increasingly direct, as states openly disregard international law and border inviolability. Coercive kinetic threats are compounded by state-directed actions that undermine national interests without crossing the threshold of war, gradually eroding trust in democratic and civil society institutions and norms. These below the threshold-of-war or hybrid threats are also designed to exploit government responses constrained by authorities and divisions of responsibility as well as institutional weaknesses (Wang & Zakheim, 2025)

Integrated deterrence is a concept advanced by the US as the "intellectual paradigm shift" needed to enable the integration and synchronization of all the instruments of state, and indeed of society, allies and partners, for defence and security to maintain a campaign in an ongoing strategic competition. Integrated deterrence as an aspiration should enable governments to integrate planning to cooperate and collaborate across domains and theatres, using all instruments of national and allied power against a spectrum of threats deliberately targeting across boundaries to avoid aligning with institutional, national or alliance boundaries. It is premised the need to bolster and expand deterrent activities to address the concern that hybrid techniques can win the competition without resort to open conflict. A fundamental feature of integrated deterrence campaigning is that it will be continuous and dynamic. In short, it is an attempt to promote integrated planning across governments, societies and allies to deter threats. (United States Government, JCC, 2023)

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Horizontal and vertical integration

In an era of strategic competition, the circumpolar Arctic, Arctic Ocean and high north environs are no longer excluded from geo-political maneuvering for economic and military advantage. The Arctic is not immune from the requirement to be integrated into a more holistic global defence and security posture. However, the Arctic both demonstrates the challenges of integrating deterrence and provides examples of some new solutions and ways to navigate integrated deterrence planning.

The defence and security challenges of the Arctic are parsed and operationalized through multiple discrete national, regional and international organizations and sovereignties, some with reasonably clear divisions along traditional domains of responsibility and authorities, with others overlapping and blurring boundaries. The number and nature of these challenges are also changing, in some cases dramatically. New technologies and traditional divisions have been weaponized against states, institutions and individuals. The new threats must be understood on their own terms but how they interact and shape each other is equally important to create integrated and synchronized planning that can properly frame and deliver actionable policy and strategy responses. These are necessary to respond to actions that seek to take advantage of vulnerabilities and seams between the national, regional and international organizations and sovereignties.

The starting point for creating a global perspective on integrating the Arctic into an effective deterrence campaign is to address seams at the highest levels. The Arctic's North American and European northern defence continental division between, respectively, the North American Aerospace Defence (NORAD), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as well as European Command (EUCOM) must evolve to sort command and control and synchronize activities to combat gray zone activities as well as kinetic threats. New missile technologies and dependencies of space and cyber create vulnerabilities and gaps that could be exploited by adversaries. The renewed focus on Greenland's importance to the defence of North America is only one example of the inter-relationship between deterrence and vulnerabilities on both sides of the Atlantic. Having North American and trans-Atlantic lines of communication be held at risk could constrain or slow responses to threats in and against Europe. Canada's re-conception of the defence of the Canadian Arctic as an Alliance responsibility is an example of the evolution required. In 2023, Canada declared that "contributions to securing the Arctic are an important component in the defence of NATO's western and northern flanks and directly support broader NATO deterrence efforts" (Department of National Defence, 2024, p. 4-5).

Similarly, the air, maritime and littoral focus of NATO's northern flank as an operational theatre has received increasing attention since 2014; with the accession of Finland and Sweden in 2023, NATO's northern flanks has changed dramatically, incorporating a significant land component and the need to renew cold weather capabilities (Thankey & Dickson, 2022). Finland and Sweden joining NATO and the relatively greater access through the Arctic Ocean also expanded NATO's view of the maritime, surface and sub-surface Arctic as a circumpolar operational theatre and underscores integration with the Baltic (Lajeunesse, 2022, p. 3; Surwillo & Slakaityte, 2025). The Arctic is also increasingly drawn into Indo-Pacific issues and concerns as a western flank is faced with China's "near-Arctic" challenges (GAC, 2024).

Technology has further expanded the northern flank to include new domains of competition, notably cyber, space and information operations as well as social and cognitive domains. These domains create new targets of opportunity from states and institutions to local authorities and individuals. Adversaries are increasing the volume and ubiquity of progressively integrated campaigns directed against NATO and Europe allies (Edwards & Seidenstein, 2025, p. 3-4). Since 2014, following its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has also sought to exploit continental and regional divisions over the “remilitarization” of the Arctic, compartmentalizing its actions while promoting the Arctic as a region to continue cooperation. While Russia’s 2022 expansion of its invasion largely destroyed that effort, it continues to seek wedge issues, including threatening to expand the traditional norms of which states are considered Arctic stakeholders to underline its increasing cooperation with China in the region as elsewhere.

Globalizing responses

A global defence and security perspective on the Arctic is slowly evolving, building on regional efforts. For example, the United Kingdoms’ Joint Expeditionary Force and the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) are also dynamic actors in the region establishing joint efforts in the air, land and maritime domains that should be coordinated (Strauss et al., 2024). As noted, the Canadian government’s narrative on NATO’s role in the North has become more welcoming of collaboration. Finland, the United States and Canada signing of the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort – the ICE Pact – in 2024 has the objective of collaborating to accelerate icebreaker production capacity and contributing to efforts that counter the influence of Russia and China. Denmark is also open to increased allied cooperation, both in the size of allied deployments to Greenlandic water and the surrounding areas, as well as their frequency. Clearly communicating intentions and capabilities, including military exercises and deployments, can help deter potential aggressors by demonstrating resolve and the willingness to respond along with enhanced maritime domain awareness capability. The standup in 2018 of Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk as the successor to Allied Command Atlantic – which was disbanded in 2002 - was a further signal that NATO’s force posture had to support Arctic operations and provide greater Arctic defence coherence (Gosnell, et al., 2024).

However, in a region where collaboration between civil and military stakeholders is critical to maintaining national security and societal stability, an integrated approach to cooperation and planning is more pervasive. A deliberate approach to deterrence like emergency management and crisis response requires citizen education and engagement to enhance resilience and safeguard institutions. In Arctic regions, local communities and individuals are particularly vulnerable to state actors with malign intentions that masquerade as investment or disinformation that exacerbates potentially fragile trust in distant national institutions.

To address this, Arctic nations have established citizen resilience education as a policy priority by committing resources to supporting its development. These activities further integrated deterrence by incorporating deterrence by denial – societal and individual resilience – with deterrence by punishment, where resilience is a necessary but not a sufficient means of responding to the multi-domain threats. For example, Finland’s comprehensive security approach, which is the foundation of resilience in Finnish society, requires everyone to be a security actor in a national resilience framework. All actors – government, businesses, and citizens – collaborate to safeguard the vital

functions of society, for example electricity, and healthcare, coordinated and driven by the national government - a comprehensive whole of society approach

The Yukon, like the Nordic and Baltic states, has taken similar steps. In 2023, the Yukon territorial government established the Yukon Arctic Security Advisory “to provide expert advice on the Yukon’s security infrastructure and strategic direction for meeting the Yukon’s security goals.” Its goals included, among others, identifying opportunities for collaboration, enhancing the well-being of its citizens and contributing to an integrated national effort. An educated, prepared and resilient public and further integrated planning were cornerstones of its recommendations. A Canadian Institute for Yukon Security was subsequently established to continue to lead and promote Arctic security dialogue and education (Yukon, 2023, p. 6-7).

Transnational efforts, old and new also promote resilience. Arctic Indigenous cooperation is facilitated through the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum where Indigenous Permanent Participants are integral members, alongside Arctic states. Arctic actors are demonstrating a level of cooperation and synchronization across what one author describes as “inter-subnational” bodies such as the new Arctic Mayors Forum (AMF) that can create an agency and influence through “paradiplomacy”. The new political influence of the local level can also further integrate with the regional and global levels to facilitate resilience and thus deterrence (Winther, 2024).

Similarly, Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy aims to promote links between levels, the federal, territorial and local, with Indigenous and other communities to enhance prosperity and defense. The federal government also promotes dialogue and integration with other actors from the public and private sphere to enhance security and resilience. For example, the Northern Responsible Energy Approach for Community Heat and Electricity (Northern REACHE) is an example of collaboration between local and Indigenous energy leaders, utilities, regulators, and provincial and territorial governments to support clean energy solutions for communities and regions (Couves, 2025).

A formal representation of this has been the long-standing Arctic Security Working Group (ASWG), a Canadian federal and territorial government forum created in 1999 to discuss Arctic security and safety issues, enhance inter-agency cooperation, and share information. To foster a unified and collaborative approach to security challenges in the vast and harsh Arctic environment. Co-chaired by the Commander of Canada’s northern theatre Joint Task Force North but attended by representatives from a wide range of government departments and agencies, it highlights an approach that recognizes that while defence does not lead on many of the files, in an austere environment of scarce resources, where much infrastructure is dual use, defence will have the most robust capabilities and can lead from behind. It's role in tying together security and defence was underlined by a recent meeting focusing on “All Domain Awareness,” to discuss malign hybrid activities currently or potentially targeting the Arctic region and identifying the vulnerabilities that are being targeted. It is an example of efforts to integrate public and private, as well as federal, local and individual stakeholders to further integration> However, it also demonstrates that dialogue, and the forums for it, can be effective in mitigating the potential constraints of jurisdiction, authorities, and responsibility (Dickson, et al., 2021, p. 18).

Conclusion

The northern flank in its broadest sense – in its maritime, air, land, cyber, information and space domains, along with societal and cultural domains – requires both horizontal and vertical integration of these domains across government, cultures, nations and alliances to ensure a holistic and global approach to deterring adversary activities. The unique challenges of Arctic defence and security have forced responses that can provide some lessons for improving integrated planning and restore the credibility of deterrence. A renewed focus on resilience as an element of deterrence by denial, the inclusion of all five Nordic countries in NATO and North America's more international view of Arctic defence enhances NATO and NORADs thinking around Arctic strategy and wider resilience. The Arctic remains essential to NATO's deterrence and defence posture.

A more accessible Arctic is also essential to a successful strategic deterrence posture. Integrating and tailoring deterrence planning requires, first, agreement on the nature of the threat to prompt synchronized action. Among the NATO member states, the primary threats have crystalized as have the vulnerabilities posed to all regions, institutions and citizens. Integrated deterrence is particularly important for the north and Arctic – a regional focus that requires the use of multiple instruments, allies and government departments is necessary as part of a more holistic approach to deterrence, and if it fails, defence. As plans and policy materialize for a greater presence and increased military posture, they will require more Arctic based infrastructure, increasing risks and vulnerabilities.

Both as a concept and as a planning tool, integrated deterrence remains underdeveloped. However, even as its operationalization remains challenging, the concept continues to shape approaches to the very real requirement to address an ever-evolving hybrid threat environment where adversaries instrumentalize, to borrow a movie title, everything, everywhere, all at once. The Arctic as a defence and security region bifurcated along multiple lines, with its economically vulnerable populations and limited infrastructure is a tempting target. Focusing only on armed conflict and developing the weapons systems and concepts to deter strategic adversaries like China and Russia from their pursuit of strategic objectives cedes too much ground across domains like space, cyber and information. And a limited focus risks allowing adversaries to undermine the institutions, societies and trust required to compete and prevail. Horizontal and vertically – multi-national to local - coordination and collaboration is developing, driven at all levels by the demands of an evolving threat environment. The final integration synchronization across and down these levels now require integrated planning at the national strategic level by key states in order to create a truly integrated – and successful – deterrence posture.

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