

Securing a Blue Arctic Century

Assessing Multilateral Institutions in Great-Power Competition

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Abstract

This article explores the roles, relevance, and limitations of existing international institutions and mechanisms to address the underlying conditions that could lead to misperceptions and instability in the Arctic region. It offers a framework for policy makers to reinforce, restore, and scale current multilateral mechanisms and assess new ones to increase security dialogue and prevent misperceptions in the Arctic region. This framework calls for an inclusive, tailored approach to address the unique circumstances within and across Arctic subregions and to elevate the voices of non-Arctic states to jointly seek practical solutions to prevent conflict between military forces operating in and through the region. The United States must take a long-term view, working closely with the other seven Arctic states and with like-minded non-Arctic states. Modernizing US military capabilities and pursuing a strategy of deterrence and forward defense in the Arctic region must be balanced with persistent and practical dialogue and diplomacy. Pursuant to this approach, the US Department of Defense must actively lead in international institutions in areas where enhanced military force postures and hybrid operations threaten US and partner strategic interests in the Arctic region.¹

Today, US defense policy makers face a critical inflection point on the future of the Arctic region. Do the United States and its allies and partners pursue a strategy that further isolates Russia from international institutions for the Arctic region, or do they gradually and deliberately include Moscow to tackle shared regional security challenges and prevent instability. Pursuing the former exacerbates an Arctic security dilemma characterized by enhanced regional security policies and postures of Russia and the West and a lack of regional forums for security dialogue and coordination among these actors. Integrating Russia back into regional forums provides Russia and the West an opportunity to build shared awareness and confidence to address underlying conditions that might lead to instability and conflict in the Arctic. Chief among these conditions and concerns is the prevention of misperceptions

between naval forces that could lead to friction and conflict. In this article, the term *misperceptions* includes inaccurate inferences, miscalculation of consequences, and misjudgments of how others will react to one's naval policies and force posture in the Arctic region.²

In January 2021, the US Navy published a new Arctic strategy, *Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic*. This pivotal document reframes the Arctic region for the Department of the Navy and by extension the Department of Defense (DOD)—stretching from the North Pacific to the North Atlantic—as an emerging theater of strategic competition and potential conflict where rapidly melting sea ice and increasingly navigable Arctic waters create new challenges and opportunities for Arctic and non-Arctic states. In this new Arctic, “peace and prosperity” are expected to be “increasingly challenged by Russia and China, whose interests and values differ dramatically” from the West.³ In the opening years of the twentieth century, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder laid the groundwork for the most enduring perspectives on the century of conflict yet to come: land power versus sea power.⁴ Yet neither Mahan nor Mackinder considered a Blue Arctic.⁵ In light of this new maritime Arctic, the *Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic* calls for expanded regional consultative mechanisms and collaborative planning to “reduce the potential for misperceptions, accidents, and unintended conflict among forces operating in the Arctic.”⁶

Catalysts to Instability

Current and future world economies, supported by advances in telecommunications and improvements in international commercial logistics, will increasingly rely on the maritime Arctic. A stable maritime Arctic region in the decades ahead contributes to global safety and security. A variety of state and nonstate actors will likely increasingly challenge the stability of the Arctic maritime domain in many ways, as will natural disasters, environmental destruction, and illegal seaborne migration. While environmental and human security will likely remain the priorities for the Arctic region in the next decade and beyond, increased military activity and hybrid operations are potential sources or catalysts of instability. This includes different types of coercive and subversive activities beyond information manipulation and cyberattacks to gain access and influence in the region. These activities serve as a catalyst for other actions and aim to exploit current vulnerabilities and a lack of adequate measures to address them. Political instability, limited resources, and lack of enforcement mechanisms internal to Arctic states and subnational territories also provide fertile grounds for hybrid operations. By mid-century, climate change, shipping, fish and fuel, and

political-military developments will drive likely sources of regional instability, requiring enhanced dialogue among senior defense leaders.

Climate Change and Shipping

In the century ahead, a Blue Arctic envisions a scenario where the Arctic has warmed three times the average rate of the rest of the world.⁷ As a result, sea levels will have increased 11 inches globally.⁸ New technologies and improvements in logistical efficiency will reduce freight-related CO₂ emissions by 60 percent.⁹ Improvements in ship technology, structure, and materials will lead to even bigger megaships (20,000 TEU containers).¹⁰ Global maritime trade volumes will triple, with an annual growth rate of 3.6 percent.¹¹ The Arctic via the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and Transpolar Sea Route (TSR) will account for 15 percent of world trade, with 3,000 vessels transiting the Arctic by 2050, for a total of 150 million tons of cargo.¹² By 2040, Russia will have completed its ambitious Northern Sea Transport Corridor project, with hubs and transport-logistic centers built in Murmansk and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky.¹³ New commercial deep-water ports in Nome (Alaska), Longyearbyen (Svalbard), and Finnaforð (Iceland) will serve as major Arctic hubs.¹⁴ China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) will be the world's leading container shipping company, with one-third of its fleet, approximately 400 ice-class container ships ranging from 5,000–20,000 TEU, sailing between ports in Europe and Asia via the Arctic. Permafrost will continue to decrease, disrupting the foundations of all civilian and military infrastructure throughout the region—most notably in Canada, Alaska, Siberia, and Greenland.¹⁵

Fish and Fuel

Persistent growing global demand for seafood will have led many non-Arctic countries with distant water fleets—most notably China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Spain—to trawling in newly opened fishing grounds. The Arctic region—stretching from the North Atlantic to the North Pacific—will account for 55 percent of global fishing, with 41 new fish species in the North Pacific, 44 new species in the North Atlantic, and 25 new species above 66 degrees North.¹⁶ Global energy demand will have increased almost 50 percent, driven by population and economic growth, particularly in developing Asian countries.¹⁷ Asia will be the largest importer of natural gas and crude oil, with liquid fuel making up 28 percent of global energy demand in 2050, compared with renewables at 27 percent.¹⁸ Russia, connected to Europe by pipelines and liquefied natural gas (LNG) trade, will have more than doubled its net exports from

2020–2050, and these exports will account for 40 percent of Russia’s gross domestic product.¹⁹

Political-Military Developments

By 2050, Denmark could establish a Compact of Free Association with Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Their governments will consult with Copenhagen on foreign affairs issues. Copenhagen will also have “full authority and responsibility for security and defense matters” in return for Danish government services, the opportunity for Greenlanders to work in Denmark, and annual grants. China and Russia will continue to shun formal alliances with each other and most other countries in favor of transactional relationships that allow Beijing and Moscow to exert influence and selectively employ various forms of national power while avoiding mutual security entanglements.²⁰ The Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) surface and subsurface deployments to the Arctic will become routine, and modernized nuclear missile forces, including sea-based weapons, will enhance the viability of China’s strategic deterrent by providing a second-strike capability and a way to overcome missile defenses.²¹ Russia will have modernized its bastion defense and strategic nuclear forces, including new road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles, new ballistic missile submarines, upgraded heavy bombers, and new bombers carrying hypersonic weapons.²²

With this future scenario in mind, several major challenges or flash points could give rise to instability and conflict in a Blue Arctic. The first and most likely of these deals with miscalculations among increased military activities of Arctic and non-Arctic states. These activities fall within several categories: exercises and training, deployments, missile tests, naval incidents, overflights, air-defense operations, and air policing.²³ While still less military activity in the region than at the height of the Cold War, there will be increasing military activity not only from Russian, but also from British, French, Canadian, American, and other NATO units exercising in the High North and the Arctic. Lack of dialogue on regional security and defense matters, driven primarily by the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and 2022 invasion of Ukraine, will exacerbate the situation. A natural fault line exists between Arctic NATO nations, which will likely soon include Finland and Sweden, and Russia, but the buildup will extend beyond Arctic states, particularly if coast guard and other law enforcement entities are included. Such increases will yield concerns for an Arctic security dilemma, especially if states find themselves without robust mechanisms for dialogue and transparency.

Existing Mechanisms

Arctic Council

The Arctic Council has seen its fair share of acclaim and criticism since its founding through the Ottawa Declaration in 1996. The Council fosters dialogue, cooperation, and coordination among the eight Arctic states and six Indigenous permanent participants. While the chief focus of the Council's work and progress has focused on environmental protection and sustainable development issues, its success facilitating agreements related to "soft-security" issues—search and rescue, oil spill prevention and response, scientific cooperation—not only helps mitigate drivers of instability but also acts as confidence-building measures on their own. The issues surrounding these agreements, however, stem from lack of implementation or a forcing function for cooperative enforcement efforts.²⁴ Responsibility for cooperative enforcement has been taken up in large part by the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF), which brings together Arctic coast guards and coast guard-like agencies to discuss practical opportunities to strengthen cooperation.²⁵ Much of the day-to-day work of the Arctic Council is spearheaded by its six institutionalized working groups, which have no formal relationship with the ACGF. In addition to the eight members and six permanent participants, there are a large and growing number of observer states. Observer contributions, however, and influence over the work and decisions of the Council are quite limited and remain a major concern among observers, especially China.²⁶

Despite its progress, the Arctic Council's mandate to exclude security and defense matters poses an immediate problem for a region facing increased military activity and challenges to the rules-based order. Many argue that taking on these matters will reduce much needed progress and cooperation in its core mission.²⁷ But it is clear that rising geopolitical competition in the Arctic can no longer be ignored and isolated from the Arctic region. Taking on such matters would change the character and charter of the Arctic Council, but not doing so risks China or Russia creating an alternative forum to fill this gap.²⁸ Taking security issues on in the Council also risks non-Arctic states exerting their influence over what historically has been the purview and core policy preferences of just Arctic states. For these reasons, at least for the time being, there does not appear to be an appetite to modify the Council's mandate nor is it recommended that the Council do so.

Despite disagreements among member states—including over the Iraq War in 2003, Russo-Georgian War in 2008, and Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014—the Arctic Council has remained one of the few forums where Russia can still engage with the West. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, abruptly

ended the Council's isolation from global geopolitical events. Less than two months after the Arctic Council was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, seven member states took an unprecedented step in declaring they would be "pausing participation in all meetings of the [Arctic] Council and its subsidiary bodies" based on the belief that Russia violated the core principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity underpinning the Arctic Council, which Russia currently chairs. The Barents Euro-Arctic Council and ACGF also took similar steps, suspending activities involving Russia. Soon after, the Arctic Council, however, decided to resume its work in projects that do not involve the participation of the Russian Federation.²⁹ The fallout of the Arctic Council's decisions to pause and restart its work without Russia could be long-lasting and create space for Nordic countries to create an alternative forum without Russia. Doing so, however, would not only forfeit the institutional legitimacy and progress that the Arctic Council has fostered but also sow deeper mistrust between Russia and the West.

As a result, a more significant long-term impact of this decision could result in deeper Sino-Russian cooperation and a more welcoming stance to Chinese investments by Arctic states. Cooperation in the Arctic Council, especially in the sensitive Barents region, only became possible at the end of the Cold War because Arctic states had the political will and policies to build trust and confidence between policy makers and operators alike. Changing the Council's mandate to include security and defense matters will only make it more difficult to build back the trust, confidence, and progress lost by the Council's decision to pause and continue some of its work without Russia. This idea was reinforced by Russia's senior Arctic official, Nikolay Korchunov, suggesting that "the Arctic should remain as a territory of peace . . . and thus, this unique format should not be subject to the spillover effect of any extra-regional events. For us, there is no alternative to uninterrupted sustainable development of our Arctic territories."³⁰

NATO

NATO's fundamental security tasks are underpinned in the Washington Treaty (the Alliance's founding treaty, also known as the North Atlantic Treaty). Russia's aggressive and unprovoked war on Ukraine has recentered NATO's core mission on collective defense and the protection of its members from potential threats emanating from the Russian Federation. In this spirit, NATO produced its 2021 strategic foresight report on the Arctic, acknowledging climate change as being a "threat multiplier" able to "influence drivers for future conflict" in the circumpolar region.³¹

Today, NATO exercises in the Arctic—such as Cold Response and Trident Juncture—respect the transparency obligations under the Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Vienna Document, which governs the rules for

military exercises in the Euro-Atlantic area. Under these obligations, Norway invited all OSCE member states to send observers to both exercises. In terms of notification requirements, the Chief of the Norwegian Joint Headquarters informed the Commander of the Russian Northern Fleet about Cold Response 2022.³² Most recently, the impending addition of Sweden and Finland into NATO will bring two relatively small nations with advanced militaries into the Alliance, adding significant military capabilities and improving the Alliance's ability to deter additional Russian aggression. Contrary to arguments by opponents of NATO enlargement, Sweden and Finland would likely strengthen transatlantic security and decrease the probability of Russian aggression against the Alliance.³³ Conversely, their addition also makes Russia the only non-NATO nation in the Arctic, further deepening the divide and mistrust between Russia and NATO.

The addition of Sweden and Finland will significantly reduce the prospects of leveraging the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). In April 2014, following Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea, the Alliance suspended all practical cooperation between NATO and Russia. However, the Alliance agreed to keep channels of communication open in the NRC and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council at the ambassadorial level and above to allow the exchange of views, first and foremost on the crisis in Ukraine. Despite Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, NATO allies remain willing to keep channels of communication open with Moscow to manage and mitigate risks, prevent escalation, and increase transparency.

NATO's long history in the Arctic argues for a greater role in regional security, yet increased tensions between NATO and Russia call into question the nature of that role. During the Cold War, the Arctic was an important strategic part of NATO's northern flank and critical for the Soviet Union to project power, defend allied territory, and control critical sea lines of communication.³⁴ Although NATO's Arctic focus diminished after the Cold War, the navies of Russia and NATO allies have maintained an enduring presence through the deployment of submarines as a deterrent and nuclear second-strike capability.

Advocating for NATO to facilitate Arctic security dialogue would likely introduce non-Arctic NATO nations into regional security discussions. Moscow would likely not fully support this approach and could further use information warfare to sow divisions between it and allied nations' populaces. For these reasons, NATO is not the right venue for leading dialogue and cooperation on Arctic security. The Alliance does, however—through the NRC—remain a valuable, legitimate Arctic actor that can contribute to mitigating the likelihood of dangerous miscalculations of intent between NATO and Russian forces in the Arctic.³⁵ Practically, this increases the need for the NRC to coordinate with Joint Forces Command–Norfolk (JFC–NF), which has operational responsibility of protect-

ing sea lanes between Europe and North America in the Atlantic and High North.³⁶ Whether facilitated through the OSCE or NRC, the need has never been higher for NATO and Russia to develop a military code of conduct for the Arctic to decrease the “risk of miscalculation . . . regulate irresponsible behavior, brinksmanship-prone activities and dangerous military activities.”³⁷

Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe

Lessons learned and inspired by the OSCE also provides an avenue to prevent conflict among naval forces in the Arctic. OSCE member states, which include all eight Arctic states, convene periodically to set priorities and the political orientation of the organization. The OSCE’s comprehensive approach to security is closely tied to early warning, conflict prevention, and crisis management. Practically, this forum facilitates negotiation, mediation, and other conflict prevention and resolution efforts and supports regional cooperation initiatives. This includes tackling the transnational security implications of climate change in the Arctic. For example, OSCE activities that support maritime and inland waterways security and environmental concerns can also be applied in the Arctic maritime environment.³⁸ To this end, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly established a Special Representative on Arctic Issues in August 2021. This first step aims to raise awareness and promote cooperation on security issues and concerns among OSCE members. The most relevant aspects of the OSCE’s work that can be applied to preventing naval conflict in the Arctic is rooted in the 1990 Vienna Document. This politically binding agreement requires nations to exchange and verify information about armed forces and military activities.³⁹ The most relevant aspects of the Vienna Document that could be applied and facilitated by the OSCE or another regional organization include:

- information exchange among Arctic and non-Arctic nations conducting naval operations in and through the Arctic, including manpower and major conventional weapons and equipment systems, as well as deployment plans and budgets;
- provision of prior notification of time about major military activities and exercises;
- invitation of other states to observe certain activities; and
- consultation and cooperation in instances of unusual military activity or increasing tensions.⁴⁰

Like NATO, the OSCE does not have a dedicated Arctic strategy or collective approach to address security issues. And like NATO and the Arctic Council, the

main reasons for the lack of an Arctic strategy stems from Arctic states' desire to keep security and defense matters to the business of Arctic states only. Opening security dialogue and coordination to third parties could strain the long-lasting history of regional cooperation among Arctic naval forces. Despite these concerns, the OSCE does provide a forum where Russia and the West can meet and discuss their concerns. The original aim of such meetings—to build trust—now seems naïve, but simply informing one another of one's position and rationale can help avoid misunderstandings that could lead to friction and potential conflict. And, like NATO and the Arctic Council, the OSCE faces a critical decision of maintaining diplomatic relations with Russia. Taking decisions without Russia, and thus effectively suspending Russia from the OSCE, could very well lead to a future without the organization. As a result, Russia's allies and partners could follow suit. At this point in time, the OSCE does not seem like a viable option to lead the development and implementation of confidence-building measures in the Arctic.

Although the OSCE's mandate covers the Arctic region, the organization has not managed to perform monitoring of increased naval activity in international waters and the territorial waters of Arctic coastal states, where provocations are increasingly expected to happen. Creating an enduring mechanism, like the Special Monitoring Mission, would enable all 57 OSCE participating states to observe and report in an impartial and objective way on the increased naval activity in sensitive maritime areas in the Arctic and to facilitate dialogue among all parties involved. While this approach aligns with the OSCE's founding principles outlined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the OSCE does not currently have the proper technical equipment to monitor activities at sea and the corresponding focus of specific restrictions on freedom of navigation along the NSR. Moreover, considering NATO's enhanced maritime policies and posture in the Arctic and in the event the NRC remains dormant, it is worth the OSCE studying the Alliance's baseline naval mission requirements to determine where the organization can help facilitate dialogue and deconfliction among naval forces in the region. Despite NATO–OSCE cooperation on a range of functional and geographical issues, the Arctic region does not appear well-suited for such collaboration between the two organizations.

The European Union and Beyond

Unlike NATO and the OSCE, the European Union (EU) has emerged as an unfamiliar and unlikely voice on Arctic security issues. The EU's 2021 Arctic strategy recognizes the region as a strategic domain for European security in an era of growing geopolitical competition.⁴¹ The strategic importance of the Arctic region and the EU's approach to Arctic security was recently codified in the organization's *Strategic Compass*. The EU's unprecedented sanctions on Russia detracts

from the forum's potential role to facilitate dialogue and coordination on Arctic security issues. Moreover, the only two existing security cooperation mechanisms, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) and the Arctic Chiefs of Defense (ACHOD) Staff meetings, were called off or held without Russia since the latter's 2014 annexation of Crimea. Both forums provide senior military leaders an opportunity to voice their concerns and identify practical ways to coordinate and reduce misunderstandings between the military forces of Russia and the West.

Creating a mechanism through the United Nations to manage the geopolitical ramifications of an opening Arctic also seems less likely, given Russia's seat in the United Nations Security Council and desire to keep Arctic security and defense issues under the control and influence of Arctic states. Finally, the nonbinding "Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea," spearheaded by the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, also serves as an example of Arctic and non-Arctic nations adopting measures to reduce the chances of an incident at sea or an unintentional escalation.

This idea was underscored by ADM James Foggo, USN, former Commander Naval Forces Europe: "As ships encounter one another in the Northern Sea Route, in the Polar Route, in the Northwest Passage, there's a need to communicate. There should be a copy of some kind of a scripted manner in which you communicate, a common language . . . there should be those capabilities on any ship operating in international waters."⁴²

Recommendations

As long as Russia pursues an expansionist policy and continues to act as a revisionist power, deterrence and defense are expected responses. The Cold War taught the West that dialogue on mutual interests, such as preventing avoidable friction and conflict, is a vital complement to deterrence and defense. Considering the projected Arctic security environment and current state of regional security mechanisms, policy makers should reinforce, restore, and scale current multilateral frameworks. Though the Arctic Council faces challenges, the current mandate has yielded great progress and has been an avenue for dialogue and cooperation among political leaders of Arctic states. Changing the organization's mandate to include security and defense issues risks stifling future progress. However, opportunities to mandate and empower actors to enforce current agreements should be considered. Moreover, the Council's leadership should consider restarting its work with Russia, providing Moscow and the West a step toward slowly rebuilding cooperative efforts and trust. Similarly, the ACHOD and ASFR forums should include Russia again. Doing so could further enable improved integration through military exercises, combined operations, communication, information sharing, transparency measures, and other cooperative mechanisms. Moreover,

the ACGF should maintain its core mission as an operationally driven organization focused on soft security and invite Russia to return.

Despite revisions to current frameworks, gaps still exist among senior naval leaders and high-level political-military leaders of Arctic and non-Arctic states. The evolving strategic landscape warrants the implementation of new multilateral frameworks. First, Arctic nations should consider creating an Arctic Ocean Maritime Symposium to foster dialogue and coordination of maritime security and defense activity and concerns among international naval leaders. Such an endeavor could be modeled upon the Western Pacific Naval Symposium and used to spearhead an Arctic Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea with the goal of reducing the chances of an incident at sea or an unintentional escalation. While the eight Arctic nations would lead and manage such a forum, similar to the ACGF model, all nations would be invited to attend. Finally, Arctic governments should consider creating a new high-level political-military forum for the Arctic. In the spirit of the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration, such a forum could focus on commonalities to address regional challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities that an opening Arctic poses to the security and defense of Arctic nations.⁴³

Conclusion

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Arctic has been viewed as an area of “high north, low tension.” Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev’s infamous Murmansk speech in 1987 called for peace-building measures to reduce strategic tensions in the Arctic. And in 1996, the then newly created Arctic Council decided to omit security affairs from its agenda and from the organization’s founding document. Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, and most recently, its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Arctic region has become vulnerable to conflict and confrontation between Russia and Western powers. Current trends, triggers, and threats to stability, exacerbated by the absence of a regional institution devoted to security issues, highlight the importance of adopting confidence- and security-building measures among Arctic and non-Arctic states to prevent future instability and conflict. Such measures can be promoted within existing fora, but limitations remain. Governments with interests and military deployments to the Arctic should prioritize reinforcing, restoring, and scaling current multilateral frameworks. High-level forums for naval leaders and heads of state should also be considered. These recommendations outline a new framework for the US response to Arctic instability. It elevates prevention, addresses the political-military drivers of miscalculation and instability, and supports inclusive solutions driven by all Arctic states. Ultimately, this framework depends on the will and forward thinking of US policy makers and a comprehensive whole-of-government top-to-bottom policy review and approach. ✪

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