



**THE BARENTS TO THE BALTIC:
RUSSIA'S NEW BORDER WITH NATO AND ADAPTING ARCTIC STRATEGIES**

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JCSP 49

Exercise Solo Flight

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THE BARENTS TO THE BALTIC: RUSSIA'S NEW BORDER WITH NATO AND ADAPTING ARCTIC STRATEGIES

“In all history, this is the first time that an allied headquarters has been set up in peace, to preserve the peace and not to wage war”.

Gen Dwight D Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (1950)¹.

Introduction

The Washington Treaty of 4 April 1949 formed NATO in the spirit of the UN Charter as a collective defence alliance to directly counter the new threat from the Soviet Union. For the nations of Europe, it provided the ultimate insurance policy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO grew to become a norms-giving organisation. Allies created the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in the 1990s which allowed former Soviet Union states to reform their military and democratic institutions in line with alliance values, clearing a path for NATO membership to those nations desiring it. With ongoing territorial disputes or populations still under heavy Russian influence, some states wanting membership have been unable to meet the conditions for accession leaving them vulnerable to Russian interference. In 2022, NATO's raison d'être is restored to its origin – to counter the threat from the East. Not until Russia's invasion of mainland Ukraine did PfP partners Sweden and Finland feel the need to join the alliance to insure their own sovereignty.

Finland has joined the alliance on NATO's 74th anniversary, increasing the physical border between NATO and Russia by 110% overnight. “Given Finland's geographical proximity to Russia and their shared border, policymakers in Helsinki have viewed Russia as their dominant national security threat throughout the post-Cold War period.”² Perhaps the only surprising thing about this quote is that Finland had not sought to join NATO at an earlier inflexion point. In 2022 the balance between, assured sovereignty and incentive to remain neutral, tipped in favour of NATO when faced with an increasingly aggressive Russia.

NATO's expanded membership will provide renewed challenges for the alliance and for Russia. New borders to protect and additional NATO presence in the Arctic and Baltic are likely to mean that under its apparent strategy, Russia will be compelled to counter, or at least posture to counter, this perceived advance on its borders and spheres of influence. The narrative in Russia, that Putin as the strong leader is keeping the aggressive NATO at bay, will surely wear thin without demonstrable counter action. This could mean the development of new or novel ways to hold NATO allies at risk, or greater physical presence in the North and in particular the Arctic. For decades every aggressive Soviet or Russian attempt to destabilize and ensure less NATO, has ultimately resulted in the opposite outcome. NATO

¹ *NATO Declassified*. NATO, updated 23 Nov 2016.
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_137961.htm

² Meijer, H, Brooks, S; *Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back*. *International Security*, Vol 45, Issue 4 Spring 2021: 7–43. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00405

will soon stand at 32 members including all Arctic states – except Russia. Russia’s plans to dominate the Arctic will invite, yet again, more NATO to Russia’s near abroad.

The argument will be made that Russia’s strategy to deter NATO expansion has failed and that an application of similar strategy to the Arctic will yield similar results. Russia should adopt a different approach. However, acknowledging that Russia will likely continue with its strategy of militarising the Arctic, NATO, including its new Arctic allies will need to adapt their own strategy to counter.

Russian Strategy to Counter the NATO Threat

Although inconsistent with its narrative, Russia regularly claims that NATO is a threat to Russian sovereignty³, giving reason to its desire to maintain a buffer of neutral states between the two entities and the seemingly logical strategy of deterring NATO expansion. Does Russia truly feel a threat to its sovereignty or is it the loss of its sphere of influence that Russia fears? It must be the latter since NATO lacks the unitary decision-making authority needed to be a truly aggressive alliance and Putin must know this. However, there is evidence to suggest that there is either lingering doubt or a deep-rooted disinformation campaign designed to keep up the pretence of fear. A Russian Defence Ministry publication from December 2022 describes Finland and Sweden’s accession and the possible basing of NATO hardware as “the most urgent challenge for Russia”⁴. Whether there is truth in Russia’s narrative or not, attempts to prevent NATO expansion and maintain its sphere of influence or even restore a greater Russia have so far failed. The strategy of threatening and aggressive grey-zone meddling, to exploit political and cultural seams that prevent the base conditions for NATO membership being met, is having only limited short term success.

This approach was inapplicable to Finland. Vladimir Putin maintains that Russia has a historical claim to many lands⁵, a tool used to place barriers on accession to NATO for its near neighbours, in effect, using NATO’s openness and consensus-based culture to Russian advantage. Despite the outcome of the Continuation War of 1941-1944 when elements of Finnish Karelia were ceded to the Soviet Union (and are now a part of the Russian Federation), there are no live claims relating to Scandinavian territory. Similarly, Finland is made up of a content population that despite small ethnic Swedish and Russian minorities, lacks seams in the social fabric to be exploited by Russia as they are in Serbia, Donbas, Transnistria and the Caucasus. This has made Finland’s joining NATO relatively simple.

Although incredible to Western observers, the argument, that NATO threatens Russian sovereignty and that a buffer of neutral states is required, is used as one of many justifications for the invasion of Ukraine. It partially explains the criticality of Belorussian relations and explains Russia’s continued sowing of anti-western rhetoric in Eastern Europe and Caucasus regions. The obvious counter argument is that such actions are also explained by malign goals of Russian leaders to restore a greater Russia and Russian sphere of influence. The strategic ambiguity between defense versus expansionism suits Russia’s purpose but regardless, NATO

³ *Gerasimov: Russia Army plans may consider NATO’s expansion*. Al Jazeera, 24 Jan 2023.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/24/russian-military-reforms-respond-to-western-involvementgeneral>

⁴ Quoted in Lokker, N, Hautala, H, *Russia Won’t sit Idly by After Finland and Sweden Join NATO*. War on the Rocks. March 2023. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/russia-wont-sit-idly-by-after-finlandand-sweden-join-nato/>

⁵ Putin, V. *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. 12 July 2021.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

continues to expand. Having hitherto maintained a neutral status, Finland and Sweden have defacto provided the desired buffer in the North but this has now vanished. NATO's open door policy persists and even where an article five defence is not appropriate, significant support has been lent to Ukraine as a prospective member and key bastion of European security.

Following Finland's accession to the alliance, if Russia genuinely felt an increased threat from NATO, logically it would need to protect its new vulnerabilities and as such NATO could expect the border area to be reinforced over time. New vulnerabilities can be said to include a broad land front in proximity to the Northern Fleet at Severomorsk, a key arm of Russia's nuclear deterrent and one of the remaining commands with genuine military credibility and future importance. It also includes important sea lines of communication (SLOCs) between Kaliningrad and St Petersburg across a Baltic Sea almost entirely at the preserve of NATO member states⁶. Thus far, reports of Russian Federation Armed Forces movements are mixed⁷ and normal, with forces coming and going, prioritized as needed for the war in Ukraine. Senior Russian officials have commented on potential future basing in the area⁸, as well as stating that there would be a "military technical retaliation"⁹ to the accession of new states. According to clarification provided by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov via the TASS news agency, this equates to deployment of military hardware¹⁰. It is unclear whether reforms of the Leningrad and Moscow Military districts in the period 2023-2026¹¹ have been long planned or are a reaction to the accession of Finland and Sweden. NATO will watch and carefully consider what the counter moves, if any, should be.

Russia must know that there is no real threat from NATO via Finland. Even if NATO had offensive action in mind against Russian strategic targets in the region, it would not need a land border to achieve such hypothetical aims. It is for that reason that any suggested Russian reinforcement of its border with Finland is most likely to be a continuation of the 'aggressive NATO' narrative and reassurance of the public that Russia remains strong. Irrespective, Russian policy already calls for an increased presence along its northern coastline as a part of its Arctic strategy¹², and so there is an argument to be made that in fact Finland and Sweden joining NATO is simply collateral damage for Russia, that Russian leaders know there is no direct threat to Russian sovereignty, but that they already plan to have sufficient combat power in the region to mitigate the slightly increased risk. Either way, it is all but certain that additional attempts to dominate in a NATO area of interest will only

⁶ Lokker, N, Hautala, H, *Russia Won't sit Idly by After Finland and Sweden Join NATO*. War on the Rocks. March 2023. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/russia-wont-sit-idly-by-after-finland-andsweden-join-nato/>

⁷ Andreikovets, K. *Russia transferred part of troops from the Finnish border*. Babel.ua. <https://babel.ua/en/news/81019-russia-transferred-part-of-the-troops-from-the-finnish-borderpresumably-they-were-sent-to-ukraine>

⁸ *Gerashimov: Russia Army plans may consider NATO's expansion*. Al Jazeera, 24 Jan 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/24/russian-military-reforms-respond-to-western-involvementgeneral>

⁹ Jack, V. *Russia threatens 'military-technical' retaliation over Finland's NATO bid*. Politico, 12 May 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-threaten-military-technical-retaliation-finland-nato-bid/>

¹⁰ *Top diplomat explains how Russia sees its military-technical response to security threats*. TASS Russian News Agency, Jan 2022. <https://tass.com/defense/1388331>

¹¹ Lokker, N, Hautala, H, *Russia Won't sit Idly by After Finland and Sweden Join NATO*. War on the Rocks. March 2023. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/russia-wont-sit-idly-by-after-finland-andsweden-join-nato/>

¹² Kluge, J, Paul, M. *Russia's Arctic Strategy Through 2035*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs. November 2020. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2020C57_RussiaArcticStrategy.pdf

invite increased alliance activities in the very areas in which Russia claims to want to achieve deterrence. The Arctic is, therefore now more than ever, a NATO area of interest.

Russia's Arctic Strategy

The greater long term strategic impact of Finland and soon Sweden joining the alliance, is the movement of NATO's geographic centre of gravity to the North.

Although they do not have territorial water or exclusive economic zones in the Arctic Ocean, they are Arctic Council members. Russia is the only other non-NATO council member at the present time. This could lead to Russia feeling a deeper isolation in this forum and invite further Chinese, or other, support for its Arctic strategies. Whilst there is no current risk of territorial dispute in the Arctic, potential flash points do exist there. Russia is likely to pursue the two levers described next, and NATO will need to have contingency responses ready. Finland and Sweden bring significant boon to any potential response.

The first avenue Russia is likely to pursue, is to dominate Northern sea routes (NSRs). By most assessments NSRs will become routinely viable within 50 years¹³, significantly shortening SLOCs between Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Russia has a history of threatening economic connectors in times of crisis. Recent examples include hydrocarbon pipelines to Europe, agricultural shipping from Ukraine and threats to sea-bed cables. It is likely that Russia will establish the ability to threaten or restrict NSRs (which it claims as inland waterways¹⁴), a tactic to be employed in future Arctic disputes. There is evidence that the Northern Fleet has already been mandated in this regard¹⁴. Conley and Melino, in their report *Great Power Competition in the Arctic to 2050*¹⁵, predict that the Russian military baseline in the Arctic will include a build-up of robust anti-access and area denial capabilities deployed from the Greenland-

Iceland-United Kingdom gap to the Bering Strait, with a significant presence in Murmansk, bordering Finland. The goal will be to hold adversaries at risk, or as a minimum, ensure any Arctic operations are observed.

The second potential source of Arctic friction is continental shelf claims and the extraction of natural resources. Geologists estimate that Arctic sea beds are host to vast undiscovered hydrocarbon reserves; around 13% of the world's oil and up to 30% of natural gas¹⁶. Arctic nations will look to secure access to the greatest possible share

¹³ Masson-Delmotte, et al. *Climate Change 2021. The Physical Science Basis. Summary for Policy Makers*. IPCC 2021. 22.

https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM_final.pdf ¹⁴

Barltrop, H. *Territorial Disputes Over the Northern Sea Route*. Western University.

https://www.democracylab.uwo.ca/Archives/2018_2019_research/shipping_in_the_arctic/territorial_disputes_over_the_northern_sea_route_.html Accessed 3 March 2023.

¹⁴ Moe A. *A New Russian Policy for the Northern Sea Route? State Interests, Key Stakeholders and Economic Opportunities in Changing Times*, *The Polar Journal* 2020. Vol. 10, Iss. 2. 209-227.

¹⁵ Conley, H, Melino, M. *America's Arctic Moment. Great Power Competition in the Arctic to 2050*. Center for Strategic and International Security Studies, Europe Program. March 2020. https://csiswebsite-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/publication/Conley_ArcticMoment_layout_WEB%20FINAL.pdf?EkVudAlPZnRPLwEdAIPO.

GlpYEnNzIN

¹⁶ Howard, R. *The Arctic Gold Rush: The New Race for Tomorrow's Resources*. Bloomsbury, 2009. 6369.

of global reserves such that they can secure their own supplies, or so that in times of crisis they can impact adversaries by affecting commodity markets. For an economy so heavily reliant on export of natural resources such as Russia, this is critical and explains the determination to secure the Arctic. It is unlikely that there will be a direct confrontation over the rights to extract resources¹⁷ given that most undiscovered resources are thought to lie within accepted territorial claims¹⁸.

“As polar sea ice melts and exposes Russia to new risks, defence of this region is now at the forefront of Russian maritime doctrine, contingency planning, and law making...”²⁰. “Today, the Arctic is the only region where Russia has military and strategic supremacy...”¹⁹. It is natural for Russia to pursue maintenance of such an advantage in a critical area, but the lengths to which Russia goes to enhance it will also determine the reaction from NATO. Taking the approach of strength above all else, is to invite the continued expanding circle of military build-up, of action and counteraction. So how could Russia change its trajectory in the Arctic? Avoiding over-militarisation and enhancing prosperity should be the Russian aim. Resource extraction is one area mentioned earlier, but this is largely an internal Russian issue, unlikely to cause friction in and of itself. Exporting those resources via Arctic seas and encouraging others to use NSRs is however an area where Russian claims are unlikely to be recognised in their current form.

Russia’s Arctic strategy already encourages use of NSRs as trade routes and its large fleet of icebreakers enables that. Russia also claims sovereignty over the waters of the NSR and thus the right to close them; something that is both an unacceptable risk to voluminous trade and not applicable to other critical trade routes such as the Suez Canal or Strait of Malacca²⁰. Russia could also use its seat at the Arctic Council to open a process of developing governance for use of the NSR series of straits, drawing on precedents set by previous conventions such as the Constantinople Convention²³ (Suez) or Montreaux Convention²¹ (Dardanelles and Bosphorus). This would be an opportunity to set a legitimate baseline for Arctic passage and one that Western nations would struggle to ignore given their rules-based outlook. Free market forces will only be drawn to the Arctic once conditions of profitability accompanied by sufficiently low risk calculus are met. Russia therefore should also become a net provider of regional security and set conditions for the successful economic exploitation of its Arctic territory, ports, coastline, seabed and sea lanes. All of this would take time, but if

¹⁷ United Kingdom. *Global Strategic Trends: The Future Starts Today*. Ministry of Defence. 6th Edition. 259-267.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1075981/GST_the_future_starts_today.pdf

¹⁸ Howard, R. *The Arctic Gold Rush: The New Race for Tomorrow’s Resources*. Bloomsbury, 2009. 71. ²⁰ *Seeking Deterrence in the High North*. Wilson Centre. Blogpost No. 19 March 2023.

¹⁹ Perez, C. *How Russia’s Future with NATO will Impact the Arctic*. Foreign Policy Analytics, February 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/25/arctic-ukraine-russia-china-eu-invasion-nato/>

²⁰ Makarov, D et al. *Development prospects and importance of the Northern Sea Route*. Elsevier BV 2022 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352146522003696> ²³ Constantinople Convention, Free Navigation of the Suez Canal, October 1881.

<https://www.suezcanal.gov.eg/english/about/canaltreatiesanddecrees/pages/constantinopleconvention.aspx>

²¹ League of Nations Treaty No. 4015. Convention regarding the Regime of the Straits, with Annexes and Protocol. Signed at Montreux, July 20th, 1936.

<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%20173/v173.pdf>

Russia is seen as a risk, the trade shall not pass and sovereignty over a lightly used waterway will mean very little.

Given Russia's failure to deter NATO expansion, for Putin to retain credibility with Russian people and Russian elites, the Kremlin will also need to adapt its internal narrative. NATO will be present to the West and increasingly to the North. Putin will need to spin that in a way that does not appear as weakness.

Whether Russia decides to make a change of strategy, to moderate its Arctic military build-up and to approach NSRs differently will depend on a few factors. The two main ones being self-assessment of the current strategy's success (this will depend heavily on the outcome of the war in Ukraine) and also the position of the US and Canada on the Northwest Passage. Canada currently makes claims of sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, which the US and other nations dispute²². It is not difficult to see how Russia will exploit the lack of Western unity on this issue. The probability is that Russia will attempt to continue to dominate and govern the NSR through strength and refuse to commit to international treaties that fall short of the expectation of sovereignty.

Adapting NATO for the Arctic Long Term

How will NATO's Northern strategies be affected by Finland and Sweden's membership? If as expected, Russia's strategy does not change course, how should NATO adapt its own strategies for the Arctic? As a defensive alliance, generally NATO is reactive to adversary actions. A potential future for the alliance is one with a forward leaning approach that reinvigorates the alliance, introduces new technologies integrated across domains, enhances cooperation with other supra-national organisations and manages the security challenges posed by China and Russia.²³

At the policy level, Danoy and Maddox call for a comprehensive NATO Arctic strategy²⁴. Incredibly, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept does not mention the Arctic at all. Likening establishment of a presence in the Arctic to securing of high ground early, they argue first for the establishment of a political consensus-challenging for the 31-nation alliance with differing levels of interest in Arctic affairs. Leadership and political drive will be especially necessary to convince some Arctic states that have hitherto resisted a NATO role. There have also been arguments presented for a NATO Arctic Command (ARCCOM) to be established²⁵. Such a command would coordinate increased alliance activity and enhance Arctic awareness, coordinate exercises, create contingency plans, form an Arctic Rapid Reaction Force and maintain stability in the region through dialogue with Russia. At present, the European Arctic is the responsibility of NATO's Joint Forces Command Norfolk. It is logical that any future ARCCOM would be borne out of this organisation and require a good working relationship

²² Steinfeld, D. *The US – Canada Northwest Passage Dispute*. Browns Political Review, Mar 2020.

<https://brownpoliticalreview.org/2020/04/the-u-s-canada-northwest-passage-dispute/>

²³ Ellehuus, R. *NATO Futures: Three Trajectories*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 2021.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-futures-three-trajectories> 'Trajectory 2'.

²⁴ Danoy, J, Maddox, M. *Set NATO's Sights on the High North*. Atlantic Council, Oct 2020.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/nato20-2020/set-natos-sights-on-the-high-north/>. Accessed 3 March 2023.

²⁵ Mottola, L. *NATO's Arctic Command: A case for expanding NATO's mission in the High-North*. Arctic Institute, Jan 2023. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-command-case-expansionnato-mission-high-north/>

or potentially even a dual command relationship with NORAD, which retains responsibility for the North American Arctic. As well as the obvious addition of capable forces, the accession of Finland and Sweden to the alliance will add depth to the corporate Arctic knowledge of the alliance as well as providing new potential hosts and leadership for any significant Arctic endeavour.

At the tactical level, NATO presence must increase in the region. As a minimum this is required to ensure a good grasp of adversary activities. Most of this presence is likely to be in the Maritime, Air and Space domains, with increased deployment of alliance surveillance capabilities and freedom of navigation operations. Land force presence will require very careful management. The deployment of Land forces similar to the Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroups seen in Baltic States will be a sensitive issue for new members' Russian relations and may not be seen for some time. Sweden has already signalled that it does not want a permanent alliance presence, with Finland yet to express a preference²⁶, but equally, it will be necessary to demonstrate effective deterrence and reassurance without triggering an overreaction from Russia.

In between NATO policy and physical presence, there lies the opportunity for NATO to develop its ability to counter adversaries that do not wish to play by the same rules. Western intelligence capabilities are strong, but turning intelligence into an effective counter information campaign to discredit the opponent is not currently a commonly used tool. Since the start of the invasion of Ukraine, the public release of selected intelligence has been successful in exposing Russian plans and actions. Although it cannot be proven, it is possible that Russian plans have been changed as a result. Further developing this concept, allies could develop a framework for attribution, declassification and disclosure of adversary actions that will likely continue to occur sub-threshold and in the grey-zone. The next step would be to agree on mechanisms for timely measured response, as without one an adversary will not be deterred. The issue for NATO is that achieving consensus on when and how it would be appropriate to take this kind of action will be problematic. It will take strong diplomatic leadership to effectively juxtapose intelligence sharing arrangements within the alliance, differing levels of willingness to challenge Russia openly and then agree the careful balance that must be struck between appropriate response and risk of escalation.

Conclusion

Finland having joined NATO and Sweden likely to follow suit in the coming months will create strategic ripples through the alliance for the coming decades. These new members are a significant boost to NATO's presence in the increasingly viable Arctic. Their membership also represents a thorn in the side of Russia. Having railed against NATO expansion for so long, Russia's strongman strategy of threatening, disrupting and destabilising to use NATO's own entry criteria as means to contain NATO's expansion, has failed. The struggle for future dominance in the Arctic, is one where many of Russia's most recent tactics will not work. There are no weak states to be controlled, no societal seams to attack and no possibility of deterring NATO presence. A change of strategy, to set conditions for Russian prosperity based upon Russian rules for use of the NSR is less likely to attract unwanted NATO attention than a continuance of policies which threaten or endanger the

²⁶ Masters, J. *How NATO will Change if Finland and Sweden Become Members*. Council on Foreign Relations. June 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-nato-will-change-if-finland-and-swedenbecome-members>

national interests of NATO's Arctic states. It is also more likely to garner genuine public support inside Russia.

In the near term however, a change of Russian strategy is unlikely and so NATO must adapt its own approach to address a continued Russian disruptive activity in the new Arctic theatre. Physical presence is an insufficient deterrent. NATO will need to change the rules to allow the meeting of Russia's sub-threshold activity with proportional response.

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