Great Power Competition and Conflict Potential in the Arctic

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marks a watershed in relations between the West and Russia, including in the Arctic. However, the hope remains that Arctic security relations are sheltered from the War in Ukraine, despite tension creeping northwards through both bellicose statements from Russia, the Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO, and fears of hybrid operations in the North. This article takes a look at the different political dynamics when it comes to state, or military, security in the Arctic, and how they have evolved since the beginning of 2022. It leans on a conceptual separation between levels of analysis in international affairs, as well as Norway as a case study when examining the "national" level, to further develop the way we conceive of Arctic security and geopolitics moving forward.

Keywords: Russia; Arctic; Norway; Levels of Analysis; Regional Security.

Resumo

Competição entre Grandes Potências e Potencial de Conflito no Ártico

A invasão russa da Ucrânia em fevereiro de 2022 marca uma divisão de águas nas relações entre o Ocidente e a Rússia, incluindo no Ártico. No entanto, permanece a esperança de que as relações de segurança do Ártico estejam protegidas da guerra na Ucrânia, apesar da tensão que se espalha em direção ao Norte através de declarações belicosas da Rússia, da adesão finlandesa e sueca à NATO, e dos receios de operações híbridas no Norte. Este artigo analisa as diferentes dinâmicas políticas no que diz respeito à segurança estatal ou militar no Ártico, e como elas evoluíram desde o início de 2022. Apoia-se numa separação conceptual entre níveis de análise em assuntos internacionais, bem como na Noruega como estudo de caso ao examinar o nível "nacional", para desenvolver ainda mais a forma como concebemos o avanço da segurança e da geopolítica do Ártico.

Palavras-chave: *Rússia; Ártico; Noruega; Níveis de Análise; Segurança Regional.*

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I. Introduction

Geopolitical tensions and competition for influence in the Arctic have intensified over the past few years. Although there is limited chance of direct competition for resources in the North[1], the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to a halt in security cooperation with Russia and there has subsequently been an uptake in military exercises and bellicose rhetoric from Russia about the "threat" from the West. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marks an additional watershed in relations between the West and Russia, including in the Arctic, as also cooperation in non-security domains was halted and further sanctions on Russia were put in place. Moreover, the Russian invasion of Ukraine further underscores another trend in the Arctic, namely the increased engagement of China in Arctic issues, as well as Russian-Sino political, economic and even military collaboration in parts of the same area. Although China, as many other non-Arctic actors, holds legitimate research and economic interests in the region, there is also an element of "great power competition" driving an Arctic interest. This is not only the case for China, but applies more widely to actors like India, the EU, the UK and even – at times – the USA. These dynamics are, however, different from the immediate security consequences of Russian behaviour in the Arctic, or more accurately, parts of the Arctic.

Finally, despite the increased regional tension and the dividing line between Russia and the other seven Arctic states[2], both Arctic scholars and Arctic states emphasise how the Arctic is a region characterised by the need for mutual cooperation. To sufficiently manage shared marine living resources, measure Arctic-specific effects of climate change, or ensure the rights and livelihoods of Arctic Indigenous peoples, some form of dialogue and engagement with Russian actors is needed. Moreover, some express a hope that due to Russia's vested interest in low-level "softer" forms of collaboration in various issue areas that pertain to the Arctic, this part of the world could be one arena where the "West" and Russia re-engage politically and economically when, or if, Russia ceases hostilities in Ukraine.

What these sets of political dynamics amount to is a complex pattern of "great power competition" in the Arctic. Furthermore, different security dynamics in the Arctic (or parts of the Arctic) entail varying potential for conflict between Arctic, or non-Arctic, actors. This article sets out to further outline and explore both these dynamics and the linkages to conflict. How is great power competition playing out in the Arctic both before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022? And what does that mean for the conflict potential in various parts of the Arctic?

1 As some believed during the first surge of international attention to the Arctic. See for example Borgerson (2008) and Emmerson (2010).

2 Canada, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

One way to approach a study of these is by separating into "levels of analysis", a basic concept in the studies of security policy, as for example, formulated by David Singer. Singer (1961, pp. 80-82) divided into "international system" and "nation-state" in order to better distinguish between events in international politics that occurred at one level but not the other. I distinguish here between three levels: *the international* (the system level), *the regional* (the Arctic level), and *the national*.[3]

The system level is linked to neorealism and Kenneth Waltz (Waltz, 1959, 1979), where all states are considered equal entities in the search for relative power. A spotlight on the nation-state, on the other hand, is about understanding states' foreign policy decisions and their specific security strategies. Graham Allison's study (1969) of the US handling of the Cuban [Missile] Crisis in 1962 is a prime example of such an analysis. Over the past decades, we have also seen a number of regional studies on security policy. The decisive factor in such studies is geographical proximity: states that are close to each other have more intense interactions (positive and negative) than those located on different continents (Kelly, 2007). Regional security dynamics in regions such as the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, and the Arctic have spurred increased academic attention to the "regional" level (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde, 1998; Hoogensen, 2005).

Dividing into these three levels – here using Norway as the example on the national level – helps bring to light the various dynamics of the Arctic; it explains why ideas of conflict persist and why this is not necessarily contrary to the concepts of regional stability. In addition, such striation enables a discussion of how the different Arctic states perceive security policy challenges in their northern regions, and how things have changed (and not) since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This article is thus a conceptual piece but with an empirical focus asking: how can we better unpack political security dynamics amongst Arctic states after 2022?

I. International Level: Power Balance and Spillover

During the Cold War, the Arctic played a prominent role in the political and military competition between two superpowers. The region was important not due to conflicts of interest within the Arctic itself but because of its strategic role in the systemic competition between the US/NATO and the USSR at the international level (Åtland, 2008). Norway was one of only two NATO countries (the other being Turkey) that shared a border with the Soviet Union. And Alaska – albeit separated by the Bering

3 Østhagen, Andreas. 2020. "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Three Levels of Arctic Geopolitics". In "The Arctic and World Order" eds. Spohr, Kristina, David S. Hamilton and Jason Moyer. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press: Chapter 15, pp. 357-378.

Strait – was in close proximity to the northeast of the USSR. Greenland and Iceland were strategically located in the North Atlantic, and the Kola Peninsula was, and still remains, key in terms of Soviet and Russian military planning, as it provides Russian access to the Atlantic Ocean for strategic nuclear submarines (Huebert, 2013). When the Cold War ended, the Arctic went from a region of geopolitical rivalry to one where Russia could be included in various cooperative arrangements with its former opponents. Several regional organisations (such as the Arctic Council, the Barents Council, and the Northern Dimension) appeared in the 1990s to deal with issues such as environmental matters, regional and local development, and cross-border cooperation – and relates to *regional* relations (next section) (Young, 2009; Lackenbauer, 2011). Although the interaction between Arctic states and Arctic peoples increased during this period, the region nevertheless disappeared from the geopolitical radar and lost its *systemic* or global significance.

Over the last two decades, the strategic importance of the Arctic region has again increased. As in the Cold War, the strategic importance of the region has grown primarily because Russia is committed to revamping its global militaristic and political position. The Arctic is one of the geographical areas where this can be done more or less unhindered. At the same time, the region is critical to Russia's nuclear deterrence strategy vis-à-vis NATO because of the Russian Northern Fleet, which houses the country's strategic nuclear submarines. Russia's increased military emphasis on the Arctic stems both from the melting of the sea ice that leads to increased shipping and activity, and from the importance of the Arctic to Putin's overall strategic plans and ambitions (Hønneland, 2016; Sergunin and Konyshev, 2017; Todorov, 2020).

In turn, especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, this has led NATO countries to look north and counter the Russian presence by increasing their military presence through exercises or maritime security operations in the Barents Sea (Depledge, 2020). With Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the security environment in the Arctic has become further tense. Hopes of re-starting security dialogue in the North to reduce tension that emerged around 2019-2020 have been dashed, and sanctions on Russia, as well as halts in dialogue with the country, have been put in place. Finland's and Sweden's subsequent decisions to join NATO in 2022 – making seven out of eight Arctic countries NATO members – further solidify the divisions and spillover of tensions to the North.

In contrast to what was the case during the Cold War, China has also emerged as a player in the North. When Beijing asserts its influence on the world stage, the Arctic is one of many regions where China's presence and interactions are components in an expansion of power, be it through scientific research or investments in Russia's fossil fuel industries (Edstrøm, Stensdal and Heggelund, 2020; Guo and Wilson, 2020). China describes itself as a "near-Arctic state", which can be perceived as not only having the right to get involved, but also having a duty to do so (The Guardian, 2019).

But China's entry into the Arctic policy realm elicits reactions, especially in the United States. This has led to the Arctic becoming relevant in the increasing global power competition between China and the United States. US Secretary of State Pompeo's 2019 warning about Beijing's Arctic interests highlights how the United States sees the Arctic as yet another arena where the new systemic competition between the two countries is sharpening (US Department of State, 2019). This is to a lesser extent linked to Chinese actions in the Arctic; it is more about the United States wanting to blunt China's global growth in as many areas as possible (Østhagen, 2021b). However, questions about Chinese-Russian cooperation in the Arctic and the effects this could have on regional tension are increasingly on the agenda after the sanctions placed on Russia in 2022.

Thus, tensions arising from issues in other parts of the world (i.e., Ukraine) or *global* power struggles have a spillover effect for the Arctic: on the rhetorical level in the form of bellicose statements and on the operational level in the form of increased military presence and exercises by NATO and Russia. The Arctic will continue to be on the global political agenda both because of its importance for Russia's strategic thinking and because of increasing Chinese interest in the region that in turn engender rivalry with the US.

II. Regional Level: Shared Interests in Stability

There is an important difference between these overall strategic considerations and those security issues concerning the Arctic region in particular. As highlighted, when the Cold War's systemic competition came to an end, regional interaction and cooperation flourished in the North in the 1990s. As the region again gained global attention, in response to the concerns about "a lack of governance" in the Arctic, the five Arctic coastal states gathered in Greenland in 2008 and declared the Arctic to be a region marked by cooperation (Arctic Ocean Conference, 2008). They affirmed their intention to work within established international parameters and agreements, especially the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea – highlighting a specific *regional* approach and coherence amongst the Arctic states (Stephen and Knecht, 2017).

Following this meeting, the Arctic states have frequently repeated the mantra of cooperation, articulated in relatively streamlined Arctic policy and/or strategy papers (Rottem, 2010; Heininen *et al.*, 2020). The deterioration in the relationship between Russia and the other Arctic states in 2014 did not change this (Østhagen, 2016; Byers, 2017). They reconvened in Greenland in 2018 and repeated promises of cooperation and protection of the Law of the Sea (Jacobsen, 2018), which, after all, gives the Arctic states sovereign rights over large parts of the Arctic Ocean.

In fact, it has been claimed that cooperation at low (regional) levels helps to ensure a low level of tension in the North (Stokke, 2006; Keskitalo, 2007; Graczyk and Rottem, 2020). The emergence of the Arctic Council as the primary forum for regional issues in the Arctic plays a role here, despite (or because of) the fact that the forum actively avoids discussing security policy (Graczyk and Rottem, 2020). An increasing number of actors outside the Arctic have applied to the Council for observer status and this serves the Arctic countries more than anyone else, as it ensures that Arctic issues are addressed by the Arctic states themselves (Rottem, 2017). Demonstrating well-functioning cooperation mechanisms in the region also helps restrain the conflict-oriented discourse we have seen regarding developments in the Arctic. The Arctic Council can also curb any competing regimes in the area (Stokke, 2014).

The Arctic states have shown a preference for a stable political environment in which they maintain their dominance in the region. This is not only encouraged by regional cooperation but also by economic interests, which are well served by a stable political climate. As a consequence of the melting ice and high raw material prices at the beginning of this century, the Arctic states have looked north both in terms of investment and opportunities related to shipping, fishing, and oil and gas extraction. Russia's ambitions with the northeast passage and industrial activity on the Yamal Peninsula in particular require a presence in the North, but also stability (Claes and Moe, 2018; Jørgensen and Østhagen, 2020).

Therefore, we see a commonality of interests between the Arctic states. This is particularly visible at the regional level, where mutual dependence and common interests lead to the absence of conflict. Here, the Arctic states are served by cooperation, with the aim of promoting their own interests. Such cooperation will create interdependence between the players, which in turn will raise the threshold for exiting the cooperation (Young, 1986).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to the suspension of cooperation with Russia in various forums such as the Arctic Council and Barents Cooperation. Despite these negative developments, the Arctic countries have still stated a desire to shield the region from conflicts in other parts of the world and cooperate in so-called "soft" policy areas. However, political cooperation or dialogue with Russia is not possible as of the time of writing and will apparently be very limited in the country in the future. The question is to what extent the events in 2022 will alter the long-term fundamentals of shared interest amongst the Arctic states. The Arctic is unlikely to figure less prominently in Russian economic development agendas, but this might be counterweighed by its increased strategic importance vis-à-vis NATO. Whether the Arctic Council will ever return to "normal" remains to be seen, and much depends on the actions of the Putin regime in Moscow.

III. The National Level: How Important is Russia?

Finally, to understand the dynamics of security policy in the North, we must include a national perspective on the challenges and opportunities in the Arctic. Central to this is the role of the region in national defence and security considerations, as there is great variation in what each country chooses to prioritise in its northern regions in terms of national security and defence.

For Russia, as mentioned above, the Arctic is integrated into national defence considerations. Although these are to some extent related to developments elsewhere, investments in military infrastructure in the Arctic also have an Arctic impact, although primarily on the countries in close proximity to Russia (mainly Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and to some extent those in the wider North-Atlantic area and the US across the Bering Sea/Strait). Consequently, the Arctic is also integrated into the national defence policy of the Nordic countries, precisely because it is here that Russia – as a major power – invests some of its military capacity (Saxi, 2019; Depledge and Østhagen, 2021).

In North America, the Arctic plays a slightly different role in national security concerns (Østhagen, Sharp and Hilde, 2018; Depledge and Lackenbauer, 2021). Although an important buffer vis-à-vis the USSR and later Russia, some have argued that the most immediate concerns facing the Canadian Arctic today are social and health conditions in northern communities (Greaves and Lackenbauer, 2016; Lackenbauer, 2021). This does not discount the need for Canada to be active in its Arctic domain and to have Arctic capabilities, but this perspective differs from the crucial role that the Russian land border plays in Finnish and Norwegian security concerns. However, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the debate has (again) emerged if Canada has actually invested sufficiently in Arctic security capabilities to be able to deter Russia in the north (Blake, 2022).

The United States, however, is in a different situation. For Alaska, security relations are indeed defined by its proximity to Russia. Alaska plays a somewhat important role in the US defence policy, with its border with the Russian region of Chukotka across the Bering Strait – albeit it is not comparable to the role of the Russian border in the security policy concerns of Norway (and NATO) due to the presence of Russia's strategic nuclear weapons (submarines and ballistic missiles) (Hilde, 2013; Padrtova, 2019). However, this has only to a limited extent attracted the attention of decision-makers in Washington, DC. The United States has been reluctant to make a significant investment in capabilities and infrastructure in the North (Conley *et al.*, 2020), although the rhetoric around the Arctic hardened under the Trump administration, and decisions were made to invest in new icebreakers for the US Coast Guard (Herrmann and Hussong, 2021).

The limited involvement of the US in its own "northern areas" highlights the mentioned differences in the nuanced distinction between the international (system) level and national considerations. At a system level, the United States can and will involve itself in regions such as the Arctic when it coincides with American interests. The activity of the US Sixth Fleet in the Barents Sea in May and September 2020, the reactivation of the US Second Fleet out of Norfolk in 2018 with responsibility for the North Atlantic (i.e. High North)[4], and increased US participation in NATO exercises in Norway since 2014 – such as the biannual *Cold Response* exercises and *Trident Juncture 2018* – are examples of the United States' ability and willingness to engage in security policy in parts of the Arctic as required – with a goal to both reassure its Nordic NATO allies and keep a close eye on Russian strategic capabilities on the Kola Peninsula (Østhagen, 2021b).

At the same time, Alaska itself has primarily served as a base for US missile defence and a limited number of forces (primarily air force), and there is no immediate concern over Russian threatening actions across the Bering Strait – a stark contrast to what the northern border with Russia means to Norwegian defence and security policy.

IV. Norway's Delicate Balancing Act

The relationships between states, however, are more complex than either/or descriptions – especially concerning security. The best example of this is Norway's relationship with Russia in the Arctic. Concerning security policy, the commonly used mantra of "deterrence and reassurance" can still be used to summarise the Norwegian approach to its neighbour in the east (Holst, 1966; Søreide, 2017; Hilde, 2019). Norway is actively working to "deter" Russia by maintaining its own defence capabilities and engaging Allied nations in its challenges in the North.

At the same time, as part of Norway's "reassurance" policy (Rottem, 2007; Søreide, 2017; Hilde, 2019), it chose to not allow nuclear weapons on its territory, to restrict military aircrafts flying east of the 24th meridian east, and not allow foreign countries to set up military bases on Norwegian territory. In addition (as a further step in "reassurance"), cooperative relations, both military and civilian, are being built across the border with Russia, with the aim of breaking down distrust (at least before 2022) and avoiding crises.

4 Note that "Arctic" and "High North" are not used interchangeably. The Arctic refers to the whole circumpolar area, often defined as everything above the Arctic Circle (although some countries, like Canada, the US and Denmark/Greenland often include parts below the Arctic Circle in their national definitions of the Arctic). The High North, however, is specifically targeted towards the European Arctic – the area that includes the Barents Sea, North Norway, Svalbard, and the North-western parts of Russia.

However, here it is crucial to highlight that the change in the defence and security posture started already in 2007-2008, as Russia resumed Cold War-patterns of military activity on the Kola Peninsula in 2007, and engaged in conflict in Georgia in 2008. Concerns related to Russia never completely disappeared after the Cold War, but were seen as less pressing in the early 2000s. Before the High North policy was lifted on the political agenda in 2005, and to a large extent from 2005 to 2007, traditional security aspects were almost absent in the High North policy debates. While cooperation was still highlighted in Norwegian foreign policy in general, in the years 2007 and 2008 there was a clear shift in Norwegian security and defence policy.

With the renewal of the Russian Northern Fleet, Norway was (again) faced with a more challenging security policy situation in the north. At the same time as the Stoltenberg II government (2005-2013) continued to emphasise the need for good neighbourly relations with Russia, this government also took the decision to modernize the Norwegian military (Pedersen, 2009). Here, the Norwegian work to secure NATO's and allies' attention regarding Norwegian concerns in the north is central, among other things through the "Core Area initiative" launched by Norway in NATO in 2008 (Rowe and Hønneland, 2010; Haraldstad, 2014; Østhagen, Sharp and Hilde, 2018).

The blue-blue coalition government had only barely started (in office since 2013) before a recalibration of the High North policy was forced by external events. Russia's annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014 and the fall in the price of oil and natural gas in the autumn of 2014 changed both the economic and security policy calculations in the north. The Norwegian authorities began to openly refer to Russia as a possible threat that needed to be deterred – a shift that in many ways was a return to "normalcy" in Norway-Russia relations (Rowe, 2018).

Traditional security policy issues related to geography and Russia in the North became more pronounced, while joint exercises with Russia in the North and forums to discuss Arctic security policy challenges were cancelled. At the same time, as NATO gradually returned to emphasising collective defence at home from 2014 onwards, instead of promoting NATO's involvement in the "Arctic" (Hilde, 2013), Norway placed new emphasis on maritime security issues in the North Atlantic/Barents Sea (Olsen, 2017). As a result of developments after 2014, Norwegian security and defence policy gradually became more detached from the Norwegian Arctic policy. The High North initiative largely consisted of foreign policy attempts to preserve the forms of cooperation in the North in areas such as environmental cooperation and fisheries management, not least within the framework of the Barents Cooperation and the Arctic Council.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014-15 is the obvious driver of the "new" policy, namely, to strengthen allied interest in Norwegian northern areas. Thus, the rhetorical and political shift came first in 2014 after the conflict in Ukraine. In the same period, the effects of Norway's desire for attention to

the north become clear: operational interest in the Arctic and the North Atlantic from allies becomes more obvious in terms of presence. In addition to the rotating forces, the United States demonstrated its commitment to the defence of NATO's "northern flank" through exercise activity and military operations. The largest military exercise in Norway after the fall of the wall – the NATO exercise *Trident Juncture* – was held in autumn 2018. In 2020, American interest in the High North culminates with the US Navy carrying out so-called "maritime security operations" in the Barents Sea together with the British Navy (in May) and with the British, Norwegian and Danish Navy (in September), which creates a discussion about whether there was too much allied attention given to the Norwegian Arctic (Påsche, 2021; Sveen, 2021).

At the same time, in 2020 and 2021 American Seawolf-class nuclear-powered submarines mark a presence outside Tromsø, and in 2021 American B-1 bombers operate in the Nordic region from Ørland air station. This eventually leads to a debate about local interests in the use of Tønsnes harbor for submarine landings, and Norway's role in a possible conflict in the north. The Russian invasion in 2022 is therefore not a watershed in the security posture; it just amplifies the already present concerns and provides a rationale for further investments in defence and security with a northern focus. It also has become even more of a priority to ensure allied (i.e. NATO and especially US) engagement in Norwegian security concerns.

We also see signs in the period 2019-2021 that the relationship with Russia was entering a new phase or a new "normal state", characterised by both political and military tension at the same time as cooperation and dialogue resumed in some areas. In 2019, Prime Minister Solberg met Russian President Putin for the first time since 2014, at the Arctic Forum conference in St. Petersburg. Six months later, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov was in Kirkenes together with Søreide and Solberg as well as King Harald to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Eastern Finnmark. In the same period, Norway and Russia are negotiating an addition to the Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA) from 1990 to prevent dangerous incidents at sea (Bjur, Hilde and Eggen, 2020).

At the same time, the relationship with Russia has several dimensions. Norway had to deal with the particularly difficult Frode Berg case, after the retired Norwegian border inspector was arrested in Moscow in December 2017 on charges of espionage. It took almost two years before Berg was returned to Norway in 2019. After the dust had barely settled after the Berg case, Norwegian MFA had to deal with a Russian Svalbard sting in February 2020. In connection with the centenary of the Svalbard Treaty, Russia breathed life into the old conflict about who has the right to what in the sea areas around the archipelago, at the same time as it invited Norway to a bilateral dialogue on Svalbard (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020) – which they know would be in direct conflict with Norwegian Svalbard policy (Jensen, 2020; Moe and Jensen, 2020).

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, we have seen that any idea of collaboration or cooperation with Russia has been placed on hold. Norway only maintains bilateral mechanisms to deal with co-management of the shared fish stocks in the Barents Sea, emergency preparedness and response in the border-region at sea, over Svalbard where 400-500 Russians live as they can according to the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, and regarding nuclear waste and safety in the north. At the same time, we have seen continued allied engagement in the North through military exercises – the pinnacle being *Cold Response* in March 2022 – and statements about the importance of the Arctic.

Norway's foreign policy decisions in the North are of course influenced by developments at the other two levels already described (Østhagen, 2021a). The balance of power and tensions between the United States, China, and Russia (and the EU) at the international level have consequences for Norwegian policy and regional agreements and dynamics within the Arctic region. At the same time, the national level is more complex (including foreign policy-wise) than allowing dynamics at another level to set the entire framework for Norwegian manoeuvring space (Østhagen and Rottem, 2020). Local and national interests come into play, such as the need for trade and cultural cooperation across the border between Finnmark and North-west Russia (Hønneland and Jørgensen, 2015).

Clearly, the state's deliberations on the development of foreign policy consist of more than just the balance of power and/or common interests. Historical circumstances, identity, and the impact of Norwegian-Russian cooperation across the three decades since the fall of the Soviet Union play an important role here (Neumann, 1996; Jensen, 2017; Østhagen, 2021a). The narrative is also important for the development of a High North policy by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Steinveg and Medby, 2020). The relationship between Norway and Russia in the North, especially related to the Barents' cooperation and practical forms of cooperation, are examples of activity at the national level that is not necessarily characterised by either a systemic balance of power or regional co-operation, but includes a bit of both (Rowe, 2018).

V. Conclusion: Arctic Dynamics After 2022

Security and geopolitics in the Arctic region cannot simply be boiled down to a statement of conflict or no conflict. This tenet holds, even after February 2022. The Arctic states have limited reason, if any at all, for entering into direct regional conflict over resources or territory in the whole Arctic region – even though sub-regional or national security concerns persist, such as those between Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia. These are linked to the defence posture of various Arctic countries, as

well as the overarching links between the Arctic region and other domains such as the Baltic Sea.

Still, the war in Ukraine has clear consequences for the Arctic security dynamics in several ways. The impression of what is possible in Russian behaviour changed radically. It strengthens the security policy arguments mentioned above. Although the drivers of the growing tension between NATO/"West" and Russia are not in the High North or in the Arctic in general, we are already seeing the contours of the consequences along several axes.

First, the European High North might become even more central to operational defence and security policy thinking in both Norway and NATO in general. This would have been the case even without the Finnish and Swedish accessions: the more tension between NATO and Russia, the more relevant the High North is in terms of deterrence, surveillance and ability to deny Russian access to the North Atlantic/Atlantic at large. These trends are further amplified by the Finnish and Swedish NATO membership, in effect making the Baltic Sea surrounded by NATO countries (some have used the term a "NATO lake"). The force structure of Finland, Norway and Sweden combined, will also be considerable. Some have even made the point that the three countries could divide force responsibility amongst themselves – Finland taking land, Norway taking sea and Sweden taking air – although that seems highly unlikely given the extended land, maritime and air space that each country have been – and will continue to be – responsible for (Diesen, 2022).

Although the entry of Finland and Sweden to NATO is a big shift for each country, and for the Nordics and the immediate High North/European Arctic security environment, these Nordic countries have been training together, exchanging information, engaging in joint-procurement procedures and attempted at closer military and political integration for decades (Saxi, 2011, 2019). The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) is an example of this. However, the main barrier NORDEFCO and the mentioned efforts have always come up against has been the divergence in security and political alliances (NATO vs. EU) (Bailes, Herolf and Sundelius, 2006; Archer, 2010; Forsberg, 2013; Saxi, 2019). With this impediment out of the way, perhaps even closer integration will be possible in years to come.

Some expect that this in turn makes Russia more "insecure" in the north and will lead to it placing further emphasis on the ability to deter threats from both land and sea in the Barents region (Diesen, 2022). Will Russia use this as an excuse (or feel threatened?)[5] for increasingly belligerent military behaviour in the North, vis-à-vis

5 The debate on Russia's threat perceptions and concerns has been ongoing in the Arctic ever since Russia started re-investing in its Arctic military posture around 2005-2007 (Mitchell, 2014; Sergunin, 2014; Wilson Rowe and Blakkisrud, 2014; Rumer, Sokolsky and Stronski, 2021). In Norway, for example, the years 2019-2021 mark a time of hefty debate regarding whether NATO's actions/expansion made Russia "insecure", or whether Russia was the primary source

the Nordics? Moreover, to counter the new 1340 km long NATO border between Finland and Russia, as well as the losses suffered by Russia in Ukraine including troops from the Northwestern parts of its Arctic region, Russia is likely to focus on enhancing its military capacities in that specific part of the Arctic. Although the reason for conflict does not emerge from the Arctic, the Arctic is undoubtedly important for Russian military doctrines and thus also in a larger deterrence perspective as seen from NATO headquarters in Brussels and Mons. Linked, there is a question concerning Russian calculations in the north. Forums for cooperation in the Arctic have been suspended, and thoughts of a security policy dialogue with Russia in the North have been shelved. The goal of reduced tension and dialogue with Russia in the North (Norwegian Government, 2021, p. 80) has been replaced by a halt in cooperation in some areas and an increased need to deter Russia in the High North.

Up until 2022, it has been the conclusion of decision-makers and scholars alike that Russia has been served with stable relations in the north also from a purely self-interest perspective (Tamnes and Offerdal, 2014; Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017; Depledge and Lackenbauer, 2021; Østhagen, 2021b). Moreover, Russia has signalled a continued desire to keep cooperation on low-level issues sheltered. The question is whether these interests are shifting away from a desire to keep Arctic relations peaceful, as some of the economic projects in the north are more difficult to complete due to sanctions and Russia has been excluded from various cooperative forums in the north. In this context, small disputes over sovereign rights at sea, the legal status of passageways or maritime zones, or (un)intended mishaps during military exercises and operations might escalate beyond immediate control. Such escalation could drag the Arctic (or parts of the Arctic) into an outright conflict between Russia and NATO members. This is arguably the most troublesome aspect of the current political situation in the North, where transnational dialogue and multilateral cooperation are needed to alleviate pressures.

Additionally, the great power rivalry in the Arctic will increase, as the USA, Great Britain, France, the EU, China and – increasingly – India look more to the North for strategic and symbolic reasons as the region is increasingly accessible as well as relevant in global power games. The Arctic will not become less important, simply because the United States and Russia are already in the region, and actors like China, India and the EU are increasingly demonstrating their (strategic) interests in the North. The worse the relationships among these players are globally, the more tension we will see in the Arctic, too, which is materialised by challenging statements,

of tension in the North (e.g., Heier 2021). With Russia's invasion in 2022, this debate was further amplified, as those who had argued for a deeper understanding of Russian motivations and interests clashed (through op-eds and media coverage) with those who had argued for a more hard-line approach to Russia (e.g., Khrono 2022; Fanghol 2022; Snoen 2022).

sanctions, and occasional military displays. This became particularly apparent in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Such tension has little to do with regional issues in the Arctic (ice melting, economic opportunities, etc.), and everything to do with the strategic position that the Arctic holds as a geographic space where these actors engage.

From the national perspective of Norway, it is also clear that the biggest challenge and concern is how to deter Russia from aggressive behaviour in the North, while maintaining low tension in the same region. Norway needs allied support, but it does not want uncoordinated allied actions that might cause more friction in the Barents Sea (Hilde, 2019). On the one hand, it is a question of coordination and knowledge amongst NATO allies. On the other hand, it is a question of mechanisms to manage unintended (or even intended) escalation in the North. Examples of the latter are the so-called "hotline" between the Norwegian Armed Forces HQ and the Northern Fleet, and the INCSEA agreement with Russia amended in 2021.

In all of this, in a Nordic-NATO context, the US is the most central actor given its security posture. It is also worth noting that the US' High North presence is also about controlling the movements of Russia's strategic assets sailing out of the Kola Peninsula. These submarines with ballistic missiles could pose a threat to the whole North Atlantic seaboard, not just Norway. With Finland and Sweden joining NATO, we are not likely to see less allied – and US – interest in and engagement with security concerns in the north. This is inherently of benefit to Norway (and Finland and Sweden), as long as there is also an emphasis on controlling tension and avoiding escalation in the north.

Finally, despite the unravelling of relations after 2022, Russia and its Nordic neighbours are served with having pragmatic and functional relationships, in order to deal with practical issues ranging from environmental protection to nuclear safety and resource co-management. This, in turn, means that notions about conflict and cooperation are not necessarily mutually exclusive but are components in a more complex picture of the North and the Arctic. Still, whether anything will remain of the "cooperative Arctic spirit" depends on the time and scale of the Ukraine war, and whether the conflict between Russia and the West is further escalated either in the Arctic or areas beyond.

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