



NATO and the Arctic revisited: spillover from crisis in Crimea?

By Nigel Chamberlain and Ian Davis, NATO Watch

Introduction

Russia, which accounts for half of the Arctic region, is one of eight nations that make up the Arctic Council (the others are Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and United States), along with representatives of six Indigenous Peoples' organisations. During the Cold War the Arctic was a heavily militarised region and a focus for competing East-West strategies. However, former Soviet President Gorbachev's 1987 speech in which he called for a "zone of peace" to be created in the Arctic, set the tone for a new era of cooperation and the founding of the Arctic Council about a decade later. Since then larger geopolitical questions have tended to be overlooked by the Council.

While the crisis between Russia and Ukraine is creating political fault lines that may yet spill over into the Arctic Council, for now at least, it seems to be business as usual with [Russia participating at the eight-country Council meeting](#) currently taking place in Canada. But what are the longer term prospects for the Council and the region itself? And is the Crimea crisis forcing NATO to rethink Arctic defence?

Growing signs of discord

At least one Council and NATO member, Iceland, has questioned whether Russia's strong-arm tactics in Crimea might spill over into Arctic affairs. Icelandic Prime Minister Sigmundur Gunnlaugsson, during a recent trade mission to Canada, said "Clearly, it has made many players

in the Arctic quite worried about developments and whether they might be a sign of what is to come".

Norway, another member of both the Council and NATO, has significantly increased its defence spending, while other Council members closely allied to NATO, especially Finland and Sweden, are also said to be very nervous about the implications of what Russia is up to in Crimea. In addition, Russia and Canada have their own territorial dispute in the Arctic (see below), although both countries say that disagreements can be settled by the existing UN legal framework.

Signs of Russian ambition in the Arctic have been apparent since it sent a mini-submarine to plant a flag on the sea-bed beneath the North Pole. The Putin regime has been steadily increasing its military capability there since 2007 and has been clear that it deems any foreign interests — be they government, commercial or environmental — as hostile. Russia is also building a new generation of nuclear powered icebreakers, new ballistic missile submarines and, creating two special army brigades to be based in the Arctic.

US-Russian military cooperation in the Arctic is one casualty of the present tensions, with the US cancelling a joint naval exercise and a bilateral meeting on Coast Guard Arctic operations, as well as suspending work on an Arctic submarine rescue partnership. Last weekend, the US navy held [submarine exercises in the Arctic Ocean](#) about 150 miles off the north coast of Alaska.

Despite being organised prior to the current crisis in Crimea, the drills were intended as a show of force for the benefit of allies, according to American defence officials.

The view from NATO

In a bullish speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC on 9 January, the Norwegian Minister for National Defence, [Ine Eriksen Soreide](#), called for increased NATO exercises and training and greater commitment to out-of-area operations. She also voiced concerns about Russia's increased military activity in the Arctic as climate change could lead to disputes over oil and other natural resources, saying: "In a sea of instability, there is no better anchor than NATO".

Visiting Norway in May 2013, as part of the North Atlantic Council's delegation to the Armed Forces operational command centre in Bodø, [Secretary General Rasmussen](#) said: "We all have an interest in how the situation in the region evolves. After all, four of the five Arctic littoral states are NATO members. The Arctic is a hard environment. It rewards cooperation, not confrontation, and I trust we will continue to see cooperation."

Later that month, [Defense News](#) reported that Norway has been trying to persuade NATO to establish a military presence in the Arctic High North as a strategic counterweight to Russia intensifying its military presence in the region. While aware of the increasing tensions and the potential for disputes over sovereign rights to the region's vast oil and natural gas resources, the Secretary General said: "At this present time, NATO has no intention of raising its presence and activities in the High North."

However, a [NATO Defence College Research Paper](#) published in July 2013, suggests that "a strong case can be made for NATO to develop a High North policy framework now given the pace of development over the last four years". The author concludes that "the safety, security and defence implications of a warming Arctic are real and cannot be ignored" and outlines three options for renewed NATO engagement in the region (discussed further below).

Exercise Cold Response 2014

[Cold Response 2014](#) took place in Norway between 10 and 21 March and involved thousands of soldiers from 16 different countries training together in the Arctic Circle. While representing a return to the type of winter warfare drills that were used during the Cold War, this particular exercise was scheduled before the current tensions in Crimea.

The [Barents Observer](#) reported on 10 December 2013 that 230 officers from all participating countries gathered in Harstad, North Norway, to plan the biannual NATO winter training exercise, "probably the largest ever with 16,000 soldiers from 16 countries". Exercise Coordinator Trond Bakke said the main purpose of the exercise is to rehearse high intensity operations in winter conditions and: "The reason for the large interest to take part in next year's exercise is that all NATO countries are gathering strength after finishing the mission in Afghanistan and are trying to find back to the roots of military training."

Claims and counter claims

Cold Response came soon after Canada announced plans to extend its territorial claims in the Arctic. On 9 December 2013, [Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird](#) said: "We have asked our officials and scientists to do additional work and necessary work to ensure that a submission for the full extent of the continental shelf in the Arctic includes Canada's claim to the North Pole." Leona Aglukkaq, who currently chairs the Arctic Council, added: "Fundamentally, we are drawing the last lines of Canada. We are defending our sovereignty."

Canada had recently made a scientific submission on Arctic resources to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. It included claims to the seabed and undersea bed beyond the 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone, which, if accepted, would extend Canada's ownership of natural resources in the Arctic. The submission is part of Canada's responsibilities as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Currently, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States, alongside Canada, have exclusive access to natural resources 200 nautical miles from their northern coasts.

The day after the Canadian announcement, [President Putin](#) told his defence chiefs to concentrate on rebuilding infrastructure and military units in the Arctic, including one on the New Siberian Islands, saying that the region was crucial to protecting Russia's "security and national interests". Canada's submission angered the Russians as it claimed ownership of the Lomonosov Ridge, an undersea mountain range between Ellesmere Island and Russia's east Siberian coast, which Russia insists belongs to them. And [Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu](#) said that next year the military will form a dedicated group of forces in the Arctic to protect Russia's national interests in the region. This follows earlier comment from Russia's former Ambassador to NATO, [Dmitry Rogozin](#), who concluded: "The 21st century will see a fight for resources. Russia should not be defeated in this fight."

On 22 November 2013, [US Defense Secretary Hagel](#) announced his department's new Arctic Strategy at the Halifax International Security Forum in Nova Scotia, Canada. He noted that global energy demands would place more emphasis on emerging sources of energy from new frontiers and, as global warming accelerates, Arctic ice melt will cause a rise in sea levels that could threaten coastal populations around the world -- but it could also open a transpolar sea route. He said the eight Arctic nations, "have publicly committed to work within a common framework of international law and diplomatic engagement". However, unlike the other named countries, the United States has still not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Secretary Hagel did add that the US would remain prepared to detect, deter, prevent and defeat threats to the United States, and continue to exercise US sovereignty in and around Alaska and that:

By taking advantage of multilateral training opportunities with partners in the region, we will enhance our cold-weather operational experience, and strengthen our military-to-military ties with other Arctic nations. This includes Russia, with whom the United States and Canada share common interests in the Arctic, creating the opportunity to pursue practical cooperation between our militaries and promote greater transparency.

He also said that the US would be prepared to help respond to man-made and natural disasters in the region and to work with other agencies and nations, as well as Alaska natives, to protect the environmental integrity of the Arctic. And lastly, "we will support the development of the Arctic Council and other international institutions that promote regional cooperation and the rule of law".

Academic perspectives

While accepting that nations with continental shelves extending into the vast 18-million-square-mile polar region are now vying for access and control, professor of global politics and international law at the University of British Columbia in Canada, [Michael Byers](#), did not think this would lead to the militarisation of the Arctic. He told [the Guardian](#) that the claims and counter claims covered some of the most remote and harshest places on the planet, and commercial exploitation of resources was a long way off, "so it's not about economic stakes, it's about domestic politics".

[Phil Steinberg](#), Director of the International Boundaries Research Unit at Durham University in the UK seemed to agree with Byers when he said that the rhetoric over the Arctic was politically charged but scientists from Canada and Russia were working closely together to map the region. He added that the North Pole is not home to untold oil and gas riches and the tension is "more a symbol of national pride".

However, [Robert Huebert](#), Associate Director of the Center for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary in Canada does see potential for greater tension in the long term. "As Russia improves its submarine capabilities and nuclear deterrence, its military activities will increase and that, in turn, will trigger a response from NATO," he told *Deutsche Welle*.

And [Andrew Foxall](#), Director of the Russian Studies Centre at the Henry Jackson Society in Cambridge, UK said: "It's often said that the Russians act with their Arctic policy in an aggressive, nationalistic and unilateral way. The same thing can be said about the Canadians. [Prime Minister] Harper has said Canada is an Arctic nation. He frequently goes up into

Canada's high Arctic. There are large-scale military exercises there."

In an interesting [Finish Institute of International Affairs](#) (FIIA) Briefing Paper of September 2013, Juha Käpylä and Harri Mikkola make five significant points:

- According to a popular notion, huge natural resource reserves located in the Arctic region will lead to a conflictual "gold rush" when Arctic states compete to claim these reserves for themselves;
- More precisely, there is the potential for interstate conflict in the Arctic area related to unresolved border issues, control of the Arctic maritime routes, and demarcation of the resource-rich continental shelves under the Arctic Ocean;
- However, Arctic states have little to gain by letting the Arctic dynamics slip into a conflict state that would create an unfruitful investment environment in the region;
- Relatively well-functioning regional and international governance mechanisms further defuse the interstate conflict potential in the region. Despite the divergent political interests of various players, the intra-Arctic conflict potential remains low; and
- Should interstate conflict surface in the Arctic, the source is most likely to be related to complex global dynamics that may spill over to the region and which cannot be addressed with existing Arctic governance mechanisms. This extra-Arctic perspective should be increasingly taken into consideration by scholars and policy-makers.

The two authors conclude that: "This most likely means that the US, or NATO, has no overwhelming and immediate desire to demonstrate an increasing presence in the Arctic and challenge Russian interests in the region."

In his [NATO Defence College Research Paper](#) published in July 2013, Brooke A. Smith-Windsor explains why he believes that NATO has been 'marginalised' from the debate about security in the Arctic since 2009, despite Norway's encouragement. While not quite calling for a reversal of policy, he does suggest "a range of options for a renewed NATO engagement in the High North". His rationale is that security in the

Arctic region most definitely is an issue for the Alliance as it is "in *de jure* terms, decidedly not out-of-area".

Having presented a justification for greater NATO regional engagement, he goes on to outline, a la Simon and Garfunkel (perhaps a little incongruously) three models for "a NATO bridge over the melting ice and warming waters of the High North".

1. A comprehensive High North policy framework which would:
 - recognise the Arctic as an environmentally sustainable zone of peace and stability;
 - acknowledge the existing legal framework that applies to the Arctic Ocean, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea; and
 - build on international cooperation already established in the region.
2. A European High North policy framework which would accept that an Alliance policy may be a 'bridge too far' and concentrate on building support for Norway, Denmark and Iceland's expressed interest in more coordinated regional activity on defence and security matters.
3. A High North contact country, on a permanent or rotational basis, would take responsibility for monitoring and informing other Member States about defence, security and safety issues in the region in order to be able to respond collectively to crises with "conviction and clarity of purpose".

In a [DefenseNews](#) article of 8 September 2013, Smith-Windsor is far more forthright in encouraging NATO to develop a clear northern security policy "which creates stability and predictability for all parties concerned" as the Alliance "cannot afford to ignore the fact that an ice-free Arctic has the potential to fundamentally alter the global military balance". He goes on to state that "most Arctic states have already embarked on northern rearmament plans". The disclaimer at the bottom of the article states that Brooke Smith-Windsor is a senior policy adviser in the research division the NATO Defence College in Rome and that "the views are the author's and may not reflect those of NATO or the NDC".

NATO Watch comment

This brief review of the state of play with regard to NATO and the Arctic indicates that while some Member States are of the opinion that a collective regional security effort is advisable, consensus remains elusive, partly due to the specific interests of individual littoral nations. While these competing interests may lead to increased tensions in the Arctic, increasing military activity in the region would clearly be an inappropriate and unproductive response.

Clearly, what the region needs least of all, despite some encouraging calls from the sidelines, is any further NATO-Russia confrontation. And all concerned should consider how their military exercises in the region are perceived by 'the other side' and how they can be used to justify the adaptation of 'counter measures'. Despite the rhetoric and occasional warnings of deteriorating relations, it is clear that there has been much productive and collaborative work done around, over and under the northern polar ice cap.

In an earlier [NATOWatch Briefing Paper](#) on the Arctic, we made three recommendations and we would like to reiterate these in the light of recent developments:

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