The Cost of Arctic Succession

Russia's Militarization Demands a NATO Response

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its simultaneous militarization of the Arctic underscores a strategic shift NATO can no longer ignore. The Arctic, long viewed as a cooperative frontier, is emerging as a geopolitical hotspot rich in resources and vital shipping lanes. The Arctic Council, constrained by its lack of a security mandate, has proven ill-equipped to address Russia's expanding military footprint. This article argues for the establishment of two complementary NATO institutions: an Arctic Security Council to align political objectives and an Arctic Command to centralize military operations. Together, these bodies would streamline regional decision-making, counterbalance Russia's hegemonic ambitions, and strengthen the alliance's collective defense posture in the High North. The Arctic's future will be shaped not by outdated diplomatic frameworks but by the powers willing to command it. For NATO, the path forward is clear: secure the Arctic now or cede it to Moscow's revisionist aims.

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Russia's remilitarization of the Arctic is shattering the illusion of post–Cold War tranquility north of the 66th parallel. Long shielded by ice and an inaccessible, desolate landscape, the Arctic has for decades remained a peaceful frontier—a sanctuary of multilateral cooperation governed by the Arctic Council since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Rich in hydrocarbons, fisheries, and rare minerals such as copper and zinc, the region has fostered economic opportunity and multilateral cooperation without inviting military confrontation. That era of peace has ended.

The Arctic is warming—literally and geopolitically. As sea ice retreats at an unprecedented pace, longer ice-free seasons present newfound prospects for shipping, resource extraction, and military projection. The region's thaw is more than a meteorological phenomenon; it is a strategic boon to whoever recognizes its significance. NATO, which has since 1991 been sluggish and reactive, must abandon its posture of strategic patience. While the Arctic region's de facto hegemon is distracted in its protracted war with Ukraine, the alliance must refashion its view that the Arctic is a museum piece for Russia to maintain and manage, to one that's imperative to NATO's security in the twenty-first century. Moscow's northern ambitions are neither new nor subtle. As it seeks to restore its imperial-like influence along its western and southern flanks, Russia has also drastically fortified its

northern bastions, quietly constructing a web of air bases, missile systems, and nuclear-capable assets in an attempt to dominate the Polar High North's air, land, and sea. NATO must meet this challenge head-on by crafting and executing a coherent Arctic strategy—one that seizes the window of Russian distraction and reasserts Western leverage in the region.

A Realist's Quest for Regional Hegemony

The world is divided into spheres of influence, and states, without exception, pursue power to ensure hegemony in their respective region. Behind the facade of international law and multilateral diplomacy lies the oldest truth in geopolitics: realpolitik is law; the fittest are those that survive. States act not out of goodwill, but from a cold calculus of self-interest in order to ensure their own sovereign security.[1]

John Mearsheimer's seminal work *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, conceives of this logic as offensive realism, a theory that holds that the international system—anarchic by nature—operates under zero-sum constraints. One state's gain is another's loss. The ledger of power is continuously in flux and the balance rarely favors the naive.

Mearsheimer's theory rests on five pillars:[2]

1. The international system is anarchic, which does not mean that it is chaotic or riven by disorder.
2. Great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other.
3. States can never fully discern the intentions of others.
4. Survival remains the ultimate objective of all great powers.
5. States are rational actors that calculate costs and benefits to secure their place in the system.

I accept Mearsheimer's analysis of all state's relentless struggle for power, though I question his skepticism toward multilateral defense organizations. He argues that alliances are marriages of convenience—temporary and transactional rather than principled. States, in his view, will abandon treaties and partners the moment self-interest demands it. History offers no shortage of proof. Consider the diplomatic somersaults of the early twentieth century: Britain, France, and Russia formed an

[1] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 29.
[2] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 30–31.

alliance to check German ambition in World War I, only for the Soviet Union to abandon their WWI allies and sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany in 1939 that carved Poland into spheres of influence. Such reversals were neither accidents nor betrayals. The balance of power forced the Soviets into a deal out of self-interests that granted them an expanded territory, resources and, at the time, a security guarantee that hinged on tolerating Adolf Hitler's political ambitions.

Before the advent of durable postwar institutions like NATO, no mechanism existed to check the ambitions of regional hegemons. The international system was a raw contest of wills, and the Arctic's future now appears poised to return to that old order unless the West acts with clarity and resolve.

NATO's commitment to collective self-defense remains the cornerstone of today's global balance of power. The alliance exists not out of sentiment, but calculation. Member states understand a simple truth: collective security amplifies each participant's relative strength. Expansion is not charity. It is strategy. Admitting new members fortifies the alliance's political leverage across the international system, enlarging the deterrent shield that serves every signatory's self-interest.

But expansion comes at a cost. To adversaries left outside the alliance—chief among them, Russia—NATO's eastward march instills encroachment, not cooperation. Moscow viewed the alliance's extension to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as an existential challenge to its historical sphere of influence.[3] From the Kremlin's perspective, NATO presented an ultimatum: accept a diminished regional role or resist by force.

President Vladimir Putin made that choice explicit in December 2021 when he warned that Ukraine's bid for NATO membership constituted a red line for war. Two months later, Russian forces crossed Ukraine's border.[4] Some, like Mearsheimer, lay the blame for this invasion squarely at NATO's feet, arguing that alliance expansion cornered Russia into action. The logic holds if you accept the premise of ultimatum politics. But this view discounts a harsher reality: Ukraine's sovereignty was imperiled not because NATO expanded too far, but because they dragged their feet with its membership status.[5]

Once a state joins NATO, its political survival is virtually assured. Russia has shown no appetite for confrontation with alliance members. If the Federation was

[3] John Mearsheimer, "Who Caused the Ukraine War?," *John's Substack* (Substack newsletter), 5 August 2024, https://mearsheimer.substack.com/.

[4] Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference" (transcript, President of Russia official website, 23 December 2021), http://en.kremlin.ru/.

[5] Harald Edinger, "Offensive Ideas: Structural Realism, Classical Realism and Putin's War on Ukraine," *International Affairs* 98, no. 6 (November 2022): 1873–93, https://doi.org/.

so concerned with NATO expansion, why had they made no fuss or taken preemptive military actions against Slovakia, Slovenia, or Bulgaria—all of who are former satellites within Moscow's "Near Abroad"— when those respective states were granted NATO membership? Had Ukraine been admitted alongside the Baltic states in 2004, or granted membership following the Bucharest Summit in 2008, the Kremlin would have faced the cold calculus of Article 5. In all likelihood, the invasion never would have happened.[6]

Moscow's invasion of Ukraine was not a spontaneous act of aggression but a calculated attempt to reassert dominance over the last non-NATO frontier threatening Russia's regional hegemony. The Arctic, however, presents a different equation. Here, Russia already holds the upper hand. The Federation commands the largest share of Arctic territory, an immense inventory of military hardware, and the most entrenched presence north of the 66th parallel. By every metric—geography, manpower, infrastructure—Russia is the Arctic's uncontested hegemon.

Yet this advantage is melting away, along with the ice that once locked the region in strategic stasis. As new sea lanes open and resource access expands, NATO's idleness willfully surrenders the Arctic to Moscow . This would be more than a symbolic loss; it would be a geopolitical blunder. Arctic waters hold not only oil, gas, and minerals but emerging trade routes that could redraw global supply chains.

The West cannot afford to cede this ground. NATO must invest—not merely in strategy papers and summits—but in hard infrastructure and forward-deployed firepower. There is no rational self-interest in surrendering strategic territory, brimming with untapped wealth and global transit potential, to NATO's primary adversary.

Russia's Militarization of the Arctic

Eight nations hold sovereign territory north of the Arctic Circle; six command Arctic Sea access. Russia dominates the map, claiming roughly 53 percent of the Arctic's coastline.[7] The remaining 47 percent falls to Norway, the Kingdom of Denmark, Canada, Iceland, and the United States.[8] Russia's right to defend its own borders is not at issue here. What matters—and what demands attention—is the scale and intent behind the Federation's Arctic remilitarization.

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[6] North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "Bucharest Summit Declaration," Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania, 3 April 2008, https://www.nato.int/.

[7] "The Russian Federation," *Arctic Council* (website), https://arctic-council.org/.

[8] Sweden and Finland do not have direct coastline access to the Arctic Ocean, although parts of both countries lie north of the Arctic Circle (66th parallel).

The Federation's contempt for international law is no secret. Moscow underscored that disdain with its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, an unprovoked and illegal assault on a sovereign state. The attack shattered the illusion of Russian restraint and sent longtime neutral states scrambling for collective-shelter beneath NATO's security umbrella. Sweden and Finland, after decades of nonalignment, applied for alliance membership and won approval in 2024.[9] Their accession delivered a clear message: provoke us, and we will unite to contain you.

But symbolism is not strategy. NATO's expansion, while politically potent, has done little to offset the Federation's overwhelming military footprint in the Arctic.

Russia divides its Arctic defense into eastern and western commands. The eastern flank revolves around one prize: the Northern Sea Route and the Bering Strait. Control of this narrow maritime chokepoint grants Moscow not only the ability to surveil US air and naval movements but also to command one of the world's last promising commercial corridors. Reduced ice coverage threatens to transform the Northern Sea Route from a seasonal curiosity into a permanent artery for global trade—a reality that exemplifies the Federation's placement of military outpost along the trade route's intended pathway.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has refurbished a chain of Arctic airfields and naval installations once left abandoned. Some sites now host upgraded Soviet-era systems, while others bristle with next-generation hardware. Sophisticated surveillance platforms like the Sopka-2 radar provides over the horizon tracking capabilities, while advanced anti-air systems—chiefly the S-400 "Triumf" stationed at Kotelny Island—allow the Federation to detect, track, target, and, if necessary, engage incoming air threats.[10] These forward positions form the backbone of Russia's eastern Arctic defense, but the real muscle lies to the west.

The northwestern Arctic is the beating heart of Russian military power. Here, Russia houses its most advanced sensors and weapons—systems intended to shield the Federation's nuclear arsenal. At the center stands the Northern Fleet, headquartered in Severomorsk on the Kola Peninsula, which is designated responsible for the defense of Russia's entire northwestern frontier. The Northern fleet commands a formidable triad of land, air, and sea capabilities, to include near-silent submarines engineered for strategic deterrence.

The Federation's Arctic ambitions extend beyond firepower. Russia fields more than 40 icebreakers, both nuclear- and diesel-powered—a naval advantage the

[9] Joseph Clark, "Pentagon Welcomes Sweden, Finland in Ceremony Marking NATO Anniversary," *Defense News*, 4 April 2024, https://www.defense.gov/.

[10] Heather A. Conley and Caroline Rohloff, *The Ice Curtain: Russia's Arctic Military Presence* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 28 March 2017), https://www.csis.org/.

United States or NATO cannot meet with parity.[11] Washington's own icebreaker fleet is threadbare: two aging ships, one of which was crippled by an on-board electrical fire, the other approaching obsolescence.[12] Moscow, meanwhile, has begun arming its icebreakers with military-grade weapons and electronic warfare suites, transforming them from utility vessels into instruments of power projection.

Russia's sweeping investments in radars, surveillance platforms, and ice-capable warships signal a return to Cold War doctrine—a twenty-first–century reincarnation of the Soviet Bastion defense concept. The result: a nearly impenetrable fortress stretching across the Federation's Arctic coastline. And unless NATO moves to challenge this dominance, the Arctic's emerging frontier will belong to Moscow by default.

The Soviet Union pioneered the Bastion defense concept as a means of power projection through deterrence. Russia's modern Arctic posture is a direct descendant of that Cold War strategy. The Federation's reintegration of sensors, missile systems, and fortified bases throughout the Arctic serves as its "big stick"—a silent but unmistakable warning to Arctic and non-Arctic states alike: stay back.

Moscow's ambitions do not stop at the Arctic's icy boundary. The Federation has constructed deep-water ports, lengthened and reinforced Arctic runways, expanded its submarine fleet, and fielded advanced missile systems capable of projecting power far beyond its immediate periphery—most notably toward the GIUK-N gap (Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom, Norway). This strategic corridor anchors sea lines of communication (SLOC) that connect the United States to Europe. These SLOCs are not merely commercial lifelines; they are the spinal cord of NATO's transatlantic military connectivity and communications.

A single severed link in this network could cripple allied coordination and fracture Europe's security architecture. The Federation's systematic militarization of the Arctic—especially along the edges of these vital SLOCs—poses an open challenge to NATO's freedom of movement and a direct threat to the alliance's ability to defend itself. The danger is clear and present. What is absent is a political framework capable of containing it.

Politically Institutional Ignorance

The Arctic Council, established under the 1996 Ottawa Declaration, was designed to manage the region's political dialogue—but not potential security dilemmas.

[11] Conley and Rohloff, *The Ice Curtain*.

[12] Keith Johnson, "The Arctic Great Game Won't Be Won in the U.S. Shipyards," *Foreign Policy*, 3 September 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/; and Ben Townsend, "Coast Guard Icebreaker Healy Cancels Arctic Mission After Electrical Fire," *Alaska Public Media*, 12 August 2024, https://alaskapublic.org/.

Unlike the United Nations, the Council's mandate is strictly limited in scope and membership, and its influence over military affairs is nonexistent.

The Council counts eight permanent members: the United States, Russia, Iceland, the Kingdom of Denmark (via Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Canada. Six indigenous groups hold "permanent participant" status, a designation that grants them the right to speak on issues but not to vote. These include the Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, and the Saami Council.

Beyond this core, the Council hosts a growing roster of observers—a diverse and proliferating list that includes international organizations, NGOs, and non-Arctic states. Over the past decade, states like China and India have secured observer status, along with institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Wildlife Fund. Observers hold no voting rights, nor are they permitted to address the Council directly during meetings. They do, however, enjoy access to Council deliberations and may participate in cooperative efforts, particularly in research and environmental initiatives.

The Arctic Council's consensus-driven model is often credited with preserving peace in the region—a fair point, but one that misses the broader reality.[13] The Council was never designed to handle security. Its charter confines it to governance, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development, leaving a vacuum where strategic deterrence and collective defense should stand.

The Arctic Council's charter all but compels cooperation through its institutional design. Chairmanship rotates biennially among the eight permanent members, granting each state the authority to steer the Council's agenda and outline its priorities. In theory, the structure encourages collaboration; in practice, it ensures paralysis. Every decision must receive unanimous approval—a stipulation that from the start neutered the Council's ability to address politically sensitive or security-related issues.[14] The Council was never intended to govern military affairs, and this structural omission has become its most glaring weakness.

The unanimity requirement, meant to foster peaceful consensus, has instead shielded Russia's remilitarization of the Arctic behind a veil of procedural silence. The great irony is that the very mechanism designed to prevent conflict—multilateral consensus—has tolerated the significant actions of one member to rearm the region unchallenged.

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[13] Pavel Devyatkin, "Arctic Exceptionalism?: A Narrative of Cooperation and Conflict from Gorbachev to Medvedev and Putin," *Jordan Center Blog*, 10 October 2023, https://jordanrussiacenter.org/.

[14] *Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council*.

Russia, with the largest Arctic footprint of any state, holds disproportionate sway over the region's affairs. No Arctic policy can advance without its cooperation, especially within the confines of the Council. In 2014, Moscow formalized its Arctic military ambitions by creating the Northern Military District (later restructured as the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command).[15] This move signaled the Federation's commitment to consolidating its northern military posture. Yet because the Council's mandate excludes security issues, the body could not even table a discussion on the matter—allowing Russia's Arctic militarization to proceed unchecked.[16]

While the Council remains the Arctic's premier political institution, its inability to adjudicate security concerns has rendered it largely symbolic in the face of Russia's strategic ambitions. Moscow has repeatedly exploited this gap, blurring the line between commercial activity and military maneuvering. Nowhere is this clearer than in its claim that the Arctic Sea constitutes an "internal waterway"—a position the international community flatly rejects.[17]

Despite being a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Russia continues to impose unilateral rules on Arctic navigation. The Federation requires a 45-day advance notification for any vessel planning to enter what it calls its internal waters and demands prior permission and a mandatory military escort for passage. These measures not only tighten Moscow's grip over Arctic transit but also embed military oversight directly into commercial shipping—placing de facto tolls on the region's sea lanes.[18]

The Northern Sea Route, which stretches roughly 3,500 miles from the Bering Strait to the Kara Gate, offers shipping distances far shorter than traditional global routes.[19] Russian leaders have recognized this economic potential since at least the Gorbachev era.[20] But the Federation's fusion of military regulation with commercial navigation has ensured that Arctic shipping operates on its terms, not the Council's.

The Arctic Council's narrow mandate, its blind spot for security affairs, and its reliance on unanimous consent have created a vacuum. Russia—and increasingly, China—have exploited this institutional weakness, leveraging ambiguity for strategic gain at the expense of the Council's remaining members and the integrity of Arctic governance itself.

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[15] Mark Vicik, "Strengthen Arctic Governance to Stop Russian and Chinese Overreach," *Parameters* 52, no. 4 (Winter 2022–2023): 105–18.

[16] Heather Mongilio, "Russia's Arctic Rise," *USNI News*, 29 October 2024, https://news.usni.org/.

[17] Conley and Rohloff, *The Ice Curtain*.

[18] Lawson W. Brigham, "Cold, Hard Realities of Arctic Shipping," *Proceedings* 139, no. 7 (July 2013), https://www.usni.org/.

[19] Conley and Rohloff, *The Ice Curtain*.

[20] Devyatkin, "Arctic Exceptionalism?."

As early as 2004, China established its Arctic foothold with the creation of the Yellow River Station on Svalbard Island—a research outpost disguised as scientific curiosity but designed for strategic access. A decade later, Beijing parlayed that position into observer status on the Arctic Council, branding itself a leader in Arctic research while subtly exploiting the region's ambiguous legal and institutional framework.

The Arctic represents the last great global resource frontier—a reality not lost on Beijing. The region holds an estimated 10 percent of the world's proven petroleum reserves and roughly 25 percent of its undiscovered ones.[21] Below the ice lies lucrative resources like manganese, copper, cobalt, zinc, and gold. Above the waterline, the Northern Sea Route offers a transit corridor 35 to 60 percent shorter than conventional shipping lanes, slashing sail times and, more critically, bypassing strategic chokepoints like the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal, and the Strait of Malacca. For China, a reliable Arctic passage would reduce its dependence on these vulnerable corridors, an advantage the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sees as both strategic and economic.[22]

Where Russia views the Arctic as an export vault for energy and raw materials, China sees it as an economic goldmine. The CCP's ambitions for the Arctic are aimed squarely at domestic consumption and long-term growth—objectives reflected in Beijing's calculated rhetoric.[23] Since 2018, China has styled itself as a "Near-Arctic State," a term invented to justify its speculative Arctic stake, despite geography proving otherwise.[24]

Over three decades, the Arctic Council has devolved from a symbol of multilateral cooperation to an institution paralyzed by its own design.[25] The Arctic Council's insistence on consensus has rendered it incapable of confronting the one-sided arms race unfolding within its own membership. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Council has failed to convene a full meeting of its permanent members—a break in precedent for an organization that, from 1996 to 2022, met

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[21] David W. Titley and Courtney C. St. John, "Arctic Security Considerations and the U.S. Navy's Roadmap for the Arctic," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 38, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/.

[22] "'Malacca Dilemma' a Major Security Challenge for PRC," *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, 27 October 2023, https://ipdefenseforum.com/.

[23] Vicik, "Strengthen Arctic Governance."

[24] *China's Arctic Policy* (Beijing: State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, January 2018), https://english.www.gov.cn/.

[25] Uri Friedman, "Russia's War in Ukraine Sends Tremors into the Arctic," *Scientific American*, 10 March 2022, https://www.scientificamerican.com/.

without fail on a biennial schedule.[26] This paralysis has raised serious doubts about the Council's survivability.[27]

The underlying geopolitical fault line is clear: seven of the eight permanent members are also NATO allies, leaving Moscow with little faith in the Council's impartiality. By 2023, the Kremlin made its position plainly clear—Russia was openly weighing its exit.[28] With that, the Arctic Council now stands at a defining crossroads that forces one to question: was the Arctic's much-celebrated era of peaceful exceptionalism ever anything more than a consensual illusion?

History offers a blunt answer. The Council's structural dependence on unanimous consent, paired with its deliberate exclusion of security affairs, has left the institution toothless in the face of Russia's remilitarization. The Federation has exploited the Council's blind spots to reassert its regional influence, using the Arctic not as region for cooperation but a pedestal for their own power projection.

Given the Council's repeated failure to check Russia's expansionist aims—at the direct expense of all other Arctic states—NATO must step forward. Only a unified security framework can credibly counter the Federation's ambitions. The age of passive observation is over; the burden of deterrence now rests squarely on NATO's shoulders.

Toward a More Secure Arctic

NATO has long maintained a rotational presence and schedule of exercises to bolster allied security in the Arctic. One of the clearest demonstrations of this commitment came with Steadfast Defender 2024—an alliance-wide exercise staged from January to May 2024. All 32 NATO members participated, deploying nearly 90,000 military personnel, more than 50 naval vessels, 80 aircraft, and 1,100 combat vehicles.[29] More recently, the geographically relevant members—Norway, the United Kingdom, Canada, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States—executed Joint Viking under Norwegian command. This Arctic-specific training, involving more than 10,000 troops, underscored the alliance's ability to

[26] *Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council*.

[27] Serafima Andreeva and Svein Vigeland-Rottem, "How and Why the Arctic Council Survived Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Jordan Center Blog*, 30 January 2025, https://jordanrussiacenter.org/.

[28] "MID ne isklyuchil vykhod Rossii iz Arkticheskogo soveta" [Foreign Ministry did not rule out Russia's withdrawal from the Arctic Council], *RIA Novosti*, 11 May 2023, https://ria.ru/.

[29] North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "Steadfast Defender 2024," NATO website, 8 March 2024, https://www.nato.int/; and "Spotlight: Steadfast Defender 24," Department of Defense website, 2024, https://www.defense.gov/.

conduct cold-weather operations in one of the world's harshest theaters.[30] Expanding these exercises into sustained, institutionalized operations is no longer optional if NATO intends to credibly deter Russian remilitarization.

Since 2008, Norway and Iceland have quietly provided a blueprint for this type of enduring cooperation. Without a standing military of its own, Iceland relies on Norway to police its airspace under a NATO-backed air policing agreement. Royal Norwegian Air Force fighters routinely deploy to Keflavík Air Base, securing a critical air corridor near the GIUK-N gap and protecting vital SLOCs. In 2025, Finland joined the mission, deploying F/A-18 Hornets to support this collective defense arrangement.[31] These operations illustrate the value of regional cooperation but also expose the core weakness of NATO's Arctic posture: it remains fragmented, reactive, and piecemeal.

The Arctic Council's structural flaws and NATO's lack of a unified regional strategy have created a vacuum that Russia has moved to fill. Two proposals would begin to address these institutional shortcomings.

Establish the Arctic Security Council (ASC)

NATO's policy formulation and implementation require unanimous consent from all 32 member states—a structural reality that often hampers the alliance's agility. National priorities rarely align perfectly, and domestic politics frequently intrude on strategic coherence. Turkey's months-long delay in approving Finland's accession, driven by a bilateral dispute rather than alliance-wide considerations, revealed the fragility of NATO's collective defense model when unanimity is the price of action.[32] Yet the inclusion of Finland—a state that shares an 830-mile border with Russia—and Sweden has indisputably strengthened NATO's strategic posture in the High North.

To address this persistent flaw and close the Arctic security gap, NATO should establish an Arctic Security Council (ASC). This standing sub-alliance would include Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Canada, and the United States, along with two rotating non-Arctic NATO members. Each ASC member would hold veto authority over regional security decisions, preserving consensus but limiting the number of decision-makers to a practical core. Eight votes can

[30] Lauren Frias, "See How US Marines Brave Freezing Temperatures While Readying For a Fight in the High Arctic," *Business Insider*, 2 March 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/.

[31] "Finland Conducts Its First NATO Air Policing Mission in Iceland" (press release, Government of Iceland, 9 January 2025, https://www.government.is/.

[32] Yusuf Gezer, Amy Cassidy, and Jack Guy, "Turkey to Start Ratifying Finland's NATO Membership After Months of Opposition," *CNN*, 17 March 2023, https://www.cnn.com/.

yield unity; 32 is a recipe for deadlock. The ASC's design rests on two clear advantages: first, the participating states share a vested interest in checking Russian military assertiveness; second, six of the core members possess direct regional expertise rooted in geography, climate, and lived security challenges. This institutional refinement would transform NATO's Arctic posture from patchwork deterrence to sustained strategic coherence.

Stand Up Arctic Command (ARCCOM)

Establishing Arctic Command (ARCCOM) would centralize NATO's military posture under the direction of the ASC, signaling to adversaries like Russia and China that the alliance views Arctic security not as a seasonal concern but as a permanent strategic priority. Modeled after Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) in Northwood, United Kingdom, ARCCOM would serve as the ASC's coercive instrument—responsible for translating political consensus into military readiness. Stationed close to the region's operational front lines, the Commander for Arctic Command would bring critical proximity and specialized expertise in cold-weather warfare, enabling sharper mission planning, disciplined exercise execution, and unified command should a crisis escalate into conflict.

ARCCOM's force structure would draw from a permanent pool of assigned personnel and assets, representing the full spectrum of NATO's land, air, and naval capabilities. Unlike MARCOM's Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMG), which rely on voluntary national contributions, ARCCOM would be allocated dedicated resources from each ASC member—ensuring that its operational tempo is not subject to the vagaries of national politics. This structural permanence would empower ARCCOM's commander to execute the ASC's strategic priorities without the delays and compromises that too often accompany ad hoc force generation. In the Arctic, geography is as much an obstacle as any foreign military. Consolidating operational control under a single, theater-focused command would provide the alliance with the speed, flexibility, and coherence needed to meet the region's accelerating security challenges head-on.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exacted a steep price in blood and treasure, exposing the limits of Moscow's strategic reach and the vulnerabilities of its long-term war calculus. Within this miscalculation lies an opportunity NATO cannot afford to squander. The Arctic remains one of the world's last untapped frontiers—rich in natural resources capable of sustaining national industries for decades. Beyond its resource wealth, the region offers shorter maritime routes

linking Southeast Asia and Europe, bypassing traditional chokepoints such as the Suez Canal, Panama Canal, and the Strait of Malacca.

Russia's remilitarization of the Arctic underscores the region's strategic significance. The Federation has poured billions into rebuilding old Soviet installations and deploying advanced military hardware across the eastern, central, and western Arctic. Its sustained investment in cutting-edge weapons systems and cold-weather infrastructure has secured it the status of regional hegemon—at least for now. That reality, however, does not obligate NATO to accept a future defined by Russian dominance.

For nearly three decades, the Arctic Council functioned as the region's primary forum for cooperation. Yet its founding flaw—a deliberate omission of security from its mandate—rendered the organization structurally incapable of confronting the region's emerging threats. Russia's stated willingness to withdraw from the Arctic Council should not be met with resistance; it should be met with resolve. Rather than clinging to a political body that lacks enforcement power, NATO must chart a new course by establishing the ASC, a body designed to advance the alliance's strategic interests with clarity and purpose.

Like it or not, the Arctic is no longer a peripheral concern—it is a geopolitical prize. Control over this region enhances the political leverage and military reach of whichever power commands it. Realigning Arctic security structures to expand NATO's sphere of influence is not just prudent; it is essential. Allowing Russia to entrench its dominance would do more than reshape the region—it would erode NATO's credibility and threaten the alliance's broader strategic equilibrium.

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