

NATO ENCOUNTERS ON "HIGH NORTH" STRATEGIC DIRECTION

*Captain Dragoș-Mihai PĂUNESCU, PhD Candidate**

Abstract: *Due to global warming, the Arctic region's economic relevance radically increased and transformed into an arena for strategic rivalry. As former impenetrable barriers between Eurasia and North America are melting, Russia is stepping in to claim Arctic territory and occupies the most proactive position in the region. The High North has always remained an important strategic direction for Euro-Atlantic security and its relevance has re-emerged on the international agenda.*

Keywords: *Arctic region, High North, climate changes, Russia, China, United States, Arctic Council, UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.*

During the Cold War, the Arctic region, or High North¹, received significant security consideration due to its strategic importance. After being overlooked for more than two decades, this region returns as a top priority for international economic and security actors and military competition has been reignited.

The Arctic is once again of deep significance to NATO security due to the warming climate that allowed new economic opportunities and the re-emergence of geopolitical competition in the region. The climate changes are occurring now at a faster rate than previously thought, having a significant impact on the Arctic and the security of Arctic littoral states. For decades, Washington and Moscow preserved a delicate balance of power but, in the context of current changes, that balance of power is precarious.

Among Arctic countries has been identified the need to cooperate in order to address common challenges and solve territorial disputes by diplomatic means. The eight Arctic states, Canada, Denmark, Finland,

* "CAROL I" National Defence University, paunescu.dragos@yahoo.com.

¹ The term "High North" firstly appeared in Norwegian Government documents being used as a broad concept referring to the wider circumpolar area. See Jonas Gahr Store, "The High North and the Arctic: The Norwegian Perspective", Arctic Herald, Moskva, no. 2, June 2012, available at www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/nord_arktis/id685072/ accessed on March 12, 2020.

Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia and the United States established the Arctic Council with the aim of promoting the region as a space of cooperation and mutual problem-solving, while recognising the distinct geography, demographics and economics of the High North. The council has also encouraged collegial debate, cooperation, and a progressive perspective on climate change. In spite of a cooling of relations between Russia and the United States since 2014, a tacit agreement among the membership allowed to further coordinate Council's decisions and overall Arctic diplomacy.

Fast warming of the region and consequently the melting of the ice cover has significant consequences: an increased marine traffic, the development of integrated land and marine transportation networks, economic competition in exploration and exploitation of local resources.

All these come with an increased geopolitical and military competition to control the new shipping routes between Europe and Asia, namely the Northwest Passage² and the Northern Sea Route (NSR)³. NSR would reduce the travel time from Europe to Asia by almost 40%, decreasing substantially the shipping costs. Greater than ever before, the commercial activity will pose substantial logistical challenges in case of a shipping accident or oil spill.

The current relations between Arctic littoral states are mainly characterized by cooperation. However, the occurring climate change and resources competition creates some frictions. One of the main ongoing maritime delimitation disputes is the claim for the underwater Lomonosov Ridge, involving Russia, Denmark (Greenland), and Canada. This and other territorial disputes in the High North are currently reviewed under the framework of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

² A sea route connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans along the northern coast of North America. Sovereignty over the Northwest Passage is claimed by Canada as internal waters, a status contested by the United States.

³ Or Northeast Passage is a shipping route lying within the Russian EEZ and Arctic waters, running from the Barents Sea to the Bering Strait along the Russian northern coastline. The summer of 2016 saw the first cruise ship traverse the Northwest Passage

(UNCLOS)⁴, which allows countries to claim an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 200 nautical miles beyond their shoreline.

Arctic states have issued updated national strategic documents that are underlying the increased interest in the region. Moreover, substantial national investments are being made in ground-based surveillance, early warning, and ballistic missile defence – the geography of the region being key to countering any emerging missile threat. Having their sovereignty as the top priority, the Arctic states are pursuing economic and security interests in the region, which could potentially affect the current tenuous stability. Moreover, the tough environment of the region, as well as overlapping territorial claims between the Arctic states present major challenges for governance and collaboration in the region.

The climate changes bring many concerns for all countries in regard to demographic, economical, and political consequences. Russia however, is likely to benefit from a moderate climate change in numerous ways and this could be its opportunity to re-emerge as a major global power. The melting polar ice cap has opened up the region and may bring a change on High North militarization. The increase in Russian actions comes as climate change risks triggering greater competition for natural resources and communication routes in the High North.

Since 2009, Moscow has reopened and deployed forces into the Cold War military facilities that have been previously closed. Russia is consequently upgrading the existing infrastructure in the Arctic, mainly to improve transport and communication infrastructure directly linked to the opening of the Northern Sea Route.

Russia is also establishing high-tech bases, such as the Arctic Trefoil on Franz Josef Land, which enables Russia to protect both border and airspace, and to service the Northern Fleet. The world's largest fleet of icebreakers has supported these moves into Arctic. The region is also mentioned as a strategic resource base for Moscow, compensating for the decreasing gas and oil production in Western Siberia.

⁴ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, available at [https://www-un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf), accessed May 21, 2020.

The High North is extremely important for Moscow as nearly 20 percent of Russia's GDP is produced above the Arctic Circle⁵. In addition, it is assessed that more than 90 percent of potential hydrocarbon resources on the Arctic shelf are still unexplored, most deposits being expected to be situated in or near Russian territory. The exploration and exploitation of natural resources in its Arctic zone is then extremely relevant for the future prosperity of a state as economically challenged as Russia.

As Russia has the longest coastline of all Arctic littoral states, it needs to invest in infrastructure to maintain and develop its energy exploration. As the region brings challenges because of its inaccessibility and harsh climate, Moscow developed emergency relief and safe and rescue capabilities that are frequently provided by military units. Nevertheless, much of the Kremlin military build-up is clearly not for the safety of shipping and commercial activity.

Moscow adopted an Arctic strategy in 2008, designed to address the new security challenges determined by climate change and increased human activities in the region. This has brought Russia very close to Canada's territories, resulting in the collapse of "Fortress North America"⁶ Cold War concept that has long comforted the US and Canadian military planners.

The responsibility of guarding Moscow's military objectives in the High North was given on December 2014, to the newly created Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command of the Russian Navy. This Arctic military command, created by removing the Northern part of the Western Military District, is designated to protect Moscow's growing interests in the region and to strengthen military options on the northern border. The strategic command includes Komi Republic, Murmansk Oblast, Arkhangelsk Oblast (regions), Nenets Autonomous Okrug (district) and numerous Russian islands in the Arctic Ocean was transformed by an Executive Order signed by President Vladimir Putin on June 5, 2020 into a full military district. *"The following military-administrative division of the Russian Federation shall be established starting January 1, 2021... the Northern Fleet within*

⁵ „Investments in Russian economy in Arctic to exceed \$86 bln until 2025”, available at <https://tass.com/economy/1051080>, accessed May 16, 2020

⁶ Term used during both the Second World War and the Cold War referring to the option of defending Canada and the US against their enemies if the rest of the world were lost to them

the administrative boundaries of the Republic of Komi, Arkhangelsk and Murmansk regions and Nenets Autonomous Area"⁷. This is the first time on the evolution of Russian military districts when a fleet becomes equal in command to a geographical military district.

Military build-ups like deployment of long-range air and coastal defences along the coast, even east of Novaia Zemlia, cannot be described as designated to provide shipping safety and exploration support, but military interdiction and force projection. A potential reason for Russia's efforts to increase the interdiction capabilities in the area represents the Arctic bases of the Russia's Northern fleet. Moscow is also preoccupied about the sea-based nuclear deterrent deployed in the High North.

The opening of the new arena for power and competition could be considered August 2007, when Russian submarines submerge up to the bottom of the Arctic Ocean implanted a titanium made Russian flag 4000m under the sea level, at the North Pole. Russia is now the dominant power in the Arctic operating the world's largest fleet capable of sailing year-round in extreme northern waters and maintains dozens of military bases above the Arctic Circle.

On the other hand, Washington is becoming more responsive to the Arctic as an arena of global powers, and as many of the new Arctic sea route belong to Russia, US seek to expand military operations of their air base in Greenland to enhance their surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. However, since the end of Cold War, the US has maintained a constant presence in the Arctic region primarily through nuclear submarine deployments while relying on NATO allies in the region for logistical support.

US increased the military presence in the Arctic, especially around Alaska, including deployments of the Navy advanced maritime patrol aircraft, the P-8A Poseidon and exercises conducted by the US Marine Corps. In 2018 Marines joined soldiers, sailors, and airmen in Alaska for Arctic Edge exercise, where they trained "to fight and win in the Arctic," as the head of Alaskan Command, Air Force Lt. Gen. Ken Wilsbach declared

⁷ „Northern Fleet to become Fifth Military District”, available at <https://arctic.ru/news/20200608/946402.html>, accessed on June 10, 2020.

during the training activities. After Arctic Edge 2018, Marine Corps commandant Gen. Robert Neller stated that after years of focusing on the Middle East and Pacific, the Marines “*had gotten back into the cold-weather business ... we're moving in the right direction and doing our best to get more deployments for training to Alaska to take advantage of the terrain and the climate.*”⁸ The Navy’s P-8A Poseidon specialized in the anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, and shipping interdiction roles, also returned to Keflavik in Iceland, where it had a base from the early 1960s until 2006.

Similar to other Arctic littoral states such as Canada, Denmark, Russia and Norway, the United States also submitted territorial claims to the UN. As these claims overlap one another, it is up to the UNCLOS to determine the ones that are justified. The challenge consists in the fact that the US, among very few nations, is not a signatory of the Law of the Sea, even if it participated in the third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, which took place between 1974 and 1982.

Trump administration did not look as if stimulated the cooperation and collegial debates on climate changes, but U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo participated in May 2019, to the Arctic Council meeting held in Rovaniemi, the capital of Finland’s northernmost province and presented the US determination for a deeper involvement into the region. “*This is America’s moment to stand up as an Arctic nation and for the Arctic’s future ... because far from the barren backcountry that many thought it to be ... the Arctic is at the forefront of opportunity and abundance.*”⁹ Moreover, as an indicator that his administration looks for a more offensive approach to the challenge with Russia and China for polar resources, US President requested in June 2020 the construction of a fleet of icebreakers and naval bases to follow US interests in the Arctic and Antarctic that should be available on one decade. As for now, Russia has 51 icebreakers, more than any other state, China also invests significantly, and on the other

⁸ „Sullivan, top navy leaders agree – next conflict could be in an arctic region, new strategy needed”, available at https://www.sullivan.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sullivan-top-navy-leaders-agree_next-conflict-could-be-in-an-arctic-region-new-strategy-needed, accessed June 10, 2020.

⁹ „Looking North: Sharpening America’s Arctic Focus”, available at <https://ee.usembassy.gov/americas-arctic-focus/> accessed June 10, 2020.

hand, the US has five functioning, but operates a single heavy icebreaker and also no deep-water ports north of the Arctic Circle. The Challenge for US was that if Pompeo wanted to think of the High North as an arena for power and for competition where a race most probably will take place, other players already had a solid head start.

The High North is not only a subject of strategic interest for the "Arctic Five" but also for external powers such as the five Asian countries approved as observers to the Arctic Council in 2013 – China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore. Taking into account the increased presence and engagement of non-Arctic states, such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), it may be necessary for the littoral states to consider strengthened legal and regulatory frameworks in the Arctic. China is a newcomer in High North region and in the country's Arctic Policy adopted by the "State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China" in January 2018, it is considering itself a "*Near-Arctic State*"¹⁰, term invented in order to obtain a seat, as an observer, in the Arctic Council.

Like Russia, China's gigantic commercial shipping industry seeks to secure the benefits from the new arctic routes and Beijing planned by this time to exploit these sea-lanes included in the country's project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The only BRI partner among the eight Arctic nations is Russia, which is mostly supporting Beijing's involvement in the Arctic, not least because Moscow is keen for Chinese investment in its infrastructure but because of the cooling relations with the West.

Beijing has taken steps over the past several years to protect its interests in the High North, pursuing a presence in Svalbard, Iceland, and Greenland and intensifying diplomatic relations with Nordic countries. Greenland represents for China a soft entry point in the region and investments in infrastructure, tourism, mining and scientific research projects have already started. In Greenland, China intends to build its second research station after the one in Svalbard.

10 „China's Arctic Policy”, available at http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper-/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm, accessed June 10, 2020.

PRC also signed a free-trade agreement with Reykjavik in 2013 and began a collaboration in geothermal power and tourism. If the Arctic ice recedes further, Iceland could become a major shipping hub of the Transpolar Sea Route, which would become an alternative to the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and Beijing is preparing for it by constructing two nuclear powered icebreakers to be added to its Arctic fleet.

The Chinese Arctic strategy might be perceived as a part of its maritime military doctrine under President Hu Jintao, which shifted from the regional to the global scale, projecting power abroad. China's movements in the High North are important for the security interests of NATO states as the developments in the region also have an impact on the economic and political stability of Europe.

The High North geopolitical moves raise the question for the Alliance to build a NATO policy for the Arctic. NATO member states positioned in the northern flank, have a deep interest in preserving a peaceful situation in Arctic. Canada, Denmark and Norway favours NATO's proactive defence of High North region because Moscow is seen as threatening power.

As five of the Arctic Council's members are also NATO members, there is a contradictory opinion about Russia's intentions and increasing military presence in the region, a potential escalation of tensions between Russia and the Alliance, as well as China's increasing involvement, are making the Arctic an arena for strategic rivalry. At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, the Alliance reaffirmed its willingness to improve security on all of its borders, including the North Atlantic. A formal role of the Alliance with regard to the Arctic was established when a Graduated Response Plan (GRP) for Norway, North Atlantic and North Sea was agreed.¹¹

The Alliance also denounced "*Russia's aggressive actions, including provocative military activities in the periphery of NATO territory*", emphasised deterrence and the need to strengthen NATO's defence posture. At Warsaw, NATO members agreed to enhance the situational awareness in the North Atlantic as a reaction to Russia's military development because

¹¹ John Andreas Olsen, *Security in Northern Europe: Deterrence, Defense and Dialogue*, Routledge; 1 edition (November 1, 2018), *NATO and US Reorientation*.

safeguarding the sea lines of communication, especially during a crisis or conflict, is vital for the security of the Alliance.

Ranking second in Arctic land holdings, Canada is heavily invested in the Arctic. Canada's northern borders have been long time secured by the vast expanses of Arctic ice, but if the ice sheets disappear, the country's northern territories will become vulnerable. However, the major drawback of Canada in the High North is, the same as Russia's in Siberia, the demographic. Demographic size matters a great deal in geopolitics and in the decades ahead, it will matter even more and Canada can either capitulate its interests in the Arctic, most likely to US, or try to steadily grow and distribute its population.

Also, the relations in the Norwegian-Russian borderlands became overwrought over the last decade as major military investments have been put in place. Norway's close bilateral relationship with the United States and the defence spending are guarantees of the national interest protection. The country's core defence budget is almost twice that of Denmark and Finland, and considerably bigger than Sweden's¹². As a strong NATO foothold Norway's defence concept and thinking in the High North, rely on its sea forces, being able to survey the vast sea areas and starting 2011, relevant procurement has been made in terms of frigates, logistics and support vessels¹³, and submarines being upgraded or replaced.

The Svalbard archipelago generates the biggest concern for Norway. Under the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, Norway's sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago is formally recognised and supported by the 40 High Contracting countries. The increasing Russian speaking community, the Chinese and Russian companies involved in mining and infrastructure development and the discussions if the islands pertain to the Russian continental plate raised significant worries 2000 Km south of Svalbard, in

¹² SIPRI, "*SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*" Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019

¹³ „South Korea's DSME wins contract for design and build of a new logistics support vessel for Norway", available at www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/year-2013-news/august-2013-navy-world-naval-forces-maritimeindustry-technology-news/1191-south-koreas-dsme-wins-contract-for-design-and-build-of-a-newlogistics-support-vessel-for-norway.html, accessed June 10, 2020.

Oslo. During peacetime, there is no permanent Norwegian military presence on the islands, but lately the Norwegian Joint Headquarters, located in Reitan, where during the Cold War NATO's Allied Command North was based, makes sure that periodically its soldiers are seen patrolling on and in vicinity of Svalbard. During crisis or war, the islands offer a feasible location as a base for resupplying NATO ships including submarines and for projecting military power to secure Arctic lines of communication.

Norway builds up national forces and received allied reinforcement¹⁴, but also deploys new weaponry, including portable anti-aircraft and anti-armour weapons, in its Norwest province, Finnmark. These movements are part of the development of the new Finnmark Land Defence, which is planned to become fully operational in 2025.¹⁵

Northern NATO allies put heavy emphasis on multinational joint exercises, in the effort of maintaining or strengthening the interoperability between national and NATO forces. The exercises will also ensure that NATO structures and forces are familiar with the High North context, climate, terrain and infrastructure.

Regardless of their non-NATO membership, Sweden and Finland have increased cooperation with alliance members on multilateral and bilateral levels, intensifying debates about full membership. These debates intensified when Russia conducted a big military exercise where the scenario allegedly was a rapid intervention in the islands of Åland (Finland), Gotland (Sweden), Bornholm (Denmark) and northern Norway¹⁶.

The Arctic has become once again a front for NATO in recent years, as Russia has ignored European policies not to militarize the region. For the Alliance, the first security concern in the Arctic is represented by Russia's military and civil emergency forces build-up that has increased since 2008 as part of a wider programme of military modernisation. Given China's improving relationship with Russia, Beijing's increasing commitment in the

¹⁴ Since the beginning of 2017, US Marine Corps units have been deployed to Norway on a rotational basis.

¹⁵ Atle Staalesen, „Missile hits target in test launch near border to Russia”, available at <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2020/06/missile-hits-target-test-launch-near-border-russia>, accessed June 12, 2020.

¹⁶ Edward Lucas, “The Coming Storm: Baltic Sea Security Report”, available at <https://cepa.org/the-coming-storm/>, accessed on June 12 2020.

High North should be closely watched, especially in the context of China's and Russia's greater than ever actions to contest Western influence. Moreover, from UK defence official perspective, Russia and China should be viewed as "one alliance" in the Arctic, "*We cannot distinguish much, as you have arguably two power competitors there, in the American perspective, they should be treated as one alliance*" declared in June 2020 Tobias Ellwood, the U.K.'s chair of the Defence Select Committee in the House of Commons.¹⁷

In response to Russia, NATO will attempt to improve its capability and capacity to operate in the High North region. In May 2020, for the first time since the Cold War, NATO warships returned to the increasingly militarised Barents Sea¹⁸. To deter the Russian threat and Chinese spreading influence and safeguard maritime security, the Alliance must sustain its presence in the region. In our opinion, possible solution could be the establishment of a Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMG1) dedicated to the Arctic and separate from the maritime groups focused in Baltics and Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean.

Global warming has turned the poor, barren and frozen Arctic almost overnight into the century's resources competition. In the actual weather conditions, we assess that large military actions represents too much hassle for anyone and an opened military conflict is less probable to start in the High North, but if it appears elsewhere, the Arctic will be for sure one of the joint operations areas.

As Arctic ice cap continues to decrease and non-NATO states re-evaluate their posture in the High North, it would be prudent for NATO to engage in an effort coordinated among member states to improve its situational awareness and force posture in the Arctic. From a Western perspective, the Alliance's presence and situational awareness are needed to

¹⁷ Sarah Cammarata, "Russia and China should be viewed as 'one alliance' in the Arctic, U.K. defense official warns", available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/06/-russia-china-alliance-304582>, accessed June 12, 2020.

¹⁸ Four-ship patrol, the British Royal Navy frigate Kent and three Ships belonging to U.S. Navy's 6th Fleet based in Rota, Spain, tried to demonstrate a high-profile NATO presence in the Russia's backyard.

deter both Russia and China while protecting maritime security and its interests in the Arctic.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CAMMARATA S., “Russia and China should be viewed as 'one alliance' in the Arctic, U.K. defense official warns”, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/06/russia-china-alliance-304582>, accessed June 12, 2020.
- LUCAS E., “The coming storm: baltic sea security report”, available at <https://cepa.org/the-coming-storm/>, accessed on June 12 2020.
- OLSEN J.A., *Security in Northern Europe: Deterrence, Defense and Dialogue*, Routledge, 2018.
- STAALESEN A., „Missile hits target in test launch near border to Russia”, available at <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2020/06/-missile-hits-target-test-launch-near-border-russia>, accessed June 12, 2020.
- United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, available at https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf, accessed May 21, 2020.
- ”Investments in Russian economy in Arctic to exceed \$86 bln until 2025”, available at <https://tass.com/economy/1051080>, accessed May 16, 2020.
- ”Northern Fleet to become Fifth Military District”, available at <https://arctic.ru/news/20200608/946402.html>, accessed on June 10, 2020.
- „Sullivan, top navy leaders agree – next conflict could be in an arctic region, new strategy needed”, available at <https://www.sullivan.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sullivan->

NATO ENCOUNTERS ON "HIGH NORTH" STRATEGIC DIRECTION

- top-navy-leaders-agree_next-conflict-could-be-in-an-arctic-region-new-strategy-needed, accessed June 10, 2020.
- „ Looking North: Sharpening America’s Arctic Focus”, available at <https://ee.usembassy.gov/americas-arctic-focus/>, accessed June 10, 2020.
- „China’s Arctic Policy”, available at http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm, accessed June 10, 2020.
- „South Korea's DSME wins contract for design and build of a new logistics support vessel for Norway”, available at www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/year-2013-news/august-2013-navy-world-naval-forces-maritimeindustry-technology-news/1191-south-koreas-dsme-wins-contract-for-design-and-build-of-a-newlogistics-support-vessel-for-norway.html, accessed June 10, 2020.
- * Warsaw Summit Declaration (Warsaw, NATO Summit, 8-9 July 2016)
- ** NATO: Ready for the future – Adapting the Alliance (2018-2019)
- *** *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, SIPRI, 2019
- ****www.regjeringen.no

