

Landpower and Security in the European Arctic

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Abstract

Arctic experts talk about the circumpolar region as three Arctics—North American, European, and Russian (sometimes called Asian)—each with unique physical characteristics that heavily influence their defense and security considerations. The differences between the regions are usually expressed in terms of climate, topography, geography, populations, resources, and infrastructure. Because the Arctic is intended to be a zone of peace and cooperation,¹ nations with Arctic interests normally focus on nonmilitary security topics such as food security, economic security, energy security, and environmental security. Less addressed are the military threats to peace and stability in the Arctic. This article will examine those emerging military threats in the European Arctic and High North that are challenging the United States, its allies, and its partners.

From a European perspective, threats to peace and security extend beyond the European Arctic nations of Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. In the European Arctic, the looming military threat from a belligerent and confrontational Russia also extends to the Baltic nations of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, all of which were occupied by Soviet Russia after the Second World War, have contemporary land borders with Russia, and are dealing with ongoing, albeit undeclared, hybrid attacks from Russia.² Therefore, when considering security and defense issues related to the European Arctic, the European perspective necessarily includes the Baltic nations. Europe's northern flank stretches in an arc from Greenland to Latvia to encompass the Arctic and the Baltic nations. This region is known as the European High North.

It is important to emphasize that neither the United States nor NATO pose any threat to Russian security or to the Russian Arctic. Despite aggressive rhetoric coming from the Kremlin, the United States and its NATO partners constitute a purely defensive alliance. Melting sea ice and a warming Arctic Ocean, though, have opened a back door to Russia that for centuries was held closed by bitter cold, ice, snow, and vast unpopulated expanses. The security Russia once enjoyed along its previously

inaccessible 24,000-kilometer-long northern border now presents Russia with the dilemma of needed economic opportunities juxtaposed against a perceived security vulnerability.³ Simplistically speaking, melting sea ice now offers Russia access to previously inaccessible critical resources and the opportunity to develop the Northern Sea Route. The dilemma is that this access simultaneously exposes a vulnerability that plays into traditional Russian paranoia over another foreign invasion.

Harkening back to the thirteenth century, when Batu Khan's Mongols invaded, burned Moscow to the ground, and ransacked every major city in what is now Russia, the collective Russian psyche has been influenced by fear of yet another outside invader.⁴ In the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Turks invaded and burned Moscow, followed by the Swedes and the Poles in the seventeenth century. Napoleon Bonaparte's 1812 invasion ended in a French disaster, but not before his forces also burned Moscow. In 1856, the Ottoman Turks, the British, and the French combined to defeat Tsarist Russia in the Crimean War. Sixty years later, in 1918, after the Central Powers defeated Tsarist Russia, Moscow's former allies—Britain, France, Canada, the United States, and others—intervened in the Russian civil war. That “invasion” cemented Russian distrust of the West and fueled Soviet narratives that continue to this day.

West Germany's accession into NATO in 1955 exacerbated Russian paranoia, particularly among elderly Russians who remember the almost 14 million Russian military and civilian casualties caused by Nazi Germany's 1941 invasion. Given that many of Russia's historical invaders are now—or soon to be—members of NATO, the theme of “Mother Russia under siege” remains a popular domestic narrative.⁵ This narrative complements the Kremlin's strategic calculus specific to a warming Arctic—Russia promotes an imagined threat to its sovereignty by the West so it might reassert itself as a great power. The Kremlin propagates this message for internal consumption because the reality is that the West is not threatening Russia in the High North.⁶

Challenges

The United States discarded most of its Arctic capability in the 1990s, after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union. It was assumed that the threat to North America from the Arctic approaches was no longer significant. The US Army refocused and redesigned its organizations, training, exercises, and capabilities for combat in a desert environment. US Marine Corps (USMC) equipment, weapons, and ammunition stored in Norwegian underground facilities were, and continue to be, earmarked for Marine expeditionary operations worldwide, and so there are no guarantees that it will be available for defense of the European High North. Also, as the USMC reorients back to naval expeditionary warfare and the Indo-Pacific theater, it is reasonable to expect that US Marines will have less presence in the European High North than they have had in the past.⁷

Although there are no plans to base US soldiers in Sweden or Finland, the recent reactivation of the 11th Airborne Division, the “Arctic Angels,” in Alaska equips the US Army with a rapidly deployable land force that is trained, equipped, and ready for extended operations in Arctic and sub-Arctic regions.⁸ The challenge from a European perspective, however, is that the 11th Airborne Division’s primary theater of responsibility is Indo-Pacific Command.⁹ In the event of a conflict affecting multiple theaters, the Arctic Angels will likely be committed elsewhere and may not be available for operations in the European High North. This force structure reality helps explain why US Army planners are considering alternative options for re-sourcing potential land force requirements for defending the High North.

Russia, on the other hand, has been flexing its military muscles in the Arctic: upgrading air and naval facilities, especially on and near the Kola Peninsula and expanding its strategic reach into the Barents Sea and North Atlantic using a “double dual” approach. Arctic infrastructure is being built or upgraded for both civilian and military use while blurring the intent for Russian defense forces on and around the Kola Peninsula. This approach is placing European nations at risk and disrupting NATO military assets in the North Atlantic along the sea lines of communication that would be needed to reinforce NATO in the event of war.¹⁰ Russia is also adapting equipment and units and reopening and repurposing Cold War-era bases, as well as designing and fielding specialized equipment for Arctic operations.

Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine created new challenges to peaceful cooperation and collaboration in the Arctic. First, in response to Russia’s invasion, European nations increased their defense budgets and defensive troop commitments.¹¹ Second, many Western companies suspended their investment or withdrew from oil and gas projects in the Russian Arctic. Third, the Arctic Council, the Barents-Euro Council, and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum paused activities that involved Russian participation. Fourth, the European Union ramped up economic and financial sanctions to restrict Russia’s ability to continue the war. Fifth, Finland and Sweden changed their long-standing policies on neutrality and requested to formerly join the NATO alliance.

These geopolitical and geographical changes dramatically impact the defense of the High North. Sanctions and ostracism have paused international forums for communication and collaboration intended for information sharing and cooperative engagement. Should Finland and Sweden successfully join NATO, the Arctic Council would then be comprised solely of NATO members save Russia. At that point, the Baltic Sea would be completely encircled by NATO member nations except for small areas at Kaliningrad and Saint Petersburg.

Opportunities

Under the NATO collective defense mandate, the US Army, along with its Nordic and Baltic partners and allies, will play a key role defending the 2,100-kilometer-long land border NATO shares with Russia. That border runs from the Barents Sea in the north to the Polish–Latvian border in the south. We can learn a lot from the 1940 Russo-Finnish Winter War, where outnumbered and outgunned Finns held off the Soviets for five months by effectively incorporating the terrain and the climate into their tactical and logistical schemes. The emerging High North reality and the new training and exercise opportunities will influence the Army’s training, doctrine, organizational structures, equipment, and leader development programs.¹² Where the European High North was once a predominantly maritime and air domain, likely future requirements related to the Arctic land domain should significantly increase because of the presumed addition of Sweden and Finland into NATO and fears of Russia testing NATO’s resolve by also invading one of the High North nations as it has in Ukraine. With the USMC shifting its primary emphasis to the Indo-Pacific region, it is reasonable to assume that the US Army will assume a leading role as the joint force land component commander in the High North, as well as a key force provider.

Since joining NATO as an original member in 1949, Norway has not allowed foreign basing on its soil. However, Oslo has invited foreign military forces to participate in military exercises Norway hosts, an approach seen as a means of deterring Russia while also assuaging Russian fears of Western encroachment. Russian aggression in Ukraine and Crimea, though, spurred the Norwegian parliament to approve a new defense cooperation agreement in 2021, giving the United States unprecedented access to three air bases and one naval base, all in addition to the USMC’s prepositioned stocks currently stored in Norway.¹³

The Alliance currently has eight multinational battlegroups deployed from Estonia in the north to Bulgaria in the south, with the United States providing a sizeable contingent of land, air, and maritime forces to support these current efforts.¹⁴ The United States is increasing its Arctic and mountain warfare training by sending units to the Swedish Winter Warfare Course and is participating in Arctic exercises such as Saber Strike, Northern Viking, and Cold Response. The National Guard Bureau’s State Partnership Program is linking High North nations with state national guards. For example, the Maryland Army National Guard is partnered with Estonia, Michigan is partnered with Latvia, and Pennsylvania is partnered with Lithuania.¹⁵ While the Nordic nations currently are not included in the State Partnership Program, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have established strong bilateral relationships with several states’ national guards. For example,

Minnesota has trained in Sweden and Norway and has a long-standing exchange program with Norway's Home Guard. The Vermont and Wisconsin Air National Guards are also opening doors with the Nordic nations. And, as MG Brian S. Eifler, USA, commander US Army Alaska and 11th Airborne Division, points out elsewhere in this issue, the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center–Alaska will offer outstanding opportunities for allies and partners to train together, year-round, in all Arctic climate and terrain conditions.

Conclusion

This is a time of change for the US Army, but, as has been so often seen, from adversity comes innovation. The threat to US and allied interests from a resurgent and aggressive Russia is resulting in complex post–Cold War challenges, most importantly the need for land forces to defend NATO's northern and northeastern flanks in a domain previously dominated by maritime and air defenses. Still, there is cause for optimism. Finland and Sweden, if they are accepted into NATO, will add two very reliable, capable, and interoperable partners who are ready and willing to help the US Army regain the Arctic dominance called for in the current Arctic strategy.¹⁶ The 11th Airborne Division is becoming the nation's dedicated Arctic fighting force, and Army National Guard units are strengthening their ties with High North nations that are threatened by or under hybrid attack from Russia. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has spurred European allies to quickly reach the agreed-to two-percent spending levels for defense that have stymied past administrations. In concert with European allies and partners, the US Army poses a significant defensive challenge to Russian aggression in the High North—in all conditions, terrain, and climates. From a defense and deterrence perspective, the prospects for peace and security in the European Arctic remain positive. 🌟

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Notes

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