

The High North

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ABSTRACT

The High North, encompassing the Arctic regions of countries such as Norway, Russia, Canada, Denmark (Greenland), and the United States (Alaska), is a region of critical geopolitical, environmental, and economic significance. This area is characterized by its harsh climate, unique ecosystems, and the presence of indigenous communities with rich cultural heritages. Climate change is dramatically reshaping the High North, leading to the melting of ice caps and glaciers, which in turn opens new maritime routes and reveals vast reserves of natural resources like oil, gas, and minerals. These developments have spurred international interest and competition, highlighting the need for robust governance and sustainable practices. The region's environmental sensitivity, combined with its role in global climate regulation through ice-albedo feedback mechanisms, underscores the urgency of addressing environmental and socio-economic challenges. The High North stands at the forefront of global climate change impacts, necessitating comprehensive strategies for conservation, sustainable development, and international collaboration to ensure its future stability and resilience.

Keywords: The High North is a complex region; The role of Arctic Allies as strategic actors; The Arctic Council; The Arctic Allies as strategic actors; The High North security; the High North is contrary to NATO's interests

INTRODUCTION

The High North is a complex region consisting of sovereign territories, continental shelves, international waters, territorial seas, and exclusive economic zones (Buchanan, 2021). Geographically, it includes the North Atlantic, elements of Northern Europe, and Arctic regions; it is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Northern Flank. It is also an area of geostrategic importance, holding oil and natural gas, minerals, and fisheries (Buchanan, 2022). Recognition of the region as a strategically important arena started during the Cold War (Tamnes & Offerdal, 2014). Acknowledgment of the area as a strategically significant zone began during the Cold War due to its location between rival superpowers and its possible function during wartime as a pathway for nuclear strategic exchanges. According to the NPT (The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is an international treaty aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and promoting cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy. It was opened for signature in 1968), non-nuclear-weapon states that are parties to the treaty have pledged not to produce or acquire nuclear weapons or any other devices capable of nuclear explosions.

However, following the Cold War, "Arctic exceptionalism" prevailed, meaning the High North became a unique region with unwritten but commonly accepted norms and collaboration (Devyatkin, 2023). This status quo is now at risk (Buchanan, 2021). Climatic changes continue to increase accessibility, resource extraction, and East-West shipping routes, allowing for strategic military positioning. Russia's 2022 further invasion of Ukraine has heightened the immediacy of these changes and increased tensions. As such, the "New North" will likely become the center of geopolitical interests and competition, perhaps sooner than anticipated (Ozawa, 2021).

While acknowledging the role of Arctic Allies as strategic actors, this essay seeks to consider the High North as an area of strategic competition for NATO. In the context of increasing strategic competition with Russia and China, it will analyze NATO's prospective role in the region while maintaining its three core tasks of deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security (A, 2023). This essay will use three prospective futures from Buchanan to consider shifting strategic competition between NATO and Russia to understand what actions can be taken to avoid deepening ruptures in the geostrategic environment: (1) the High North will become more "fractured," meaning the region becomes a strategic flashpoint once more in Cold War-style competition; (2) more "fragmented," meaning maintaining a scenario where relationships between NATO Allies and Russia in the region are simultaneously friendly and hostile (Rowe, n.d.); or

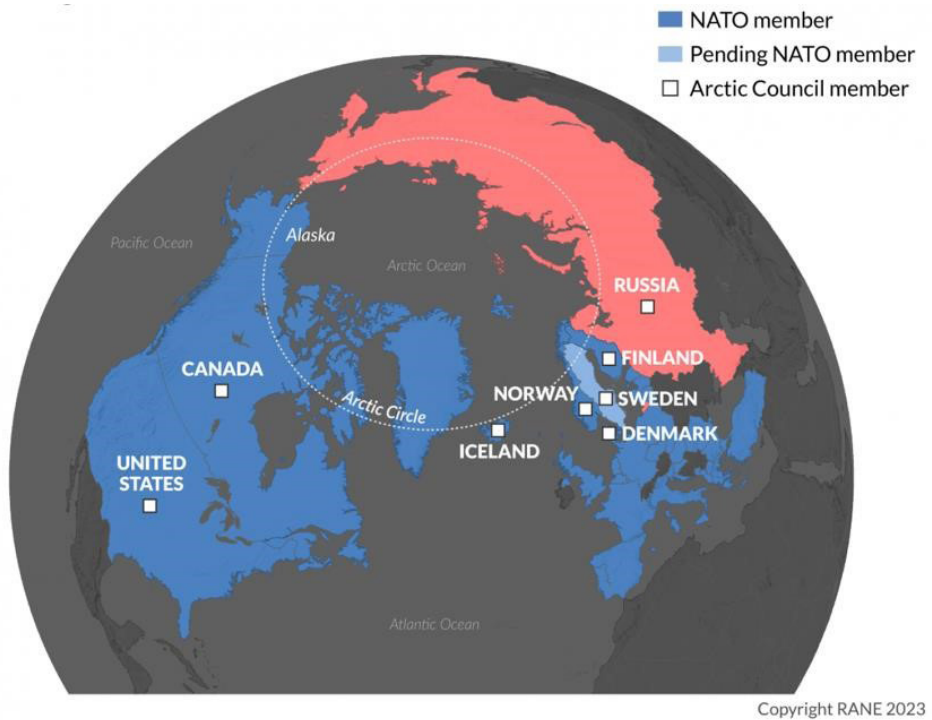
(3) more “functional,” with greater collaboration between states on areas of mutual interest (Buchanan, 2021). This essay presumes that functional collaboration between NATO and Russia is unrealistic and that a fractured High North is a wholly undesirable current trajectory (Kjaergaard, 2023).

This essay will address changes following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, including expanded NATO membership and changes to the Arctic Council. It will argue that there will be increased impetus for NATO to respond to and invest in countering threats from the High North to avoid fracturing the region. The implications of Russia-China cooperation will be analyzed regarding the threat to the Alliance before concluding with recommendations for NATO to ensure a less fractured High North. It will conclude that NATO must take steps to avoid a fractured High North and aspire for functionality or maintain partial fragmentation to reduce the threat to the Northern Flank.

METHODS

Non-military issues pertaining to the High North have long been governed by the Arctic Council. However, the stakeholder community has expanded and now includes “near-Arctic” states like China, multilateral institutions, and commercial entities (Buchanan, n.d.). In this context, Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine had two critical security implications for the High North. First, NATO membership has been extended to two more Arctic Council states: Finland and, soon, Sweden (Sacks, 2022). Second, Russia has been suspended from the Arctic Council, meaning it is no longer a forum for cooperation on Arctic issues (Kornhuber et al., 2023). These issues will be examined in turn.

The expansion of Alliance membership northward is significant. As depicted in “item 1,” Finnish membership has increased the NATO-Russia border by approximately 1,340 kilometers (U.K. Parliament, 2007–2008). This poses a significant challenge. The security and stability of the High North is a primary concern for Finland and Sweden due to their geography on the Northern Flank (Kai Kornhuber, 2023). Therefore, their membership is predicted to mark a political shift toward NATO responding to Northern security issues (Anna, 2023). This will include ensuring NATO’s supply and communication lines, such as the Greenland, Iceland, and UK (GIUK) gap, changing capability pressures for Allies, and increasing the necessity for regional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) to defend the border with Russia. These defensive actions should maintain fragmented High North security.

Figure 1

Note. Reference: RANE. “Shifting Arctic Governance” 2023 [Map]

https://www.stratfor.com/sites/default/files/styles/wv_large/public/arctic-council-nato-may-2023.png?itok=O2bQPZkM

To date, NATO has been unable to reach a consensus on its policy toward the High North, resulting in a diluted approach within the 360-degree strategy (NATO, 2018). The High North is only briefly addressed in the 2022 Strategic Concept, which acknowledges that Russia’s capability to disrupt freedom of navigation and reinforcements is a strategic challenge for NATO. In 2020, NATO established the Atlantic Command in JFC Norfolk, co-located with the U.S. 2nd Fleet, to respond to High North issues. Examining NATO’s political drivers, many recognize the risk of fracturing security. The United States views the region as “an arena for sustainable economic development, international cooperation, and governance” (“National Strategy for the Arctic Region,” 2022). Similarly, the United Kingdom, a Near-Arctic nation, acknowledges the growing importance of the High North to its national defense and security and the increasing competition in the evolving security environment (Defence, 2022). Denmark’s approach to the region is predominantly sovereign, although Denmark has been a critical advocate within NATO for protecting the Northern Flank. Denmark’s high priority is to maintain low risk

in the High North (Defence O.i., 2023). The Canadian Arctic strategy treats all threats from the High North as a national, rather than NATO, priority (Canada, 2019). However, military investment in Canada remains at approximately 1.29% of GDP (Gollom, 2023). While overall military investment is higher in the U.K. and the U.S., Arctic-specific investment remains modest, even though Arctic capabilities are notoriously expensive and uniquely challenging (Savitz, 2022). The United States Coast Guard currently operates two icebreakers, the same number as China. There may soon be more significant investments from Denmark in High North capabilities, such as ISR, to improve situational awareness (Command, 2023).

Conversely, Russia has increased investments in capabilities and facilities (Mathieu, n.d.), such as the Standing Russian Arctic Civil Icebreaker Fleet, which has 26 ships and at least five nuclear-powered icebreakers in production (Lagutina, 2013). While production has slowed following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this fleet outnumbers all other fleets in the High North littoral countries combined (Lagutina, 2013). This imbalance fragments and risks fracturing NATO security in the High North.

Figure 2



Note. Reference: *The Economist*. "Northern Sea Route" 2023 [Map]

<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/09/24/what-is-the-northern-sea-route>

The Kremlin's 2020 family of strategic documents reaffirms the priority of protecting national interests in the Russian Arctic Zone ("The Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic in the Period to 2035"). The "Northern direction" (K Z., 2010) of Russia's strategy is summarized in two main areas: first, maintaining jurisdiction over the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which navigates a vast stretch of the Northern Flank (as shown in fig. 2); and second, extending control over the exploration and exploitation of natural resources on Russia's continental shelf beyond the standard 200-nautical-mile limit (Nazarin, 2018). With numerous Arctic-capable assets, Russia dominates the NSR, regulating all shipping (Malte, 2023). It is expected to be primarily navigable in the summer by 2025–2030, potentially shifting Russia from the periphery of the world economic system to the center (Maria, 2013).

Russian capability investment and dominance of the NSR are at odds with the stability and security of the Alliance. This, combined with NATO's potential re-focus northward, risks fracturing stability in what has been a "low-tension" area (Mathieu, 2019). It is feasible that any NATO re-focus northward could be viewed as encroachment into a traditionally non-NATO arena, further fracturing stability.

RESULTS

Russia has been suspended from the Arctic Council, and the Nordic Council of Ministers has also stopped cooperation with Russia (Aagaard, n.d.). Additionally, Russia has halted participation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (Astri Edvardsen., 2023). This diminished cooperation through international fora is assessed to reduce transparency as nations continue to pursue divergent national interests without governance (Kai Kornhuber. et al., 2023). This diplomatic drought is significant. While the Arctic Council is explicitly not a forum for defense issues, cooperation on areas of mutual scientific and indigenous interest increased functionality or, at the very least, reduced fracturing security in other interdependent defense areas (Andrew, 2020). This is a result of the duality of Russia's approach to "securing" investments in the "zone of peace" ("Plan razvitiya infrastruktury Severnogo morskogo puti na period do 2035 goda," 2019). Utilizing dual-use scientific and defense capabilities blurs the line between military and security (Buchanan, n.d.). However, the U.S. has mostly refrained from militarizing the High North, with the Coast Guard retaining policing responsibility; this is not universal across the Alliance. Like Russia, Denmark maintains a dual-use approach for capabilities in the High North. This means the Arctic Council had aided functionality in the arena by increasing Russian and Allied awareness of dual-purpose assets and presence.

Removing this forum for cooperation and deconfliction risks misunderstanding and escalation, thus fracturing the High North.

Regarding Russia's ambition, which mostly adheres to international laws and norms, Russia claims approximately 40% of the High North (over 9 million square kilometers) (Note, 2013). Almost 10% of Russia's GDP originates from the Russian Arctic Zone, accounting for 20% of all exports ("The Decree of the President of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR," 2013). Russia's paused participation in the Arctic Council is unlikely to impact this economic pursuit. However, as Russia traditionally derives its strategic position and power from the hydrocarbon and minerals trade, new exploitation of the High North threatens to undermine sanctions imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, thus fracturing security more globally. Securing investments in the High North is a costly endeavor, but in a "zone of peace and mutually beneficial cooperation" ("Plan razvitiya infrastruktury Severnogo morskogo puti na period do 2035 goda," 2019), Russia has found a new partner: China.

Russia has increasingly looked to China in an age of frozen diplomacy and economic anxiety. The partnership between NATO's two greatest threats risks fragmenting security and directly threatens NATO security. China identifies as a near-Arctic state in the "greater Arctic" [大北极] (Li, 2016). Obtaining Arctic Council observer status in 2013, China has since increased its ambitions, often citing Arctic issues impacting China's interests (*China's Arctic Policy*, 2018), including as part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, the NSR, and China's vision for a Polar Silk Road.

Russia's diplomatic isolation will open opportunities for increased cooperation between Russia and China in areas of shared benefit. Russian and Chinese interests converge over the NSR, which can potentially reduce the distance between Europe and Asia by 40% (Deiana, 2023). The NSR, under favorable Russian control, offers China an option to overcome its "Malacca Dilemma" (Pawel Paszak, 2021), whereby more than 80% of China's energy and cargo currently pass through the Malacca Strait, making it vulnerable to denied passage in a conflict (Satish, 2023). Similarly, China is dependent on over 70% of its oil and 40% of its natural gas from imports (Xie, 2021), making the High North an attractive source of resources. China needs Russia's support and cooperation as the largest Arctic country to achieve its goals, while Russia, in turn, requires Chinese financial investment.

While currently a case of peaceful coexistence, cooperation between NATO's primary adversary and a country considered a strategic threat (Luis, 2023) risks frag-

menting NATO's security. Alternatively, other states demanding natural resources may seek to gain from Russia's geography in a manner more functional for High North security. With its defined Arctic policy, interests in developing the NSR, and stable relations with Moscow, India could become a viable alternative and less fracturing to High North security. Both nations are already discussing deepening cooperation in the Arctic (Malte Humpert 2023).

CONCLUSION

Navigating the strategic waters

The High North was once marked by Arctic exceptionalism and collaborative norms. However, as demonstrated by the issues discussed in this paper, the region's isolation has thawed, and the risk of fracturing is increasing. Fracturing the High North is contrary to NATO's interests and should be an Alliance priority to prevent. Therefore, NATO must balance its core aims in this evolving geopolitical context and agree on a policy that allows the following actions:

Balancing deterrence and dialogue: NATO should think creatively about confidence-building measures and exploit opportunities for dialogue with Russia. A shift in mindset will be difficult due to current political constraints on cooperation, but it is required. Effort "should concentrate on proving to the Kremlin that cooperation is in everybody's interest" (Juha Kämpylä, Harri Mikkola, 2019). This will help undermine the emerging Russian-Chinese cooperation and reduce regional fractures. Areas for consideration include military deconfliction mechanisms and emergency and rescue protocols. It may be simpler to achieve consensus on using political levers to reaffirm the role of the Arctic Council as the forum for non-military Arctic issues and public recognition that reinstating Russian membership would increase functionality. This could be achievable and effective.

Militarily: NATO needs to make decisions that allow it to defend against and balance threats emanating from the High North. The upcoming final determination of the JFC Norfolk Area of Responsibility is necessary to allow for continued joint NATO exercises in all domains in the High North to strengthen NATO's defense and deterrence posture. This will help determine responsibility for undertaking ISR investment in the High North to increase awareness of possible threats. To ensure that NATO does not inadvertently contribute to a fractured High North, conscious capability investment decisions must be made (Officer in the Danish Joint Arctic Command, 2023). It will likely be difficult for NATO to achieve consensus to com-

pete with infrastructure or asset investment on the same scale as Russia and China while maintaining existing commitments. However, NATO should take practical steps to balance this presence by routinely identifying gaps and investing in High North capabilities through the Defense Planning Process.

As NATO charts its course in the High North, it must navigate with a clear-eyed assessment of the risks and opportunities. Any increased activity must be accompanied by transparent strategic messaging to mitigate the risk of miscalculation or misunderstanding. NATO's response should be agile, adaptive, and cooperative, ensuring the High North remains a region of shared interests rather than a fractured battleground.

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