



## **European Security Seminar – North 2022**

### **High North, High Tension?**

*Analysis and recommendations for an evolving security environment*

*By Rachael Gosnell and Katrin Bastian*

#### **Overview**

In September, more than fifty senior policymakers, security practitioners, and academics from fifteen nations gathered in Garmisch-Partenkirchen for the fifth iteration of the European Security Seminar – North (ESS-N). For the first time, the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies co-hosted ESS-N with the newest DOD Regional Center, the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies. The findings within this paper do not necessarily reflect the individual views of participants or the hosting institutions, but rather the consensus of the invited experts.

This year's event focused on the implications of the Ukraine conflict on the European High North and Baltic Sea Region. The war in Ukraine has had a profoundly negative impact on the Arctic, to include Arctic governance, cooperation, scientific collaboration, and economic activity. The increased securitization has further impacted regional stability and the Arctic, long known by the adage 'High North, Low Tension,' is witnessing an unquestionable rise in tensions.

The era of Arctic exceptionalism has ended and it is unlikely that there will be a viable path to regain the cooperative spirit that existed for the past couple of decades. This will be damaging to long term regional environmental protection, sustainable development, and human security. Mutually beneficial cooperation has halted in areas such as climate change, economic development, crisis response, and military deconfliction, notably enabling China and other actors to gain leverage in the Arctic.



However, there are continued opportunities for like-minded Arctic states and Arctic stakeholders to strengthen cooperation and security in the region. This report will detail the current security environment and identify both challenges and opportunities emerging in the region. Recommendations developed for policymakers include the importance of clear signaling, credible integrated deterrence, predictable presence, and investment in resiliency measures. It is critical to understand Russian threat perceptions, particularly towards their strategic bastions. Mechanisms for deconfliction and prevention of inadvertent escalation should be instituted to avoid broader conflict and ensure strategic interests in the region are upheld.

### *Dynamic Security Environment*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has altered global dynamics and this will be felt acutely in the Arctic region. The old adage 'High North, Low Tension' can no longer be applied. Yet there may be an opportunity to temper the rise in tension and prevent a 'High North, High Tension.' Last year's ESS-N noted the region was experiencing an accelerated trend away from the cooperative spirit that had long enveloped the Arctic. There was an overall sense that the region was being impacted by rising tensions with Russia. While recommendations were given to improve cooperative mechanisms and reduce tensions in the region, there was a collective analysis that also highlighted the growing potential for regional instability given the evolving security environment.

This year, ESS-N met during an even more challenging security environment. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted a renewed dialogue as to the importance of regional security. In particular, the seminar examined spillover effects of the Ukraine conflict – and what the implications will be on cooperation, security, and stability.

There is no doubt that the absence of Russia from Arctic governance and cooperative mechanisms will impact the broader region. As the largest [Arctic state](#), Russia possesses more than 24,000 km of Arctic coastline, about 53% of the total Arctic coastline. About 2.5 million people, more than half of total Arctic inhabitants, reside in Russia's Arctic territory, including eleven recognized indigenous peoples.

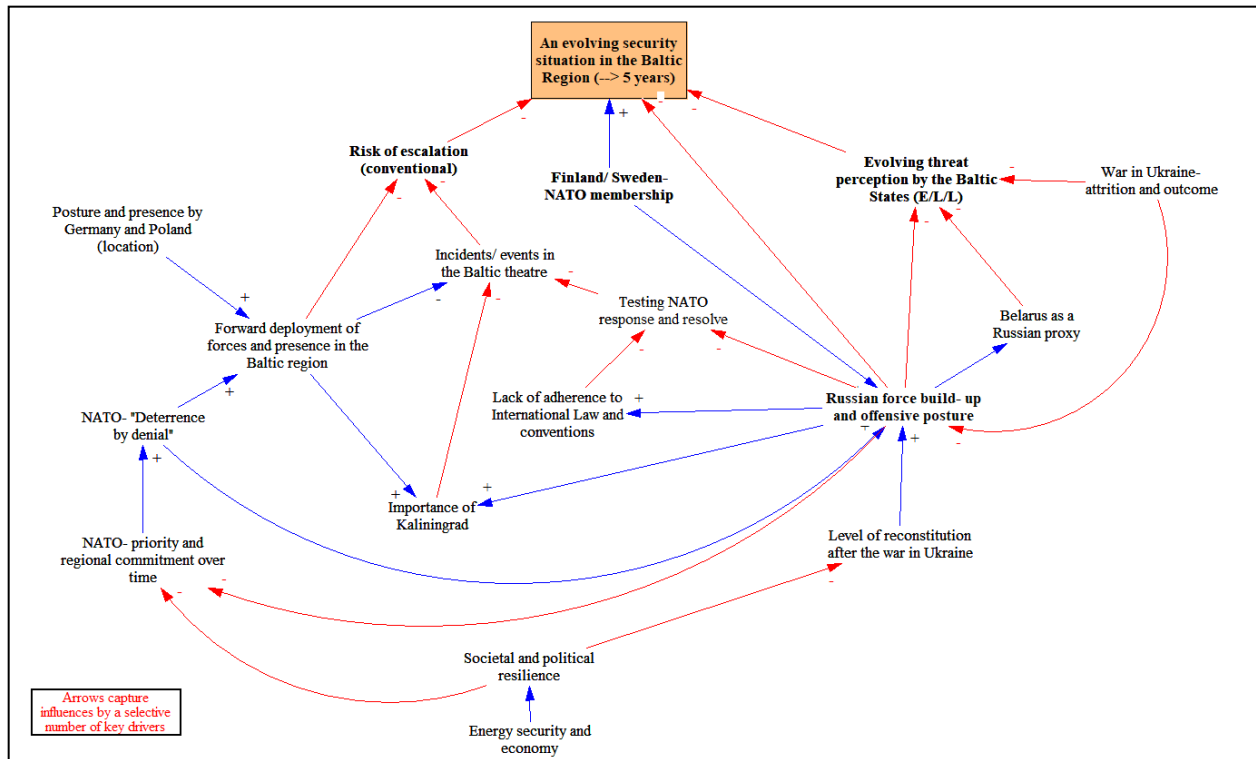
In the decades that followed the signing of the multilateral 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy and 1996 Ottawa Declaration, founding the Arctic Council, the region experienced significant cooperation amongst the eight Arctic states. The unique challenges of a fragile ecosystem, harsh and changing climate, resource discoveries, and native communities led to enhanced dialogue and cooperation despite geopolitical trends elsewhere. Yet this era of Arctic exceptionalism is likely over, with the introduction of new global players into the region as sanctions and western ideals shift the economic development in the region. The previous narrative of Arctic states versus non-Arctic states dominating regional governance has abruptly been displaced. It is expected that the unity of the 'Arctic 7' – the like-minded Western governments of Canada, Finland, the Kingdom of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States – will continue, while Russia will seek investment from states like China and India to supplant previous Western support in developing the Russian Arctic.

The halt in cooperation among the Arctic 8 occurs at a precarious time for both sustainable economic development and research on climate change. Russian data collection and research on

the Arctic region has long been vital to scientists seeking to better understand the effects of climate change. Just three years ago, from September 2019 to October 2020, the monumental polar expedition conducted a one year tour into the central Arctic Ocean, exploring the climate system in an unprecedented fashion. The project “MOSAiC” with a total budget exceeding 140 million Euro has been designed by an international consortium of leading polar research institutions led by the Alfred Wegener Institute, Helmholtz Centre for Polar and Marine Research (AWI). Of the seven icebreakers and research vessels needed to ensure mission success, four icebreakers were provided by Russia. In other words, the project would not have been realized without Russian collaboration. Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the joint analysis of MOSAiC mega datasets from the expedition has become a serious problem that will likely delay some research findings.

Though collaboration with Russia has halted, the region is experiencing significant warming trends that will result in dramatic change. Not only will sea ice be impacted, but global weather patterns are shifting due to a warming Arctic causing changes to the jet stream. Extreme conditions will persist longer, as there is a stronger heat exchange between the north and lower latitudes. This warming trend will accelerate in the decades to come, with a significant impact to the Arctic ecosystem.

With the backdrop of climate change deeply affecting the Arctic region, there are also other drivers creating significant change for the security situation. The region has emerged as a nexus of climate, economic, environmental, technological, and geopolitical trends. Though once relatively isolated, the Arctic has become an emerging global hotspot due to its economic potential, stakeholders, and global geopolitical tensions. The current security situation is a complex one, with a number of differing drivers impacting the European High North and Baltic Sea Region. The below graphic was developed by ESS-N participants to demonstrate the complex array of security drivers that must be accounted for when evaluating the evolving security situation in the High North.



*Drivers of Change – the security situation as developed by ESS-N*

One of the most impactful changes to regional security dynamics will be the accession of two additional Arctic states into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In May, Sweden and Finland simultaneously submitted their official letters of application to join NATO. If ratified, seven of the eight Arctic nations will be NATO Allies. This will further alter dynamics in the Arctic as well as the Baltic Sea region, creating a northern land bridge through the region. Sweden and Finland have long been NATO partners and currently have significant interoperability with NATO allies – their regional expertise and impressive operational capabilities will undoubtedly strengthen NATO’s position in the region. The European security architecture is evolving after decades of stability in ways that will tip the center of gravity northward. This evolution has implications for NATO, as well as the national security interests of regional states.

The Arctic security environment demands unique military capabilities. Although Russian ground forces are heavily committed in Ukraine, the Arctic is uniquely defined by the air and naval domains – highlighting the importance of submarines, surface vessels, and A2/AD. Yet it must be remembered that the bloodiest Arctic conflict – the [Battle of Petsamo-Kirkenes](#) in 1944 – saw more than 150,000 troops fighting for control of valuable mines and ports in challenging terrain north of the Arctic Circle. Conflict in the region would likely rely upon sea, air, and ground forces. Russia has traditionally developed and fielded its most sophisticated naval weapons systems and platforms in the High North, with the Northern Fleet – now holding the same status as a Military District – receiving the most capable platforms. A significant portion of Russia’s strategic submarines are also based in the High North, increasing Russia’s apprehension as maritime accessibility rises and their nuclear strategic bastions are easier to access.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, most mechanisms for dialogue between Russia and the other Arctic states were suspended. The lack of cooperative mechanisms to enable dialogue amongst the Arctic states will be determinantal to regional stability and security. However, dialogue in the manner that existed before the Ukrainian invasion is no longer sustainable given Russia's actions. Though limited means of deconfliction remain – primarily through high level hotlines or bilateral agreements such as Incidents at Sea (INCSEA) or the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities – the lack of constructive dialogue may serve to further increase tensions and potentially inadvertent escalation due to misperceptions and misunderstandings. Clear communication is essential to ensure not only clear signaling, but also to ensure effective deterrence.



Source: <https://www.fiia.fi/sv/publikation/the-geostrategic-arctic?read>

While tensions in the region will continue to rise in reflection of broader geopolitical dynamics, it must also be recognized that the majority of Arctic states are well unified in terms of democratic ideals, commitment to sustainable development, and adherence to international rules and norms. The 'Arctic 7' will likely be characterized by a like-minded approach to the region, reflecting a commitment to the rules-based international order as well as the principles of collective security and defense that have ensured NATO is the most effective security alliance in history. The likely admittance of Sweden and Finland into NATO will provide a commonality for cooperative security in the region, which could serve to strengthen deterrence and stabilize rising tensions. With the majority of the 'Arctic 7' also belonging to the European Economic Area, it is probable that these states will be able to agree on a common approach on economic development, environmental regulations, and protection of indigenous communities.

### *The role of the European Union in the Arctic*

By focusing its strategy on climate action and acknowledging the region as a strategic domain for European security in a growing geopolitical contest, the EU claims a rightful place within the Arctic discussions. In its Arctic Policy of October 2021, the EU emphasizes climate policy,

socio-economic development, and research and science as the pillars of its engagement in the region. With Denmark, Finland, and Sweden being EU members, and with Iceland and Norway in the European Economic Area (EEA), 5 out of 8 Arctic States are subject to EU legislation. Although not a full-fledged member or observer of the Arctic Council, the EU actively finances and cooperates with the working groups in which the Arctic Council is organized.

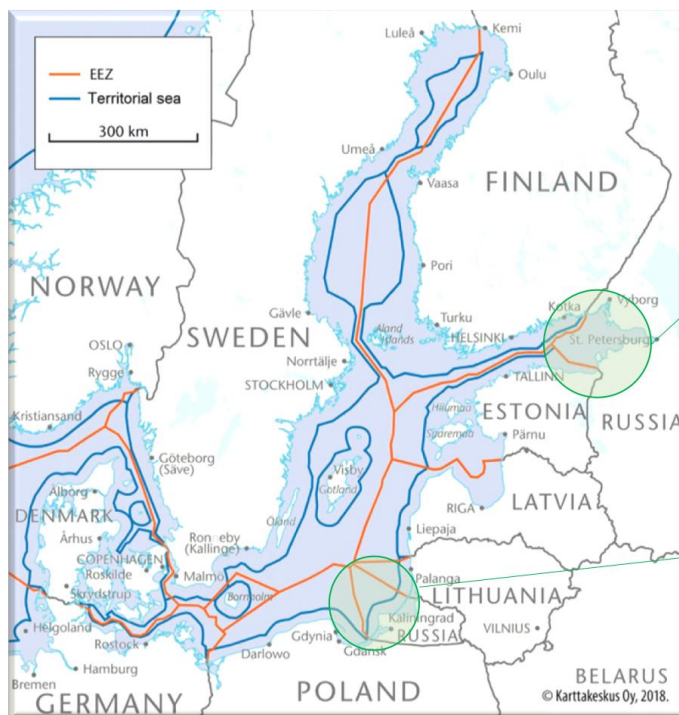
The EU is a member of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the other body for intergovernmental cooperation also dealing with sustainable development. In addition, the strategic relevance of the northern neighborhood for the EU, along with the east and the south, was confirmed by the 2022 Strategic Compass for European security and defense, especially in the context of maritime security. In light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the EU has joined member states and key like-minded partners in suspending Russia and Belarus from the activities of various regional cooperation frameworks. The EU issued joint statements regarding the Northern Dimension policy, Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation, and the Council of the Baltic Sea States. The EU takes the view that cooperation on Arctic matters with like-minded interlocutors, in relevant bodies and via suitable channels, should be carried forward. With Finland and Sweden joining NATO, the EU-NATO intersection becomes even more substantial.

The most powerful instrument at the EU's disposal is its sanctions regime towards Russia. In late September, the EU and its member states were preparing what would be the bloc's eighth sanctions package against Russia, which was scheduled to be adopted by the European Council in Prague in early October. While some voices still doubt the effectiveness of Western sanctions, the number of studies showing the opposite is increasing. In August 2022, an in-depth study by [Yale University](#) showed that over 1,000 foreign firms – who had invested more than \$600 billion in Russia and had employed over one million Russian people – were shutting down or significantly reducing their business in the country. The study concluded, “The value of these companies' investment in Russia [worth 40 percent of Russian GDP] represents the lion's share of all accumulated, active foreign investment in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union” The lack of this investment will especially hit economic development plans in the Russia's Arctic region, e.g. the completion of Novatek's mega project Arctic LNG 2 in the Gulf of Ob south of the Kara Sea. Cautious to avoid secondary sanctions, China also froze its cooperation in this project. With regards to its own energy supply, the EU has acted to address energy security by launching the RePowerEU initiative, a plan to rapidly reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels and move the green transition forward. As an example, at the beginning of the war Europe still imported 40% of its gas from Russia, by early September that had dropped to only 9%. While the transition will be difficult, a unified approach is critical.

### *NATO in the High North*

With the accession of Sweden and Finland, NATO will find its center of gravity shifting northward. Though historically less involved in the region, NATO began to operate in earnest in the High North with the 2018 Exercise Trident Juncture, the largest post-Cold War exercise that brought together nearly 50,000 personnel, 65 ships, 250 aircraft, and 10,000 tracked and rolling vehicles. An Article 5 collective defense scenario, the exercise involved every member of the Alliance – plus NATO partners Sweden and Finland.

The armed forces of Sweden and Finland are both highly competent and inter-operable with NATO already. The enlargement of NATO would undoubtedly strengthen the Alliance’s capabilities. The Baltic Sea Region would most benefit from the enlargement, as shown in the below graphic which depicts the evolving NATO North-eastern flank. The accessions process should be expedited to prevent any attempt at intervention to prevent enlargement in the High North. Indeed, potential division within the Alliance would undermine NATO credibility and signal weakness in the Alliance’s unity to Russia and China. The swift accession of Sweden and Finland is in the interest of trans-Atlantic security. As of October 1st, all NATO member states, except for Hungary and Turkey, had ratified the accession.



*Graphic by CDR Stefan Lundquist, PhD, Swedish Defence University*

The accession to NATO should spur discussions on a unified approach to security in both the Arctic and North-eastern Flank. The opportunity to strengthen collective security and defense in the Baltic Sea is tremendous, but will require updating NATO command structures. Strategists and planners must carefully examine the regional challenges and gaps in existing command and control structures and operational plans in order to fully realize the benefits of enlargement. A new regional assessment should be conducted in order to fully account for the regional challenges and opportunities. Given the proximity to Russia, there will be a vital need to recognize the shared strategic space and clearly articulate NATO’s policies in the region – and appropriately resource them in order to provide a credible deterrent.

Deterrence remains critical in the High North and Baltic Sea region. In order to offer a credible deterrence, the Alliance must demonstrate capability and credibility – and clearly communicate.

This will require a revamping of the Enhanced Forward Presence concept – to include size and locations. Greater cooperation among the Nordic and Baltic countries will be necessary, with integration of other nations such as the United States and the UK to ensure interoperability and interchangeability while demonstrating a credible deterrence. This cooperation can be further utilized as a rheostat in accordance with regional tensions.

Coordination between NORAD and NATO should also be revisited in an effort to modernize the trans-Atlantic relationship. Modern threats yield decreased reaction times due to the speed of the missiles. Early warning and close coordination will be critical to defending the Alliance. This also necessitates a clear understanding of the decision-making process on both sides. The nuclear and hybrid elements should not be discounted and must factor heavily into Alliance planning.

### *Regional Challenges*

We are likely witnessing a geopolitically driven change that will lead the region towards a “Two Arctic World,” balancing the ‘Arctic 7’ with the potential for Russia to continue to pursue its Arctic objectives with China and India. However, the realization of a bipolar Arctic may be premature. The war in Ukraine – and perceived successes and failures of Russia – will likely have a tempering effect on investment into the Russian Arctic, even by nations not adhering to Western sanctions. Western energy firms have withdrawn financial and technological support from Russia due to sanctions. Maritime cooperation in the region has also diminished, even among states that have not joined the sanctions regimes. Recent data from Russia’s Northern Sea Route Administration highlights that the route did not host any international transits in 2022 – a notable first in nearly 15 years. Even the Chinese shipping company COSCO, which has conducted almost a hundred NSR transits in the past decade, did not sail the icy waters this year. Only internationally flagged LNG carriers serving Novatek remain active on the route. As a result of sanctions, geo-political sensitivities, insurance difficulties (in a Western controlled market), and concerns of potential seizure of vessels by Russia, even unaligned nations are avoiding the route.

Environmentally, diminished use of Western funding and technology could have a negative impact on the Russian Arctic. With Western companies withdrawing financing and technological support for LNG development projects, the Arctic will be more vulnerable to the devastating effects of an oil spill or similar crisis. Given the fragility of the Arctic ecosystem, this could present problems for the wider region. While the Arctic Council developed protocols to address the challenges of regional search and rescue (SAR) and oil pollution preparedness and response, the suspension of dialogue makes further cooperative agreements unlikely and draws into question the commitment of Russia to abide by the previously signed agreements.

Yet in the long term, it must be acknowledged that it will be difficult to address broader Arctic concerns without the inclusion of Russia. Tackling challenges such as environmental protection, indigenous peoples’ issues, sustainable development, and militarization all require dialogue and coordination amongst all Arctic states in order to develop effective solutions in the long term. Further, enduring challenges such as nuclear arms regimes and nuclear strategic understanding pose unique difficulties in a region long home to strategic bastions and projected flight paths of nuclear armed missiles.



The seismic shift in global politics is necessitating an evaluation of regional security architecture. There is an increasing need to tailor European security architecture to the evolving region, given the likely inclusion of Sweden and Finland into NATO and the increased potential for regional crisis. Yet it must also be recognized that significant cooperation can and should continue to move forward under the auspices of the ‘Arctic 7.’ The ability to focus like-minded Arctic states on charting a common vision for the region is significant. There will be an abundance of challenges that will require dialogue and cooperation between the ‘Arctic 7.’

### ***Opportunities Exist***

Although the current geopolitical situation has resulted in a number of challenges to the stability and security of the Arctic region, there are opportunities to positively shape the Arctic by those like-minded nations with collective interests, will, and capabilities. Indeed, the ‘Arctic 7’ should actively strive to demonstrate near term unity and collaboration in the region – economically, environmentally, and militarily – or risk other states filling the gap.

Economically, there is a unique opportunity to integrate public-private partnerships, leveraging the desire for many companies to align investments with values prized by their shareholders. The momentum of Western unity generated by the Ukraine conflict should be further utilized to reduce the energy dependency on Russia, as well as to establish strong environmental protocols in order to enhance sustainable development in the region.

Security of the European High North and Baltic Sea region is becoming increasingly intertwined with the likelihood of Sweden and Finland joining the NATO Alliance. NATO should focus on developing conventional capabilities and tailoring the European security architecture. Clear focus on enhancing nuclear strategic understanding will reduce political anxiety and the threat of miscalculations on both sides.

### ***Recommendations for Policymakers***

The ‘Arctic 7’ states should continue dialogue and cooperation in the short term, with consideration of involving other Arctic stakeholders into challenges such as climate change, sustainable development, and human security issues. In the mid to long term, it will be necessary to cooperate with Russia on matters deemed mutually beneficial. But recent experience has demonstrated that cooperative interests – and even economic interests - will be subordinated to Putin’s political and security interests.

#### ***Enhance strategic cooperation***

With the ‘Arctic 7’ sharing like-minded values and adherence to international law and norms, it will be important to build upon this cooperation. Although scientific research collaboration with Russia has mostly ceased, many Arctic stakeholders have strong research programs in the region and cooperation can yield an increased awareness of the Arctic. For instance, the EU maintains impressive research programs in the Arctic and collaboration among the willing should be strengthened.

#### ***Embark on a comprehensive approach to build resilience***

The Ukraine conflict has demonstrated the importance of resilient societies. Much can be done to strengthen the resiliency framework of like-minded nations in the High North, looking beyond

military capabilities to include economic and societal action in order to strengthen the resolve among citizens and present a unified front to any potential adversary. This includes the expansion of public-private-indigenous partnerships to stimulate economic development and increase investment opportunities in the Arctic.

### ***Conditional engagement with Russia***

While Russia's aggression in Ukraine has made short term government to government dialogue virtually impossible, regional dialogue is vital to ensuring stability in the mid to long term. Efforts should be made to keep a limited dialogue below the official level with Russia open. Mutually beneficial topics such as climate research, indigenous concerns, search and rescue, incidence response, and military deconfliction should remain at the forefront of any communications.

While it will not be possible to normalize relations in the near-term given the current conflict, care must be taken to keep lines of dialogue open in the mid to far term as the geopolitical environment evolves. Further, it must also be recognized that other states – namely China – will likely seek to seize any opportunities to exploit the Arctic. All Arctic nations have a substantial interest in protecting the environment and indigenous peoples from exploitation. Scientific cooperation offers an opportunity to build trust and relationships that are mutually beneficial. For example, the aforementioned MOSAiC expedition was a prime example of international cooperation, involving more than 500 scientists from 20 nations (representing 37 nationalities) on its year-long study on Arctic climate. This model provides an exceptional foundation from which other research expeditions could be devised.

### ***Enhance regional capabilities***

In order to proactively shape the Arctic domain, stakeholders must seriously address capability and capacity limitations in the region. In order to further the ideals and norms of the rules-based international order, like minded nations must work together – and with corporations – to communicate requirements and develop a path to meet them. In particular, air defense is a vulnerability in the European High North. The challenges of fighting in difficult terrain and extreme weather make it critical to improve logistics and communications abilities in the region, while also adapting warfighting tactics and strategy to a unique part of the world.

### ***Focus on Resiliency***

Lessons learned from the Ukraine conflict highlight the importance of resiliency. While the Nordic nations have strong traditions of self-reliance and exercising resiliency measures such as total defense concepts, there must be a concerted effort to further strengthen resiliency in the region. Nations must improve their information warfare and cyber defense capabilities to reduce vulnerabilities to exploitation. But countries must also modernize weapons stockpiles and increase investment in asymmetric maritime capabilities.

### ***Reevaluate the Military Status Quo***

Deterrence is a careful balance, with presence providing a clear signal of capability and commitment. However, presence should not be unduly provocative and it is critical for planners to understand the implications of increased presence of NATO forces in the High North. Care should be taken to normalize presence as allies work together to develop capabilities and

demonstrate credible deterrence, without provoking a response unwittingly. Understanding Russia's threat perception and strategic calculus will continue to be vital to regional security.

### ***Prepare for Incidents***

Given the rising regional tensions, policymakers and military planners alike should prepare for an increase in air and maritime incidents in an effort to ensure there are no inadvertent escalations. While it is important to deconflict and communicate in order to avoid misperceptions and misunderstandings, it will be critical to also have response options ready.

### ***Conclusion***

While the long-term vision for the Arctic remains one of stability, inclusivity, and peace, the short to mid-term dynamics will present significant challenges. The Ukraine conflict has unquestionably impacted the European High North by introducing a new security dynamic – as well as opening opportunities for new players in the region. Western sanctions are likely to result in an enhanced role of states like China and India in the Arctic, as Russia increasingly turns to non-western nations to provide the financial and technological resources needed for development in the region. Like-minded Arctic states must become more unified in the approach to regional security and stability. Credible integrated deterrence in the European High North is critical, but this requires clear communications, enhanced capacities, and unity. The accession of two additional Arctic states into NATO will further impact the security environment and NATO must quickly seize the opportunity to think strategically about the Arctic. NATO must also reevaluate and update existing command structures and operational plans, while continuing High North military training and capability development. The West should ensure unified and clear signaling regarding the region in an effort to avoid misperceptions that would invite Russian aggression. Ultimately, it is in the long-term interest of the region to ensure sustainable economic development, a strong multilateral framework, and a stable and secure Arctic. Transnational challenges such as climate change and environmental fragility necessitate long-term regional cooperation, but much can be accomplished by a unified 'Arctic 7.'



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