THE ISSUE

The Arctic is increasingly viewed as an arena for power projection and spillover from conflicts elsewhere. In this regard, the Svalbard archipelago is an important case study because it has economic, scientific, political, and security implications for states in the High North, the United States, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance. Svalbard’s unique status as a sovereign territory of Norway with provisions for foreign nationals, Russia’s presence on the territory and interests at sea, as well as the archipelago’s proximity to critical Russian military locations make Svalbard a potential geopolitical flash point. This brief examines the geopolitics of Svalbard and the security implications for Norway, the United States, and NATO. Through close examination of the archipelago, the authors aim to contribute to a more granular understanding of Arctic geopolitics and how NATO and the United States can best prepare for heightened geopolitical tensions in the region.

INTRODUCTION

The emphasis on cooperation that has long characterized Arctic politics has deteriorated. During the Cold War, despite the geographical proximity between NATO member Norway and the Soviet Union, a geopolitical equilibrium ensured that interstate clashes in the Arctic were practically nonexistent. In fact, both sides pursued significant scientific collaboration in the region. The early 2000s saw rapid growth in Arctic interest and engagement among Arctic states, including Russia, on everything from economic development to climate research. However, simultaneously, Russia has increased its military presence and activity in the North. After Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, security affairs in the Arctic became more tense, with the final remnants of regional cooperation evaporating after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Moreover, some see Russian overtures to deepen ties with China as strengthening Beijing’s claim of being a “near-Arctic” state and thus posing a challenge to the seven other Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States). This growing geopolitical tension in the region warrants closer scrutiny by European High North countries, the NATO alliance, and the United States. Few case studies embody this development better than Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago with an area about twice the size of Belgium and located approximately 650 kilometers north of the Norwegian mainland and just 1,000 kilometers from the North Pole. An analysis of the links between geography and power politics around Svalbard–Norway’s northernmost territory, with a unique political and economic status–reveals the complexity of the geopolitical competition in the
Arctic, and how simple depictions of conflict/no-conflict scenarios can be unhelpful.

Svalbard’s unique regional position is especially pertinent. The archipelago has significant strategic importance, as its location could be crucial to controlling access to and from Russia’s Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula, which houses Russia’s strategic nuclear submarines. Waters around Svalbard also contain plentiful fish stocks, such as cod and shrimp, and extensive deposits of metal minerals. Melting ice will gradually improve access to some of these resources and may facilitate an increase in shipping activity in this part of the Arctic.

In this regard, Russia is particularly attentive to the implications of climate change for the commercial development of the Northern Sea Route, which offers a shortcut for vessels traveling between Europe and Asia, primarily along the Russian Arctic coast. However, even in the Arctic, where a melting icescape presents new opportunities for states to maneuver, overly broad framings of the geopolitical rivalry term are often too simplistic. Instead, it is imperative to more closely examine specific cases of geopolitical competition and rivalry in the North.

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Both scholarly and journalistic works tend to misunderstand the sovereignty of Svalbard and its associated geopolitical dimensions. Despite Norway having “full and absolute sovereignty” over Svalbard, according to the Svalbard Treaty, misconceptions abound regarding Svalbard as a “shared space” or Svalbard’s legal status being ambiguous. Another dubious claim is that the “Norwegian interpretation of the Svalbard treaty is disputed by its other signatories.” Moreover, some argue the archipelago is shrouded in “NATO ambiguity” and question whether it is covered by the alliance’s territorial security guarantee. Statements such as these are inaccurate and obscure the legal and political situation surrounding Svalbard. They seem to confuse the ambiguity concerning the archipelago’s maritime zones with a more fundamental dispute about Norwegian sovereignty of the territory writ large and—unintentionally or deliberately—amplify a narrowly circumscribed issue while ignoring other geopolitical dimensions concerning Svalbard.

One way to overcome this inaccuracy is to examine the more tangible geopolitical dimensions of Svalbard in international politics. These include (1) explicit challenges to Norwegian policies on land, (2) disagreement over the legal status (sovereign rights) of the maritime zones, and (3) the potential military use of Svalbard in a larger conflict with Russia.

**CONTEXT: POLITICAL HISTORY OF SVALBARD**

The origin of Svalbard’s unique legal status may be traced to its role as a locus for commerce and trade centuries ago. Initially named Spitsbergen by the Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz in the sixteenth century, the archipelago was renamed Svalbard by Norway in 1925, while Spitsbergen is now the name of the archipelago’s largest island. Only in the early twentieth century, when promising discoveries of coal were made and mines were established, were negotiations opened to establish an administration of the Svalbard archipelago, at first driven by Norway’s wish to define the territory’s legal status after the dissolution of its union with Sweden in 1905. Although various models were discussed before World War I, postwar negotiations in 1920 resulted in the Spitsbergen Treaty (here referred to as the Svalbard Treaty), which confirmed Norway’s sovereignty over the territory.

After affirming Norway’s full and absolute sovereignty and responsibility for managing the islands, the treaty attempts to secure the economic interests of foreign nationals as a key objective. This was done by including provisions on equal rights and nondiscrimination in the most relevant economic activities at the time. For example, Norway may not treat other nationals less favorably than its own citizens in certain defined areas, and taxes levied on Svalbard in connection with mining may be used solely for local purposes. Moreover, the
islands may not be used for “warlike purposes,” and no military fortifications may be built on the islands.

The Soviet Union was not present during the treaty negotiations due to its ongoing civil war, so one concern at the time was whether the Soviets would challenge the treaty, given their geographic proximity to the area and claims of historic use. In 1924, however, the Soviet government unconditionally and unilaterally recognized Norwegian sovereignty over the archipelago and acceded to the treaty in 1935. The Soviet Union made several attempts to gain special status on Svalbard in the aftermath of World War I and later in 1944 with a suggestion by Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov to Norwegian foreign minister Trygve Lie that the treaty should be scrapped in favor of a bilateral arrangement. However, Norway firmly rejected this suggestion.

International economic interest in Svalbard plummeted before World War II, and soon only Norwegian and Soviet mining companies conducted economic activities there. Consecutive Norwegian governments have sought to maintain the Norwegian population on the islands, predominantly by subsidizing coal mining with the state-owned company Store Norske and supporting the islands’ largest community, Longyearbyen. Similarly, successive governments in Moscow sought to maintain a sizeable Soviet population through the state-owned mining company Arktikugol in the company towns Barentsburg, Pyramiden, and Grumant—of which only Barentsburg is active today.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE: THE GEOPOLITICAL RELEVANCE OF SVALBARD

As interest in Arctic issues has risen over the last decades, Svalbard and its special legal provisions, economic history, and geostrategic location have
received considerable attention. Three specific geopolitical dimensions warrant further examination from both Norwegian and Transatlantic observers.

CHALLENGES TO NORWEGIAN SVALBARD POLICIES

While Norway’s sovereignty over Svalbard is undisputed, there have been debates since 1920 about how Norway adheres to the treaty and implements its provision. As the sovereign, Norway regulates all activities in the archipelago, but citizens and companies from a number of other countries operate there. Over time the critique from some treaty signatories over alleged treaty breaches has grown as Norway has implemented stricter environmental regulations, increased the coordination of research activities, and limited certain types of activities, especially with concern for the fragile environment on the archipelago. The complaints have primarily come from the Soviet Union and, later, Russia—the only country with a sizeable, albeit declining, population and distinct communities in the archipelago. These complaints have focused on Russian companies not being allowed to use helicopters beyond mining activities, expansion of environmental regulation, creation of national parks, and questions concerning the use of a satellite station for military purposes. One additional issue that has attracted Chinese interest in Svalbard has been Norwegian efforts through the Norwegian Polar Institute to better coordinate research in Ny-Ålesund, a small research settlement on the island of Spitsbergen. Here, China expressed concerns over whether Norway was overreaching in regard to its treaty obligations to foreign entities. As China has increasingly engaged with Arctic politics and governance, it has also become increasingly concerned with its “rights” and “interests” on Svalbard. This is reflected in China’s 2018 Arctic policy, which, despite its status as a near-Arctic state, invokes provisions of the Svalbard Treaty six times to legitimize certain Chinese rights in the Arctic writ large. Another challenge has been Russian complaints about Norway using Svalbard for military purposes in breach of Article 9 of the treaty, which 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 coast guard docks in Longyearbyen to resupply, and the Norwegian navy sends a frigate to Svalbard regularly to highlight Norwegian sovereignty and capability in the area. Russia, in turn, argues this is a challenge to the Svalbard Treaty, though the treaty does not hinder Norway having military presence on or around the archipelago as long as the purpose is not “warlike.” Russian sensitivities to the question of military activity on Svalbard relate not only to the treaty but primarily to the proximity of Svalbard to the Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula and its strategic position to defend Arctic territory and project power in the Greenland, Iceland, and United Kingdom–Norway (GIUK-N) gap. Similar complaints have come from Russia concerning the Norwegian satellite station located on Svalbard, one of the largest in the world, which has prompted Russia to question whether the data gathered are being used for warlike purposes. Norway is obviously sensitive to such protests given its treaty obligations in Svalbard and the broader long-standing but fragile tranquility that has existed in the Arctic region. However, Norway has consistently manifested its treaty obligations to limit military activity for warlike purposes on Svalbard.
While complaints such as these from Russia or China do not directly erode Norwegian sovereignty, the sum of the complaints could amount to a larger challenge to how Norway adheres to the treaty. In addition, Russia—if it wanted to escalate a conflict while retaining some form of plausible deniability—could initiate actions to undermine Norwegian sovereignty using these complaints as justification. Notably, the Russian consul general in Barentsburg recently led a highly symbolic military-style parade that involved a helicopter and dozens of vehicles waving Russian flags to mark the anniversary of the Soviet Union’s defeat of Nazi Germany.20 Albeit primarily done as a way to get attention by the new director of the Russian state-owned mining company Trust Arktikugol, Ildar Neverov, this event does highlight the increasingly tense relations on Svalbard.

Statements from Russia regarding Svalbard seem to continually support an underlying policy of strategic uncertainty concerning both challenges to Norwegian rules and regulations on Svalbard and Russia’s legal position when it comes to the maritime zones beyond 12 nautical miles from the archipelago’s shores. The question is whether the 200-nautical-mile maritime zone and the continental shelf around Svalbard are covered by the provisions in the 1920 Svalbard Treaty.22 In recent years, the European Union, in particular, has been a proponent of the former view—that the FPZ and shelf are subject to Norwegian jurisdiction but that Norway must adhere to the Svalbard Treaty’s provisions. This issue came about because of a dispute between Norway and the European Union over the right to fish for snow crabs from 2015, which led to another dispute over cod quotas from 2020 that emerged as a result of Brexit.23 Russia has taken a different approach, maintaining a form of strategic ambiguity or uncertainty as to its position, while arguing that Norway could not establish any zone unilaterally and thus only flag states have jurisdiction over fishing vessels in the fisheries protection zones (PFZ). Regarding the shelf, however, Russia argues that it is covered by treaty provisions.24 There are two aspects of this dispute with potential to further intensify geopolitical competition in the region. The first relates to access to resources and possible attempts by fishing vessels from various countries to claim their treaty-protected rights, as exemplified with the European Union in the snow crab case. China, which has the world’s largest fishing fleet, could hypothetically also assert itself on this issue through possible Chinese claims to equal access to fishing rights, though no official attempts have been made so far.25
The second issue is the possible escalation of interactions in the FPZ between Russian vessels and the Norwegian coast guard.\textsuperscript{26} Although escalation when interacting with Russian fishing vessels is the primary concern, questions are increasingly being asked about the activities of Russian vessels at large in Norwegian waters.\textsuperscript{27} For example, in January 2022, one of the two subsea cables crucial for information technology on Svalbard was cut after Russian fishing vessels had been operating extensively in the area. Although Norwegian authorities have not publicly identified the perpetrator, many have speculated the incident is connected to Russian intelligence gathering and hybrid activity in the Norwegian Arctic.\textsuperscript{28} With the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea in September 2022, this issue became increasingly relevant in the Norwegian security and defense debate.\textsuperscript{29}

Complicating the matter is the fact that both fishing and research vessels from Russia have access rights to Norwegian waters that are difficult to curtail. The fishing vessels’ ability to fish throughout the Barents Sea regardless of zonal boundaries constitutes one of the core pillars of the successful comanagement scheme of fisheries cooperation between Norway and Russia.\textsuperscript{30} The research vessels’ access to the Norwegian EEZ, the FPZ, and the shelf rests on United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) Article 246, which states, “The coastal State should normally grant its consent” except in a few specific circumstances.\textsuperscript{31} In other words, the burden of proof concerning Russian vessels conducting illegal activities in Norwegian waters including the FPZ lies with Norwegian authorities. This creates a significant operational and bureaucratic hurdle for Norwegian law enforcement and limits Norway’s deterrence of Russian gray zone operations.

Making inspections and possible arrests in Svalbard’s waters particularly sensitive is Russia’s refusal to acknowledge the FPZ as waters where Norway has the authority to inspect and arrest—although in practice Russian fishers generally accepts inspections by the Norwegian coast guard. Still, in a tenser security environment, the concern has been that Russia could claim that Norway is exceeding its jurisdiction if Norwegian authorities inspect and arrest a Russian vessel. In turn, Russia could respond by threatening to use military force, as it has previously hinted at when Russian fishing vessels were arrested in the FPZ by the Norwegian coast guard in the early 2000s.\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image1.png}
\caption{Monument to former Soviet head of government Vladimir Lenin in the miners’ town of Barentsburg.}
\end{figure}

\textbf{THE MILITARY USE OF SVALBARD IN AN EAST-WEST CONFLICT}

Finally, the role Svalbard might play in a large-scale conflict that involves the Arctic cannot be ignored. Although Article 9 in the Svalbard Treaty states that the area should not be used for “warlike purposes”—which is not the same as a demilitarized zone—the degree of concern over the possible use of the archipelago for military purposes has historically fluctuated with the degree of East-West tension.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was particularly concerned about the possible military use of the archipelago, demanding strict adherence to the treaty’s ban on the use of the islands for warlike purposes including the establishment of fortifications or naval bases. If war were to break out, control over Svalbard would have been the primary motivation for the Soviets, both to limit NATO command and to use it as a base for Russian military forces in order to protect strategic submarines with nuclear ballistic missiles.\textsuperscript{33} This was the central component of the Soviet Union’s bastion defense concept.\textsuperscript{34}

Increased Russian military activity in the European Arctic since 2005 has highlighted Svalbard’s geostrategic location. Although there are no military fortifications on
the archipelago, as per the Svalbard Treaty, the concern for Norway is that it would rapidly be subject to Russian attempts to control it if a full-scale conflict between NATO and Russia broke out. The archipelago’s proximity to the Russian Northern Fleet, located at Severomorsk in the Kola Peninsula, and Svalbard’s strategic position as a potential base for so-called antiaccess and area denial (A2AD) operations in the Barents Sea and the North Atlantic are still the primary drivers of Russian security interests in the region. Some are questioning whether Svalbard truly holds such a strategic position given the technological advancements in Russia’s long-range ballistic missiles and the change in defense concepts in the North. Regardless, it seems likely that Svalbard will remain a potential area for Russian power projection, as Russia will likely be intent on rebuilding its Arctic force posture and capabilities attrited in Ukraine and in response to Sweden and Finland’s NATO memberships.

**THREAT LANDSCAPE: RUSSIA VIS-À-VIS NORWAY AND NATO**

From the perspective of a Norwegian defense planner or policymaker, the main security concern in regard to Svalbard will undoubtedly remain Russia. Across all the geopolitical dimensions highlighted above, the Russian threat looms large since the military use of the archipelago is relevant only in a NATO-Russia conflict. It is rather unthinkable that other EU or NATO states would significantly impede Norway’s territorial sovereignty through either covert or military action. Moreover, other potential adversaries in a large-scale conflict (e.g., China) are too far removed from Svalbard to pose any short- to medium-term threat. Small-scale challenges to Norwegian policy on land or jurisdiction at sea, however, include a range of actors that could pose a challenge other than just Russia. As mentioned, the most active challenge to the Norwegian position regarding maritime zones in recent years has come from the European Union and some of its member states: first, over access to snow crab fisheries and, second, over the share of cod quotas in the FPZ after Brexit. It is also possible to imagine countries other than Russia and EU member states, such as China, moving to challenge the Norwegian position or claiming equal rights to economic activity in the water column or on the shelf.

Still, from a geopolitical perspective, Russia remains the primary security concern due to the high number of Russian fishing vessels operating in the zone each year in accordance with the comanagement regime of shared fish stocks in the Barents Sea. Despite the one-time issue of Chinese protests regarding research, the same conclusion holds for possible disputes on land over Norwegian policies and alleged violations of the Svalbard Treaty by Russian officials.

While the Russian geopolitical threat remains paramount, Chinese encroachments facilitated by an isolated Russia may complicate the Arctic security landscape in the longer term. The coast guard agencies of Russia and China recently signed a cooperation agreement on strengthening maritime law enforcement to great fanfare in Murmansk, a city on Russia’s western flank close to Norway. Moreover, when all other Arctic coast guard agencies suspended their participation in the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, Russia invited China to join the forum—clear signs of China’s expanding presence in the High North. As Iris A. Ferguson, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for arctic and global resilience, has put it, Chinese efforts aim “to normalize its presence and pursue a larger role in shaping Arctic regional governance and security affairs.”

*Russian flags flying in the miners’ town of Barentsburg on May 7, 2022. Sign in foreground in Russian “Our goal is communism.”* 
Photo: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP via Getty Images
While the Russian geopolitical threat remains paramount, Chinese encroachments facilitated by an isolated Russia may complicate the Arctic security landscape in the longer term.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

With its 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region, the administration under U.S. president Joseph Biden sent a strong and clarifying signal that it would prioritize the region. The strategy effectively updates the 2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region and is organized around four pillars of action: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance. Regarding the security pillar, the strategy aims to expand the military and civilian capabilities necessary to protect U.S. interests in the Arctic—for example, through increasing the U.S. Coast Guard’s icebreaker fleet. While the strategy states that “the US seeks an Arctic region that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative,” it also recognizes that rising geopolitical tension, especially following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, may bring geopolitical competition to the Arctic in the future. With these considerations in mind, the United States should pursue the following course of action.

1. **Push for a coordinated NATO approach with special consideration for Svalbard.**

   As previously noted, Svalbard’s geographical position could be central in controlling access to and from Russia’s Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula, which houses Russia’s fleet of nuclear submarines and is Washington’s primary focus in the High North. Thus, Washington needs to recognize that Svalbard represents a potential flash point in a looming Arctic power struggle and should work with Norway to tailor deterrence in a manner that minimizes the impact on the archipelago’s unique legal status. This approach should carefully balance a robust defensive posture while taking Svalbard’s status into account to minimize the risk of further military tensions.

   Given the risk of the Kremlin using Article 9 of the Svalbard Treaty as pretext to escalate any expanded NATO presence, the alliance should credibly signal its intention to minimize capability development and military exercises in Svalbard. To avoid compromising overall deterrence, this restraint should be complemented by a strong amphibious force in mainland Norway, including through military exercises responding to conventional Russian escalation in or around Svalbard. Part of this effort could be built into NATO’s biannual Cold Response exercises, which Norway hosts to test allied troops’ ability to fight and survive in an Arctic environment. At the same time, clarifying that NATO’s Article 5 covers Svalbard as part of Norwegian territory is important to avoid any strategic ambiguity.

   A major diplomatic line of effort could also be achieving alliance-wide consensus on the Svalbard Treaty applicability of Svalbard’s maritime zones. This means resolving the ongoing dispute between Norway and the European Union to avoid Russian exploitation of an allied rift—possibly in favor of the Norwegian position.

2. **Work with regional allies to strengthen resilience of critical infrastructure, such as fiber-optic cables on the Arctic seabed.**

   A recent CSIS brief examining the Russian Arctic threat after the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine notes that Russia’s use of hybrid tactics in the region “seems to be increasing in both frequency and severity.” These fears are perhaps best exemplified by the severing of a critical subsea information technology (IT) cable serving Svalbard while Russian fishing vessels were operating extensively nearby. Norwegian authorities have also arrested several Russian nationals for illegal photography across the country and have observed unannounced drone sightings over Svalbard. Western stakeholders seemed to acknowledge this vulnerability following the sabotage of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, especially given Norway’s importance as Europe’s main pipeline gas supplier. In fall 2022, Norway deployed its Home Guard to protect critical maritime infrastructure, a move
that was supported by NATO ship patrols in the North Sea. The U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region also recognizes the need to address this risk, stating Washington’s intent to “make targeted investments to strategically enhance security infrastructure as required to enable these aims, while building the resilience of critical infrastructure to protect against both climate change and cyberattacks.”

Given the depleting effects of Western sanctions and the weakened state of Russia’s Arctic forces, if tensions between NATO and Russia continue to escalate, it would be reasonable to expect the Kremlin to increase its use of hybrid tactics around Svalbard, at least in the short- to medium-term. Sporadic ad hoc initiatives to counter Russian hybrid threats may thus fall short of the mark and would benefit from a more structured NATO approach. For example, NATO can facilitate regional tabletop exercises spanning the political and military spectrum that incorporate hybrid elements into conventional military scenarios. Other options include improved consultation and information-sharing channels between allies, government institutions, and the private sector to enhance initial detection and response to emerging hybrid crises.

3. Establish the acceptable scope of regional governance, specifically the role of China.

Finally, the United States should attempt to preserve what remains of the Arctic’s geopolitical exceptionalism—the increasingly tenuous status quo that has historically excluded hard security issues from regional governance. This should include building upon the resumption of limited work in the Arctic Council, announced in June 2022 by seven of the council’s eight member states—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States. Part of this effort should also address China’s growing ambitions in the Arctic and their implications for Svalbard. The United States should emphasize that China, as a near-Arctic state, is welcome to engage with regional stakeholders on environmental issues and sustainable economic development in the Arctic, including through its legitimate research activities on Svalbard.

However, the United States and Norway should clearly signal that any undue Chinese encroachment into the governance and security affairs of the European High North will not be tolerated. It should be noted that the manifestation of Arctic geopolitical tension is not uniform across the circumpolar region. Rather, military activity in the Arctic is constrained to various subregions, most prominently the High North/North Atlantic region and the North Pacific/Bering Sea region. In the former, Russia’s military buildup of the Northern Fleet and surrounding forces factors into the Kremlin’s larger geostrategic competition with the West and is linked to nuclear deterrence capabilities and access to the Atlantic writ large. In the latter region, Russia’s military buildup contributes to increased bilateral cooperation with China and highlights the belated U.S. awakening to Arctic security and geopolitical issues on its northwestern periphery.

Although the actions and related effects of Chinese actors in the Arctic so far have been rather limited, China has increasingly attempted to gain a foothold and influence in various parts of the Arctic and in different branches of Arctic economic activity. China’s interests do not necessarily align with those of Western Arctic states, though when it comes to specific economic projects in the Arctic, Chinese investments and capital might still be in demand and warranted. The effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are likely to spur more China-Russia cooperation in the Arctic.

This risk of undue Chinese encroachment into the European High North is particularly acute in regard to the closer cooperation announced between the Chinese and Russian coast guards. China’s coast guard has displayed a tendency for aggressive behavior, exemplified by Chinese vessels recently blocking and threatening a Philippine patrol vessel in the South China Sea. China has developed expansive sovereignty claims over the South China Sea, most of which were rejected at a tribunal brought against China by the Philippines under UNCLOS in 2016 at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. A flotilla of Chinese vessels also recently entered a gas site operated by Vietnamese and Russian state firms in Vietnam’s EEZ. Similar Sino-Russian cooperation in the maritime domain has already manifested elsewhere in the Arctic region as the U.S. Coast Guard encountered Chinese and Russian warships operating together near Alaska on several occasions in recent years.
While unlikely in the short term, the Chinese and Russian coast guards could increase their presence in the Barents Sea in the long term, possibly using the legitimate presence of Chinese and Russian nationals and entities in or around Svalbard as pretext. This approach would not be dissimilar to Russian operations to protect Russian nationals in South Ossetia and Crimea. The United States and Norway should be cognizant of this dubious track record and clearly signal that any similar encroachments will not be tolerated in the waters around Svalbard.

CONCLUDING REMARKS
Discussions of Arctic security often fail to examine specific issues of concern, exemplified by an often-counterproductive framing used to discuss the Svalbard archipelago. Research and discussions about such potential flashpoints and their related issues are needed to dispel commonly held misconceptions, especially when it comes to understanding sovereignty and sovereign rights, as well as distinguishing between different types of security threats and potential conflicts.

As per the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, which Russia has acceded to and has not challenged, sovereignty over the area is undisputed. As part of Norwegian territory, Svalbard is also unequivocally covered by NATO’s Article 5. Given the heightened tensions between Russia and the West, Norway must work with the United States and other allies to clearly refute any misconceptions about NATO ambiguity on the archipelago. This work should start at home by cementing a shared understanding of the legal and political complexities of Svalbard issues within the alliance.

Arctic security studies often generalize, leading to sweeping conclusions that do not consider regional complexity and disparate security challenges north of the Arctic Circle. Closely examining specific Arctic environments such as Svalbard is necessary for a more granular understanding of regional geopolitics and how possible conflict scenarios might unfold in the North.

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This brief is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this brief.
ENDNOTES


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