

# Northern Connections

## The European Arctic by 2035

As 2026 unfolds, the European Arctic faces a fundamental transformation. The rules-based international order that once governed the region is not merely fraying—it is fast unraveling. Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, President Trump's aggressive pursuit of Greenland, and the spillover effects from ongoing transatlantic tensions have shattered any remaining illusions of Arctic exceptionalism. What emerges is a region where traditional security architectures are being tested, redefined, and in some cases, discarded entirely.

The convergence of these developments reveals a broader truth: The European Arctic is no longer a peripheral concern, but an important theater for geopolitical competition that will shape Europe's strategic future. The increasing frequency of hybrid threats—from sabotage of critical infrastructure to disinformation campaigns—underscores that the region has shifted from a zone of peace to one marked by persistent tension and strategic competition. Meanwhile, the prospect of continued tensions between Europe and the United States over Greenland, whether through economic coercion or other means, raises fundamental questions about sovereignty, self-determination, and the durability of transatlantic partnerships in an era of transactional and coercive diplomacy.

In this edition of *Northern Connections*, experts examine three critical dimensions that will shape the European Arctic over the next decade. Collectively, these articles illustrate both the profound challenges and potential pathways forward for a region caught between competing visions of international order.

In the first article, Dr. Andreas Raspotnik and Robert Habeck examine the European Union's evolving vision for the European North. They argue that Europe must develop a new strategic framework—one that builds upon the legacy of the **Northern Dimension** policy framework while adapting to today's geopolitical realities. Their proposal for a European Arctic/North Atlantic alliance among like-minded democracies represents an ambitious counterproposal to great power encroachment, positioning the region not as a distant frontier but as a geopolitical epicenter where Europe's security and influence will be decisively shaped.

In the second article, Dr. Elizabeth Buchanan assesses Greenland's possible futures in light of President Trump's persistent overtures toward the territory. She revisits four scenarios for Greenland's trajectory from her book *So You Want to Own Greenland: Lessons from the Vikings to Trump*, arguing that while a conscious decoupling from Denmark remains viable, U.S. pressure may paradoxically undermine the independence movement it seeks to exploit. Buchanan warns that Greenland has become a proxy for an emerging international order where might increasingly trumps right.

In the third article, Dr. Gabriella Gricius examines the proliferation of military exercises in the European Arctic and challenges the notion that increased military activity equates to dangerous militarization. She argues that exercises serve as tools of predictability and stability in the region, allowing states to signal credibility and manage deterrence. Looking toward 2035, Gricius contends that military presence will settle into a regular rhythm, creating a new equilibrium that, while more armed than the past, need not lead to armed conflict.

Together, these perspectives reveal a region in transition—one where the old order has collapsed but the contours of what comes next remain contested and uncertain.



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## Redefining Arctic Alliances: A New Vision for Europe's Northern Dimension

By Dr. Andreas Raspotnik, Director of the High North Center for Business and Governance, Nord University, and Dr. Robert Habeck, Senior Analyst, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine no longer merely signifies the return of wars of aggression to Europe; it marks a deeper shift in the global order. Similarly, the recently published **U.S. National Security Strategy** signals a permanent change in global security, with profound implications for Europe at large. These interrelated changes underscore a broader transformation in the global order, reflecting a departure from long-established norms and institutions. The world is unmistakably shifting away from the relative stability of the post-Cold War era.

While new powers are rising and global influence is becoming more multipolar, this shift is accompanied by increasing uncertainty and unpredictability. The past decade has seen the first signs of this change, driven by the rise of authoritarianism, surging nationalism, and numerous global challenges—from climate change and a major pandemic to disruptive leadership and the emerging uncertainties of artificial intelligence—issues now

compounded by the growing concentration of power in the hands of a few large entities that control key technological infrastructure, information, and resources.

The Arctic, with its increasing geopolitical significance, stands as an often-neglected example of this evolving global landscape. Once hailed as exceptional and a zone of peace, the Arctic has increasingly moved to the forefront of strategic planning, influenced by the expanding U.S. footprint, Russia's historic and continued presence, and China's rising interest. If global relations between these powers continue to deteriorate—through bellicose rhetoric, military posturing, and sanctions—escalating tensions seem inevitable in the Arctic as well. As the region becomes more deeply entwined with broader geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics, shifts taking place beyond the Arctic will inevitably have repercussions north of latitude 66° N. Moreover, and as 2025 (and early 2026) has demonstrated convincingly, developments in the Arctic can also ripple out and affect the rest of the world.

### **THE EUROPEAN UNION AND “ITS” ARCTIC**

For Europe, these regional developments should not come as a surprise. The region is hardly a new frontier; rather, the European Union—Europe's institutional embodiment—already **has a presence there**, along with three Nordic member states: the Kingdom of Denmark (with the notable exception of Greenland, which is not part of the European Union), Finland, and Sweden. However, over the past two decades, outside of the European Union's official Arctic policy, which has been evolving since 2008, the broader circumpolar North has been **largely absent** from strategic European security discussions. The region's former status quo as peaceful and stable offered few incentives or security concerns—particularly regarding the Russian Federation—that would have prompted deeper European engagement.

Today, this oversight seems surprising, especially given the European Union's **significant competencies and influence** in the European Arctic. Yet, in terms of (hard) security, the European Union has become **increasingly irrelevant** in the region, especially when it comes to managing the most critical issue for its Nordic member states and close northern allies, Iceland and Norway: how to navigate security relations with the Russian Federation.

Russia's actions in the broader European North should be taken seriously, particularly as the European Union now considers the European Arctic region as **part of a broader continuum** that includes the Baltic Sea, marked by shared challenges and interests. This continuum, recently articulated by the European Parliament, underscores the interconnectedness of these regions and the need for a coordinated response to emerging security concerns. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this **larger security landscape** has become increasingly vulnerable to complex hybrid threats. These threats—often state-backed and maritime in nature—include sabotage of critical infrastructure, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and covert operations involving suspicious vessel movements and the deployment of unusual radio equipment on fishing trawlers. Recent incidents—including Russia's suspected involvement in the **Estlink 2 cable outage**, **website hacking** prior to Danish local elections, an **attack on a railway line** in Poland, and **disruptions to Baltic Sea telecommunications**—underscore Moscow's ongoing efforts to destabilize this broad region, influence political decisions, and erode public trust in national institutions.

Given the interconnectedness of the European Arctic and Baltic Sea regions, the European North should no longer be viewed as merely a regional concern, but as a critical component of Europe's overall security strategy. With its institutional competencies in environmental regulation, economic policy, and maritime governance, along with substantial financial capacities, the European Union is well positioned to take a more active role in the region. However, despite the growing strategic importance of the Arctic, the European Union and several of its key non-Arctic member states—such as France, Germany, Poland, and Italy—have largely overlooked the region in security and foreign policy discussions over the past decade, often treating it as a peripheral issue or considering it only through national, rather than supranational, perspectives. At the same time, other Northern European countries—notably Iceland and Norway, but also Greenland—are not members of the European Union, which presents a significant obstacle to asserting a unified European political stance on Arctic issues. This division is particularly glaring when it comes to Russia, which poses direct challenges via the Arctic to both the European Union and non-EU member states and demands a more coordinated, proactive response.

### **A NEW VISION FOR EUROPE'S NORTH?**

Europe's political philosophy is built on the limitation of (national) power. Rules-based orders, international law, treaties, and negotiation processes form the core of Europe's self-image—both for the continent as a whole and the European Union specifically. However, in today's world, Europe can only enforce this vision of order if it evolves into a more powerful political actor itself.

As part of this transformation, the European Union must consider a foundational question: What does the North actually mean for Europe? After nearly two decades of EU-Arctic policymaking, a new strategic vision is sorely needed—one that redefines the European Union's role in a wider European North, particularly following the **recent termination of the Northern Dimension**, the joint policy framework that had covered areas of common interest between the European Union, Russia, Norway, and Iceland since 1999.

The Northern Dimension addressed a range of issues, from environmental concerns to economic cooperation and education. Its broader goal was to raise awareness of the North following the European Union's 1995 enlargement and to bring the region's largest eastern neighbor into this wider space, fostering cooperation rather than conflict. The policy was originally rooted in Finland's vision for future relations with Moscow, designed to reduce the likelihood of military threats from the Russian Federation. Over time, the Northern Dimension became a common policy shared by four equal partners—an approach that recognized the complexity of regional cooperation. As such, it was never a single-issue framework but rather a broad, multidimensional policy of cross-border cooperation involving a wide range of actors and policy sectors.

In September 2025, the European Union, Iceland, and Norway **announced** they were formally terminating their cooperation in the framework, chiefly due to Russia's war against Ukraine—though maybe in part also due to a lack of shared cross-European interest in “the North.” In the framework's absence, Europe must now develop a new, genuine vision of what the North means for the continent. This vision should build on the

legacy of the Northern Dimension and **nearly 20 years of EU-Arctic policymaking**, while also taking into account today's political and foreign policy upheavals, and clearly outline the European Union's counterproposal for this broad region.

This counterproposal should not simply address the European Union's existing competencies, but rather establish a more pronounced political claim for the European North—one that includes non-EU countries and encourages closer coordination with Norway, Iceland, Greenland, and the United Kingdom, perhaps even bringing Canada into the fold as a key partner. As this broader continuum of the European Arctic and Baltic Sea moves from a zone of peace to one increasingly marked by tensions, the unique peace project that is the European Union will be forced to adapt to this new reality. What are the European Union's core interests and competencies in this context, and how can they be effectively leveraged? How can Europe transform its normative strength into operational capability—without adopting the role of a self-righteous moral guardian? These are just a few of the questions the European Union must confront as it seeks to redefine its role in the European North.

#### **TOWARD 2035: A NEW PARTNERSHIP?**

The European Union should pursue a strategic partnership—and even more, a strategic alliance—with like-minded states and territories in the North Atlantic. This partnership could create a unified space of partners, willing and able to make firm agreements and pursue common interests, standing strong against the pressures exerted in the region by Russia, China, and even the United States.

Obviously, such an alliance should be open to engagement with the United States, but it must do so with a clear-eyed view of its own interests. In a transatlantic context, this means positioning Europe once and for all as an **“independent pole of the multipolar world”**—asserting itself as a great power in its own right. This should entail building a robust **European/Nordic pillar within NATO**; defending economic sovereignty, particularly in areas such as critical minerals; and resisting any external interference in domestic politics, such as Greenland's political autonomy. Further, such an alliance should adopt a robust stance toward China, seeking cooperation where possible while protecting its own strategic priorities. While ensuring economic security (particularly regarding critical minerals) and protecting technological advantages and cybersecurity infrastructure are key priorities, areas for cooperation could include joint actions on Arctic maritime transportation, such as establishing green corridors and enhancing search-and-rescue capabilities; sharing ocean science research data, especially when data sharing with Russia is not possible; and assuming shared responsibility for fisheries management as both Europe and China negotiate the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement on equal terms. Finally, as long as Putin's Russia continues to aggressively and belligerently undermine international order, the alliance must regard Russia as a persistent threat.

Europe needs a robust power strategy, not just a reformulation of the status quo, to effectively counter these pressures. Such an idea is, in fact, nothing new. **As early as 2005**, the European Parliament urged the European Commission to “create a comprehensive approach in the external Northern Dimension policies of the Union, including the Baltic Sea, Barents region, and the Arctic as a whole.” At the time, the institutional interpretation of the “North” encompassed both a territorial and maritime Arctic dimension,



emphasizing the crucial role of the European Union's Arctic partners across the Arctic Ocean, including Canada.

While the idea itself is not novel, building a strategic alliance in the North Atlantic today requires a fundamentally new approach—one that is grounded in power politics. In a world of growing threats and shifting geopolitical ambitions, the European Union must actively champion the idea of a new transatlantic partnership—a renewed vision for the European North that transcends Europe's natural geography. To make this a reality, *all* member states must be convinced that prioritizing this new “northern dimension” is essential for the union. To start achieving this objective, EU leaders could leverage existing programs, instruments, and frameworks in the Arctic and beyond. For example, the European Union has already positioned itself as the world's largest funder of Arctic research through Horizon Europe, which has made significant advances in understanding climate change and its impacts. However, to maximize this leadership, the European Union must **ensure better alignment** between scientific research and political action.

By integrating its scientific dominance with strategic partnerships, the European Union can enhance its geopolitical influence in the region. Southern and eastern European member states stand to gain from this broader Arctic effort as well. They would benefit from easier access to critical raw materials or participation in green hydrogen and renewable energy initiatives, while also expanding their markets for technology in fields like drones, satellites, space exploration, and communications. In doing so, the initiative would create a more comprehensive and resilient regional strategy, balancing the long-standing focus on regional environmental and social well-being with the urgent demands of European security and energy stability, while ensuring that scientific advancements translate into concrete geopolitical leverage.

Moreover, cooperation among countries committed to democracy and the rule of law could serve as a catalyst for further steps to strengthen the European Union as a whole. Today's European North is closely linked to the developments in Ukraine, with the region's future hinging on how Europe collectively responds to the shifting global order. In light of Russia's war against Ukraine, Finland and Sweden have broken with long-standing tradition to join NATO, bolstering their own defense and strengthening the alliance. Why shouldn't a similar process unfold for the new European North? Why not invite Iceland, Norway, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and even Scotland and Great Britain to (re)join the European Union, or at least cooperate more closely with the European Union, especially as times and geopolitics are changing? The European Parliament **has already begun this process**, arguing for the European Union to use the shifting political momentum in the North to deepen its integration process. Now, it is up to Europe's leaders to take this opportunity seriously and act with the foresight and ambition the moment demands.

This is not just a matter of regional cooperation; it is about Europe's strategic future. The North is not merely a distant frontier—it is a simultaneously old and new geopolitical epicenter where Europe's stability, security, and global influence will be significantly shaped in the coming decades. The creation of a unified, like-minded partnership in this broader European North could be the cornerstone of Europe's renewed power strategy, ensuring that the European Union plays an active, decisive role in shaping the future of the regional order. It would be in everyone's interest across the region to make this vision a reality.

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## Greenland's Possible Pathways to Red, White, and Blueland

By Dr. Elizabeth Buchanan, Senior Fellow, Australian Strategic Policy Institute

In May 2025, I finished the manuscript of my book, *So You Want to Own Greenland: Lessons from the Vikings to Trump*. Since its publication in September 2025, Greenland has

experienced increased scrutiny following President Trump's recent overtures toward the territory. In the book, I posit four scenarios for Greenland's future before concluding that the current status quo will likely endure. I presumed that the deeply rooted Greenlandic independence movement could be fueled by strategic sources of economic support from Denmark to facilitate the territory's sustainable independence from its former colonial ruler. I was wrong.

In this article, I revisit my scenarios for Greenland's potential future 10 years from now based on the ebbs and flows of international relations (and President Donald Trump's Truth Social musings). Trump's recent overtures toward Greenland may be the final nail in the coffin of a rules-based international order that has long been wobbling.

In the aftermath of a successful U.S. military operation to oust Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, Trump has restated his aim to acquire Greenland. In response, Denmark has attempted to highlight its commitment to Greenland's security with **new investments** in Arctic defense capabilities, further **support for Greenlandic infrastructure and social services**, and **greater Greenlandic representation** in the Kingdom of Denmark's foreign policy. In doing so, Danish leaders seek to pull Greenland closer and deepen Nuuk's reliance on Copenhagen. Meanwhile, the United States has **appointed** a "special envoy" to Greenland, underscoring the high-level political commitment to acquiring the island. The White House has further **floated fiscal offers** (purposefully vague, in the \$10,000–\$100,000 range) directly to the people of Greenland to entice support for unification with the United States. This would ostensibly aim to light a fire under the Greenlandic independence movement and sow division within the Kingdom of Denmark.

In recent weeks, White House, Danish, and Greenlandic officials have organized meetings as all parties seek to understand the depth of their counterparty's conviction and the scope for diplomatic engagement. European leaders have thrown their weight behind the Danish position, urging Trump to refrain from interfering in Greenlandic affairs. Counterintuitively, the same European leaders have also continued to demand U.S. assurances of *any* peace deal struck in the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war. Many European countries have also signaled their intent to establish an **increased NATO presence** in and around Greenland (which would be highly reliant on U.S. platforms and intelligence). This dissonance only further highlights that the extant rules-based order, in which the United States quarterback a security umbrella with support from a fledgling group of smaller European states, is flatlining.

#### **SCENARIO I: THE "CONSCIOUS DECOUPLING" OF GREENLAND AND DENMARK**

This scenario entails the Greenlandic and Danish governments acting in partnership toward Greenlandic independence, in accordance with the **2009 Act on Greenland Self-Government**, which laid the foundation for a potential independence referendum. The existent amicable Greenlandic independence process may have gained traction in recent years, but it is unclear if U.S.-induced interest will throw a spanner in the works. Greenland's premier has now **publicly stated** that "if we have to choose between the U.S. and Denmark here and now, then we choose Denmark." Economic diversification efforts in Nuuk have also developed, with **EU investments in graphite extraction** serving as one example of alternative economic partnerships emerging for Greenland.

The United States' appointment of a special envoy, compounded by heightened rhetoric over intent to "buy" or "take" Greenland coming out of the White House, may also push the Danes to revise the 2009 Act on Greenland Self-Government to enable responsibilities in the foreign and defense realm to be shifted to Nuuk. This development would spur incremental independence, such as Danish support for a Greenlandic nonmilitary coast guard or training of a Greenlandic home defense force.

The original scenario of "decoupling" between Denmark and Greenland still appears to be a viable end point. However, the aggressive U.S. methods to pull Greenland closer may have the opposite effect and undermine the Greenlandic independence movement.

#### **SCENARIO II: INDEPENDENCE, INTERRUPTED**

Denmark's (possible) resistance to Greenlandic independence may harden as U.S. interest in acquiring the island intensifies. Copenhagen's fiscal injection may be viewed as an attempt to coerce enduring Greenlandic patronage. Here, Greenland's rural-urban societal divide among its 57,000 nationals may yet be a decisive factor in the speed or progress of Nuuk's independence plans, as rural Greenlanders are less interested in the day-to-day politics of the independence movement and place greater emphasis on sustainable support for the industries that underpin their livelihood.

The United States' refusal to take military action off the table has surely concerned Denmark, particularly since losing control of the territory would mean ceding access to Arctic resources and relevance within NATO. No longer able to cite Greenland as part of its contribution to the alliance, Copenhagen may fear the real cost of having to significantly ramp up its commitments to the alliance.



A concession between Denmark and Greenland may take the form of “hyper-autonomy” (i.e., much greater Greenlandic autonomy in defense and foreign affairs, including the ability to enter into partnerships without Copenhagen’s explicit consent). This would likely require revisions to the 2009 act. This may affect domestic sentiment in Copenhagen, provoking public backlash against enduring semblances of denial of Greenlandic independence. In many ways, the increased U.S. interest in Greenland has sharpened Denmark’s long-standing dilemma related to letting Greenland “go.” But it will be the people of Greenland who suffer; investment firms and major resource multinationals are not going to take the risk that stems from an emerging market characterized by instability.

### **SCENARIO III: GREENLAND—THE 51ST STATE?**

This scenario sees the United States following through on its threats to secure Greenland—**“the easy way or the hard way.”** Denmark, Greenland, and Europe seemingly still hold no real cards with regard to deterring President Trump from pursuing aggressive U.S. action. This action could be taken militarily or non-militarily; either way, the end point would see Greenland absorbed under the U.S. footprint. Alignment with Washington on the back of an independent Greenland could occur, but it is likely Nuuk would have to cede further concessions to secure both sustainable economic prosperity and strategic protection under the U.S. military umbrella.

Becoming an overseas territory, of which the United States has several—for example, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands—would afford Nuuk a status comparable to its existing arrangement with Denmark: under another country’s sovereignty, albeit with significant self-governance powers. This is, for Nuuk, undesirable. Forming a Compact of Free Association, however, may yet have legs. The United States already has such an agreement with the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. Greenland would be self-governing, but significantly, an *independent* state. The United States would then provide substantial economic assistance, defense provisions, and security.

Developments in 2026 point to an imminent timeline for Washington’s designs on Greenland. Economic action is likely to be prioritized by Trump, although military action will remain the “stick” in the Greenlandic equation.

### **SCENARIO IV: DE FACTO ANNEXATION**

While the current status quo might yet endure, murkiness regarding Greenland’s future status will likely persist, and we may yet see the internationalization of the Greenland issue if Beijing and Moscow decide to weigh in. Greenland appears to have wedged itself in terms of its independence movement by accepting reinforced Danish fiscal commitments to the island, as opposed to political support for hastening the movement toward independence. Greenland’s premier declaring **“we choose Denmark”** might yet have domestic implications and incite unrest.

The United States is likely to persist with its Greenlandic ambitions, with a blend of actions taken across the spectrum of logistics, military-strategic investments, technological support, seabed cable infrastructure, and resource development. This is of course a form of de facto annexation—an influence operation that presents a future of new overreliances for Nuuk. This scenario remains, albeit updated, my prediction for

Greenland's future. It is most probable in that it allows for incremental independence, not least because it does not make independence utterly unobtainable.

Greenland, while clearly a North American landmass, will continue to impact the global community. What happens in Greenland is no longer simply a matter for Greenland. European cohesion more broadly, as well as NATO's relevance and its actual power if the United States is not onside, are all squarely in the firing line. Greenlandic Indigenous rights, while now appearing muted by Danish efforts to maintain the kingdom's grasp on the strategic island, will likely gain prominence in the coming months. Diplomacy may have some impact—in that a shooting war over Greenland is extremely unlikely—but it is no match for the tide of *realpolitik* that is now washing over the international system.

Greenland has in some ways become a proxy for broader questions about the emerging international order, in which the world seems to be returning to an age of might over right. Alliances and partnerships are subordinate to national interests, and traditional ways of business are no more. This is, of course, a watershed moment for modern Europe, which must strike a deal or be set to sit the next arc of geostrategic competition out.

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Sean Gallup via Getty Images

## More Exercises, Not More Militarization

By Dr. Gabriella Gricius, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Konstanz

Military exercises such as **Cold Response** and **Arctic Light**, and presence drills such as those of **NATO's Standing Maritime Group 1**, have dominated recent news coverage about security dynamics in the European Arctic. Similarly, Russian exercises in the region, including the **Zapad exercises**,

seem to suggest that military activity from the eight Arctic states is on the rise. However, these exercises are not—as some suggest—evidence that hot conflict is imminent in the region. Instead, they indicate that states are relying more heavily on exercises to signal stability and predictability than in the past. This may sound counterintuitive, yet it is exactly through displaying presence and capability that Arctic states seek to avoid misunderstanding and miscalculation. While a casual observer might assume that the Arctic is fast turning into a zone of military competition given the increasing frequency

of exercises and related news coverage in recent years, the region is instead adapting to a new equilibrium in which frequent military presence and exercises are a tool of predictability and stability.

The increased frequency of these exercises is not evidence of militarization in a conventional sense. In fact, hybrid activities falling below the threshold of armed conflict are the most salient security threat in the Arctic today. Disinformation, cyberattacks, and threats to critical infrastructure are important tools in Russia's, and to some extent China's, strategy to sow division and pressure western Arctic states. These activities are designed to avoid the prospect of an armed response. However, exercises are now taking these threats into account—and in some cases centering them as principal threats.

### **CURRENT TRENDS IN THE EUROPEAN ARCTIC**

Some Arctic **exercises** operate on a regular basis; these include **Arctic Challenge**, a live air Nordic-hosted exercise that has occurred semi-regularly since 2013, and Cold Response, a Norwegian-led exercise that has similarly occurred every other year since 2006. The number of participants from different armed forces has undoubtedly **risen** in recent years. However, this is due to a rising interest in building preparedness rather than a wish to militarize the Arctic. NATO's presence in the Arctic is similarly calibrated through traditional military assurance practices. For example, NATO clearly signals its presence in the region through press releases showing that member states participate in exercises such as the **Danish-led Arctic Light**. There are also some unique exercises, such as the **2018 Trident Juncture exercise**, a NATO-led military exercise that practiced an Article 5 collective defense scenario involving over 50,000 personnel.

These exercises operate through the logic of **deterrence**, specifically deterrence by denial. Following this logic, NATO allies must demonstrate to a potential aggressor that a denial would be credible. Increasing exercises in the Arctic, then, is one such mechanism to show credibility as part of **an integrated deterrence strategy**. Arctic allies must show that they can operate together and are able to respond to threats from adversaries, and doing so involves practice and exercising interoperability. This is particularly true given the recent accession of Finland and Sweden to the NATO alliance, although the two states were already close partners and regularly participated in exercises run by both NATO and NATO member states.

As NATO and the Arctic allies have been increasing their military presence through exercises, Russia has simultaneously become more **cautious** in its military exercises and posturing since 2022. Rather than seeking to militarize the region, Russia is **invested** in maintaining the status quo. Russia's priorities in the region remain developing the Northern Sea Route and further developing its oil and gas extraction capacity, both of which would not be served by increasing military behavior or militarizing the region.

China has not conducted military activity alone in the Arctic, but it has cooperated with Russia on several joint exercises. For example, in July 2024, Russia and China **conducted** joint aerial patrols near Alaska. A joint Chinese Coast Guard and Russian Border Service exercise was also **conducted** near Alaska in September 2024. These drills may indicate that the Sino-Russian security relationship in the region is growing closer. However, it is similarly important to acknowledge that this cooperation is inherently **limited** due to

structural factors, including Russia's wariness of letting China—as a more powerful state—into the Russian Arctic and historic distrust on both sides.

### **TEN YEARS FROM NOW**

Looking a decade into the future, it is very likely that there will be increased military activity in the European Arctic. Driving this trend in part are new military structures that will allow NATO to become more active in the region and specifically prepare allies to operate in cold weather. For example, exercising among NATO and Nordic allies will be coordinated between the Combined Air Operations Center in Bodø, Norway; the Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters in Enköping, Sweden; and the Multi-Corps Land Component Command Northwest in Mikkeli, Finland. Importantly, as Finland and Sweden integrate more fully into NATO, increased exercising and presence in the North may become an integral part of the alliance's European posture, particularly now that all Nordic countries are under the **command** of Joint Force Command Norfolk.

It is also likely that Russia will continue to exercise in its Arctic, including through ballistic and hypersonic missile testing and its biannual Zapad or Okeanskiy Schit exercises in the land and naval domains. Recent studies **show** that Russian military activities have either stabilized or decreased since 2022. A continuation of this flattening trend is probable for the near future. However, it is hard to make a concrete prediction, as much of this is contingent on how the war in Ukraine evolves and how threatened Russia feels by an increasing NATO presence.

While the frequency of Russian exercises is stabilizing, the percentage of these that are done in cooperation with China bears noting. It is difficult to say whether such joint exercises will increase in frequency. On one hand, increased collaboration could **serve** the broader economic and security interests of both Moscow and Beijing. For China, developing a closer relationship would give it increased practice in operating in the Arctic, access to the Northern Sea Route, and access to Russian oil and gas. For Russia, a closer relationship would provide more investment for building out the Northern Sea Route and a dependable partner for energy exports. (Of course, these interests may also be served through a closer commercial relationship, rather than closer collaboration on military exercises.) On the other, historic distrust or concerns about Chinese encroachment into the Russian Arctic may limit collaboration. This distrust has **roots** in the Cold War, Russia's disagreement with China's claim as a "near Arctic state," and disagreements on how both states view the Northern Sea Route. Russia has also **expressed** worries about China's growing military and its illegal acquisition of weapons technology.

While military activity in the European Arctic may increase in frequency over the next 10 years, analysts should refrain from equating that development with unchecked militarization. Rather, it illustrates that there is increased signaling of deterrence between the seven western NATO Arctic states and Russia. Both must continue to demonstrate credibility in their deterrence postures, illustrating that they can impose the costs necessary to do so. Moreover, all military actors in the Arctic must ensure that military signaling through exercising and presence is perceived by their adversaries in the manner intended. This requires additional strategic communication, both in actual people-to-people communication and in communicating through presence.

### **ADJUSTING BEHAVIOR**

The new status quo will demand a rethink of how NATO allies can adjust their policies appropriately. First, military signaling should be calibrated appropriately to show that allies can act in the Arctic if they need to. This will involve exercising to show that troops can be moved en masse across the European continent, particularly on the **Scandinavian** peninsula, to respond to potential threats. Practicing military mobility is **already** on the minds of many European defense planners but will need to be enhanced in future years. Allies must also develop a stronger capacity to respond to unconventional threats, such as physical sabotage to subsea cables and drone presence. Recent **drone** sightings across European capitals have clearly shown this to be an area of weakness that should be developed.

Second, NATO's strategic communications must be aligned. While the alliance's consensus-based nature makes it difficult for NATO to act quickly, strategic communications should be more closely linked between allies to create stronger and more effective signaling tools. Avoiding public disagreement as much as possible may proactively mitigate Russian disinformation campaigns when divisions arise.

Third, while European allies should continue to work closely with the United States as a cornerstone ally for European security, preparations should also be made for a world in which the United States cannot be relied upon, a scenario outlined in the newly **released** U.S. National Security Strategy. Luckily, the legwork required for building either a closer European-U.S. relationship or a Europe not reliant on the United States is the same. It requires increasing burden sharing on the European side of the transatlantic alliance through increased spending on defense and building closer bilateral and minilateral arrangements for defense. This is already happening in the Nordics **in the air domain** and in other areas across the continent.

### **THE BOTTOM LINE: INCREASED MILITARY PRESENCE, SANS DANGEROUS MILITARIZATION**

Rising military activity in the Arctic may give the illusion that unchecked militarization is spreading in the North. However, in 10 years' time, it is more than likely that such activity will have settled into a regular rhythm that states can rely upon. Predictability and stability thus will not look the same as they do now; states will indeed appear much more armed and prepared than they have in the past. The current state of affairs in which we see rising military activity in the region will have stabilized into this new norm where there are expected exercises, counter-exercises, and signaling patterns between competitors, all of which require changes in how allies behave.

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