



Promoting a more transparent and accountable NATO

## Increasing military activity in the Arctic

By Nigel Chamberlain, NATO Watch

### Key points:

- Russia wary of NATO exercises in the High North.
- Bigger role for Special Forces and cold weather training.
- Climate change could lead to competition for resource exploitation.
- Scope for non-military cooperation on environmental protection.

### Winter training for Special Forces

Speaking to senior military staff from the Russian Defence Ministry on 27 February, [President Vladimir Putin](#) said that:

*We see methodical attempts to undermine the strategic balance in various ways and forms. The United States has essentially launched now the second phase in its global missile defence system. There are attempts to sound out possibilities for expanding NATO further eastward, and there is also the danger of militarisation in the Arctic.*



(US Marines stage gear on a landing craft in Norway as they prepare to participate in exercise Cold Response 2010 – photo credit: US DoD/ flickr)

On the same day as Putin was warning of the militarisation of the Arctic, Norway's Minister of Defence, Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen, was visiting a [joint Norwegian and British exercise](#) with Philip Hammond, the UK's Defence Secretary. She has invited other NATO Member States to conduct winter training in the Arctic. The [Daily Telegraph](#) reported that:

*With the Arctic's huge natural resources increasingly crucial to Britain's energy supply, Mr Hammond travelled to the High North to scrutinise a new front line for the Armed Forces after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Mr Hammond watched an elite unit diving into frozen lakes and downing shots of rum to kick start their circulation — training for a new "era of contingency", where the Armed Forces are ready to respond to crises.*

Also on the same day, a [US Special Forces unit arrived in Finland](#) to participate in winter exercises across northern Lapland. The elite US Army soldiers will also provide training for their Finnish counterparts in international operations. "This is part of the development of Finnish special forces skills. From time to time it is important to see what we can learn from others. We will now have to work in a unified way" said Regiment Commander Colonel Heikki Välivehmas. Finnish soldiers have collaborated with NATO troops previously in Special Forces exercises in Norway and Afghanistan.

The NATO Secretary General has often spoken of the need for a concerted effort for Allies to work together, flexibly, and to share capabilities. He foresees a growing role for Special Forces from partner nations cooperating with Allied Special Forces. NATO marked the official opening of a new [Special Forces HQ in Casteau, Belgium](#) on 12 December 2012. In a ceremony in Mons, NATO's Supreme Commander Admiral James Stavrides said the new command centre will ensure that national elite units will continue to develop their capabilities by training together.

Russia and Norway have for many years held joint exercises involving the two countries navies in the high north. Visiting Moscow earlier in February, Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen agreed with Russia's Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu to expand the two countries' military cooperation and to have more joint exercises, both in Norway and in Russia.

### Tune in to radars and satellites

In an [interview with the Voice of Russia](#), Agenta Norberg, Vice Chair of the Swedish Peace Council commented on the militarisation of the Arctic region and the NATO expansion into 'neutral' areas.

She spoke about a book on [Satellite War](#) by Bård Wormdal – a journalist with Norwegian radio whom she had invited to speak about the subject in Stockholm. He said that you have to change your whole idea of how war is conducted. War is now conducted more via satellite and radar installations. For example, Norway has allowed the US to deploy a radar installation on the Svalbard Islands which is connected with a global network of military satellites and relay stations. The Svalbard Islands were set aside for peaceful development, as agreed by 14 nations. She also said that there been a huge increase in NATO and US exercises in northern Sweden and Norway in recent years.

(Svalbard Satellite Station (Svalsat) station from Platåfjellet – photo credit: lanzen/ flickr)



In a 2012 study by the Russian International Affairs Council

entitled, [The Arctic - Proposals for the International Cooperation Roadmap](#), the chapter on 'security' recommends continued and expanded military cooperation in the Arctic. This includes joint naval exercises between Russia and Norway, as well as between Russia, Norway, and the United States – and that these exercises are extended to other countries.

[NATO Watch](#) reviewed the movement of major NATO and Partnership for Peace forces into northern Norway in March last year in preparation for Exercise [Cold Response 2012](#) (12-21 March). We reported that the large exercise may be no more than a concerted effort to "rehearse high intensity Crisis Response Operations in winter conditions within NATO with a UN mandate", but suggested that Russia may not see it quite that way. There is no Cold Response exercise this year and Cold Response 2014 is expected to be held in Nordland, Norway from 10 to 19 March 2014 (still to be confirmed).

### Arctic geopolitics and Russia

In a recent [Defence IQ](#) article Dr. Katarzyna Zysk, Associate Professor at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies in Oslo, argued that the Arctic is becoming pivotal to geopolitics because of "climatic deviations that lead to shrinking and thinning of the ice cap on an unprecedented rate and scale" and the "representation of the region as a new and very promising energy frontier".

The thawing Arctic ice has also exposed longstanding border disputes and other unresolved legal issues. A more assertive Russian foreign policy and tensions in the relations with the US and NATO have also contributed to future uncertainties. While Zysk concludes that a "military conflict potential is low, the region remains vulnerable and, to a large extent, unprepared for security implications of environmental changes, technological accidents and disasters such as oil spills".

With sea-based nuclear forces deployed with the Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula. Russia has a strong military presence in the region with "increased activity since 2007" according to Zysk. She added:

*The growing international interest and increasing accessibility of the Arctic Ocean to Russian and foreign actors have had an impact on their security perceptions. Russia has produced large-scale plans aimed at improving border protection, surveillance,*

*law enforcement, navigation and communication systems, as well as search and rescue capabilities.*

*The increased Russian military presence also has a political and symbolic value aimed reasserting the country's key position in the Arctic.*

### Environmental exploitation or cooperation within a Polar Code?

[Captain Henrik Kudsk](#) was the joint chief of Greenland Command for five years until November 2012 before his retirement from the Royal Danish Navy. He was responsible for the military defence of Greenland as well as taking on a Coast Guard role including Search and Rescue (SAR). He is now a Special Arctic Advisor to Admiral Danish Fleet:

*What I saw was that the Arctic is going through a very dramatic change. People are now coming to the Arctic in order to exploit the area because of climate change. Large areas used to be ice-locked throughout the year but now some areas are opening up during the summer time enabling access to minerals and oil and gas.*

He said his experience of the region has convinced him of the need for a [Polar Code](#) - an international code of safety for ships operating in polar waters that is being developed by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Kudsk expects the Polar Code to be agreed later this year and called for increased cooperation between state actors in the Arctic.

Asked about potential military threats, Kudsk said that "Denmark does not see a current military threat that needs to be addressed in the Arctic ... because we believe the nations are there to share interests rather than compete for them". Last year Kudsk oversaw the first multi-national SAR exercise off the east coast of Greenland called SAREX 2012, which was conducted by the Arctic Council. The exercise was considered to be a success though it focused attention on the Arctic's highly complex and dangerous operating environment.

(Arctic sea ice – photo credit: banyanman/ flickr)

In a recent [op-ed](#) biological oceanographer Paul Berkman, notes that cooperation on exploiting the oil, gas, mineral and fisheries resources in the Arctic has taken place but "there has been little effort to develop legal mechanisms to prevent or adjudicate conflict. The potential for such conflict is high, even though tensions are now low". He adds that China and the EU are among non-Arctic governments rushing to assert their interests in the region and that some states have increased military personnel and equipment there.

While the Arctic Council has identified sustainable development and environmental protection as 'common Arctic issues' the crucial subject of 'maintaining the peace' has not been on the table. Berkman advises nations to "compare their separate security policies, identify the ways in which those policies reinforce or conflict with one another, and then balance national interests with common interests".

He calls for the US administration to ratify the Convention on the Law of the Sea and notes that in 2010 Admiral Stavridis, NATO's Supreme Allied Command Europe, warned of an "icy slope toward a zone of competition, or worse, a zone of conflict". Berkman believes that:

*President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia clearly understands the benefits of a northern sea route and of the hydrocarbon deposits on his nation's continental shelf, and has emphasized the importance of peace and cooperation in the Arctic. So have leaders of other Arctic nations. But we*

*have heard virtually nothing from President Obama, even as he has made the dangers of a warming earth a priority of his second term.*

And he recommends that, "as the head of an Arctic superpower and a Nobel laureate, Mr. Obama should convene an international meeting with President Putin and other leaders of Arctic nations to ensure that economic development at the top of the world is not only sustainable, but peaceful".

## Conclusion

NATO's [LibGuide on Arctic Security](#) claims to be a starting point for further research but offers very little detail and few links. In a June 2012 Heritage Foundation article, Luke Coffee argues that "the US should make the Arctic a higher priority for NATO while working to allay the concerns of Canada, which is wary of a stronger NATO presence in the Arctic".

Canada takes over the chairmanship of the Arctic Council from Sweden in May. Perhaps we will see continued Canadian resistance to NATO becoming more actively involved in the region. The new Permanent Secretariat of the Arctic Council, based in Tromsø, Norway, will also open in May.

NATO Watch reviewed Coffee's article in [Briefing Paper No. 27](#) and our conclusion then remains prescient today. NATO's seems committed to conducting small and large scale exercises in the Arctic, regardless of the concerns of Russia, and presumably plans are in hand for Cold Response 2014 in Norway. We therefore restate that:

1. The UN Convention on Law of the Sea is a crucial agreement for framing future economic development in the Arctic region and environmental protection issues must not be downgraded by pressure from political and economic interests.
2. Emergency and disaster preparedness in the region are a natural corollary to economic exploitation but they should not be used as a cover for militarising the Far North. For that reason, an expanded Arctic Council is the more appropriate body to promote regional development rather than NATO, partly as Russia is a Member State of the former and not the latter.

And add, as per the NATO Parliamentary Assembly resolution from November 2012:

3. NATO member states should develop greater transparency with Russia on military deployments and strategies in the High North.