



# SVALBARD

## NATO'S ARCTIC 'ACHILLES' HEEL'



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**R**elations between the West and Russia have returned to a level of mistrust and antipathy not experienced since the height of the Cold War. NATO's declaration at the July 2018 Brussels summit stated that "Russia's aggressive actions, including the threat and use of force to attain political goals, challenge the Alliance and are undermining Euro-Atlantic security and the rules-based international order." Russian President Vladimir Putin appears determined to restore Russia's great power status, including its influence over neighboring countries. Russia is likely to continue to employ disinformation campaigns and malevolent cyber operations in an attempt to divide and weaken the West, while at the same time seeking to avoid a direct military confrontation with NATO.

In the current highly charged international environment, there remains a danger that an armed conflict could arise from miscalculation or opportunism. NATO's main strategic focus has been the vulnerable Baltic states and Poland. There is concern that Russia's theater-ready forces could seize peripheral territory before NATO could fully mobilize and would then employ anti-access/area denial systems to deter the Alliance from mounting a counterattack. As Paul Cornish and Kingsley Donaldson discuss in their book *2020 World of War*, Russia may venture that many NATO members would be reluctant to engage in a major war to retake occupied territory, particularly if the Russian government declared that its limited objectives had been achieved and no further military action was intended. NATO's failure to respond would destroy its credibility as a

military alliance and could permanently alter the balance of power in Europe.

To address this challenge, NATO has deployed multinational battlegroups to the most vulnerable NATO states. This development, known as the Enhanced Forward Presence, demonstrates that in the event of Russian aggression, major NATO powers would be directly involved in fighting from the start. Although these forces are modest, their presence would complicate Russian decision-making in a crisis and threaten a wider war. A major conventional war with NATO would be a huge gamble for Russia, not least because its relative economic and military weaknesses would be exposed in a protracted conflict. Therefore, military adventurism on NATO's eastern flank remains a risky option for Russia.

On the assumption that Russia will continue to seek ways to challenge and divide the West, it is not unreasonable to conclude that it might look for less problematic targets on NATO's flanks to test Alliance solidarity. This article examines the extent to which the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard might represent such an opportunity. Although there is growing academic interest in Arctic security, with notable exceptions, the particular challenge of Svalbard remains underresearched. The article seeks to raise awareness of Svalbard's status and potential vulnerability in the wider security and defense studies communities.

The first section of the article examines Svalbard's unusual legal and political status and how this results in disagreements between Norway and Russia — a reflection of Svalbard's vulnerability. The second section addresses Russia's ambitions in the Arctic and the shifting balance between cooperation

and competition in the region. This is followed by a more speculative discussion concerning the potential Russian threat to Svalbard and hypothetical responses by Norway and its allies should this threat become manifest.

### THE DISPUTED STATUS OF SVALBARD

Svalbard is a group of islands within the Arctic Circle, 400 miles (640 kilometers) north of mainland Norway. The archipelago has a polar climate but is influenced by the Gulf Stream and some areas around the islands remain ice-free, although permafrost, glaciers and snowfields cover most of the land. Natural resources include coal, iron ore, copper, zinc, phosphate, wildlife and fish. Oil and gas reserves are believed to be present offshore. Spitsbergen, the largest island, has the main population centers, with about 2,500 permanent residents as of 2016. Coal mining is the only industrial activity, although its importance is declining. Scientific research, higher education, tourism and space-related activities are becoming more significant. Norwegian nationals make up the largest community, but there are residents from all over the world. The majority of people live in the capital, Longyearbyen. The second largest settlement is Barentsburg, the coal mining center, where most of the archipelago's Russian population lives. Under the terms of the Svalbard Treaty (originally the Spitsbergen Treaty) of 1920, citizens of the 46 signatory states do not require work or residence permits to settle in Svalbard.

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Norwegian Army tanks maneuver during the Reindeer-2 U.S.-Norway joint military exercise in Setermoen, Norway, in October 2019. REUTERS

Article 1 of the Svalbard Treaty grants Norway “the full and absolute sovereignty” over the archipelago. However, this sovereignty comes with certain limitations imposed by international law on Norway's right to exercise authority. The treaty allows all signatory states equal rights to fish and hunt on the land and in territorial waters. Nationals of contracting parties have equal access and entry “for any reason or object” subject to local laws and regulations. Article 7 allows equal status for property ownership and mining rights. Article 9 deals with military restrictions and states: “Norway undertakes not to create nor to allow the establishment of any naval base in the territories specified in Article 1 and not to construct any fortification in the said territories, which may never be used for warlike purposes.”

The Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security White Paper on Svalbard maintains that the country “has the exclusive right to exercise authority over all nationalities and companies ... throughout the territory.” The Norwegian interpretation of Article 9 of the Svalbard Treaty prohibits all foreign military activity. However, it does not prevent access by the Norwegian Armed Forces in the exercise of Norway's sovereignty and the protection of the environment. This includes visits by Norwegian military forces, especially Coast Guard vessels, and permits Norway to undertake defensive measures, including activities under NATO's Article 5. In the absence of a military base on Svalbard, the overstretched Coast Guard provides the only constant Norwegian maritime security presence in the archipelago.

The Norwegian interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty is disputed by other signatories. In the case of Russia, it has provided a frequent source of diplomatic friction since Soviet





U.S. Marines offload amphibious assault vehicles from a landing craft in Alvund, Norway, during Trident Juncture 18, an exercise to train Alliance forces to defend a member state after an aggression. PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS DEANNA GONZALES/U.S. NAVY

times, as discussed by Kristian Åtland and Torbjørn Pedersen in a 2008 paper for the journal *European Security*. Maritime disputes have been particularly contentious. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides demarcations and establishes access rights in coastal and high seas areas. In 1920, territorial waters were just 3 nautical miles, but Norway unilaterally extended its territorial waters around Svalbard to the UNCLOS norm of 12 nautical miles in 2003, a change only accepted by Canada and Finland. The question of an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is even more controversial. UNCLOS allows a state to claim an EEZ on its continental shelf that can extend up to 200 nautical miles from its coast. An EEZ gives a state “sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring it and exploiting its natural resources.” No other state can exploit the natural resources of a recognized continental shelf without the consent of the relevant coastal state.

As the Svalbard Treaty predates UNCLOS, its terms do not mention the area outside territorial waters. Therefore, Norway maintains that it has exclusive rights under UNCLOS to the continental shelf, as the treaty does not apply there. Russia and several other signatory states disagree with Norway’s claim and question its entitlement to maritime zones around Svalbard without their agreement, according to Marlene Laruelle in her book *Russia’s Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*. Despite Norway’s claim to a full EEZ around Svalbard, it has chosen not to

establish one. Rather, it introduced a fisheries protection zone (FPZ) of 200 nautical miles in 1977. The legitimacy of the FPZ has also been a source of dispute and not just with Russia. Several European Union countries also maintain that the terms of the Svalbard Treaty apply outside territorial waters and on the continental shelf.

Despite frequent disagreements over details, Russia has generally accepted Norwegian jurisdiction over Svalbard, although according to Laruelle it claims special status among treaty signatories because of its long historical association with the archipelago. Since the late 1990s, Norwegian action to protect declining fishing stocks around Svalbard has caused a number of clashes with Russian fishermen and officials. These incidents, which had the potential to escalate, were handled by diplomatic means. Russia and Norway signed a treaty in 2010 that established a maritime delimitation zone in the Barents Sea and Arctic Ocean. This removed many of the wider problems associated with fishing rights in the region, but Russia stressed that the treaty did not resolve disagreements with regard to the delimitation of waters around Svalbard. In 2015, Russia objected when Norway opened three new blocks for oil and gas exploration near Svalbard, arguing that this action ignored other states’ rights in accordance with the Svalbard Treaty.

The seas around the archipelago are not the only source of disagreement. In 2001, Russia objected to the introduction of the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act, which it



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

claimed was an attempt by Norway to challenge mining rights on the islands and impede the Russian presence on the archipelago. Svalbard did not escape diplomatic fallout following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. A row occurred in 2015 when Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin made an unannounced visit to Svalbard despite being sanctioned by Norway for his part in the Ukraine conflict. In turn, Russia objected to a fact-finding visit by NATO parliamentarians in 2017. Russia condemns NATO's involvement in Svalbard, claiming it undermines what Russia regards as the archipelago's demilitarized status. Russia's long-standing complaints include the integration of the islands into NATO's command structure and visits by Norwegian warships and military cargo aircraft. The installation of scientific facilities, including Svalbard Radar (1996) and the Svalbard Satellite Station (1997), have provoked the greatest Russian ire, with perhaps justifiable objections. As Timo Koivurova and Filip Holienčin point out in a 2017 article in *Polar Record*, these could be used to monitor ballistic missile flight paths. Russian commercial helicopter operations and the transit by Russian military personnel through Svalbard during an exercise in 2016 have also caused disquiet on the Norwegian side. As noted above, the Svalbard white paper states that the Norwegian Armed Forces can visit Svalbard to exercise Norway's sovereignty and protect the environment, while foreign military activity is prohibited. Unless it involves

"innocent passage" through territorial waters, Norway requires any foreign military and civilian government vessels wishing to enter the territorial waters around Svalbard to apply in advance for diplomatic clearance. This policy also applies to port calls and landings at airports.

Diplomatic relations between Norway and Russia have deteriorated in recent years. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov raised specific complaints about Norway's Svalbard policy at a meeting of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in October 2017. The same month, a Russian maritime threat assessment cited Norway's attempts to establish "absolute national jurisdiction" over the archipelago as a potential cause of war. Russia also threatened "consequences" following the 2018 announcement of plans to double the number of U.S. Marines training in northern Norway and argued that the deployment reversed the unilateral decision made by Norway in 1949 not to base foreign troops permanently on its territory. In response, Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Marie Eriksen Sørreide denied that there were U.S. bases in Norway and, somewhat disingenuously, that the increased U.S. Marines' presence was aimed at Russia.

## SECURITY AND RUSSIA'S ARCTIC AMBITIONS

Russian government statements stress constructive dialogue, development and cooperation in the Arctic. Russia observes international agreements to maintain maritime safety

and is an active member of the Arctic Council and other nonmilitary regional organizations. At an Arctic forum in 2017, Putin declared that “Russia believes that there is no potential for conflict in the Arctic. International law clearly specifies the rights of littoral and other states and provides a firm foundation for cooperation.” The latest Russian National Security Strategy also states: “The development of equal and mutually beneficial international cooperation in the Arctic is of particular significance.” The Arctic has long been a strategic priority for Russia both economically and militarily. As Malte Humpert describes in a 2018 article in *High North News*, the Northern Sea Route, in particular, is important for Russia’s energy and industrial development. However, Western sanctions following the occupation of Crimea have had a negative impact on planned growth, which arguably reduces Russia’s incentive to cooperate in the region, according to Jon Rahbek-Clemmensen in a 2016 paper in *Polar Record*.

Collaboration has generally characterized Russia’s relationships with other Arctic states, but recently there is evidence of a more competitive and antagonistic approach. Renewed rivalry between NATO and Russia has undermined cooperation and made disputes both harder to resolve and potentially more dangerous. Russia has been building up its military muscle in the region, with

enhancements to the Northern Fleet, two new Arctic infantry brigades, new and rebuilt military infrastructure and more frequent exercises. This buildup reflects the security priority accorded to the Arctic by Russia at a time when the region is on the threshold of unprecedented change and development. However, it is also a response to Russia’s growing perception of NATO as a threat. The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation in 2014 listed NATO as the main external military danger. The Russian National Security Strategy also described NATO as a security threat, highlighting, in particular, the Alliance’s military proximity to Russia’s borders, missile defense systems and alleged violations of international law.

The Kola Peninsula remains critical to Russia’s national security, not least because most of Russia’s maritime strategic nuclear deterrence forces are based in the Murmansk oblast. The Severomorsk Naval Base is the primary home for the Northern Fleet, which accounts for about two-thirds of the Russian Navy. Many of the fleet’s ships date from the Soviet era, but new ships, aircraft and infrastructure are being introduced and an exercise program has sought to improve operational readiness. As described by Michael Kofman and Jeffrey Edmonds in a 2017 article for *The National Interest*, new bases have been established on Novaya Zemlya and Franz Josef Land, while rearmament

Remnants of a conveyor tower system, once used for transporting coal from local mines, overlooks the town of Longyearbyen, Norway, on the Svalbard archipelago. GETTY IMAGES



has focused on long-range anti-ship missiles, ground-based aviation, submarines, coastal cruise missile batteries and mines to support a layered defensive strategy intended to keep NATO navies at a distance. Analysts differ over the extent to which these developments pose a military threat to NATO. Some, such as Michael Byers in a 2017 paper for *International Relations*, have argued that Russia's military enhancements are primarily defensive. They reflect a need to rebuild national capabilities following the deep spending cuts of the 1990s and to address potential security challenges in the Arctic Zone of Russia arising from increased economic activity in the region. Other commentators, including NATO officials, regard Russia's increased military capabilities, infrastructure and activities in the Arctic as indicative of a determination to seek military dominance.

Norway maintains a dichotomous relationship with Russia. Its long-standing policy is characterized by a delicate balancing act that combines deterrence and defense through NATO with bilateral efforts to accommodate and reassure its giant neighbor. Norway continues to cooperate with Russia on fisheries, border security, search and rescue, and incidents at sea. Coast guard cooperation was sheltered from the restrictions put in place in 2014, and there is also a hotline between the Joint Operational Headquarters at Bodø and the Northern Fleet. Still, most military cooperation was suspended after the annexation of Crimea, and Russia

and NATO currently exchange less information about exercises and deployments than during the latter part of the Cold War. Norway was not informed, for example, about a major Northern Fleet exercise in May 2018. In the case of Svalbard, no institution exists to arbitrate disagreements over alleged illegal military activities on or around the archipelago. Annual meetings of the Arctic chiefs of defense staff were suspended in 2014, and Russia no longer attends meetings of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable. Confidence-building bilateral and multilateral exercises have also ceased. The Arctic Council, the primary intergovernmental forum for promoting cooperation in the region, explicitly excludes matters of military security from its mandate.

The official Norwegian government position is that Russia does not pose a military threat. Norway's strategic goal in the Arctic region, as iterated by the Norwegian Embassy in London, remains to ensure "predictability and regional stability" through respect for international law. There appears to be a marked reluctance to abandon the principle that the Arctic region is "low tension." However, Norway is increasingly mindful of Russia's military capabilities in the High North and has started to increase its combat readiness, procure new equipment and host allied exercises, including Trident Juncture in October 2018. Norway has urged NATO to pay more attention to the High North and recommends strengthened maritime



Norwegian soldiers patrol their side of the Norway-Russia border in Pasvik Valley, Finnmark, Norway, in October 2019. REUTERS

capabilities, improved command structure and increased training, exercises and presence to reinforce regional deterrence and collective defense.

### THE RUSSIAN THREAT TO SVALBARD

In the last decade, the Russian armed forces have been modernized to create a well-trained and technologically advanced force that has gained combat experience in Ukraine and Syria. Recent military exercises, such as Zapad 2017, have demonstrated Russia's growing military capabilities and alarmed the West. Norwegian commentator Kjetil Stormark even claimed that Zapad operations included simulated attacks on Svalbard for which the Norwegian intelligence service was completely unprepared. Norway's military intelligence denied that any such "attack" took place and Russia also dismissed the reports. Some predictions about Zapad 2017 were exaggerated or inaccurate. However, more sober analyses concluded that the exercise was designed to prepare Russian forces for major state-on-state conflict and was on a larger scale than the Russian authorities claimed. The Northern Fleet (Arctic) Military District played a major role in Zapad operations, including a simulated intercontinental missile launch and a missile strike against an enemy naval force.

Russia has revitalized its concept of "bastion" defense, which seeks to create a heavily defended area where its naval forces can operate unchallenged. Norwegian defense planners speculate that Russia might seize Svalbard to enhance its ability to protect strategic nuclear submarine bases and deny NATO naval forces access to the northern seas. Hypothetically, an attack on Svalbard could occur under cover of a snap exercise by the Northern Fleet, possibly spearheaded by the 80th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade, which is trained for extended, independent operations in the Arctic. Air defense systems, short-range ballistic missiles and sea-launched cruise missiles would then be employed to create anti-access/area denial coverage to counter any military response. Discussion of Svalbard's vulnerability is a confidential matter. Norwegian officials approached by the author were unwilling to be drawn into the issue, and a recent security assessment by the Norwegian Intelligence Service made no mention of Svalbard. However, a non-official study in 2016 in the Norwegian journal *Militære studier* (*Military Studies*) presented a scenario in which the archipelago was occupied by Russian forces following spillover into the High North from a crisis in the Baltic region. The study, set in 2030, highlighted the difficulties Norway would have in dealing with such an incursion, especially alone. It concluded that Norway's only chance of deterring such an attack would be a substantial investment in submarines and aircraft equipped with long-range anti-surface and land-attack cruise missiles, which would raise the military stakes involved for Russian forces. The current Norwegian defense plan puts strategic emphasis on intelligence and surveillance, strike capability, and maritime and airpower assets. Given the importance of early warning

and intelligence, Norway is spending significant resources on improvements to the Norwegian Intelligence Service, new maritime intelligence-collection capabilities and P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft. Striking power is being enhanced by 35 F-35A Lightning aircraft and new German-built submarines. Despite substantial investment, Norway's defense spending is still recovering from a post-Cold War low and is not expected to meet NATO's 2% spending pledge until 2024. To pay for the above capabilities, Norway plans to shrink its surface naval force over the next decade, which means it could lack the patrol units necessary to maintain sea control.

Yet, overt Russian military action to absorb Svalbard into a defensive bastion would provoke a direct confrontation with NATO and could lead to a major war. It seems a doubtful course of action unless undertaken as a defensive measure in the early stages of a broader conflict. Hostile action in Svalbard is more likely to take a covert, asymmetrical form, as discussed below. Russian analyst Pavel Baev, among others, has recently warned of Svalbard's vulnerability in this respect. Duncan Depledge and James Rogers note in a 2016 "RUSI Newsbrief" that the conflict in Ukraine demonstrated Russia's ability "to modulate the strategic balance through acts of rapid escalation and de-escalation using forces that do not fit traditional classifications of military/non-military." They suggest that similar activity could occur in the Arctic region. As discussed above, the peculiar status of the archipelago provides a range of possible pretexts for Russian intervention. Russia could claim that it was forced to act to protect the rights of its fishermen, to maintain access under the Svalbard Treaty to mineral resources or in response to an alleged breach of Article 9 of the treaty. As the seizure of Crimea provided a significant boost to President Putin's domestic popularity, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he might be tempted to use the same ploy in the future by changing the status of Svalbard in Russia's favor.

In Ukraine in 2014, Russian military and intelligence operatives infiltrated targeted territory to mobilize local activists. They also employed a sophisticated deception and disinformation campaign to hide Russian intentions as well as the timing and scale of operations. It can be assumed that efforts would be made to keep any hostile intentions in Svalbard vague and activities below the threshold of NATO's collective defense guarantee for as long as possible. Russia would also be anxious to avoid casualties among foreign nationals based in research facilities on Spitsbergen, especially those from NATO states and China. Russian operations might include a mix of subversion, sabotage and low-level violence involving Russian special forces, private military contractors and resident Russian citizens. The temporary population of Svalbard swells in the summer with tourists and scientists. Christian Keyser-Amundsen suggested in *Militære studier* that a Russian operation could start with the hidden militarization of Barentsburg through a large intake of "researchers" and the arrival of supply ships with large civilian containers

holding military equipment, including ballistic missiles. In this scenario, the Svalbard version of Crimea's "little green men" might seize the airport, occupy Norwegian government buildings, and spread confusion in Norway and elsewhere by severing or jamming electronic communications. Russia could be expected to launch a concurrent diplomatic and informational offensive to justify its actions, state the limited nature of its objectives and discourage NATO intervention.

Russia's takeover of Svalbard could take the form of a raid, a temporary seizure to "punish" Norway for alleged breaches of the Svalbard Treaty, before agreeing to withdraw its military forces following humiliating Norwegian concessions on sovereignty. Another possibility would be for Russia to revive the idea of a "military condominium" on Svalbard. The idea of a joint Norwegian-Russian base was first mooted by Russia in 1944, but subsequently dropped at the beginning of the Cold War. Punitive action against Svalbard would certainly provoke a political crisis in NATO, cast further doubts on collective security and further Putin's objectives of dividing the West, arguably without the risks associated with military action in the Baltic region.

#### ADDRESSING RUSSIAN BELLIGERENCE

During a speech before the NATO 2018 Brussels Summit, Secretary General and former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg repeated the oft-quoted mantra that the Arctic was a place of "low tensions" and explained that he wanted to maintain this status by dialogue with Russia through agencies like the Arctic Council. Notably, the Arctic was not mentioned in the summit declaration and was not on the conference agenda as a specific region of NATO concern.

Norway unequivocally regards Svalbard as sovereign territory where any hostile Russian action would trigger an Article 5 response from NATO. However, the 2018 Brussels summit suggests that the Alliance as a whole does not yet regard the Arctic as a high priority, and there is no available evidence that NATO is looking at possible Crimea-type scenarios in Svalbard or elsewhere in the High North. Some Norwegian analysts, such as Daniel Thomassen and Keyser-Amundsen, have already expressed doubts about Alliance solidarity during a crisis over Svalbard. Both its isolation and unique legal status might provide politically expedient justifications for the allies to spurn Article 5 military options and expose the hollowness of collective defense guarantees. NATO solidarity has, of course, already been called into question. Policy is not determined by opinion polls, but a Pew Research survey in 2015 alarmingly suggested that NATO publics in major states were reluctant to support collective defense. Majorities in Italy, France and Germany did not support the use of military force by their country to defend a neighboring ally involved in a military conflict with Russia. Then-U.S. President Donald Trump's criticism of and ambivalence toward NATO cast further doubts about Alliance cohesion. An *Economist/YouGov* Poll in July 2018 suggested that a substantial minority of Americans share Trump's doubts about the Alliance, with only 47%

replying positively to a question that asked whether the U.S. should remain a NATO member, although only 17% actually advocated U.S. withdrawal.

If effectively abandoned by its allies, Norway would face the unenviable choice of either refraining from military action and accepting the Russian occupation of Svalbard or deliberately escalating the conflict to a level that might force at least its major allies to act. Unfortunately, due to the reductions in force levels after the end of the Cold War, NATO is militarily unprepared for major air-sea operations in the High North. A proposed military operation to retake Svalbard could also pose insurmountable political obstacles for NATO, especially if, as in the hybrid scenario outlined above, Russia's objectives were limited and offensive military action could provoke an all-out war. Nathan Freier of the U.S. Strategic Studies Institute described such a situation as "risk confusion" — circumstances in which the risks of action and inaction appear equally dangerous. Action would be provocative and escalatory, but inaction represents appeasement, which, while seemingly preferable as a short-term option, could irretrievably change facts on the ground.

The best option for Norway and its allies is to deter Russian adventurism on Svalbard in the first place. Norway's key bilateral strategic partnership is with the U.S. The U.S. provides technical and financial support to Norwegian intelligence and surveillance activities and stores military equipment on Norwegian territory. U.S. Marines have been exercising with Norwegian troops since 2017 and this cooperation is being expanded at Norway's request. Norway also holds joint exercises with the U.S. Army, the United Kingdom's Royal Marines and the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps. In response to a growing perception of threat in the Arctic, the U.K. also recently decided to bolster the number of Royal Marines and British Army commandos deployed annually to Norway. The focus of allied activities is the defense of northern Norway against a possible Russian attack across the land border. However, NATO forces could also be employed to deter hybrid operations against Svalbard. Norwegian and allied special operations forces (SOF) would have a particularly important role, although, with understandable understatement, a Norwegian analyst contacted by the author described discussion of this topic as "a bit sensitive." Currently, U.S. SOF regard the Arctic as a secondary priority given the wide range of other special operational commitments, although this stance is under review. A small SOF presence on Svalbard could provide a deterrent effect out of all proportion to its numbers and firepower. Some elite NATO units are trained for the exigencies of Arctic operations, and SOF are particularly suited to the ambiguities of hybrid warfare environments when an aggressor exerts overt and covert pressure below the level of a formal armed conflict. The white paper on Svalbard provides a clear statement regarding Norway's right to defend the archipelago. It claims that Norway has "full right of control of military and defence matters" and may "individually and collectively implement defensive measures in wartime or



The Norwegian ship Polarsyssel aids in the search for a Russian helicopter with eight people aboard that crashed into the sea off Barentsburg, a town on Norway's Svalbard archipelago, in 2017. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

under the threat of war,” notwithstanding recognized treaty restrictions. A covert military presence on Svalbard during peacetime would be a questionable proposition for both political and logistic reasons, but a company-size deterrent force could be airlifted to Svalbard during a crisis, given political will to act on warning indicators. Such a move by NATO would not be without risks because the deployment of Alliance troops would be interpreted as a breach of the terms of the Svalbard Treaty and might trigger a Russian military response. However, the presence of elite Norwegian, U.S. and other Allied troops in Longyearbyen would prevent Russia from undertaking a successful hybrid operation and, like NATO’s multinational battlegroups in the Baltic states, act as a tripwire to threaten escalation to a broader armed conflict.

## CONCLUSION

Armed conflict would inevitably damage the potential economic benefits to all Arctic states from increased maritime trade and resource exploitation. Cooperation in the region makes greater strategic sense than confrontation, although it remains to be seen to what extent the Arctic can be insulated from broader international challenges. The current Svalbard regime has already survived almost 100 years and has succeeded in keeping the islands demilitarized and peaceful through the international tensions of the Cold War. But the status of Svalbard has become an

increasingly contentious issue between Russia and Norway, especially since the former’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 raised mutual Russia-NATO hostility. A security dilemma is developing in the Arctic region in response to Russia’s military buildup, which is exacerbated by the absence of Cold War-era confidence-building measures to prevent misunderstandings and miscalculations. Norway’s balancing act between deterrence and accommodation of Russia is coming under increasing pressure. In this environment, Svalbard is exposed both politically and militarily. It is a potential focus of friction in a bilateral crisis between Norway and Russia and would become a dangerous flashpoint if broader Western and Russian antagonisms spilled over into the Arctic.

Russia has no known territorial claims against NATO states and is well aware that military action, direct or indirect, toward Norway or any NATO member represents a greater risk than aggression against Georgia or Ukraine. Although the danger of a direct military confrontation remains low, Svalbard is particularly vulnerable to a Russian gamble that offers the strategic payoff of advancing Russia’s long-term objectives of dividing the West and neutralizing NATO. □