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Hybrid threats in the Arctic: Scenarios and policy options in a vulnerable region

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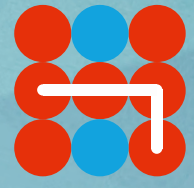

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Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis is a short paper addressing timely questions concerning hybrid threats. It aims to identify gaps in knowledge and understanding, explain processes behind a phenomenon, or highlight trends and future challenges. It is aimed at a wider audience of experts and non-experts alike.

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Hybrid threats in the Arctic: Scenarios and policy options in a vulnerable region

The Arctic is not ungoverned space, but it is experiencing a profound transformation that will test its governance. It is in the seams between international and national laws, implementation, and enforceability, where malicious hybrid actors will exploit opportunities, aided by non-transparency and a lack of indications and warning. And while Western Arctic nations have identified some governance gaps, it took nearly a decade to acknowledge the Arctic's militarization. They cannot afford to do the same for hybrid threats.

Introduction

The Arctic region is a geopolitical bellwether. In the waning days of the Cold War, it was one of the first regions singled out by Soviet authorities as "a zone of peace", and new forms of environmental cooperation blossomed thereafter.[1] Thirty years later, the Arctic was one of the first places where Russia sought to reassert itself as a great power when it re-initiated long-range strategic bomber flights across the region.[2] It was also one of the first arenas to witness the impact of strategic competition and an early glimpse of the strategic implications of greater Sino-Russian alignment. With this understanding, there is little reason to think that the Arctic will be less susceptible to Russian and Chinese malign and asymmetric hybrid activities than other regions.

It is important to assess the Arctic not as we wish it to be – a region of low tension and cooperation – but as it is and may become. As climate change makes the region accessible, Russia and China pursue their economic and security interests, albeit with differences in urgency and prioritization. The Arctic is one of Russia's core interests. Its ambitious economic vision requires it to secure its northern border, which it accomplishes by re-militarizing the Russian Arctic.[3] The Kremlin also seeks the ability to initiate offensive capabilities from the region. China, a self-labelled 'near-Arctic state', views the region as the new strategic "commanding heights".[4] To meet its long-term goal of reliable economic and military access and near-term goal of diversifying its sources of energy, minerals, fisheries, and shipping, it inserts itself into governance structures, increases its scientific footprint, builds its operating capability,[5] and pursues economic projects.[6]

The United States and its Arctic allies and partners discuss these trends in their regional strategies. They respond to militarization by increasing coordinated activity and investing in Arctic-specific

1 'Mikhail Gorbachev's Speech in Murmansk at the Ceremonial Meeting on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star to the City of Murmansk', Barents Info, https://www.barentsinfo.fi/docs/gorbachev_speech.pdf. Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 10 August 2021.
2 'Russia Resumes Long-Range Bomber Flights', Voice of America, November 1, 2009, https://www.voanews.com/archive/russia-resumes-long-range-bomber-flights.
3 Matthew Melino and Heather A. Conley, 'The Ice Curtain: Russia's Arctic Military Presence', CSIS, March 26, 2020, https://www.csis.org/features/ice-curtain-russias-arctic-military-presence.
4 Rush Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang, and Gaoqi Zhang, 'Northern Expedition: China's Arctic Activities and Ambitions', Brookings, April 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/FP_20210412_china_arctic.pdf.
5 Christopher Woody, 'China's first homemade icebreaker heads to the Arctic as Trump looks for 10 more of them from "a certain place"', *Business Insider*, July 22, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/china-xuelong-2-icebreaker-arctic-trump-deals-for-more-2020-7?r=US&IR=T.
6 Stacy Meichtry and Drew Hinshaw, 'China's Greenland Ambitions Run Into Local Politics, U.S. Influence', *Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-rare-earths-quest-upends-greenlands-government-11617807839; Tom Daly and Jeff Lewis, 'Canada rejects bid by China's Shaandong for Arctic gold mine on security grounds', Reuters, December 22, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tmac-resources-shandong-gold/canada-rejects-bid-by-chinas-shandong-for-arctic-gold-mine-on-security-grounds-idUSKBN28W18R.

capabilities.[7] As for China, they monitor its presence but do not have a coordinated view about its meaning – although all agree it could create challenges, or even tensions.[8]

The United States and its Arctic allies and partners seek to understand how strategic competition – from lower-end malign influence operations to kinetic activities – may play out in the Arctic. At the moment, however, their Arctic strategies do not sufficiently consider potential hybrid challenges. Considering Beijing's and Moscow's increasing use of such tactics globally, this is a glaring omission.

Nature of the hybrid threat

The Arctic is particularly vulnerable to hybrid threats. Its physical characteristics lend themselves well to difficult-to-detect tactics: it is exceptionally challenging to monitor owing to its vast distances, sparse population, harsh climate, and limited infrastructure and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, which cripple efforts to improve indications and warnings.

The region is also vulnerable because Western countries tend to self-deter, in part to preserve an aspiration that may have already ceased to be possible. Years of repeating the mantra "High North, low tension" have delayed an appropriate response and possibly distorted the priorities of Arctic policymakers so that an excessively high tolerance for malign activity may have developed. In an ironic twist, the appropriate desire to keep the Arctic 'peaceful' may incentivize Russia and China to act assertively, provided they are not so brazen that a response becomes unavoidable. The West's lack of clarity regarding sub-threshold warfare in the Arctic must be addressed.

The Arctic is not ungoverned space, but it is experiencing a profound transformation that will test its governance. **It is in the seams between international and national laws, implementation,[9] and enforceability, where malicious hybrid actors will exploit opportunities, aided by non-transparency and a lack of indications and warning.** And while Western Arctic nations have identified some governance gaps, it took nearly a decade to acknowledge the Arctic's militarization. They cannot afford to do the same for hybrid threats.

Current strategies and policy

The ever-growing list of US military Arctic strategies illustrates a robust understanding of Russian militarization, but a limited conception of how threats could manifest below the threshold of armed conflict.[10] The Department of Defense strategy hints at some recognition but does not describe measures to deter and defend against malign or coercive activities.[11] The US military service strategies follow a similar trend. However, there is a larger problem: the proliferation of service strategies is an effort to fill the gap left by the lack of a whole-of-government Arctic policy. As militaries cannot alone address hybrid threats, this is precisely what is needed.

European Arctic strategies, on the other hand, tend to sublimate security concerns to the wider array of regional governance issues. Finland's strategy briefly acknowledges security

7 'Arctic Military Activity Tracker', CSIS, https://arcticmilitarytracker.csis.org/; Kevin M. Baerson, 'Canada's New Drone Can Better Surveil Its Challenging Arctic Environment', Inside Unmanned Systems, January 4, 2021, https://insideunmannedsystems.com/canadas-new-drone-can-better-surveil-its-challenging-arctic-environment/; Jacob Gronholt-Pedersen, 'Denmark boosts Arctic defense spending', *Arctic Today*, February 11, 2021, https://www.arctictoday.com/denmark-boosts-arctic-defense-spending/; Thomas Nilsen, 'Norway acquires five new maritime patrol aircraft for Arctic waters', *Barents Observer*, November 26, 2016, https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2016/11/norway-acquires-five-new-maritime-patrol-aircrafts-arctic-waters.

8 Frank Bakke-Jensen, 'Norway's defense minister: We must ensure strategic stability in the High North', *Defense News*, January 11, 2021, https://www.defensenews.com/outlook/2021/01/11/norways-defense-minister-we-must-ensure-strategic-stability-in-the-high-north/; Government of Finland, *Finland's Strategy for Arctic Policy* (Finnish Government, 2021), https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163247/VN_2021_55.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, 18.

9 A recent RAND Corporation study notes that, although multilateral agreements are in place, "additional steps are needed to ensure that such rules are adequately addressing the safety needs of a fast-evolving environment": Benjamin J. Sacks et al., 'Exploring Gaps in Arctic Governance: Identifying Potential Sources of Conflict and Mitigating Measures', RAND Corporation, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1007-1.html.

10 U.S. Department of Defense, *A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic* (Department of the Navy, 2021), https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/05/2002560338/-1/-1/0/ARCTIC%20BLUEPRINT%202021%20FINAL.PDF/ARCTIC%20BLUEPRINT%202021%20FINAL.PDF; U.S. Department of Defense, *Regaining Arctic Dominance* (Department of the Army, 2021), https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2021/03/15/9944046e/regaining-arctic-dominance-us-army-in-the-arctic-19-january-2021-unclassified.pdf; U.S. Department of Defense, *Arctic Strategy* (Department of the Air Force, 2020), https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2020SAF/July/ArcticStrategy.pdf.

11 U.S. Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Arctic Strategy* (Department of Defense, 2019), https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF.

challenges before moving to climate change, the wellbeing of Arctic inhabitants, livelihoods, and infrastructure.[12] There is little discussion of the Arctic as a strategic environment vulnerable to hybrid challenges. Norway's strategy is more balanced, with chapters on Russian military dynamics and international legal issues – and yet it only devotes one paragraph to hybrid threats and does little more than recognize the challenge before moving on to governance issues.[13]

It is reassuring that European strategies view security risks as part of a wider issue set. Yet hybrid challenges are either not discussed or are only briefly alluded to without reference to the potential of asymmetric warfare. In light of this policy void and the political sensitivity around it, we see utility in drawing out theoretical scenarios to underscore that this gap is becoming a security risk.

Arctic hybrid scenarios

When one thinks of political sensitivity in the Arctic, Svalbard comes to the forefront. As vessels from Russia's Northern Fleet must pass nearby on their way to the North Atlantic Ocean, its location is strategically significant. Furthermore, its complex legal status is a vulnerability that may make it appealing to malicious hybrid actors: the 1920 Svalbard Treaty gives Norway sovereignty over the archipelago but states it "cannot treat nationals of signatory countries less favorably than…its own citizens" when it comes to maritime, industrial, mining, and commercial operations.[14] Russia has consistently tested the treaty's interpretation, particularly in relation to the 'less favorable treatment' clause as it pertains to fisheries and non-military projects.

Imagine this hypothetical hybrid scenario: it is 2025 and the Norwegian government is deciding whether to place a new radar station on Svalbard. It is intended to support the tracking of civilian shipping, but Russia complains that it could be used to track its military vessels, breaking the Svalbard Treaty's prohibition on using the archipelago for "warlike" purposes. Simultaneously, a Russian company is awaiting approval for a profitable mining project in Svalbard. In the months leading up to Norway's decision on the mine, Russia announces a scientific research expedition in the Greenland Sea. Insisting on the need to protect civilian vessels from NATO exercises, the Northern Fleet sends an escort of warships and submarines, which will conduct manoeuvres along the way. One of the research vessels is the *Yantar*, a ship that can deploy submersibles capable of destroying sections of undersea cables.[15] While Russia carries out these missions, one of the two cables comprising the Svalbard Undersea Cable System that connects the archipelago to mainland Norway is suddenly cut. Moscow states that the cable was likely damaged due to an earthquake on the ocean floor and that it observed a Chinese scientific research vessel in the vicinity. The Kremlin denies responsibility.

How would Norway, the United States, and NATO respond? What vulnerabilities allowed this to happen? Consider that Russia had the right to operate in those waters; the international legal regime protecting undersea cables is patchy at best;[16] there is no immediate way to verify whether the cutting of the cables was intentional; and NATO allies might be unable to agree on who is responsible.[17] In the meantime, having received the message, Norway could quietly withdraw its plans to install the radar station or approve the Russian mining project, defending the decisions as necessary to ease tensions.

A second scenario could involve Greenland, where both Russia and China have interests. China's[18] interests lie in the island's minerals, fisheries, and strategic location in the North

12 Government of Finland, *Finland's Strategy for Arctic Policy*.
13 Government of Norway, *People, opportunities and Norwegian interests in the Arctic* (Norwegian Ministries, 2021), https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/arctic_policy/id2830120/.
14 Andreas Østhagen, '100 Years of Arctic Geopolitics: The Svalbard Headache', CSIS, November 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/201102_Northern_Connections_Geopolitics_Neglected_Arctic_Spaces.pdf.
15 Pierre Morcos and Colin Wall, 'Invisible and Vital: Undersea Cables and Transatlantic Security', CSIS, June 11, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/invisible-and-vital-undersea-cables-and-transatlantic-security.
16 Tara Davenport, 'Submarine Cables, Cybersecurity and International Law: An Intersectional Analysis', *Catholic University Journal of Law and Technology* 24, no. 1 (2015): 57-109.
17 Sacks et al., 'Exploring Gaps in Arctic Governance'.
18 Stacy Meichtry and Drew Hinshaw, 'China's Greenland Ambitions Run Into Local Politics, U.S. Influence'.

Atlantic, whereas for Russia, the US air base and early warning missile defense radar at Thule could affect its ability to deploy nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) through the GIUK (Greenland, Iceland, the United Kingdom) gap. Imagine this hypothetical scenario: it is again 2025 and a large percentage of the Greenlandic electorate is demanding complete independence from Denmark. The view is not universally held but suppose Moscow begins a malign influence campaign strongly encouraging Greenland to remove US and Danish military forces and become a neutral country. Simultaneously, Beijing promises generous financial support and large, environmentally safe infrastructure projects to support independence.[19] Both Russian- and Chinese-sourced messages emphasize Greenland's subjugation to the United States and Denmark, including reminders of colonial-era abuses.[20] Imagine that political forces coalesce around these narratives and it appears that there are sufficient votes to elect a coalition that will terminate the 1951 US-Denmark Defense Agreement, close Thule Air Base, and allow China to gain a major economic foothold in the Arctic – all without anyone firing a shot or moving a single warship.

Another fictitious scenario could imagine that the China-Iceland Joint Arctic Science Observatory installation in northern Iceland – which has already expanded the areas on which it gathers data[21] – is found to be collecting intelligence on NATO activity. Given China's ambitions for a Polar Silk Road, reaffirmed in Beijing's most recent Five-Year Plan, which also linked scientific research to deep-sea exploration and space missions,[22] how would the Alliance respond?

Conclusion

These scenarios, and the policy gaps they exploit, make it clear that Western Arctic countries must take an expansive approach: the breadth of policy responses must match the breadth of the exploitative opportunities. A sole focus on conventional military threats (the American model) will be ineffectual, as will a nearly exclusive focus on climate change and the economic wellbeing of Arctic communities (the Finnish and Norwegian model).

To start with, Arctic regional strategies must fully acknowledge the potential for hybrid threats and focus specific activities on addressing them. Practising decision-making in challenging situations will be particularly critical. Policymakers must challenge themselves by increasing the number of **regional tabletop exercises** that span the political and military spectrum, and continuing to incorporate hybrid threat elements into conventional military exercises as well. Furthermore, they must increase **consultation and information-sharing** – both horizontally between allies and partners, government agencies, and the private sector, as well as vertically between national and local governments. This is crucial for hybrid threats because the responsibility for initial detection and response often lies with homeland security departments, local law enforcement, or private companies. Finland and Norway, which already have sophisticated concepts for whole-of-society security,[23] should apply this framework to the Arctic and share their best practices. The forthcoming EU Arctic strategy may also present an opportunity to encourage an approach that emphasizes robust communication between levels of government and nations.

19 This scenario presupposes that Greenland's recently announced participation in a collective European Union mining consortium is for some reason interrupted, or does not come entirely to fruition quickly enough: Kevin McGwin, 'Greenland joins EU minerals group', *Arctic Today*, July 9, 2021, https://www.arctictoday.com/greenland-joins-eu-minerals-group/.
20 Karla Jessen Williamson, 'Greenland Reconciliation Commission finds colonization did "a lot of damage"', CBC, January 4, 2018, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/greenland-reconciliation-commission-report-1.4471695.
21 Melody Schreiber, 'A new China-Iceland Arctic science observatory is already expanding its focus', *Arctic Today*, October 31, 2018, https://www.arctictoday.com/new-china-iceland-arctic-science-observatory-already-expanding-focus/?wallit_nosession=1.
22 Marc Lanteigne, 'The Polar Policies in China's New Five-Year Plan', *The Diplomat*, March 12, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/the-polar-policies-in-chinas-new-five-year-plan/.
23 Government of Finland, *Security Strategy for Society* (The Security Committee, 2017), https://turvallisuuskomitea.fi/en/security-strategy-for-society/; Government of Norway, *The defence of Norway: Capability and readiness* (Norwegian Ministry of Defence, 2020), https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/3a2d2a3cfb694aa3ab4c6cb5649448d4/long-term-defence-plan-norway-2020---english-summary.pdf, 16.

Increasing capacity in both a military and a legislative sense is also necessary. Countries must boost **situational awareness capabilities**:[24] intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance is the first line of defense in deterring hybrid threats. Bad actors are more likely to act maliciously if they feel they can do so unnoticed. A robust NATO ISR capacity in the waters around Svalbard, for example, might have deterred Russia in the first scenario.

Western Arctic nations must also develop **better legislative approaches to countering hybrid threats**. Finland, for example, already has statutes requiring "entities whose domicile is located outside the European Union or European Economic Area to apply for permission to buy property in Finland".[25] The government reserves the right, via a transparent process with clear criteria, to reject the application on national security grounds. Other Western Arctic nations should adopt similar laws and consult to identify loopholes and discuss suspicious applications. If China knew that its application for the mine in Greenland would never clear such a process, it may have decided the influence campaign in scenario two was not worth the risk of Western retaliation.

Finally, **early, united, and strong diplomatic responses to hybrid threats** are also needed. Western Arctic nations must proactively and publicly expose potential hybrid threat activities or actors to deprive them of the cloak of ambiguity. If these measures can be implemented, the Arctic may well remain a peaceful region.

24 US and Norwegian strategies recognize this generally, but do not consider the hybrid utility of boosting awareness: U.S. Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Arctic Strategy*, 9-11; Government of Norway, *The defence of Norway*, 4.
25 Rachel Ellehuus, 'Strange Birds in the Archipelago: Finland's Legislation on Foreign Real Estate Investment', CSIS, April 7, 2020, https://www.csis.org/blogs/kremlin-playbook-spotlight/strange-birds-archipelago-finlands-legislation-foreign-real-estate.

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