

Arctic Strategy

Deterrence and Détente

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Abstract

The guiding principle for NATO's political strategy toward Russia for the past 50 years was defined in the 1967 Harmel Report—a dualistic approach based on deterrence and détente.¹ This double-track approach came as a response to intense Cold War relations in the mid-1960s that required a revision of the Alliance's policy. The Harmel Report is still relevant, but the dynamics on the northern flank have changed. This article offers valuable insight into how Norway must rebalance its Arctic policy against the strategic backdrop of increased global rivalry, Arctic volatility, and the war in Ukraine. It argues that Norway should lean its Arctic strategy more toward deterrence to avoid exploitation by a revisionist and aggressive Russia while continuing to mitigate a potential security dilemma through active dialogue and cooperation on regional matters.

The Arctic is resuming an important geopolitical role. The primary driver for revitalized interest is the effect of global warming. Declination of the Arctic ice cap is creating economic opportunities as untapped resources become available and new waters become navigable. The resource-rich region is estimated to hold large amounts of undiscovered oil, natural gas, and minerals² and shorter shipping routes between Europe and Asia are becoming accessible. Growing signs of a great-power “scramble” for the Arctic are emerging, and Russia has claimed expanded jurisdiction and bolstered its military presence in the region. As the Russian invasion of Ukraine has proven to the world, President Vladimir Putin is no stranger to illegal aggression and violation of international law. Russia clearly has the military superiority in the Arctic region, and Putin has already shown the willingness to grab territory in Europe. This raises questions of whether Russian revisionist ambitions along its southern and western European border will metastasize to the Arctic and threaten the cooperative climate that has characterized the region in the post-Cold War era.

Norway has had “1000 years of peace” with Russia,³ and the two Arctic neighbors' relationship has been characterized by dialogue, predictability, and cooperation. But the relationship is asymmetrical, and Norway has based its security policy on a balance between deterrence through NATO membership and reassur-

ance through dialogue in combination with self-imposed restrictions on allied presence and activity. The Norwegian policy in the Arctic will remain a combination of deterrence and *détente*, but Russia's growing military capability, assertiveness, and explicit use of force is calling for a renewed balance.

Russian Intentions in the Arctic

To comprehend fully the new challenges in the Arctic, it is vital to analyze Russia's intentions in the region. Understanding Moscow's aims in the Arctic through analyzing Russia's policy documents is a challenging enterprise that includes a substantial element of assumptions. Public documents from Moscow offer basic principles and trends but may also deliberately convey misleading signals to influence political dynamics.⁴ However, this article highlights three main observations driven by the changing physical nature of the Arctic and more demanding security dynamics between key actors in the region. First, the region has emerged as an important resource base vital for bolstering the Russian economy. A weak economy has long been Russia's Achilles' heel; the economic situation has deteriorated even further as a result of sanctions imposed after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea—sanctions that were substantially tightened after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This has made the region crucial for Russia's economic future. Second, Moscow will strengthen its control over vast Arctic resources by dealing with the expanded continental shelf and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as within Russia's jurisdiction. The latter is disputed by other Arctic actors, especially the United States, because it challenges freedom of navigation. Third, Russia's regional focus seems to be gradually shifting from cooperation to deterrence. New indications of strengthened Arctic security measures and regional militarization are particularly intensified in policy documents published after 2014. With Russia becoming somewhat of a pariah state in Western international relations by 2022, the climate for cooperation appears rapidly dwindling, and increased reliance on deterrence seems to be becoming the new normal.

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation from 2016 states Russia's ambition of being a great power in a multipolar world where national sovereignty and force are essential.⁵ The concept reveals a realist view on international relations, where sovereign states are the main actors competing in a zero-sum game of power and security. Reflecting this, force—and especially military force—is important. A key element in Russian strategic culture is the propensity to use force to achieve strategic objectives,⁶ demonstrated lately in the Ukraine. On the one hand, the policy documents clearly indicate Moscow wants to pursue Arctic policies that “preserve peace, stability and constructive international cooperation.”⁷ On the other hand, it signals that “Russia will be firm in countering any attempts

to introduce elements of political or military confrontation in the Arctic.”⁸ Herein lies the greatest uncertainty with Russian intentions for the Arctic: Moscow’s dual-track communication and inclination to use military force to reach political objectives. The 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine revealed Russia’s ability to engage in hybrid *modus operandi* and Moscow’s ability to test the Western security framework’s limits. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was yet another and more explicit and overt testing of the Western security framework, albeit this time ending up with conventional military operations resembling tactics and strategy dating back to the Second World War. One should be careful not to have a short-sighted view of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as it needs further research and thorough analysis, but it shows the Moscow’s willingness to use force to achieve Russia’s objectives, and the wide spectrum of military, political, and diplomatic tools Moscow is willing to employ to achieve its national interests. The reassuring argument is that Russia is dependent on international collaboration in the Arctic to realize its economic potential due to lack of investment resources, offshore technology, and human knowledge⁹ and, therefore, likely will continue to solve questions of Arctic sovereignty through international law and multilateral institutions like the Arctic Council. However, Moscow’s Arctic policy is also characterized by fear of Western expansion and a struggle for strategic depth,¹⁰ a deep-rooted fear that has likely deepened after its 2022 exploits.

Prior to 2022, Gleb Yarovoy, in his chapter “Basics of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period Until 2020 and Beyond,”¹¹ revealed this fear and signaled that Russia will build-up and modernize its military capabilities to ensure national security and protect its northern border. Russia’s *National Security Strategy* highlighted that NATO’s encirclement through regional build-up, expansion, and posture closer to Russian borders is a threat to Russian national security in the Arctic.¹² Russian military doctrine makes the same point of holding NATO as the nation’s main external military threat and points to the necessity of increasing Russian military capabilities in the High North.¹³ The inclusion of Sweden and Finland into NATO is likely to fit this Russian narrative. So, although the Russian policy documents emphasize stability and multilateral cooperation in the Arctic, military build-up and offensive behavior reveals Moscow’s fear and militarized threat assessment.

Russia’s Military Build-up in the Arctic

Russia has strengthened and modernized its nuclear and conventional capabilities across the board. Since 2008 it has enhanced its military capability in all areas in the Arctic by investing in mobile systems, special forces, new military bases, infrastructure, and long-range precision weapons.¹⁴ In 2019, the Chief of

Defence Valery Gerasimov launched the new defense concept “active defence.” This concept emphasizes high readiness, mobility, strong coordination, and massive firepower.¹⁵ As a result, the Northern Fleet Command has been modernized, transformed into Joint Strategic Command North, and further developed to be one of five Russian military districts.¹⁶ Moscow has centralized command authority of all the Russian military units in the Arctic, including the Russian Navy’s nuclear-strike capabilities. The reinforcement concept has been modernized, and together with improved force readiness, this ensures that the northern command relatively quickly can achieve short-term local superiority by reinforcing Kola with troops and equipment by rail and air. Several new long-range precision-guided strike weapons, particularly sea- and air-launched systems, have entered into service. Common for most of them is that they can deliver both nuclear and conventional warheads. Different variants of the land- and sea-launched Kalibr cruise missile, the air-launched hypersonic intermediate-range missile Khinzal, together with the land-based mobile SSC-8 Screwdriver pose significant threats to NATO due to their duality, long-range, short warning time, and high precision. The deployment of new multilayered air and coastal defense systems improves protection of the Kola Peninsula, as well as offering the ability to assert sovereignty in the Arctic region. In sum, this interconnected system of long-range precision-guided strike and multilayered air and coastal defense orchestrated with cyber and electronic tools forms a robust Russian antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) capability from the Arctic to the Baltics and the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap that calls for reinvigorated NATO conventional deterrence and collective defense. However, in addition to nuclear and conventional military power, President Putin has a third ace up his sleeve: hybrid tools that create ambiguity and doubt. Since 2014, Western security analysts have given *hybrid warfare* much attention, often viewing it as a new Russian tool. It is essential to understand that for Russian decision makers the hybrid tools are integrated with all the other available instruments of national power that can be utilized from peacetime to wartime.¹⁷ In fact, there is a strong interdependence, as Russian hard power supports the elements of hybrid warfare and adds a looming threat to the equation that weakens the adversary’s decision making.

On the other hand, military history has provided numerous hard lessons that modern equipment and new concepts are just part of the equation for success. Although I am careful not to draw conclusions prematurely, the Russian political and military performance leading up to and during its invasion of Ukraine leaves much to be desired. Its underachievement will impact its deterrent effect, not least the basic need to replace its military inventory and personnel, which will likely take years. Conversely, the same dynamics of the 2022 war in Ukraine have ex-

panded and galvanized NATO; invigorated European economic, energy, and security cooperation; and strengthened transatlantic security bonds. How this will influence Moscow's Arctic strategy is too soon to assess, but Russia's long-term military build-up and posture in the Arctic creates uncertainty about Russian intentions. Former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis has claimed that Russia is taking "aggressive steps" to increase its military posture in the region.¹⁸ Such a shift in Russian behavior on the northern flank has been significant since 2017.

Aggressive Russian Military Behavior

The Russian military is operating in a more offensive manner against Norwegian and allied activity in the region.¹⁹ According to the Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS), there have been several examples of Russian assets targeting Norway and NATO with simulated weapon usage. In 2018, during the NATO exercise Trident Juncture in Norway, Russia demonstrated its assertiveness by deploying surface vessels and patrol aircraft to the exercise area, flying strategic sorties over the Norwegian Sea, and performing live firing off the coast of Norway. In addition, there have been several incidents of Russian jamming, resulting in lost GPS signals for civilian and allied air traffic in the northern part of Norway.²⁰ Russian policy, military build-up, and belligerent behavior in the Arctic—combined with its invasion of Ukraine—signal Moscow's will and capability to reassert its great-power status through military strength and Arctic energy. Norway must adapt to this new reality in the High North to ensure regional stability and national security and sustain its prosperity.

Norway and the Arctic

The Arctic is Norway's most important foreign policy priority. The region has strategic importance for Norway based on two main factors: economic potential and geopolitical location next to Russia.²¹ Norway is a global leader in Arctic petroleum production, a large exporter of oil and natural gas, and half its undiscovered hydrocarbons are estimated to be found in the Barents Sea.²² This becomes ever more valuable as Europe tries to free itself from Russian energy dependence. Norway is the second-largest fish exporter in the world, and this sector is the second-largest industry in the country after oil and natural gas.²³

There is a remarkable military asymmetry between Norway and Russia, and defense against neighboring Russia is driving Norwegian security. Norway's militarily inferiority to Russia represents a vulnerability that Russia might exploit. This is the main reason Norway has been a strong advocate for revitalizing NATO's focus on collective defense and increased vigilance on the Alliance's northern flank. According to the former Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ine

Eriksen Søreide, “Norway constitutes NATO’s northern flank, and our military presence in the north is therefore a significant contribution to the security of the Alliance.”²⁴ Thus, Norway has emphasized military presence in the High North. The number of Norwegian high-end capabilities available for credible deterrence is limited compared to Russia’s military capabilities, and the political authorities have lately allowed greater influx of allied activities on Norwegian territory. US and UK forces train and exercise more in Norway than they did just a few years ago. This has led to strong reactions from Russia, warning Norway that such actions will have negative consequences,²⁵ and it has also sparked debate over Norwegian strategic approach among scholars and professionals in Norway.

Adding to this debate, the NATO Summit in Madrid in late June 2022 was a big leap forward for Sweden and Finland in their aspirations for joining NATO. Should Sweden and Finland join NATO (which I hope and believe they will), they too will be part of NATO’s northern flank. How Nordic cooperation within the framework of NATO will influence Norwegian security and its relation to Russia and Arctic cooperation is difficult to assess. Still, despite disagreements on strategic approach in the Arctic, the legal principle that law is the basis of governance is the bedrock of Norwegian policy. As a small state neighboring a mighty military power, Norway is strongly committed to the international rule of law. This is also the case in the Arctic. Norway’s vision for the High North is “a peaceful, prosperous, and environmentally sound Arctic where international cooperation and respect for the principles of international law are the norm.”²⁶ Russia has so far supported Arctic governance based on international law, and Norway’s strategic goal for the Arctic is to make sure this continues in the future.

Russian and Norwegian Cooperation in the Arctic

Norwegian and Russian overlapping interests in the Arctic are based on a shared view that the region should be governed by international law in questions of sovereign rights. Both countries seek stability to pursue their economic interests. The Ilulissat Declaration,²⁷ signed in 2008 by the Arctic Five, including Russia, demonstrated this and signaled that the Arctic is “governed according to the principles that operate anywhere in the world.”²⁸ In line with this declaration, after nearly four decades of negotiations, Norway and Russia bilaterally agreed on their maritime delimitation line in the Barents Sea in 2010.

The rule of law is paramount for a small state, and like other Allies, Norway has suspended bilateral military cooperation with Russia since Putin’s 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea. Norway is currently an integral part of Western sanctions on Russia, following the invasion of Ukraine. However, Norway continues to search for areas to cooperate with Russia that are important for safety and predictability

in the region, such as search and rescue, coast and border guard, the *Incidents at Sea Agreement*, and environmental protection in the north. The two neighboring Arctic nations also have a hotline between the Norwegian Joint Operational Headquarters and the Northern Fleet to avoid unnecessary escalation and misunderstandings. And, despite differences, there is enough “common interest to provide a favorable climate for extended future cooperation.”²⁹ Nonetheless, the 2014 crises and 2022 invasion of Ukraine, plus the sanctions against Russian Arctic energy interests have complicated cooperation and increased regional tension.

Potential for Conflict in the Arctic

This article analyses two factors that can lead to an Arctic spillover: increased domestic unrest in Russia and an intensified great power rivalry in the region. Economic set back from sanctions, military setbacks, and the sense of becoming an international pariah state leading to increased isolation in the wake of a large-scale pandemic can result in domestic unrest that may drive Russia toward a more confrontational track in the Arctic. Domestic and foreign policy are intertwined in Russia, and they are centered around Putin: “Putin believes that only a Russia that is strong at home can be strong abroad, and vice versa, and that the strength of the state derives in part from its stability and unity of purpose.”³⁰

Russia’s economic growth has internally been explained as a result of Putin’s great leadership, while periods of recession have been blamed on Western malign forces.³¹ Criticizing the West, and especially the United States, has become a tool for stabilizing domestic politics in difficult times. As a result of sanctions, the public dissatisfaction over economic stagnation has grown in Russia.³² In line with Putin’s political philosophy, this can cause an assertive Russia to take more confrontational steps in the Arctic to secure its energy interests and indicate strength to internal audiences. In addition, Russia’s economic fragility and dependency on European markets have given substance to a growing Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic.

Globally, there is an escalating great-power rivalry between the United States and China that seems to have hardened the Arctic strategies and increased the risk for Arctic spillover. Russia is traditionally reluctant to any non-Arctic nation’s involvement in the region, but sanctions have made Moscow look to the East for Arctic investments, technology, and cooperation. As a self-proclaimed “near Arctic state,” China has a growing interest in the region based on science, energy, and Arctic sea routes as part of its Belt and Road Initiative.³³ This cooperation seems to have strengthened after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The rising presence of China and the strengthened Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic have sparked serious concerns in Washington, and the United States has criticized both Russian and Chinese Arctic motives. Washington has disputed Moscow’s claims to sovereignty

over the NSR because it endangers US and Allied military maneuverability, and the growing great-power rivalry seems to have revitalized American political interest in the region.³⁴ In a speech given before the Arctic Council's 2019 ministerial meeting in Finland, then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo revealed an American militarized threat assessment of the region and pointed at Russian and Chinese behaviors as illegitimate, aggressive, and destabilizing.³⁵ The United States, Russia, and China seem to be hardening their Arctic strategies, and spillover from great-power rivalry is an emerging risk for the region. This creates dilemmas for European NATO-members as they find themselves in a balancing act between security and prosperity. European security is still dependent on US military protection, either bilaterally or through NATO, but most European nations also want to trade as much as possible with China. A strengthening Sino-Russian alliance, together with fear of former President Donald Trump's and the US Republican Party's unilateralism, protectionism, and focus on China represents a long-term danger for Europe and the liberal order since it will create opportunities for an assertive Russia that has shown its willingness to take more aggressive steps.

Against this strategic reality Oslo must balance Norway's security policy against Russia. On one hand, Norway has a unique position for mitigating unintended escalation through established bilateral dialogue on Arctic matters with Russia. On the other hand, Norway is dependent on Allied support for credible and capable deterrence against Russian aggressive behavior. The key question is how Oslo should tailor Norway's Arctic policy to the current security situation.

Recommendations

This article recommends that Oslo lean Norway's Arctic strategy more toward deterrence to avoid exploitation by a revisionist Russia, while continuing to mitigate any potential security dilemma through active dialogue and cooperation on regional matters. These recommendations are derived from three main arguments.

First, the Arctic is existential for Russia's great-power ambitions. Moscow's intentions in the melting Arctic indicate Russia pursues economic development and military build-up to restore its great-power position. There is a growing instability in the international system with great-power rivalry and less confidence in the international rules-based order. Big shifts in the balance of power create opportunities for an assertive Russia that Moscow will exploit. Thus, a Russian behavioral mix of belligerence and cooperation will most likely continue in the Arctic. Therefore, Norway's choice of strategy boils down to risk management and a flexible balance between deterrence and reassurance measures in the face of Russia's behavior.

Second, Norwegian policy on the Arctic must be realistic, pragmatic, and aimed at ensuring hard security before softer issues to protect against Russian exploitation. The language that best restrains an assertive and revisionist Russia from coercive strategies is the language of power, and Norwegian posture and capability in the Arctic must therefore signal strength. Hence, Oslo must pursue continuous territorial presence with high-end capabilities in the High North to ensure Norway's sovereignty and freedom to pursue national interests and enhance deterrence on the Alliance's northern flank. NATO is the cornerstone of Norwegian deterrence, and Norway has been the most eager member in NATO for proactive Arctic defense.³⁶ This strategic approach should be strengthened despite Russian complaints of encirclement. Credible deterrence can only be attained if Moscow believes that the Allies will come to Norway's aid, and Norway must therefore ensure solid NATO coherence and cohesion on Arctic matters. A significant factor in this equation is the future level of cooperation between the Nordic nations should Sweden and Finland join NATO. With their geopolitical similarities, shared values as small liberal democracies, strong institutions, strong economies, and populations inclined to support increased Nordic cooperation, a more collective Nordic defense approach, within the framework of NATO and bilateral partners, should entail a stronger deterrent posture toward a more aggressive Russia. However, a broader and deeper NATO involvement in the region could also contribute to unintended escalation and endanger the stability that currently exists in the region. Moscow tends to respond aggressively to any NATO encirclement, and the strategic importance of the Kola Peninsula calls for caution. Thus, a stronger and enhanced regional engagement will establish a more balanced deterrence that creates space for *détente*.

Third, being both a NATO member and an Arctic partner with Russia, Norway has a unique position that Oslo must use for establishing tailored reassurance measures to reduce the security dilemma without sacrificing NATO cohesion. As the Alliance increases its Arctic capability and activity, Moscow will likely perceive it as a danger, and Russia will respond by increasing its own military posture. Hence, the potential for a security dilemma between NATO and Russia in the region is present. Thus, Norway's strategic initiative for increased NATO presence in the High North must be balanced with strengthened reassurance measures to avoid escalation. Keywords for reassurance are transparency, predictability, stability, and accountability, alongside pragmatic cooperation on Arctic governance where common interests already exist. Thus, Norway should combine its military deterrence with strengthened political dialogue and cooperation on military safeguarding the economic opportunities and environmental challenges in the region. The Arctic Council has effectively been bridging Arctic gaps but does not address

security matters, and since 2015 Russia has been excluded from the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable. Even with the current international climate toward Russia after its invasion of Ukraine in mind, the long-term absence of an arena to discuss security matters for the Arctic is a vulnerability that over time should be reduced. Because defense against neighboring Russia is driving Norwegian security, it is highly recommended that Norway welcomes an Arctic security dialogue with Russia either through existing formats or new ones. ❄️

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