

## Hybrid CoE Research Report 4

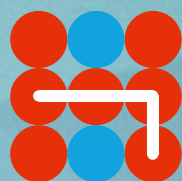
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DECEMBER 2021

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# Security and hybrid threats in the Arctic: Challenges and vulnerabilities of securing the Transatlantic Arctic

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Hybrid CoE



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**Hybrid CoE Research Reports** are thorough, in-depth studies providing a deep understanding of hybrid threats and phenomena relating to them. Research Reports build on an original idea and follow academic research report standards, presenting new research findings. They provide either policy-relevant recommendations or practical conclusions.

This report was edited by Paul Dickson and Anna-Kaisa Hiltunen at Hybrid CoE. Language editing by Lynn Nikkanen. Map on page 14 by Kauko Kyöstiö.

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The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.

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# Introduction: Scoping the Arctic region and its vulnerability to hybrid threats

Paul Dickson and Emma Lappalainen

This Research Report by the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) is the product of the initial scoping work undertaken for the Hybrid CoE project on the Arctic and hybrid threats.<sup>1</sup> The project is one in a series of regional studies exploring how hybrid threats manifest in the region, as well as the nature and extent of such threats, with a particular focus on the Transatlantic Alliance and the European Union (EU). The overall objective of the first phase of the project is to scope and identify the problem and shed light on the consequent challenges, in order to be able to anticipate, identify and counter hybrid threats.

The scoping phase of the project encapsulated in this report focused on identifying the security and policy challenges that result from the idea of the Arctic as a global region, and one with a unique character, intersecting with the competing realities of the Arctic nations, with their distinct political, strategic, cultural and economic characteristics. The studies in this report suggest that the consequent divergences and intersections of national interests and aspirational ideals in the Arctic create dynamics that give rise to vulnerabilities to hybrid threats both in the Arctic as well as from the Arctic. The chapters in this report duly focus on the broad conception of the Arctic as a region in itself, as well as how the respective security issues are approached as regional challenges, in order to identify the main strategic dynamics and features that influence the hybrid threat landscape.

This introductory chapter will provide some preliminary observations drawn from the scoping papers on these dynamics and features of Arctic

security, as well as the resulting vulnerabilities to hybrid threat activities. Drawing on the various analyses of competitors and regional strategic interests, the chapter concludes with a summary of the main challenges and vulnerabilities to hybrid threats in the region.

The second chapter of the report, by Camilla T. N. Sørensen, explores the current state of China's strategic interest in the polar regions in general and the Arctic in particular, juxtapositioning the emerging consensus on the risks posed by China's assertive posturing as a self-declared "near-Arctic" state with what she characterizes as its modest level of activity and investment. The chapter explores the consequent dynamics and their impact on the hybrid threat environment in the Arctic, including China's adaptation of its tactics in order to achieve its strategic objectives as a new actor and stakeholder in the region, and how this is playing out against the backdrop of wider geopolitical competition and perceptions of the nature of the threat among Arctic states. In general, Sørensen's analysis also provides insights into China's objectives and role as a hybrid threat actor in the region, as well as its growing impact as it asserts its view of what being a "near-Arctic state" stakeholder means for security in a region where it pushes a narrative designed to test what Chinese scholars and media see as the exclusivity of the Arctic states.

In the third chapter, Elizabeth Buchanan examines the political, military, economic and cultural centrality of the Russian Arctic, focusing on both the challenges and opportunities of the region from Russia's perspective. As Buchanan notes, the Russian Arctic is culturally, economically and

1 The opinions and assessments in this paper are those of the authors, and do not represent the policies or opinions of Hybrid CoE's Participating States. The project and report have also benefitted from a series of workshops, held in spring 2021, in support of the development of a tabletop exercise and supporting documentation.

militarily in Russia's interests; its Arctic strategy and actions reflect its desire to be perceived as an Arctic power. The European High North's importance as a strategic as well as an operational priority was signalled when Russia created a new Northern Military District in late 2019, and an electromagnetic warfare centre for the Northern Fleet in May 2020.<sup>2</sup> Buchanan highlights the vulnerabilities and risks for North America and Europe as well as the possible consequences of failing to appreciate the strategic importance of the region to Russia. The renewal of its military infrastructure is a function of that centrality, but it also reflects the deliberate strategic ambiguity that characterizes Russia's range of actions from cooperation through competition to hybrid conflict. Buchanan's chapter also emphasizes the way in which Russia deploys its role as an Arctic power as part of its wider global strategy, compartmentalizing it to leverage its cooperation while using its northern force posture to coerce and to promote its hybrid campaign against NATO.

Chapters four and five explore the Arctic as a transatlantic security region, and the dynamics of the current environment from the perspective of vulnerabilities to hybrid threats. The Arctic region is at the intersection of Europe's and North America's primary defence and security organizations. Patrick Cullen's chapter focuses on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Europe Union (EU) as they consider the Arctic and hybrid threats from a global perspective, and through the lens of their traditional missions. Cullen's chapter highlights how each organization understands and approaches hybrid threats in addition to hybrid warfare, as well as how this manifests in their views of their respective roles in the Arctic/High North. The chapter identifies the possible vulnerabilities to hybrid threats in the seams between their roles in the Arctic/High North and the ways in which they integrate countering hybrid threats into their missions. The chapter underlines the requirement to both reconcile a counter hybrid threat mission within their mandates, as well as to address defence and

security threats in the Arctic based on a shared understanding of the nature of the hybrid threats to the European High North. The gaps continue to create opportunities for adversaries to exploit.

The challenge of promoting and securing a transatlantic approach to the Arctic and hybrid threats is further exacerbated by the dynamics of the North American Arctic defence and security posture. The chapter by Paul Dickson and Gaëlle Rivard Piché explores how the US and Canada approach Arctic defence through a commons lens – the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) and Russian air, space and maritime threats. However, because their Arctics occupy different places in their respective national histories, economies, cultures and psyches, they diverge in their views on other security areas, particularly in the links between human and national security. There are also distinctions between interpretations of international legal and normative frameworks in the region, which reflect differences in geopolitical outlooks and approaches to multilateralism in international affairs. In policy and strategy, this manifests as a divergent emphasis on the importance of national presence and security capabilities as markers of sovereignty, as well as on which multilateral or regional organizations are primarily responsible for integrating hard and soft security issues.

The Hybrid CoE project focusing on the nature of hybrid threats in and towards the Arctic as a region, of which this volume is a component, starts with the question of whether the way we understand security in the Arctic is also a feature of the threat landscape. Is the renewed interest in the Arctic a reflection of geopolitical competition, or does the Arctic have a specific strategic dynamic of its own, both driving and exacerbating tensions in an area where states compete for access and influence, but also shaping the interaction with hybrid threat activities? The answer is not a binary choice between an Arctic exceptionalism vulnerable to the exigencies of international currents, or a northern theatre that must be secured. This false choice is, in and of itself, part of the hybrid

2 Mathieu Boulegue, 'Military Assets in the Arctic: A Russia-West Correlation of Forces', *Russia Matters*, 22 January 2020, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/military-assets-arctic-russia-west-correlation-forces>. Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 8 December 2021.

threat landscape dynamic in the Arctic as competing national, regional, multilateral and private sector perceptions and aspirations create policy and strategy seams that can, and in some cases appear to be exploited, and thus constitute a vulnerability to hybrid threats. Scoping Arctic security and its vulnerabilities to hybrid threats begins with an explanation of how this report will apply the concept of hybrid threats, how the report uses the concept of security in the context of understanding hybrid threats in the Arctic, and then establishing the dynamic of the Arctic region's security environment; in other words, those forces and features that are stimulating changes most significantly from a hybrid threat perspective.

### Using the concept of hybrid threats

Defence and security vulnerabilities are a function of the nature of the threat and the interests of the state which are being targeted. As an analytical concept then, qualifying threats as hybrid threats poses a challenge. It can be the result of identifying some distinguishing features that determine the nature of the threat, but also requires specifics, particularly the requirement to identify the actor and the consequences for the targeted state.<sup>3</sup> First, identifying the critical interests and probable, even possible, targets. Second, the intent – the strategic objectives – of adversaries or hostile actors, a context which is critical for assessing whether activities or actions are part of a campaign or operation, namely coordinated and synchronized actions that deliberately target the systemic vulnerabilities of states and institutions through a wide range of means. Third, whether the activities and actions create confusion as to intent and attribution. Often such activities exploit the thresholds of detection and attribution as well as the seams between war and peace, and the seams between internal and external, military and civil, or public and private responsibilities and authorities. If the actions are

covert, this suggests that they are designed to obfuscate intent and capabilities, to create ambiguity about risk and consequences that can make attribution, and therefore responses, challenging. Finally, the aim is to influence decision-making to further the hostile actor's or agent's strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target. Actual hybrid threats are difficult to identify – covert activities and/or creating ambiguity and doubt about intent and attribution is a deliberate feature – but they can be understood and assessed for their threats to national security. However, declaring an activity a threat or a harm is a policy determination as much as an objective reality, particularly when the harm is possible or potential. Distinguishing the threatening nature of activities is also a function of vulnerabilities and risk as well as consequences. The character, logic and form, as well as the intent and target, are fundamental elements that need to be understood to identify a hybrid threat and to distinguish it from what could be normal competitive activity.

Identifying hybrid threats and how they are being used as part of a more systematic pursuit of strategic objectives requires a focus on form and the tools themselves, along with intent and consequences. Similarly, the tools in hybrid threat operations are employed in and across a range of domains that are not traditionally part of a national or multilateral security regime; intrusions into healthcare systems and academia to gain an advantage in vaccine research is a recent example. The range of targets can itself be designed to blur the usual borders of international politics and operate in interfaces between public and private, or security and routine commercial competition. The ambiguity is exacerbated by combining conventional and unconventional means – disinformation and interference in political debate or elections, critical infrastructure disturbances or attacks, cyber operations, different forms of criminal activities or, at the other end of the spectrum, an asymmetric

<sup>3</sup> The hybrid threat concept used for this report is that of Hybrid CoE, and draws on the following: Teija Tiilikainen, 'Remarks on hybrid threats and the Conceptual Framework'; High Level Virtual Event on the presentation of the Conceptual Framework for Hybrid Threats, held on 26 November 2020; Paul Dickson, 'MSG Methodology: how do you assess whether an activity is a potential "hybrid threat?"', Version May-June 2020; Teija Tiilikainen, 'Concept of Hybrid Threats in Hybrid CoE's work', Presentation, October 2020; G. Giannopoulos, H. Smith and M. Theodoridou, *The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model*, Joint Research Centre and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 26 November 2020, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/the-landscape-of-hybrid-threats-a-conceptual-model/>; Johann Schmid, 'The Hybrid Face of Warfare', COI S&D Inspiration Paper (Helsinki: March 2019). For more information, see 'Hybrid Threats', <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats/>. The report has also benefited from discussions with Canadian senior strategic analyst Michael Roi, and his work on hybrid threats.

use of military means or the threat of force. The confusion is aimed at influencing different forms of decision-making at the local (regional), state, or institutional level, undermining confidence and the ability to respond.

Determining the character, logic and form of hybrid threats requires specificity, identifying the actions measured against the intent of hostile actors who use them, and the importance of the targets. The hostility is less a function of intent, but rather a function of the use of tools that are designed to confuse, blur lines, perpetuate confrontation, and exploit seams and ambiguity. These determine whether a nominally benign or normal activity should be considered threatening. Not all actions are threats to national interests, but actions that undermine or target national interests are normally considered threats. And it is in the policy and normative space between the two – the “grey zone” – that we should look for hybrid threats. For the purposes of this report, the focus is on the nexus between security and what that looks like in the Arctic.

## Concept of security

Defining the boundaries and specifics of Arctic security is perhaps a first-order challenge. Indeed, a recent essay in *Global Security Review* argued that security was, in fact, ‘everything.’<sup>4</sup> Security is an expansive analytical, political and personal concept that can, depending on the context, encompass everything from human security – daily vulnerabilities of civilians like economic security or safety – to national security, which focuses on war, conflict, violence, and crime. Analytically, these ideas have often been divided into hard and soft security, or at least defined that way to determine responsibility for addressing each as separate spheres on a national security spectrum. This dichotomy is another challenge when approaching Arctic security, both analytically and politically.

The chapters focus on security from a policy perspective, that is as a political concept to designate priorities and highlight issues and challenges.<sup>5</sup> The character of the Arctic requires Arctic security to be understood as the intersection of human security, political security (the rule of law, for example) and national security issues, including defence and the environment. This manifests as a broad range of issues and divisions inherent in the Arctic that need to be considered to promote and enhance security. Further, the interconnectivity of critical infrastructures, such as digital, transportation, electricity, water and energy resource management systems with cyber technology creates vulnerabilities, exacerbated in some Arctic areas by minimal infrastructure, distances, and extreme climate and weather. The range of security challenges are the responsibility of different levels of local and federal governments, intra-government agencies and ministries, as well as a multilateral governance regime with very distinct degrees of sovereignty, authority and equity. The fractious security regime creates challenges when seeking the means to prioritize problems, apportion responsibility and assign resources to address real or perceived threats or risks. In the Arctic context, the consequences are seams and potential divisions that could form vulnerabilities to potential adversaries.<sup>6</sup>

## Arctic dynamics and features

### The Arctic as a region real and imagined

In 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev called for the Arctic to become a “genuine zone of peace and fruitful cooperation”, an exceptional region in contrast to its militarized and volatile Cold War state.<sup>7</sup> The idea that the region could and needed to be treated as unique in international affairs resonated in the 1990s, particularly given the promise of the end of the Cold War and in anticipation of the promise of global cooperation and the end of

4 Joshua Ball, ‘What is Security? Everything’, *Global Security Review*, 7 June 2019, <https://globalsecurityreview.com/what-is-security-everything/>.

5 For a useful and wide-ranging discussion of a more expansive view of Arctic security, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Ryan Dean, and Rob Huebert (eds.), *(Re)Conceptualizing Arctic Security: Selected Articles from the Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* (Calgary: University of Calgary Centre for Military, Security and Strategic Studies, 2017).

6 Joëlle Klein and Kamrul Hossain, ‘Conceptualising Human-centric Cyber Security in the Arctic in Light of Digitalisation and Climate Change’, *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 11/February 2020, <https://arcticreview.no/index.php/arctic/article/view/1936/3997>.

7 Mikhail Gorbachev, ‘The Speech in Murmansk at the ceremonial meeting on the occasion of the presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star Medal to the city of Murmansk’, 1 October 1987, [https://www.barentsinfo.fi/docs/gorbachev\\_speech.pdf](https://www.barentsinfo.fi/docs/gorbachev_speech.pdf).

history.<sup>8</sup> The governance and dispute mechanisms borne of or matured in the spirit of the period – the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the Arctic Council – were models for regional and transnational cooperation and dialogue.<sup>9</sup> The exceptional nature of the region – high north, low tension – became a defining feature that not only characterized it as a region, but also became arguably the most compelling reason to represent the area as a region, and to be represented as part of the region, states and sovereign peoples unified by aspiration as well as locale.

In 2021, the Arctic as exceptional, as isolated from other geopolitical tensions, appears to be at risk. Military, diplomatic, and economic rivalries, exacerbated by sustained differences over how to balance addressing climate change, environmental degradation, human security and sustainable development, are of global interest and have increased the strategic importance of the region. Receding ice coverage, the potential for longer ice-free seasons, and resource demand have created new routes, and increased attempts to access, or the anticipation of access to and across the Arctic Ocean. These issues have caused new national and multi-lateral defence concerns for “traditional” Arctic states – those contiguous to the Arctic Ocean – and claims of new stakes for those once defined, admittedly by the traditional Arctic states, as non-Arctic. The stakeholder community has expanded to include multilateral institutions, transnational groups, and a wide range of private and commercial entities.

Divisions over the exceptional nature of the region as a global commons persist. They are rooted, however, in the limits of the utility of the Arctic as a term to describe, as one distinct geographic region, a complex amalgam of sovereign territory, continental shelves, internal waters, territorial seas, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and international waters.

Geographically, the Arctic can refer to an area primarily but not exclusively north of the Arctic Circle that includes the Arctic Ocean and adjacent seas, and is centred on the North Pole. However, there is no single universally agreed-upon definition of the geographic extent of the region, as the southern boundary varies from one Arctic state to another. Hence, there are effectively multiple Arctics: circumpolar, North American, the European High North, the North Calotte (the historical term for the northernmost regions in the Nordic countries of Finland, Norway and Sweden), and the northern regions of individual states.

According to the most common and basic definition of the Arctic, the region is the land and sea area north of the Arctic Circle (a circle of latitude about 66° 34' North). It comprises approximately 7.7 million square miles or 4% of the Earth's surface. While it has often been described as remote, inaccessible and cold, its most defining feature when perceived from the south is that the Arctic marks a frontier, with an almost indigent population of southern settlers, and limited regulation.<sup>10</sup> The total population of the region is low, estimated at approximately four million, a mix of settlers and Indigenous peoples. But there are extreme variances by state, particularly in terms of density, and it is shifting, with dramatic increases or decreases. Russia's Arctic has the largest population and major urban centres but has seen a dramatic decrease in population. The North American Arctic has a relatively small population concentrated in larger settlements, but the population has grown between 10% and 38% since 1990.<sup>11</sup> In Norway, the area above the Arctic Circle represents 35% of Norway's mainland territory, and 9% of its population.<sup>12</sup>

### Governance regimes

The regional disparities and asymmetric equities manifest as governance challenges within and

8 For an extended discussion, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Ryan Dean, 'Arctic Exceptionalisms', in *The Arctic and the World Order*, ed. Kristina Spohr and Daniel S. Hamilton (Washington: Brookings University Press, 2020), 327–356.

9 Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv and Kara K. Hodgson, "Arctic Exceptionalism" or "comprehensive security"? Understanding security in the Arctic', in *Arctic Yearbook* (2019), [https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2019/Scholarly-Papers/11\\_AY2019\\_Hoogensen\\_Hodgson.pdf](https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2019/Scholarly-Papers/11_AY2019_Hoogensen_Hodgson.pdf).

10 Kristina Spohr and Daniel S. Hamilton (eds.), *The Arctic and the World Order* (Washington: Brookings University Press, 2020), 1–2.

11 Timothy Heleniak, Eeva Turunen and Shinan Wang, 'Cities on Ice', *Nordregio Magazine*, <https://nordregio.org/nordregio-magazine/issues/arctic-changes-and-challenges/cities-on-ice-population-change-in-the-arctic/>.

12 Government of Norway, 'The Norwegian Government's Arctic Policy: People, opportunities and Norwegian interests in the Arctic', White Paper, January 2021.

between states. Governance, for example, is splintered between a range of national, transnational, regional and multilateral organizations whose focus is not exclusively on the Arctic as a whole. The Arctic Council (AC) is the primary intergovernmental forum focused exclusively on most Arctic issues. The AC was created in 1996 by the non-binding Ottawa Declaration, not by an international treaty, making it an intergovernmental regional forum, not an international organization. It was the creation of eight Arctic member states – the Arctic littoral states plus Iceland, Sweden and Finland and those defined as Permanent Participants – and six Indigenous peoples' organizations representing Arctic natives. These members and participants have full consultation rights in all Council negotiations and decisions. The Council also incorporates observers but makes a distinct division between member states and others – Arctic and non-Arctic. Observer status is granted, and engagement is at the invitation of the Arctic Council, “unless SAOs [Senior Arctic Officials] decide otherwise”.<sup>13</sup> Observer activities characterized as being at odds with the Council's [Ottawa] Declaration can be grounds for revoking that status. The “Arctic Five”<sup>14</sup> is a further sub-grouping of Arctic Ocean littoral states: Denmark, Norway, Canada, the US, and Russia. The goals of the AC were shaped by the desire to create a cooperative forum to settle disputes arising from the creeping jurisdictional expansion and claims of coastal states. It did not include hard security and defence matters in its mandate. Its governance model is consensual, and inclusive, recognizing the status of transnational indigenous organizations, but constrained in scope. The AC has had notable successes, negotiating three legally binding agreements under its auspices.<sup>15</sup> It is proving adaptable, but some argue it is straining to accommodate current challenges,

and challengers.<sup>16</sup> It is a means of coordination and is influential, but with no formal legal identity.<sup>17</sup>

Issues in the region are splintered across a multitude of other local, national, regional and multilateral frameworks, jurisdictions and authorities, however. Arctic defence and security are handled through several military-political arrangements, splitting the Arctic into a number of strategic areas and sub-regions. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) are the most expansive. Regional organizations include North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), Northern Defence Cooperation (NORDEF), and the Nordic-Baltic eight (NB8), all of which secure and promote defence and security cooperation. These collective security organizations are complemented by other partnering arrangements – Finland and Sweden's cooperation with NATO as Enhanced Opportunity Partners, for example, or the US-Iceland arrangement in place since 1951. Other defence and security consultation bodies include the Northern Group, a British initiative which includes the Baltics and Nordic nations as well as Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands. While inclusive, the Nordic and regional networks of arrangements have been characterized as a “complicated and fragmented network of frameworks and platforms”.<sup>18</sup>

A range of non-security arrangements and forums, like the AC, also address disputes through international conventions, treaties, legal frameworks and cooperation in Arctic safety and environmental stewardship. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is the foremost means of resolving maritime and continental-shelf boundary claims.<sup>19</sup> The Barents Euro-Arctic Council coordinates non-military issues for European Arctic states. However, in addition to this complex regime, existing non-security and security

13 Ottawa Declaration (1996), <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/85>.

14 For a useful discussion, see Andreas Kuersten, ‘The Arctic Five Versus the Arctic Council’, in *Arctic Yearbook* (2016), <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2016/2016-briefing-notes/205-the-arctic-five-versus-the-arctic-council>.

15 Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic (May 2011); Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response Agreement (2013); Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation (2017).

16 Zhao Long, ‘Arctic Governance: Challenges and Opportunities’, Global Governance Working Paper, 29 November 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/report/arctic-governance>.

17 Iceland is generally not regarded as an Arctic Ocean littoral state as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is not adjacent to the high seas portion of the Central Arctic Ocean.

18 Tuomas Iso-Markku, Eeva Innola and Teija Tiilikainen, ‘A Stronger North? Nordic cooperation in foreign and security policy in a new security environment’, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, August 2018.

19 James R. Holmes, ‘The Arctic Sea—a New Wild West?’, *The Diplomat*, April 2011, <https://thediplomat.com/2011/04/the-arctic-sea-a-new-wild-west/>.

arrangements and forums have been challenged by the new security environment characterized by a more expansive definition of security and represented by hybrid threats, as well as by having to use non-security forums to maintain dialogue and cooperation with Russia.<sup>20</sup>

### **New actors and new interests:**

#### **Global commons and stewardship**

The strategic dynamics in the Arctic are changing, stressing governance and partnerships as well as creating exploitable divisions. New actors and old actors with new ideas and capabilities are interested in resources and trade route access to and through the Arctic, and are genuinely concerned that the impact of climate change in the Arctic is a global issue.

From a global perspective, as detailed in the following chapters, the most significant new actor is China, and its assertion of itself as a “near-Arctic” state.<sup>21</sup> China’s 2021 14th Five-Year Plan signalled the prioritized development of a Polar Silk Road. The inclusion of a policy statement on the polar region was itself a first, characterized as the “most coherent signal yet” of its aspirations to be perceived as a global polar power and stakeholder, balancing “protection and utilization”. China emphasized the importance of developing technologies that could be used for deep-sea, polar and space exploration, characterized as “three-dimensional” monitoring in the polar regions, with supporting infrastructure, a strategy similar to that

pursued in the Antarctic.<sup>22</sup> Russia, on the other hand, is an old Arctic actor, but it is re-asserting its primacy as an Arctic power and the Arctic as a significant strategic, economic and cultural region. Russia is rebuilding its force posture in the region, reconfiguring its strategic command and control, rebuilding its military infrastructure and demonstrating the capabilities, including the reach, of new weapons systems. Russia and China are also developing closer economic ties, although the current relationship appears largely transactional. Russia has no desire to support China’s desire for greater influence and presence in the region. However, both Russian and Chinese initiatives have prompted a renewed interest in the Arctic from the United States, NATO and NORAD. This has manifested in a renewal of the Arctic military-strategic focus on the defence of the northern flanks and operational cold weather capabilities, particularly ice breakers.

Climate change, access and resources have also renewed the global interest of states and institutions that both promote the importance of the Arctic as a region where change will have a global impact on the environment, as well as one where defence and security discussions impact them directly and indirectly. These assertions contest the existing governance model that positions Arctic states as the primary stakeholders, as well as decision-makers. China is not the only state that deems itself a near-Arctic state, merely the most contentious one.<sup>23</sup>

20 See Alexander N. Vylegzhanin, ‘Constant and Changing Components of the Arctic Regime’, in *The Arctic and the World Order* (Washington: Brookings University Press, 2020), 251–66; for an argument that the expanded definition of security allows existing governance arrangements like the Arctic Council to function better, see Andrew Chater, Wilfrid Greaves and Leah Sarson, ‘Assessing Security Governance in the Arctic’, in *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security*, ed. Guinild Hoogenson Gjorv, Marc Lanteigne and Horatio Sam-Aggrey (London: Routledge, 2020), 43–56.

21 People’s Republic of China, ‘White Paper on China’s Arctic Policy’, 26 January 2018, The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, First Edition 2018, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm).

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 Ibid.



**FIGURE 1: Routes and national claims in the Arctic**

## The Arctic and vulnerabilities to hybrid threats

The evolving strategic environment is both exposing and creating vulnerabilities to tools and ways in which hostile actors have used hybrid threats. However, there is no consensus on the nature and extent of hybrid threats to the Arctic, nor on their use by adversaries. There is also a regional divide over the relative risks of conflict in the Arctic compared to other areas of the globe. Moreover, there is a desire to maintain the Arctic as an example of international cooperation and low conflict. The absence of consensus on these challenges can result in real policy differences between allies, and Arctic states. This gap is exploitable and inhibits responses, particularly in the hybrid threat space.

This is evident when examining Russia as an Arctic nation and its strategy for the Arctic. Russia promotes cooperation in the region, supporting Arctic exceptionalism and the status quo. Arctic states cooperate in areas such as search and rescue, and share Russia's opinions on limiting Arctic stakeholders. At the same time, much uncertainty surrounds Russia's military activity, posture and recapitalization in its own Arctic. The Russian leadership asserts that it is responding to NATO provocations. Russia also appears to be trying to exploit the transatlantic debates over Arctic exceptionalism, and to leverage its Arctic position to mitigate economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, the consequences of its aggression in Crimea and elsewhere. Russia's desire to compartmentalize the Arctic aligns with a particular view of the

region, but creates divisions which can be, and are, amplified. For example, on 31 March 2021, Russia submitted new claims to the United Nations, extending its proposed definition of its continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean to include the Gakkel Ridge, the Lomonosov Ridge, and the Canadian Basin. These claims overlap with those of Canada and Denmark, but not those of the US.<sup>24</sup> Opinion is split as to whether Russia's use of the rules-based order and the legitimate UNCLOS process is a normal and appropriate negotiating gambit or an overly aggressive extension into Canada's and Greenland's exclusive economic zones. In any case, it is cause for concern when combined with the coercive potential of Russia's aggressive re-militarization of its northern flank.

Russia's capability and employment of concepts suggest its bastion defence could be extended beyond the Barents Sea, conducting sea denial operations in the maritime spaces of northwestern Europe, all the way to the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap. This threatens a vital line of communication between Europe and North America. From a hybrid threat perspective, the new capabilities and northern exercises are deliberately ambiguous.<sup>25</sup> The Arctic Ocean, once a barrier, could provide new access points via the Pacific and the Atlantic, which calls for consideration of the three gates: the Bering Strait, the Davis Strait, and the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap. Russia's mix of cooperation and competition in the Arctic creates ambiguity about its intentions in the region, which creates confusion over how and whether to respond. These disagreements are targets for hybrid operations that, for example, further Russia's desire to deter and undermine NATO by exploiting differences over the Arctic as an exceptional region, or a vulnerable northern flank.

China's intent is also a source of disagreement. The chapter in this volume provides some indica-

tors to determine intent but posits that the security risks and consequences of hybrid threat activities require detailed assessment on a case by case basis. For example, China seeks as part of its global polar strategy sufficient icebreaking capability to "open polar waterways".<sup>26</sup> The dual-use character of these ships is suggested by the requirements that they should also be able to conduct search and rescue, resupply missions and, according to the tender, bidders required a "weaponry research and production license" as well as a "weapon systems quality certificate".<sup>27</sup> These are the same certificates required for civilian institutions to collaborate with Chinese defence industry projects.

Chinese and Russian actions and patterns of hybrid threat behaviour in the Antarctic may provide insights into actions less overt but nonetheless significant for the Arctic. Scientific research seems to provide cover for the gradual extension of claims of being significant stakeholders. China is accused of flouting the rules of the Antarctic Treaty System, systematically overfishing, and extending its scientific infrastructure in areas rich in resources.<sup>28</sup> The platforms and technologies can also provide significant intelligence and information, while supporting infrastructure enables a range of activities. According to Anne-Marie Brady, for example, in order to discern what these mean for the Arctic, it is important to understand that China views itself as a polar power, which reflects its global aspirations and self-image.<sup>29</sup> Her analysis also provides insights into other means of discerning how to respond to hybrid threat activities. China has similarly begun to raise questions as to whether the Arctic Council and the current legal framework for the Arctic should continue to be the principal means of addressing issues relating to the Arctic. To boost China's claim, Chinese scholars and media, for example, have been actively working to legitimize China's status as a near-Arctic state

24 Emma Tranter, "You cannot claim any more:" Russia seeks bigger piece of Arctic', CBC News, 11 April 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/russia-arctic-ocean-canada-united-nations-continental-shelf-1.5983289>.

25 NATO STRATCOM Centre of Excellence, 'Russian Snap Exercises in the North', Thematic Area: Coercion Through Threat or Use of Force, March 2015, 8–31; Hope Carr, 'Arctic Sovereignty and Information Warfare: The New Battlespace in the North', *The Three Swords Magazine*, 34 (2019), 83–9.

26 Trym Aleksander Eiterjord, 'Checking in on China's Nuclear Icebreaker', *The Diplomat*, 5 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/checking-in-on-chinas-nuclear-icebreaker/>.

27 Ibid.

28 L. M. Foster and Namrata Goswami, 'What Chinese Antarctic Behavior Tells Us about the Future of Space', *The Diplomat*, 11 January 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/what-chinas-antarctic-behavior-tells-us-about-the-future-of-space/>.

29 See Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

by citing other countries, such as the UK, Japan, and South Korea, which share this identity.<sup>30</sup> The Arctic is still a region of relative geopolitical calm, but that evaluation is based on a narrow view of hard security threats and does not account for the ways in which the Arctic is vulnerable to hybrid threat activities. The consensus on the continued leadership of those states which dominate the Arctic governance forums and the collaborative governance model is fraying.

Equally challenging, a defence and security architecture constructed to address challenges and promote hard security interests at a multilateral, regional and national level can miss transnational, local and individual challenges. It can also create ambiguous direction and guidance on jurisdiction and responsibility, leaving space for an adversary to act. Those levels that fall outside traditional security architectures or purviews may be especially susceptible to influence activities, exploitation and coercion. For example, the United States and Canada view their own Arctics through distinct prisms. The latter has tied Arctic human security to hard defence and security issues, while the former's prioritization of the Arctic is a function of hard security issues. These are reflected in the choices made about how to navigate the security issues – the Arctic Council or NATO – as well as what constitutes a security issue. Indeed, in addition to concerns over the militarization of the Arctic and inclusion of defence and security concerns in Arctic forums, there are general concerns that an expansive view of security and hybrid threats leads to the securitization of all issues.

The differing views on the ways ahead, and the Arctic as a space for international cooperation, create issues for adversaries to foment divisions. The Arctic's mix of levels and types of sovereignties makes the creation of a comprehensive or holistic framework challenging, and the boundaries and under-regulated spaces thus created are a grey zone that hybrid threat actors can target to under-

mine or re-interpret international maritime law and existing norms.<sup>31</sup> The Ilulissat Declaration and Svalbard Treaty discussed in the following analyses, for example, raise specific questions as to whether the legal regime of the Arctic can address the challenges of hybrid threat actors, and the extent to which they create a space for hybrid threats in the region. In 2021, for example, as part of a hybrid threat campaign against NATO, Russia targeted Norwegian naval visits to Svalbard, accused Norway of militarizing Svalbard in contravention of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, and suggested it was building dual-use capabilities, implying Norway was planning to use Svalbard for “the reception of reinforcement from NATO allies”.<sup>32</sup>

Competing priorities on security needs – economic, resource, or strategic – between the individual and community level can also create spaces vulnerable to exploitation by hybrid threat actors. The dividing lines between hard and soft, human and military security create seams and vulnerabilities. Cases of direct foreign investment, for example, can illustrate how the overlapping imperatives of the benefits of local investments and national security risk assessments can be exploited. Reporting in March 2021 uncovered an illustrative case. In January 2018, a delegation of Chinese research institutes, including the local military attaché, representing the state-funded Polar Research Institute of China, made a direct approach to local officials of the Finnish City of Kemijärvi to buy or lease the airport at Kemijärvi for use as a base for flights over the Arctic region. The flight route would also have enabled observations over the Arctic Ocean and the Northeast Passage. As the proposed site was next to the Finnish Defence Forces' Rovajärvi firing range, the Ministry of Defence blocked the plan.<sup>33</sup> The chapters in this report duly suggest the extent to which hybrid threats can target local non-security domains and actors, and require analysis of domains and levels where the ambiguity and confusion are deliberately exacerbated to

30 Chinese scholars have argued that the dichotomy of Arctic and non-Arctic states violates the 1982 UNCLOS because it automatically puts non-Arctic states in an inferior position. These arguments have been promoted in Chinese government media. On the media campaign, see e.g. 'Global Governance Needed for Arctic Affairs', *China Daily*, 10 May 2019; Zhang Yao, 'Ice Silk Road Framework Welcomed by Countries, Sets New Direction for Arctic Cooperation', *Global Times*, 7 April 2019; Liu Caiyu, 'China's Role in Arctic Governance "Cannot Be Ignored"', *Global Times*, 22 November 2018.

31 Alaa Al-Arabi, 'Legal Complexities of Hybrid Threats in the Arctic Region', *Teise*, 112 (2019): 107–23.

32 See <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/11/moscow-dissatisfied-norwegian-navy-visit-norwegian-arctic-archipelago#.YZAN-CRHmuX4.linkedin>.

33 'Defence Ministry blocked Chinese plans for research airbase in Lapland', *YLE News*, March 2021, <https://yle.fi/news/3-11820411>.

a competitor's advantage. The full extent of the hybrid threat security challenge requires detailed local, national, regional and multi-lateral study.

## Key takeaways

The analyses in this report provide some insights into the interplay between the unique features of the Arctic in the transatlantic context and the form and character of hybrid threats and operations. Distinct views or constraints on perceptions of the Arctic and security in the Arctic context reflect different national and international conceptions of where and how the Arctic fits into political and strategic objectives.

Viewing the issues from the perspective of North America's Arctic, the European High North, or NATO's Northern Flank and the institutions and organizations responsible for those issues demonstrates vulnerabilities in the seams between the policies, strategies, governance and legal frameworks. Further fracture points are possible from the spectrum of issues that inform the approaches to the Arctic region, whether responsible environmental stewardship, human security, collective security or defence.

A number of key takeaways have been identified that require further research and consideration in order to understand the hybrid threat environment in, to and using the Arctic.

### **1. Arctic exceptionalism is contested, and a vulnerability. The risk of compartmentalizing it against militarization and securitization exacerbates that vulnerability.**

It is an open question as to whether the Arctic region can avoid being drawn further into a geopolitical "great game". It is also questionable whether it has ever been exceptional, but Arctic exceptionalism is nonetheless a contested concept between states and regions, and is finding expression at the multi-lateral level between NATO and the EU, as well as among Arctic states. The disagreements and pursuit of different ideas of the Arctic are themselves targets that hybrid threat actors like Russia can exploit.

### **2. Security in the Arctic requires an inclusive approach merging the hard and soft security spectrums.**

This is a function of the intersections and overlaps in policy, and in the reality of human and national security – intersections which are magnified in Arctic regions where populations are particularly vulnerable to threats to the economic, cyber and space domains, for example. The Arctic populations' realities require investment in economies, information and network infrastructures, coupled with sustainable development. The levels of sovereignty and authority also create challenges and vulnerabilities. The tension between national, local and sovereign indigenous objectives for security can create a centre-periphery/north-south dilemma where different levels of insecurities open up space for influence and interference.

### **3. Expanding the application of the concept of security as well as assessing activities from the perspective of their potential risks to national security risks over-securitization.**

Exploring activities as hybrid threats, implying as it does conflict and confrontation rather than competition, risks securitization. Not all activities pose hybrid threats. Hybrid threats are by definition ambiguous and long term and depend to an extent on aggregation, the adversary's intent, and the target's vulnerabilities and interests. Specificity and context matter, but identifying and tracking activities for their threat potential calls for longer-term assessment frameworks that start with identifying the goals of national security.

### **4. Arctic states do not agree on the degree and scope of the threat from hybrid threat actors and their use of hybrid threats in the region.**

There is no consensus on the nature and extent of the hybrid threat – creating vulnerabilities to disinformation, and coercion – or whether there are hybrid threats specific to the Arctic. Policies and strategies to address the Arctic and hybrid threats cannot be separated from national, regional and multilateral strategies, but integrating the region into conflict management responses requires a clear understanding of the real and potential threats posed, and the vulnerabilities unique to the region. Geography matters, as does the nature and form of hybrid threats. There may not be

hybrid threats specific to the Arctic, but there are features specific to the Arctic regions, and it is the way in which they interact in national and global systems that creates acute vulnerabilities to the specifics of hybrid threat operations. Transatlantic approaches to Russia and China in the Arctic will be partially framed by how the two countries are engaged globally, but also by domestic policy towards the Arctic and northern challenges: foreign direct investment challenges, the impact of climate change, and the results of discussions over legitimate and sustainable development. These are further complicated by the gaps and seams caused by compartmentalized hard defence organizations and arrangements, including continental and geographic commands that reflect continental, national and regional preoccupations.

#### **5. Managing new security dynamics in the Arctic in an evolving geopolitical context is testing the current Arctic governance.**

Authority over and responsibility for the region and issues are widely diffused among multiple organizations, states and levels. This current complex system is being tested and stressed by the growing number of states which claim the status of Arctic stakeholder, each with different perspectives on the issues, threats, priorities and solutions. The existing governance regime is vulnerable to hybrid threat activities because of these gaps, but also due to its real limits in providing a forum for discussion of the defence and security issues of all the Arctic states, particularly from a transatlantic perspective. It is also a vulnerability as it is often limited by regional perspectives, and is only slowly adapting to the inter-relationship between security threats across domains and regions, as well as how to recognize many of these issues for the threats they may pose to security.

As suggested at the beginning of this introduction, the specificity required to bring sufficient clarity to act requires detecting details about the intent, form and nature of activities to determine whether they pose threats as a part of hybrid threat operations. It is difficult to define which Chinese and Russian activities are potential security risks, and due to the low transparency of the authoritarian states, it is possible that all activities

should be considered as such. In order to understand the objectives of an adversary, the tools, techniques, and patterns of behaviour displayed elsewhere can illuminate activities in and directed towards the region. A case in point would be the Antarctic, where the Chinese have been more assertive in their attempts to create favourable circumstances for their influence to change existing rules and constraints. Activities in this polar region can also shed light on the intent and use of an expanding science and economic footprint to gain recognition. Or the way in which China has exploited the competing requirements and appetite for resource and infrastructure development and investment with concerns over foreign ownership and dual-use infrastructure across the globe. In multilateral organizations such as the UN, the overt and covert influence techniques – economic coercion – on treaty and rule-making bodies can provide insights into means and ends for Arctic governance bodies.

The hard security vulnerabilities to hybrid threats also require assessing the deterrent and coercive uses of the Russian military build-up in the Arctic, and the emerging capability, capacity, and possible intent to hold North America and Europe at risk below a nuclear threshold. The Arctic and the High North – the northern flank – represents a deterrence gap in the transatlantic Arctic. New Russian capabilities and heightened tensions have also highlighted the importance of Greenland, which suggests the need to close any conceptual gaps in North American and European defence. The primary dilemma lies in discerning Russia's legitimate interests in its Arctic while maintaining the integrity of NATO's deterrence posture. The pursuit of these also requires coherence and the alignment of bilateral, multilateral and regional organizations, but most significantly NATO, the EU and NORAD.

A strategic response and frameworks for assessing hybrid threats also require balancing the potentially competing levels of security. The risks are that countering Russian hybrid threats in the Arctic requires cooperation between the EU and NATO, but the continuing isolation of Russia on Arctic security and defence issues may contribute to increasing regional tensions and Russia and China growing closer.

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# China and the Arctic: Establishing presence and influence

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

## Introduction

The theme of China's ambitions in the Arctic has attracted tremendous interest in recent years in both Western academic and political circles as well as in the media. In January 2018, Beijing published its first ever White Paper on Arctic policy, laying out its expanding range of Arctic interests and also highlighting the ways that China as a "key Arctic stakeholder" aims to contribute to developments in the region, linking it to the Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI).<sup>1</sup> The publication of the White Paper confirms how Beijing assigns stronger strategic priority to the establishment of Chinese presence and influence in the Arctic.

However, the developments in actual Chinese activities in the Arctic, for example within research, resource extraction and infrastructure construction, are still relatively modest. The close attention to and the prevailing view of a powerful Chinese role in the region therefore also reflect the general growing focus on, as well as the mounting concerns about, the implications of a stronger and more assertive China and how intensifying US-China great-power rivalry increasingly sets the overall frame for international economics, politics and security.

The effect is that more or less all Chinese activities in the Arctic are seen as potential security risks, especially in Washington, but also increas-

ingly in the other Arctic capitals such as Copenhagen, Oslo and Helsinki.<sup>2</sup> This further relates to a growing emphasis on the "dual use" characteristic, namely the potential parallel civilian and military use of Chinese facilities and capabilities in the region. The low transparency of the Chinese system, with complex relations and overlaps between the party-state, the military, universities, state-owned national and provincial companies, private companies and other Chinese entities, amplifies the challenge of categorizing Chinese activities and assessing the potential vulnerabilities they bring.<sup>3</sup> Explicitly characterizing all Chinese activities in the Arctic as grey zone or hybrid threat activities is not particularly helpful.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it is crucial to think through and pre-empt potential vulnerabilities.

This chapter examines the evolving Chinese engagement in the Arctic and further discusses the ways in which China seeks to establish its presence and influence in the region in the context of intensifying US-China tension and a generally more critical assessment of China in the other Arctic states. It has become more difficult for China to operate in the Arctic as there is less room for manoeuvre. The Chinese are, however, adjusting their approach to – and engagement in – the region. Establishing presence and influence in the Arctic is a persistent Chinese strategic priority that ties in with China's ability to succeed in the ongoing restructuring and

1 State Council, *China's Arctic Policy*, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, January 26, 2018, <https://www.chinadailyasia.com/articles/188/159/234/1516941033919.html>. For an analysis of the Chinese White Paper on Arctic policy, see e.g. Camilla T. N. Sørensen, 'China as an Arctic Great Power. Potential Implications for Greenland and the Danish Realm', *RDDC Policy Brief*, February 2018, [https://pure.fak.dk/files/7392648/Policy\\_Brief\\_2018\\_01\\_februar\\_UK.pdf](https://pure.fak.dk/files/7392648/Policy_Brief_2018_01_februar_UK.pdf). Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 1 July 2021.

2 Mikkel Runge & Camilla T. N. Sørensen, 'Intensifying Great Power Politics in the Arctic. Points for Consideration by the Kingdom of Denmark. From an analysis of assessments and strategies in Finland, Norway and Iceland', *DIIS Report*, No. 8, 2019, [https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/3166021/Intensifying\\_great\\_power\\_politics\\_Arctic\\_DIIS\\_Report\\_2019\\_08.pdf](https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/3166021/Intensifying_great_power_politics_Arctic_DIIS_Report_2019_08.pdf).

3 What Anne-Marie Brady terms "the party-state-military-market nexus" – cf. Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 114–136.

4 See e.g. David Auerswald, 'China's multifaceted Arctic strategy', *War on the Rocks*, May 24, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/chinas-multifaceted-arctic-strategy/>.

upgrading of the Chinese economy, and plays into China's broader and long-term geo-economic and geo-strategic visions and plans.

The first section contextualizes and examines the drivers behind China's growing strategic prioritization of the Arctic. The second section looks at the evolving Chinese approach to or tactics for establishing Chinese presence and influence in a more challenging Arctic context, with a specific focus on whether it makes sense to talk of Chinese grey zone or hybrid threat activities in the region, also drawing on the development of Chinese engagement in the Antarctic, where China's presence and level of activity are higher and have been sustained for a longer period of time.

### Drivers behind China's growing strategic prioritization of the Arctic

There are three main specific, but interrelated, drivers behind China's growing strategic prioritization of the Arctic. These are 1) strengthening Arctic research capacity and knowledge, 2) ensuring Chinese access to Arctic resources, and 3) promoting the development of the Arctic sea routes and ensuring the Chinese ability to use them.

#### Arctic research

Climate change, happening faster in the polar regions than anywhere else, has a direct impact in China, causing extreme weather patterns and negatively affecting China's agriculture and economy. There is therefore an aspiration to better understand the changing Arctic climate and to be able to predict and prepare for the implications. In recent years, Chinese research activities in the Arctic have been strengthened by launching more expeditions and intensifying efforts to build research

networks and research stations. This is a political priority. China's Five-Year Plan covering the period 2016-2020 specifically encouraged an expansion of the country's polar scientific capacity, including improving innovation and technological advancements.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, China has begun to conduct increasingly sophisticated scientific experiments as part of its Arctic voyages.<sup>6</sup> For instance, during China's 9<sup>th</sup> Arctic expedition in 2018, Chinese researchers deployed unmanned observational equipment such as an indigenously produced autonomous underwater glider for deep-sea environment observation. According to a research report, activities such as these have greatly enhanced China's ability to observe and monitor the Arctic environment.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Chinese researchers successfully launched China's first polar observation satellite, BNU-1, in September 2019. It is set to monitor sea ice drift and ice shelf collapse with the expectation that it will greatly improve China's remote sensing capability and promote the safe usage of the Arctic sea routes.<sup>8</sup> Since 2004, Beijing has had a research station, the Yellow River Station (黄河站), on Svalbard. In addition, China has recently opened the Aurora Observatory in Iceland, and has presented plans for opening a research station and satellite receiver station in Greenland.<sup>9</sup> China has also been working with Finland on jointly developing the China-Finland Arctic Monitoring and Research Centre between China's Institute of Remote Sensing and Digital Earth and Finland's Arctic Space Centre. The main objective is to collect, process and share satellite data to support environmental monitoring, climate research and Arctic navigation.<sup>10</sup> Establishing such research stations and facilities in the Arctic plays into the rollout of China's BeiDou-2 [北斗-2] navigation satellite system, China's space

5 National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), *China's 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020)*, March 2016, chapter 41, 王丽丽 (ndrc.gov.cn).

6 Ryan D. Martinson, 'The Role of the Arctic in Chinese Naval Strategy', *China Brief*, Vol. 19, Issue 22 (20 December 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-role-of-the-arctic-in-chinese-naval-strategy/>.

7 Wei Zexun, Chen Hongxia, Lei Ruibo, Yu Xiaoguo, Zhang Tao, Lin Lina, Tian Zhongxiang, Zhuang Yanpei, Li Tao and Yuan Zhuoli, 'Overview of the 9th Chinese National Arctic Research Expedition', *Atmospheric and Oceanic Science Letters*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (2020): 1-7, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/16742834.2020.1675137>.

8 Anne-Mary Brady, 'Facing Up to China's Military Interests in the Arctic', *China Brief*, Vol. 19, Issue 21 (10 December 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/facing-up-to-chinas-military-interests-in-the-arctic/>. The new domestically built Chinese polar icebreaker *Xuelong 2* is equipped with oceanographic survey and monitoring apparatus allowing for advanced research in polar oceanography, biodiversity, atmospheric and environmental conditions – cf. Zhao Lei, 'Icebreaker, satellite and stations bridge polar research gap', *China Daily*, 30 September 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201909/30/WS5d9178efa310cf3e3556e5cf.html>.

9 E.g. Nong Hong, *China's Role in the Arctic. Observing and Being Observed* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 207.

10 Ibid.; Chinese Academy of Social Science, *China and Finland sign a cooperation agreement on Arctic Space Observation Joint Research Center* [中芬签订北极空间观测联合研究中心合作协议], 17 April 2018, [http://www.radi.cas.cn/dtxw/rdxw/201804/t20180417\\_4997963.html](http://www.radi.cas.cn/dtxw/rdxw/201804/t20180417_4997963.html).

science programme and more accurate weather forecasting systems. Beijing has long aimed at developing its own global navigation satellite system to limit any dependency and vulnerabilities connected with relying on the American GPS system. In 2020, China completed its navigation satellite system with a total of 35 satellites placed in three different types of orbit.<sup>11</sup> China operates a remote satellite ground station in Kiruna, Sweden, as part of its global navigation satellite system. In recent years, China has conducted several experimental probes in the Arctic to test its communication capabilities. For example, in a 2019 evaluation, China assessed a number of technologies, including Very High Frequency (VHF) radio connectivity, medium-frequency Navtex systems, and the DSC system, as part of the Global Maritime Distress Safety System.<sup>12</sup> These facilities, systems and programmes evidently have a “dual use” character, namely a potential parallel civilian and military use.

A concern, especially in the US, is that China is also gradually building up an explicitly military presence in the Arctic. As warned in the 2019 report on China’s military power published by the US Department of Defence, “Civilian research could support a strengthened Chinese military presence in the Arctic Ocean, which could include deploying submarines to the region as a deterrent against nuclear attacks.”<sup>13</sup> Although such development over time cannot be ruled out, there is currently no evidence of an actual Chinese military presence in the region, which would also face strong Russian protests.<sup>14</sup> However, it is highly likely that the Chinese military is seeking to gain more knowledge and experience of Arctic or rather polar-specific operations, which ties in with the Chinese view on

the polar regions as “new strategic frontiers”, discussed at further length below.<sup>15</sup> What is certain is that China, like other non-Arctic states, takes an active role in the general “science diplomacy” in the region, using its research activities to legitimize and strengthen its overall presence in the region.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the research activities help strengthen China’s relations with individual Arctic states and stakeholders, such as universities, cities, regions, and provinces, through focused and specific research cooperation and networks. This includes the “China-Nordic Arctic Research Center” (CNARC), established in 2013 and led by the Polar Research Institute China (PRIC).<sup>17</sup>

### Arctic resources

Ensuring access to Arctic resources is assessed as important in order to secure and diversify China’s supply. This goes for a broad range of Arctic resources, such as oil, gas and rare earth minerals, which the region holds in abundance, and that are now becoming more accessible. Furthermore, China, which already possesses one of the world’s largest distant-water fishing fleets, is increasingly interested in ensuring access to Arctic fishing grounds.<sup>18</sup> Linked to the growing Chinese focus on the Arctic sea routes discussed below, Beijing sees important potential, as also stated in the above-mentioned White Paper on Arctic Policy: “The utilization of sea routes and exploration and development of the resources in the Arctic may have a huge impact on the energy strategy and economic development of China.”<sup>19</sup> This further relates to Beijing’s determined aim to ensure that China takes a frontrunner position within innovation and new technologies.

11 Andrew Jones, ‘China to complete its answer to GPS with Beidou navigation satellite launches in March, May’, *SpaceNews*, 28 February 2020, <https://spacenews.com/china-to-complete-its-answer-to-gps-with-beidou-navigation-satellite-launches-in-march-may/>.

12 Malte Humpert, ‘China looking to expand satellite coverage in Arctic – experts warn of military purpose’, *High North News*, 4 September 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-looking-expand-satellite-coverage-arctic-experts-warn-military-purpose>.

13 U.S. Department of Defence, *Annual Report to Congress. Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019*, May 2019, 114, [https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf).

14 See also Hilde-Gunn Bye, ‘Chinese Activity Increases in the High North: No Sign of Military Presence, Says IFS Researcher’, *High North News*, 28 May 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/chinese-activity-increases-high-north-no-sign-military-presence-says-ifs-researcher>.

15 Martinson, ‘The Role of the Arctic in Chinese Naval Strategy’.

16 Chinese Arctic scholars often highlight that their contribution to the development of polar-related science and technology is also a way to establish China as an important polar nation – cf. e.g. Lulu Zhang, Yang Jian, Zang Jingjing, Wang Yuhong and Sun Liguang, ‘Reforming China’s polar science and technology system’, *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, Vol. 44, No. 3-4, (2019): 392, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03080188.2019.1627639?journalCode=yisr20>.

17 Rasmus Bertelsen, Li Xing and Mette Højris Gregersen, ‘Chinese Arctic science diplomacy: an instrument for achieving the Chinese dream?’, in *Global Challenges in the Arctic Region: Sovereignty, Environment and Geopolitical Balance*, eds. Elena Conde and Sara Iglesias Sánchez (Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 442–460.

18 William G. Dwyer, III, ‘China’s Strategic Interests in the Arctic’, *Army War College Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (May 2016): 8–9.

19 State Council, *China’s Arctic Policy*.

Together with the deep seabed and outer space, the polar regions are identified in Chinese strategic considerations and plans as “new strategic frontiers” [战略新疆域].<sup>20</sup> These new strategic frontiers are characterized as the most challenging areas to operate in and extract resources from. Therefore, the expectation is that the great power that manages this first – that is, develops and masters the necessary new technologies and knowledge, for example in terms of building satellite receiver stations, offshore platforms, cables and pipelines and deep seaports under polar conditions – stands to gain crucial strategic advantages, guaranteeing it the dominant position in the great power competition of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Beijing wants to ensure that China gets to be the first and the best when it comes to these new strategic frontiers.

This ties in with the ongoing restructuring and upgrading of the Chinese economy, where Chinese-driven innovation is at the top of the agenda.<sup>21</sup> The “Made in China 2025” strategy identifies key sectors or industries such as robotics, space technology, artificial intelligence, the next generation of communication and information technology such as 5G networks, and maritime technology and capabilities. Within these key sectors or industries, China aims to take the lead in developing new technologies and knowledge, and in setting global standards through targeted investments, acquisitions and research and development.<sup>22</sup> Setting global standards is also one of the main drivers behind the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), which since June 2017 has included the Arctic sea routes under the heading of the “Polar Silk Road”. There is thus a significant Arctic dimension to the “Made in

China 2025” strategy and the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI).

### Arctic sea routes

China is focused on promoting and securing favourable access to the Arctic sea routes, which, besides their crucial importance for extracting Arctic resources, are considered attractive alternatives to the longer and strategically vulnerable routes through the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal. The general assessment is that the Arctic sea routes will not be commercially viable in the near future, but the Chinese, particularly the Chinese state-owned shipping company COSCO, seem to have a more optimistic outlook. As early as 2016, COSCO announced plans to launch a regular service through the Arctic to Europe by way of the Northeast Passage, and is busy testing the Arctic sea routes and designing and building new ships that are better suited to the conditions.<sup>23</sup> The Transpolar Passage, or the Central Passage cutting straight across the North Pole, is attracting growing Chinese interest. It is not only the shortest of the three Arctic sea routes, but its attractiveness seen from China is also that, unlike the Northeast and Northwest Passages, it runs mostly through international waters, where all states have freedom of navigation, and hence Chinese ships would not have to follow the specific regulations of the relevant Arctic state.<sup>24</sup>

The growing Chinese focus on the Arctic sea routes is demonstrated in China’s White Paper on Arctic policy, where Chinese companies are encouraged to assign priority to participating in the construction of the “Polar Silk Road” infrastruc-

20 E.g. *Xinhua*, ‘The draft national security law will increase security in space and other new areas’ [国家安全法草案拟增加太空等新型领域的安全任务], 24 June 2015, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2015/06-24/7363693.shtml>. The National Security Law from 2015 directs attention towards “new strategic frontiers”, declaring that “[t]he State adheres to the peaceful exploration and use of outer space, the international seabed region, and the polar regions, enhances the ability of safe access, scientific investigation, development and utilization, strengthens international cooperation and safeguards our activities in outer space, the international seabed region and the polar regions” – China Ministry of Defence, *National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China*, 2015, Article 32 (in Chinese), [http://www.mod.gov.cn/regulatory/2016-02/19/content\\_4621258\\_3.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/regulatory/2016-02/19/content_4621258_3.htm).

21 Camilla T. N. Sørensen, ‘The ice dragon – Chinese interests in the Arctic’, Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis 19 (The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 5 November 2019), <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-strategic-analysis-19-the-ice-dragon-chinese-interests-in-the-arctic/>.

22 E.g. Elsa B. Kania, ‘Made in China 2025, Explained’, *The Diplomat*, 1 February 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/made-in-china-2025-explained/>.

23 Malte Humpert, ‘Chinese Shipping Company COSCO To Send Record Number of Ships Through Arctic’, *High North News*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/chinese-shipping-company-cosco-send-record-number-ships-through-arctic>.

24 Cf. Mia Benneth, who notes that few states, except China, are preparing for an ice-free Arctic Ocean and that China could be trying to establish a first-mover advantage in the Transpolar Passage – Mia Benneth, ‘The Arctic Shipping Route, No One Is Talking About’, *The Maritime Executive*, 5 August 2019, [https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/the-arctic-shipping-route-no-one-s-talking-about?\\_ac\\_lkid=3e7-cc58-1ee8-9f6d17170d5ecfa](https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/the-arctic-shipping-route-no-one-s-talking-about?_ac_lkid=3e7-cc58-1ee8-9f6d17170d5ecfa). Such an analysis finds support in China’s 11<sup>th</sup> Arctic expedition conducted in the autumn of 2020, which exclusively operated in international waters.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Arctic expedition was China’s first Arctic expedition with the new domestically built polar icebreaker *Xuelong 2* – cf. Feng Shuang, ‘China’s polar icebreaker heading home from Arctic expedition’, *Xinhua*, 17 September 2020, <http://www.ecns.cn/news/2020-09-17/detail-ihaaeqyp8471195.shtml>.

ture.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the Arctic sea routes are now part of the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) likely means that the involved Chinese companies, banks and so forth have better chances of obtaining financial and political support.<sup>26</sup>

Digital connectivity has become a key focus of the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), and of China’s drive for a frontrunner position within innovation and new technologies.<sup>27</sup> This is also evident in the Arctic, where China encourages stronger cooperation and coordination with Arctic states and stakeholders to strengthen information structures and networks.<sup>28</sup> So far, the most advanced project within the frame of the “Digital Polar Silk Road” in the Arctic is the so-called “Arctic Connect” project, where China initiated talks with Finland in 2017 regarding the possibility of constructing a 10,500-kilometre telecommunication cable between China and Europe, running along the seabed of the Arctic Ocean.<sup>29</sup> The project is still on the drawing board as of 2021, but it is planned to be constructed on a platform provided by submarine-cable network supplier Huawei Marine, a joint venture established by Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd and Global Marine Systems Limited.<sup>30</sup>

When it comes to other projects in the Arctic, in recent years China has been bolstering its cooperation with Russia on the Northeast Passage along Russia’s coast. Generally, there is growing

cooperation between China and Russia regarding infrastructure in the Russian Arctic, such as the construction of ports, railways and roads, which is associated in particular with the large Russian-Chinese liquefied natural gas (LNG) project on the Yamal Peninsula.<sup>31</sup> Finland and Norway have initiated cooperation with Chinese stakeholders on the so-called “Arctic Corridor” – a railway line from Rovaniemi in Finland to Kirkenes in Norway – which is positioned as the possible end station of the “Polar Silk Road”. However, the future of the project remains highly uncertain as resistance is growing from Helsinki and Oslo in particular, as well as from Sámi representatives in both Finland and Norway, whereas local politicians in both Norway and Finland continue to support the project.<sup>32</sup>

### The tactics of establishing Chinese presence and influence in the Arctic

Beijing aims to ensure its presence and influence in the Arctic by establishing strong and comprehensive relationships with all of the Arctic states and stakeholders, and by gradually increasing China’s engagement in Arctic governance. The main Chinese tactic is to offer benefits, such as specific knowledge or investments, to the Arctic states and stakeholders, who then develop their own interests in keeping China engaged in the region and in fur-

25 State Council, *China’s Arctic Policy*.

26 Chinese interests in the Arctic sea routes and navigation are also spelled out in other authoritative documents, such as the ‘Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative’, where it is emphasized how ‘China is willing to work with all parties in conducting scientific surveys of navigational routes, setting up land-based monitoring stations, carrying out research on climatic and environmental changes in the Arctic, as well as providing navigational forecasting services’. Moreover, the document also calls for strengthening “common maritime security for mutual benefits, including initiatives such as maritime search and rescue, maritime monitoring and management and sharing ocean navigation results and building ocean observation and network systems” – cf. National Development and Reform Commission and State Oceanic Administration, *Full Text: Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*, 20 June 2017, [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2017-06/20/content\\_41063286.htm#:~:text=Full%20text%3A%20Vision%20for%20Maritime%20Cooperation%20under%20the%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative-0%20Comment\(s\)&text=China%20on%20Tuesday%20released%20a.21st%20Century%20Maritime%20Silk%20Road](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2017-06/20/content_41063286.htm#:~:text=Full%20text%3A%20Vision%20for%20Maritime%20Cooperation%20under%20the%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative-0%20Comment(s)&text=China%20on%20Tuesday%20released%20a.21st%20Century%20Maritime%20Silk%20Road).

27 Cf. the growing emphasis on the “Digital Silk Road” – e.g. Robert Greene and Paul Triolo, ‘Will China control global internet via its digital silk road’, *SubChina*, 8 May 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/05/08/will-china-control-the-global-internet-via-its-digital-silk-road/>.

28 The ambition is that information networks with states along the BRI will be improved by “jointly building a system with broad coverage for information transmission, processing, management and application, a system for information standards and specifications, and a network security system, thus providing public platforms for information sharing” – cf. National Development and Reform Commission and State Oceanic Administration, *Full Text: Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*.

29 South China Morning Post, ‘China mulls joining scheme to lay telecom cable across Arctic Circle’, 14 December 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/print/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2124239/china-mulls-joining-scheme-to-lay-telecom-cable-across>.

30 Frank Jüris, ‘Handing over infrastructure for China’s strategic objectives - ‘Arctic Connect’ and the Digital Silk Road in the Arctic’, *SINOPSIS*, March 2020, 15, <https://icds.ee/en/handing-over-infrastructure-for-chinas-strategic-objectives-arctic-connect-and-the-digital-silk-road-in-the-arctic/>; Marc Lanteigne, ‘The Twists and Turns of the Polar Silk Road’, *Over the Circle*, 15 March 2020, <https://overthecircle.com/2020/03/15/the-twists-and-turns-of-the-polar-silk-road/>.

31 In June 2019, China and Russia signed a joint statement in which they vow to promote the cooperation between the two in the Arctic, mainly in terms of cooperation on infrastructure, specifically connected to Arctic sea routes, resource extraction, tourism, environment protection and science – *Joint Statement of the PCR and the Russian Federation on the Development of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the New Era*, 6 June 2019, [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2019-06/06/content\\_74859445.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2019-06/06/content_74859445.htm).

32 Thomas Nilsen, ‘The dream of an Arctic railway fades as Sami herders signal ‘veto’’, *Barents Observer*, 5 March 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2020/03/arctic-railway-dream-fades-away-sami-herders-announce-veto>; Gloria Dickie, ‘A Proposed Railway in the Arctic Has Investors Excited – and Indigenous Groups Terrified’, *Pacific Standard*, 4 June 2019, <https://psmag.com/environment/kirkenes-proposed-railway-from-europe-to-asia-investors-excited-indigenous-groups-terrified>.

ther developing their relations with Chinese stakeholders. Beijing is keenly aware that China is the only great power that does not have Arctic territory, and therefore depends on the Arctic states seeing benefits in having Chinese involvement. In other words, China seeks to knit itself into the region on multiple levels through “win-win” bilateral and multilateral agreements and engagements with-in research, infrastructure and resource extraction, for example.

The challenge for China is to strike the right balance between proactiveness and reassurance in order not to heighten concern among the Arctic states about an overly assertive Chinese approach in the region.<sup>33</sup> The degree of success for Beijing varies depending on the Arctic state in question, but generally speaking, China’s initiatives and behaviour are increasingly approached with scepticism in the region, especially from the US.

Under the Trump administration, the US repeatedly drew parallels between Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea and in the Arctic, also calling attention to Chinese grey zone or hybrid threat activities in the Arctic.<sup>34</sup> As highlighted in the introduction above, it is challenging to categorize Chinese Arctic activities and assess the potential vulnerabilities they give rise to. Regarding the criteria for the coordinated use of military and non-military tools and the synchronization between the different components and actors, there is, on the one hand, a lack of clear overall political control and coordination between the many Chinese stakeholders active in the Arctic. There are incentives and guidelines from Beijing, such as the ones presented in the White Paper on Arctic policy discussed above, but these are general and broad.

It still seems that Chinese companies, including state-owned ones, are driven by market concerns and potential profit rather than by political directives. Hence, there are several cases of Chinese companies pulling out of Arctic engagements due to deteriorating market conditions or an unfavourable business outlook.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the low transparency of the Chinese system, with its complex relations and overlaps between the party-state, the military, universities, state-owned national and provincial companies, private companies and other Chinese entities, implies that more or less all Chinese activities could be categorized as hybrid threat activities.

Going into the specifics, and drawing on the more substantial literature and debate on Chinese tactics in the Antarctic, there is an emphasis on Chinese so-called “lawfare”, where the main argument – or rather expectation – is that Beijing is increasingly challenging and questioning Arctic governance, namely the legitimacy and effectiveness of the existing legal and institutional frameworks in the region, in order to promote frameworks that would give non-Arctic states such as China more influence.<sup>36</sup> Arguably, Beijing could seek to do this directly, using its role as an observer in the Arctic Council and the various working groups, for example, to obstruct from within by questioning the competence of the Arctic Council. It could also be done indirectly by supporting other groups that have similar interests, such as Arctic Indigenous people or groups that also want a bigger say.<sup>37</sup> There is a lively debate on the attractiveness of such tactics in China, and Chinese Arctic scholars often question the Arctic governance system and call for revisions. In China, the Arctic governance

33 Camilla T. N. Sørensen, ‘Intensifying great power politics play into the Arctic – implications for China’s Arctic strategy?’, in *Arctic Yearbook 2019*, eds. Lassi Heininen, Heather Exner-Pirot and Justin Barnes, [https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2019/Scholarly-Papers/21\\_AY2019\\_Sorensen.pdf](https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2019/Scholarly-Papers/21_AY2019_Sorensen.pdf). 34 Cf. e.g. Elizabeth Buchanan and Bec Starting, ‘Why the Arctic is not the ‘next’ South China Sea’, *War on the Rocks*, 5 November 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/why-the-arctic-is-not-the-next-south-china-sea/>. For a conceptualization of hybrid threats, see e.g. Patrick Cullen, ‘Hybrid threats as new ‘wicked problems’ for early warning’, Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis 8 (The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 4 June 2018), <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-strategic-analysis-8-hybrid-threats-as-a-new-wicked-problem-for-early-warning/>. See also Mikael Weissmann, ‘Hybrid warfare and hybrid threats today and tomorrow: towards an analytical framework’, *Journal on Baltic Security*, No. 5, (2019): 17–26.

35 E.g. the decision of the Chinese energy company CNOOC in January 2018 to withdraw from the Dreki oil exploration project in the waters off Iceland in the wake of the collapse of global oil and gas prices after 2014 – cf. Marc Lanteigne, ‘Stumbling Block: China-Iceland Oil Exploration Reaches an Impasse’, *Over the Circle*, 24 January 2018, <https://overthecircle.com/2018/01/24/stumbling-block-china-iceland-oil-exploration-reaches-an-impasse/>.

36 E.g. Auerswald, ‘China’s multifaceted Arctic strategy’; Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*.

37 On China’s (discursive) support for Arctic Indigenous peoples, see e.g. Mia Benneth, ‘At Arctic Circle Forum, China shows Arctic geopolitics are above Mike Pompeo’s pay grade’, *Eye on the Arctic*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2019/05/13/china-arctic-geopolitics-environment-arctic-circle-forum-conference/>. Since 2016, China has actively engaged with Japan and South Korea in the so-called “Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic”. All three hold observer status in the Arctic Council but share an ambition to play a greater role in Arctic affairs and being accepted as an Arctic stakeholder – cf. Marc Lanteigne, ‘Three to Get Ready: Northeast Asian Neighbours Discuss Joint Arctic Policies’, *Over the Circle*, 9 June 2018, <https://overthecircle.com/2018/06/09/three-to-get-ready-northeast-asian-neighbours-discuss-joint-arctic-policies/>.

regime is generally seen as preliminary with opportunities for non-Arctic great powers such as China to shape its further development and the institutionalization of rules and regulations in the region.<sup>38</sup>

In its White Paper on Arctic policy, Beijing highlights how the Arctic should not be regarded as a demarcated region, referring specifically to how climate change in the region has global implications and international impacts. It is therefore not up to the Arctic states alone to establish the rules and norms for the future development of and access to the region and its resources. Non-Arctic states like China have a role to play and legal rights to engage in Arctic research, navigation, overflight and a series of economic activities such as resource extraction, fishing, and laying cables and pipelines. The paper refers specifically to China's legal rights as a signatory to the Spitsbergen Treaty and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>39</sup> China is not alone in questioning and challenging the control and privileges of the Arctic states, as France has presented similar arguments, for example.<sup>40</sup> It does, however, imply a change from previous Chinese official speeches and documents on the Arctic, which have presented a more modest and hesitant position.<sup>41</sup> Still, there is no strong empirical support that Chinese Arctic officials are pushing such an assertive line, either in bilateral relations or in Arctic Council

settings. An exception can be found in the Chinese position with regard to the Spitsbergen Treaty, and specifically the degree to which Norway, whose sovereignty over the Arctic archipelago is formally recognized with the treaty, is obliged to treat nationals and companies from states that are party to the treaty in the same way as Norwegian nationals and companies.<sup>42</sup> During an exchange at the Svalbard Science Forum in 2019, Chinese representatives openly challenged Norwegian claims, arguing for greater scientific leeway, and the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration has similarly questioned the Norwegian position.<sup>43</sup> Judging from the debate among Norwegian scholars and journalists, the Chinese have become bolder not only in demanding unhindered access to the archipelago, but also in claiming the right to manage their own station without being hindered or restricted by the Norwegian hosts.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the lively critical debate among Chinese Arctic scholars, and indications of a bolder approach regarding Svalbard, Chinese "lawfare" behavior in the Arctic is thus far rather low profile compared to the Antarctic, where Beijing has been more prone to challenge the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), causing growing concern and criticism.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Beijing sees the Arctic governance system as evolving, not fixed, and that Beijing aims at gaining influence on how it evolves.<sup>46</sup> An example of negotiations where

38 E.g. Pan Yixuan, 'Global Governance needed for Arctic Affairs', *China Daily*, 10 May 2019, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201905/10/WS5cd4b107a3104842260bad41.html>. Zhang Yao, 'Ice Silk Road framework welcomed by countries, set new direction for Arctic cooperation', *Global Times*, 7 April 2019, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1144928.shtml>. Li Shiyue, Zhang Yiming and Li Zhenfu, 'Research on the Arctic Multilateral Governance Mechanism under the Framework of the Greater Arctic' [大北极框架下的北极地区多边治理机制研究], *Arctic Affairs* [北极去题] No. 5, (2017): 71–76, 大北极框架下的北极地区多边治理机制研究--《通化师范学院学报》2017年09期 (cnki.com.cn).

39 State Council, *China's Arctic Policy*.

40 See e.g. Siri Gulliksen and Amund Trellevik, 'France Compares the Arctic to the Middle East, Claims Region Belongs to No-One', *High North News*, 1 October 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/france-compares-arctic-middle-east-claims-region-belongs-no-one>.

41 The change has been underway for some years. In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping openly characterized China as a "polar great power" for the first time and directly linked Chinese ambitions in the polar regions with China's goal of becoming a maritime great power – cf. Martinson, 'The Role of the Arctic in Chinese Naval Strategy'; Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 3.

42 Most Chinese Arctic scholars promote an adjustable or evolutionary approach, as opposed to Norway, which follows a stricter interpretation approach. Furthermore, they often point out how Norwegian sovereignty on Svalbard is limited due to the principle of non-discrimination stating that signatory states such as China are entitled to the right of residence on Svalbard and the right to fish, hunt or undertake any kind of maritime, industrial, mining or trade-related activity – e.g. Qin Tianbao, 'Dispute over the Applicable Scope of the Svalbard Treaty', *Journal of East Asia and International Law*, Vol. 8, No. 1, (2015): 162; Liu Huirong and Zhang Xinyuan, 'Research on the Legal Application of Svalbard Waters – From the perspective of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea' [斯瓦尔巴群岛海域的法律适用问题研究—以《联合国海洋法公约》为视角], *Journal of Ocean University of China* [中国海洋大学学报], No. 6, (2009): 4; Lu Fanghua, 'An Analysis of the Nature of Norway's Jurisdiction in Svalbard from the Perspective of the Spitsbergen Treaty' [挪威对斯瓦尔巴德群岛管辖权的性质辨析], *North China Institute of Science and Technology* [华北科技学院], (2019): 12.

43 Mari Rian Hanger, 'Kina med krass kritikk av norsk forskningsstrategi for Svalbard', *Universitetsavis.no*, 16 January 2019, <https://www.universitetsavis.no/forskning/2019/01/16/Kina-med-krass-kritikk-av-norsk-forskningsstrategi-for-Svalbard-18378967.ece>.

44 E.g. Torbjørn Pedersen, 'Et dristigere Kina er i ferd med å bli et Svalbard-problem', *Aftenposten*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/OnVQ3M/et-dristigere-kina-er-i-ferd-med-aa-bli-et-svalbard-problem-torbjoern>.

45 Bergin and Press describe China as "an active, vocal and at a times disruptive, unconstructive, presence in ATS meetings, underlining a growing diplomatic assertiveness in Antarctic affairs" – Anthony Bergin and Tony Press, 'Eyes wide open: Managing the Australia-China Antarctic relationship', *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, April 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/eyes-wide-open-managing-australia-china-antarctic-relationship>.

46 As stated in the White Paper on Arctic policy: "China is committed to improving and complementing the Arctic governance regime" – State Council, *China's Arctic Policy*.

China has been more outspoken in actively seeking to shape and influence the outcome were those held in 2018 on the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA), a binding fishing moratorium. The negotiations exposed a divide between China, which sought a four-year moratorium, and several of the Arctic states, which sought 30 years.<sup>47</sup> A 16-year moratorium was eventually established, and the CAOFA is due to expire in 2034.

As indicated above, there is a lively debate among Chinese Arctic scholars on how best to promote and legitimize – even normalize – China as an important stakeholder and a great power in the Arctic without causing concern and fear in the region. It is interesting to note how a broad and flexible range of Chinese narratives has developed, often combining regional and global arguments.<sup>48</sup> The White Paper on Arctic policy contains both.<sup>49</sup> According to the regional argument, the Arctic states and Indigenous peoples' organizations have an inherent right to make regional decisions due to their geographical location in the region. The global argument, on the other hand, describes the Arctic as an open and globalized space as also highlighted above, where non-Arctic states and stakeholders influence and are influenced by developments and dynamics in the region. Consequently, non-Arctic states and stakeholders should be included in decision-making in the Arctic. This is also because their involvement is necessary for developing solutions to regional issues.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the global argument highlights forces and activities that cross boundaries and demonstrate the unavoidable interconnectedness of the Arctic and other regions.<sup>51</sup> For example, the Chinese shipping company COSCO has argued that access to the Northeast Pas-

sage could provide substantial fuel savings for the benefit of the global climate, thus justifying free access to the region based on global concerns.<sup>52</sup> Related to the global argument is the emphasis – also included in the White Paper – on how China in following international rules and treaties has certain “rights and interests” [权益] in the Arctic.<sup>53</sup> Along the same lines, Chinese Arctic scholar Li Zhenfu has introduced the concept of “the Greater Arctic” [大北极], which comprises not only the eight Arctic states but 45 other states connected to the region by different economic and logistical ties.<sup>54</sup>

Applying both regional and global arguments gives Beijing discursive flexibility that allows it to cater to several audiences, including groups such as environmental NGOs and non-Arctic states and entities that further more global narratives.<sup>55</sup> The range of Chinese narratives should not only to be seen as a deliberate strategic choice or tactic, however. It also reflects China's as yet unsettled approach to Arctic governance. A similar experimental stage of Chinese diplomacy is seen in other regions, such as Africa and the Middle East.

On the issue of China seeking to mobilize like-minded Arctic groups, the country has voiced general support for the rights of Indigenous people in the Arctic, and in 2013 arranged the “5th World Reindeer Herders' Congress” in Inner Mongolia in which Arctic Indigenous people also participated.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the Arctic Council Observer Reports submitted by China in 2016 and 2018 show that China has made financial contributions to the Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat with the aim of facilitating its work on producing a “Historic Story Map of the Arctic Indigenous Peoples”. Furthermore, the reports document how the State Oceanic Admin-

47 E.g. Liu Nengyu, 'How Has China Shaped Arctic Fisheries Governance?', *The Diplomat*, 18 June 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/how-has-china-shaped-arctic-fisheries-governance/>.

48 Cf. Mia M. Bennett, 'How China Sees the Arctic: Reading Between Extraregional and Intraregional Narratives', *Geopolitics*, Vol. 20, No. 3, (2015): 645–668.

49 State Council, *China's Arctic Policy*.

50 Bennett, 'How China Sees the Arctic', 657–58; Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 35. See also Zhang Ming, *Keynote Speech by Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming at the China Country Session of the Third Arctic Circle Assembly*, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 October 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/t1306858.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1306858.shtml).

51 Guo Peiqing et al., 'Research on the International Issues of the Arctic Route', [北极航道的国际问题研究], Beijing: Ocean Press [Beijing: Haiyang Chubanche], 2009, 320; Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 220–25, 243.

52 Bennett, 'How China Sees the Arctic'.

53 State Council, *China's Arctic Policy*.

54 Li Zhenfu, 'Pan-Northeastern Asia in the Perspective of the Greater Arctic' [大北极视角下的反东北亚], *China Ship Survey* [中国船检], No. 8, (2016): 26–28.

55 Bennett, 'How China Sees the Arctic'.

56 Njord Wegge, 'China and the Arctic: Interests, Actions and Challenges', *Nordlit*, No. 32, (2014): 90. <https://www.fni.no/publications/china-in-the-arctic-interests-actions-and-challenges>.

istration of China hosted a sideline meeting titled “Sustainable Development of Indigenous People in the Arctic and Asia’s Contribution” at the 10<sup>th</sup> Arctic Frontiers conference in Norway in 2016.<sup>57</sup> Besides that, there is not much support for this being a widespread and prioritized Chinese tactic in the Arctic. That could change of course, and it is an area that should be given close attention as it would be a potential vulnerability.

Regarding the “dual use” character, namely the potential parallel civilian and military use of Chinese facilities and capabilities in the region, such as research expeditions and stations, satellite stations, resource extraction and infrastructure projects, there might also be valuable lessons to be learned when looking at the developments in the Antarctic. The Chinese military presence has been more openly visible and developmental in this region. For example, Chinese military personnel have taken part in building infrastructure, research and radar stations, and several of the Chinese facilities such as Dome A have a direct military application.<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to note here how Beijing has sought to promote Dome A and the Kunlun Station as “Antarctic Specially Managed Areas” (ASMA) in the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings. This has proved unsuccessful to date, however, since there seems to be a general fear of China consolidating its presence in the area around Dome A.<sup>59</sup>

Another focus is on Chinese efforts to “weaponize” investments or set up “debt traps” in the Arctic, where the aim is to increase Arctic states’

and stakeholders’ dependency on China. Here the focus in the debate has been on the smaller Arctic states, such as Greenland, which are seen as more vulnerable. Again, there is little actual evidence to support the prevailing analysis of overly assertive Chinese conduct in Greenland. Often strongly encouraged by Greenlandic politicians and officials, Chinese companies have over the last decade tried to invest in Greenlandic mining and real estate, a Chinese state-owned company has made a bid to construct Greenlandic airports, and the Chinese government has made overtures to the Greenlandic government, including a pending bid to establish a Chinese research station and a satellite receiving station in Greenland.<sup>60</sup> So far, however, there is no substantial Chinese presence or significant Chinese investment there. The Greenlandic government continues to see major potential economic development opportunities in improving relations with China, especially for the Greenlandic fishing industry, tourism industry, and mining industry, and hence it has presented plans for the opening of a Greenlandic diplomatic representation in Beijing in 2021.<sup>61</sup> In order to realize Greenland’s long-term goal of full independence, there is a huge need for foreign investments and for diversifying the Greenlandic economy.<sup>62</sup> Despite years of Greenlandic efforts to attract foreign investments into the mining industry, very few have materialized.<sup>63</sup> There is growing interest, however, in rare earth minerals in particular, which Greenland has in abundance.<sup>64</sup> The primary

57 Arctic Council, *Observer Report – People’s Republic of China*, 2016, 3; Arctic Council, *Observer Report – People’s Republic of China*, 2018, 5.

58 Military activities in Antarctica are banned by the ATS. However, the ATS also states that military personnel and equipment may be used for scientific research or any other peaceful purpose granted that states report details of any military personnel or equipment to be introduced into Antarctica – cf. Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 13–14; Anne-Marie Brady, ‘China’s expanding Antarctic interests. Implications for Australia’, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, April 2017, [https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2017-08/SR109\\_Chinas\\_expanding\\_interests\\_in\\_Antarctica.pdf?LqDGafveA4ogNHB6K08cq86VoEzKQc](https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2017-08/SR109_Chinas_expanding_interests_in_Antarctica.pdf?LqDGafveA4ogNHB6K08cq86VoEzKQc).

59 Liu Nengye, ‘The heights of China’s ambition in Antarctica’, *The Interpreter*, 11 July 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/heights-china-s-ambition-antarctica>. Liu Nengye, ‘Demystifying China in Antarctica’, *The Diplomat*, 9 June 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/demystifying-china-in-antarctica/>.

60 Camilla T. N. Sørensen, ‘China is in the Arctic to Stay as a Great Power: How China’s Increasingly Confident, Proactive and Sophisticated Arctic Diplomacy Plays into Kingdom of Denmark Tensions’, *Arctic Yearbook* 2018, 1–15, <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2018/china-the-arctic>.

61 Ibid.; Michael Wenger, ‘Greenland plans representation in Beijing from 2021 on’, *Polar Journal*, 10 September 2020, <https://polarjournal.ch/en/2020/09/10/greenland-plans-representation-in-beijing-from-2021-on/>. The diplomatic representation in Beijing will be Greenland’s fourth diplomatic representation – Greenland has diplomatic representations in Brussels, Reykjavik and Washington D.C.

62 The Greenlandic economy is still heavily dependent on the annual block grant from Denmark of DKK 3.9 billion (roughly \$600 million), which accounts for a quarter of Greenland’s GDP and more than half of the Greenlandic public budget – Danmarks National Bank (Denmark’s National Bank), *Analyse: Grønlandsk Økonomi* (Analysis: Greenlandic Economy), 31 October 2019, [https://www.nationalbanken.dk/da/publikationer/Documents/2019/10/ANALYSE\\_Nr%2021\\_Gr%C3%B8nlandsk%20%C3%B8konomi.pdf](https://www.nationalbanken.dk/da/publikationer/Documents/2019/10/ANALYSE_Nr%2021_Gr%C3%B8nlandsk%20%C3%B8konomi.pdf).

63 Greenland only has two active mines today, the Vancouver-based Hudson Resources’ White Mountain anorthosite mine in southwestern Greenland, and the privately owned Greenland Ruby’s ruby and pink sapphire operation in Nuuk, each of which employs approx. 30 workers – cf. Virginia Heffernan, ‘Revving up Greenland’s mineral production will take time’, *The Northern Miner*, 27 October 2019, <https://www.mining.com/revving-up-greenlands-mineral-production-will-take-time/>.

64 The REE mining project that is furthest in the process of obtaining the necessary licences and approvals is the Kvanefjeld project (also contains uranium), run by the Australian company Greenland Minerals Ltd, which foresees that the Kvanefjeld project will become a future cornerstone of global rare earth supply. Since 2016, the Chinese company Shenghe Resources has been involved in the Kvanefjeld project, currently processing an 11 per cent

industry of the Greenlandic economy continues to be the fishing industry. A majority of Greenlandic exports – approximately 88 per cent – consist of fish and shellfish, and in this respect the Chinese market is increasingly important. It is estimated that the Greenlandic export of fish and shellfish to China stood at DKK 1.5 billion – roughly \$240 million – in 2018 with the expectation that it would increase further.<sup>65</sup> The Greenlandic government is therefore keenly interested in establishing a free-trade agreement with China.<sup>66</sup> Such moves, however, have met with resistance from Washington, which has sought to strengthen the US presence and influence in Greenland in recent years.<sup>67</sup> Beijing could counter by halting the import of Greenlandic fish and shellfish, which would be a huge blow to the Greenlandic economy. Thus far, however, nothing of the sort has occurred.

Many factors are likely to influence the further evolution of China's engagement in the Arctic in the face of growing US resistance, not least developments in relations between China and the other Arctic states, particularly Russia, which increasingly serves as a stepping stone for Beijing to intensify its activities in the region. A key question is how far Beijing is able to take its cooperation with Russia in the Arctic. Moscow remains uneasy and hesitant about allowing too big a role for China in the region and does not want to become a resource appendage for the country.<sup>68</sup> Russia is therefore busy seeking to attract attention and investments to the Russian Arctic from other Asian states, such as India and Japan. Another key question is how determined Washington is to counter Chinese diplomatic and especially economic activities in the Arctic, and hence to present the other Arctic states and stakeholders with attractive and credible alternatives. This requires a long-term US commitment

and comprehensive resources. The central point from Beijing's perspective, however, is that the importance of the Arctic diminishes in light of the current overall deteriorating situation with regard to the US-China trade and technology battle; rising tensions in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and Hong Kong; and increasing Western perceptions of China as an aggressive revisionist state. In the Chinese strategic cost-benefit assessment, there are growing costs associated with pushing for Chinese activities in the Arctic. Despite the links to the "Made in China 2025" strategy and the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), the Arctic is still not at the top of the Chinese foreign and security policy agenda. Another scenario, where Beijing is likely to decrease the focus – at least temporarily – on strengthening its presence and influence in the Arctic relates to whether the security tensions in East Asia, including in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, continue to increase with the US Navy further strengthening its presence. Under such conditions, Beijing will likely focus on East Asia even more, as this is where its so-called "core interests" [核心利益] are at stake.

## Conclusion

Establishing presence and influence in the Arctic is a persistent Chinese strategic priority that ties in with China's ability to succeed in the ongoing restructuring and upgrading of the Chinese economy, and that plays into China's broader and long-term geo-economic and geo-strategic visions and plans. The Arctic duly features in important Chinese strategic initiatives, such as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) and the "Made in China 2025" strategy, being identified in Chinese strategic considerations and plans as one of the "new strategic frontiers"

equity stake – cf. Belinda Cameron, 'Greenland Minerals (ASX:GGG) progresses Kvanefjeld Project EIA', *The Market Herald*, 23 September 2020, <https://themarketherald.com.au/greenland-minerals-asxggg-progresses-kvanefjeld-project-eia-2020-09-23/>; Kevin McGwin, 'A controversial Greenland mine passes a key regulatory hurdle, and heads for public comment', *Arctic Today*, 24 September 2020, <https://www.arctictoday.com/a-controversial-greenland-mining-project-has-passed-a-key-regulatory-hurdle-and-heads-for-public-comment/>. Yet, following the election and change of government in Greenland in April 2021, the future of the Kvanefjeld project looks grim. The new Greenlandic government has hence stated that it does not want to take the risk of having a mining project that includes uranium (zero tolerance policy) – cf. Government of Greenland, 'Greenland say yes to mining but no to uranium', 7 May 2021, <https://govmin.gl/2021/05/greenland-says-yes-to-mining-but-no-to-uranium/>.

<sup>65</sup> Naalakkersuisut (Government of Greenland), *Udenrigspolitisk Redegørelse 2019* (Foreign Policy Report 2019), 27 September 2019, 42-43, <https://naalakkersuisut.gl/~media/Nanoq/Files/Attached%20Files/Udenrigsdirektoratet/DK/Udenrigspolitiske%20redogørelser/UPR%202019%20da.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> The US has recently reopened its consulate in Nuuk, offered Greenland an economic aid package worth \$12.1 million, and paved the way for US investments in Greenlandic mining and infrastructure.

<sup>68</sup> E.g. Camilla T. N. Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, 'Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic. Possibilities and Constraints', *SIPRI Policy Paper*, No 46, 2017, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/emerging-chinese-russian-cooperation-arctic.pdf>.

[战略新疆域] where the great powers will compete in the coming years. Therefore, despite signs of a “tactical retreat” and a toning down of ambitions, the Chinese continue to closely follow developments in the region, seeking to identify opportunities to engage without huge disproportionate risks of a backlash and failure. A case in point is China’s 11<sup>th</sup> Arctic expedition conducted in the autumn of 2020, which, as mentioned above, operated exclusively in international waters, which was also probably in order to decrease the risk of rejection and negative coverage if China had to apply for permission to conduct activities in the exclusive economic zones of the Arctic coastal states. In many ways, such a careful and calculated Chinese reaction is a continuation of the more confident and sophisticated Chinese engagement in the Arctic that has developed over the past decade.

The debate on China’s evolving role in the Arctic and on whether to frame the Chinese Arctic – or broader polar – engagement as hybrid threat activities is likely to intensify in the coming years. There is no doubt that China is seeking to strengthen its influence in both the Antarctic and the Arctic. The developments in actual Chinese activities in the Arctic, for example within research, resource extraction and infrastructure construction are, however, still relatively modest and slow. Beijing has not directly sought to challenge the Arctic governance regime. In the Antarctic, the Chinese have been more assertive and willing to take risks.

As Arctic politics and security are becoming increasingly intertwined with great-power politics, specifically the US-China great-power rivalry, many challenges and implications are evolving for the Arctic states, for Arctic governance, and for specific policy areas with relevance to the Arctic. The Chinese engagement in the Arctic brings new potential vulnerabilities, where the key focus must be on identifying and managing risks. It requires building knowledge and intelligence on China within the Arctic states, such as Chinese politics and economic statecraft, in order to be able to careful-

ly analyze the instruments, techniques, and means applied in each Chinese activity and to assess the potential vulnerabilities engendered.<sup>69</sup> Such a thorough analysis is also the only starting point for designing useful legal and institutional mechanisms or frameworks, for example in relation to investment screening. As pointed out above, it is a particularly complex challenge to deal with the “dual use” character, namely the potential parallel civilian and military use, of Chinese facilities and capabilities in the region, including research expeditions and stations, satellite stations, resource extraction and infrastructure projects. China continues to have a Leninist one-party state, where the party is ever-present and involved – but to different degrees – in all matters of Chinese politics, economics and society. Hence, it is always difficult to pinpoint exactly who you are dealing with and what the driving motives are. Ideally, one has to look into each of the Chinese activities in the Arctic, such as concrete projects and agreements, in order to assess the level of party involvement and control, as well as to gauge the potential strategic and military use and value. Besides being able to identify the actors involved, it is a question of analyzing the instruments, techniques, and means.

The Arctic states need to put more effort into identifying key strategic sectors as well as important strategic locations, and proactively formulate rules and regulations. Part of the problem so far has been that Arctic states tend to deal with Chinese activities in a reactive and ad hoc manner, often also resulting in growing tension domestically between stakeholders with different interests. The analysis above points to various areas, relations and indicators to watch out for as China’s Arctic engagement evolves; for example if Chinese entities seek to mobilize like-minded Arctic groups to push for changes to Arctic governance. As the US diplomatic and economic offensive towards Greenland and Iceland in recent years shows, there is also a need to present Arctic communities with attractive and credible alternatives to Chinese investments.

69 Cf. the report conducted for the Nordic foreign ministries and aimed at developing recommendations on how the Nordic countries (Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland) should jointly address, among other challenges, increased Chinese Arctic involvement. A specific recommendation here is that the Nordic countries should develop a common Nordic analysis, policy, and approach to Chinese Arctic involvement and pursue it within relevant regional networks to which they are all parties – Björn Bjarnason, *Nordic Foreign and Security Policy 2020: Climate Change, Hybrid & Cyber Threats and Challenges*, Nordic Foreign and Security Policy 2020 Proposal, July 2020, 12, [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/vedlegg/eu-ropapolitikk/norden/nordicreport\\_2020.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/vedlegg/eu-ropapolitikk/norden/nordicreport_2020.pdf).

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# Russia's Arctic strategy: Drivers, hybridity and possible futures

Elizabeth Buchanan

## Introduction

For Russia, the Arctic is both an opportunity and a challenge. This duality poses a range of implications for Moscow's Arctic neighbours and, broadly speaking, for the West. Russia's Arctic strategy is both cooperative and competitive (and at times, coercive), which presents a challenge for the West when it comes to crafting adequate strategic responses. This chapter examines the duality of Russia's Arctic strategy by delving into the key features of Moscow's Arctic activities to highlight the areas in which other Arctic stakeholders are vulnerable.

The Russian Arctic is by no means a peripheral pursuit for Vladimir Putin's Russia, with the region accounting for roughly 10% of Russia's GDP and 20% of all Russian exports. The Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation covers almost 30% of the entire Russian Federation. Clearly, Russia's Arctic stake is about much more than the status of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and questions of who 'owns' the North Pole. Around 2.5 million Russian nationals call the Russian Arctic Zone home, and the Arctic is embedded in Moscow's strategic culture, national history and identity. Of course, the zone is also of critical strategic value given that it is the basing location of Russia's nuclear posture. Framing Russian Arctic interests with this in mind effectively reduces the scope for ideologically charged assessments of a neo-imperialist Russian Arctic agenda.

Under Putin, Russia's Arctic strategy has served two purposes: to outline Russia's national interests

in the Russian Arctic Zone and to articulate the threats or challenges posed in the region to Russian national security.<sup>1</sup> Of course, national security and national interests under Putin have become much broader than military might. Economic security, energy security and the resilience of Arctic investments in the face of external (human-induced and natural) threats are often overlooked when Western scholars contemplate what drives Putin in the Arctic.

This chapter begins by outlining the basis of Russia's Arctic interests and then moves on to plot the drivers of Moscow's Arctic strategy. By examining the complex, multifaceted nature of Russia's Arctic strategy, it illustrates the challenges posed to the West's interests in the Arctic. Russia's Arctic strategy is clearly hybrid in nature given its innate duality across the conflict-cooperation spectrum. This chapter considers the future trajectory of Russia's Arctic strategy across three potential scenarios: a fractured Arctic, a fragmented Arctic, and a functional Arctic.

## Russian Arctic strategy: a primer

The 2008 "Foundation of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic to 2020 and Beyond", signed by then President Dmitry Medvedev, set the tone for Russia's contemporary Arctic strategy.<sup>2</sup>

It underscored the role of the Russian Arctic Zone as a strategic resource base to assist socio-economic development and stated the requirement for maintenance of the region as

1 Elizabeth Buchanan, 'The overhaul of Russian strategic planning for the Arctic Zone to 2035', *Russian Studies Series*, Vol. 3, Issue 20 (2020). <https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=641>. Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 1 July 2021.

2 Government of the Russian Federation, 'Osnovy gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2020 goda i dal'neyshuyu perspektivu' [Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic to 2020 and beyond], 18 September, 2008. <http://static.government.ru/media/files/A4qP6brLNJ175l40UOK46x4SsKRHGfUO.pdf>.

a peaceful sphere – at least one of low tension. At the heart of the policy was the primacy of the Northern Sea Route as an economic lifeline for the Russian Federation. Understandably, the 2008 policy garnered international attention as it followed the 2007 publicity stunt in which Russian explorers planted the Russian flag on the seabed of the North Pole. This was, of course, more of a public relations stunt for Russia's domestic audience to flex the 'great power' narrative to shore up national support for Putin. The flag plant was nonetheless weaponized by Western media to fan sentiments of a looming 'new' Cold War in the Arctic.

The action of planting a Russian flag on the seabed of the North Pole is also an illustration of hybrid threats in action in the Arctic. The consequences of the particular action will indeed depend on *interpretations* made by Arctic stakeholders and actors. At what point do Western states in the Arctic draw a line and interpret such nationalistic actions as *more* than a simple chest-beating stunt? It becomes important for Arctic powers to consider their pre-existing assumptions of signalling and forces stakeholders to acknowledge the risks Russia is willing to take to send a message.

Naturally, the Russian Arctic is the largest open flank for Moscow – a state with a historical yet very present preoccupation with 'siege mentalities'. It is therefore no surprise that the Russian Arctic agenda has a pointed military-security component. The defence and protection of the state is a key priority for Russia when it comes to its Arctic flank. Yet Russia's Arctic strategy also prioritizes international cooperation and the maintenance of mutually advantageous cooperation within the Arctic, based on international law. Seemingly at odds, these two priorities shape Russian Arctic thinking. Here, one can gain a sense of the hybrid nature of Russia's Arctic strategy. The region, for Moscow, is as much about defence and access/area denial as it is about dialogue and diplomacy.

In 2014, during an extended meeting of Russia's Security Council, the main interagency body for coordinating and overseeing Russian strategic planning, Putin articulated Russia's lasting approach to the Arctic:

This region has traditionally been a sphere of our special interest. It is a concentration of practically all aspects of national security – military, political, economic, technological, environmental and that of resources ... we are aware of the growing interest in the Arctic on the part of the international community. Ever more frequently, we see the collision of interests of Arctic nations, and not only them: countries far removed from this area are showing a growing interest as well. We should also bear in mind the dynamic and ever-changing political and socioeconomic situation in the world, which is fraught with new risks and challenges to Russia's national interests, including those in the Arctic. We need to take additional measures so as not to fall behind our partners, to maintain Russia's influence in the region and maybe, in some areas, to be ahead of our partners.<sup>3</sup>

In 2020, Russia updated its Arctic strategy when Putin signed into law the "Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic in the Period to 2035".<sup>4</sup> Alongside this, Russia's Security Council announced the preparation of the project for a "Strategy of Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and the Provision of National Security for the Period to 2035" (Strategy of Development). This project is to be the mechanism for the realization of Russia's Arctic strategy, and points to a range of priorities for Russia from national security and threats to the ecosystem, and to the maintenance of Russia's 'scientific-technological leadership' in the region.<sup>5</sup>

3 Vladimir Putin, 'On the Implementation of Russia's State Policy in the Arctic in the Interests of National Security at the meeting of the Security Council on state policy in the Arctic', 2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20845>.

4 Government of the Russian Federation, 'Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2035 goda' [Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic in the Period to 2035], 2020. <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/f8ZpihpAaQOWB1zjyWN-04OgKil1mAvAM.pdf>.

5 Government of the Russian Federation, 'Nachalas podgotovka proekta Strategii razvitiya Arkticheskoi zony Rossiiskoi Federatsii i obsepechenia nacionalnoi bezopasnosti na period do 2035 goda' [Strategy of Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and the Provision of National Security for the Period to 2035], 2020. <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2737/>.

The implementation of Russia's Arctic policy and development strategy is based on a third document: "Socio-Economic Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation".<sup>6</sup>

This trinity of documents should be read to understand the drivers of Russian Arctic planning and, indeed, the direction we can expect the Russian Arctic strategy to take. The duality of continuity and change in Moscow's long-term priorities for the region is evident. Russia's national interests remain fixed upon ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity first and foremost. Moscow's interest in preserving the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation remains a feature. However, the new framing in terms of "stable mutually beneficial" partnerships is an interesting development for the Russian strategy. Collaboration in the Arctic will remain peaceful as long as Moscow perceives its engagement to be mutually beneficial. There is still a pointed military-security agenda. Framed as defensive militarization, Russia's military modernization programme in the Russian Arctic serves to ensure that Moscow can deter foreign military aggression in the region. Russia has increased the combat capabilities of its armed forces in the Arctic Zone and has overhauled and reopened existing Soviet-era military installations along its vast Arctic border.

Under Putin, strategic planning for the Arctic is quite pragmatic and predictable. While Moscow's agenda for the Russian Arctic Zone remains constant and unsurprising, it is also well within the agreed international norms and laws that govern the Arctic. The uptick in international attention paid to the 'emerging' Arctic region has further caused Moscow to double down on its efforts to capitalize on its self-prescribed 'great power' identity.

### Duality of the Russian Arctic strategy

State policies, strategies, and Kremlin rhetoric aside, the Russian Arctic strategy is largely driven by the 'weaponization' of Moscow's legitimate

(geographic, legal, and historical) Arctic stake.

Indeed, Russia's tendency to securitize then weaponize its own Arctic legitimacy reflects the complex nature of Moscow's Arctic agenda. Actions undertaken by Moscow to secure its own Arctic standing often involve undermining or delegitimizing competing Arctic-rim policies. A case in point is the 360-degree policy turn Putin has taken on the climate change issue – moving from ignorance of the issue to a pointed interest in mitigating the climate threat to score political points against a rather uninterested Trump administration. Here, Russia became the 'good' climate actor in the Arctic and the US was rendered the 'spoiler'. This messaging was then amplified for Russian domestic consumption – serving to drive a further wedge between Russia and the West. Of course, messaging about Russian environmental action and amplification of climate commitments is also weaponized to discredit the US as an Arctic leader among Washington's allies in the region.<sup>7</sup>

The Russian Arctic strategy is also blurring the line between what is deemed 'militarization' and what is considered 'securitization' by enhancing the concept of 'dual-use' Arctic capabilities. This is most pronounced in the ongoing debate within the field as to whether Russian Arctic coastal infrastructure (like ports, garrisons and satellite or communication hubs) serve security or military purposes. Given that it has the largest Arctic share, Russia has the largest search and rescue (SAR) area of responsibility.<sup>8</sup> To adequately monitor, patrol and render assistance should it be required, Moscow must have the necessary infrastructure in place. Figure 1 illustrates the sheer size of Russia's Arctic SAR zone. However, this kind of infrastructure can also be employed for military purposes. While actions like setting up new Russian Arctic brigades and equipping Russian military personnel with state-of-the-art weapons do not so easily sell the SAR utility, they do serve the purposes of the Russian Federation's military.

<sup>6</sup> Government of the Russian Federation, 'Prezident Rossii utverdil Osnovy gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2035' [Socio-Economic Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation], 2020. <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2750/>.

<sup>7</sup> This precedent was particularly evident following the 2019 Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo led the US delegation, which blocked (for the first time in Arctic Council history) the tabling of a ministerial communiqué due to a disagreement on the inclusion of 'climate change' in the declaration.

<sup>8</sup> For further information regarding Arctic SAR zones, see 'The Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic': <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/531>.



**FIGURE 1: Map of Russia's Arctic SAR remit<sup>9</sup>**

This grey zone within military-security applications of much of the renewed (and ever-expanding) hard-security footprint that Russia holds in the Russian Arctic Zone is a pressing issue that allied partners need to confront. SAR does not necessarily require new airfields in the Russian High North, nor the deployment of armed brigades. Given advances in technology, much of the SAR capability in the zone can be arrived at through the use of drone and automated surveillance. Of course, such surveillance can also lend itself to military-intelligence purposes. The central challenge of grey-zone capabilities is figuring out how allied partners can more clearly categorize Russian Arctic capability as either having military-security or safety utility. This challenge naturally creates divisions between like-minded states in the Arctic context – divisions that Moscow ultimately manipulates to frustrate Western unity in the Arctic theatre.

Further, the Russian Arctic strategy exists within the complex space of what constitutes 'national security'. History tells us that the Russian Arctic has long been viewed as a vulnerable open flank for Moscow. Indeed, the Arctic region was a central component of Soviet-US tensions (and later, cooperation) during the Cold War. Today, it remains the shortest distance for missiles to be sent directly between Russia and the US. In a domestic sense, the Russian Arctic Zone is a burgeoning region of priority for national socio-economic development. Making the far north regions (particularly the Yamal Peninsula) 'livable' for Russian nationals is a key priority for Moscow. Indeed, the future economic resource base of the Russian Federation is linked to the export potential and exploration of hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas – including LNG) located in the Russian Arctic.

<sup>9</sup> Reprinted with permission. Troy Bouffard, 2021, CASR, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

A historical siege mentality further shapes Moscow's approach to its Arctic strategy. Russia's vast open Arctic border, now increasingly busy with tourist and international cargo traffic, has been securitized by Russia. The challenge posed by Russia's open (and active) Arctic flank is also evident in that Moscow needs to at once facilitate the 'openness' and commercial activities of the region as a key export frontier, while also working to bolster offensive and defensive capabilities. Driven by its historical siege mentality – further fanned by NATO expansion – Russia has worked to secure its Pacific and Arctic Ocean frontiers. However, the duality of the Russian Arctic strategy also means that this siege mentality must be muted, up to a point, to attract foreign investment in energy projects and welcome international use of the Northern Sea Route (NSR).<sup>10</sup>

In a sense, at the very core of the Russian Arctic strategy is the fine balance between (or at least the quest for) cooperation and competition. Competition, of course, when not checked or diluted can and will lead to conflict. For now, Moscow's central Arctic ambitions are essentially based on a cooperative regional climate. Secure supply lines of energy to Asia require conflict-free sea lines of communication. Indeed, Russia's mega-projects in the Russian Arctic, aimed at securing the future economic foundation of the Russian Federation, are all possible only through joint ventures or capital injections from foreign partners. Obviously, there are unique flow-on effects for Russia. The Arctic is becoming a global zone in which Russian foreign policy appears to deviate from strategy elsewhere. Syria and Ukraine are merely examples, since 2014, of assertive, at times aggressive, Russian foreign policy adventurism. However, this playbook is not repeated in the Russian Arctic, or the global Arctic. In the Arctic, Russia is not the 'spoiler'. Moscow is in many ways seen to be a leader, collaboratively engaged in regional governance via the Arctic Council and a stalwart of the

agreed international legal regime in the region, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>11</sup>

Further duality concerning the Russian Arctic strategy can be found in the national strategic narrative under President Putin. Here, while a key driver may be a regional programme of industrialization in the Russian Arctic, there is also a pointed ideological agenda. Under Putin, Russian 'great powerness' has emerged as an ideal for the state to reattain. Often cited is Putin's comment that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That said, Putin has no ambition to return to the Soviet Union days – rather, it is about reigniting some of the borrowed sentiment from this era, in which Moscow was an equal great power with the US. While this ideal is unlikely to be realized, Russia appears to have reoriented this ambition to be one in which Moscow is viewed as a legitimate global actor *of consequence*. This is where the Russian Arctic comes to the forefront of this global agenda. Basic geography affords Russia the leadership stake in the region and, under Putin, this sphere has been used to promote Russia's great powerness. To this end, Putin's Russia has borrowed Stalin-era propaganda and narratives of frontier 'conquest' and Arctic 'exceptionalism'.<sup>12</sup> These concepts have materialized in a range of ways – from nationalist flag planting on the seabed of the North Pole to interesting interpretations of UNCLOS to clamp down on and control the NSR.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this nationalist agenda, which has associated elements of great power hubris, the Russian Arctic strategy is also about human security. Home to some two million Indigenous Arctic peoples, by far the most of any Arctic-rim state, the Russian Arctic is also a frontier for socio-economic development. Iterations of Arctic policy documents have alluded to human security and socio-economic priorities for the Kremlin; however, most recent policy planning initiatives have clearly

10 Arild Moe, 'A new Russian policy for the Northern sea route? State interests, key stakeholders and economic opportunities in changing times', *The Polar Journal*, Vol. 10, Issue 2 (2020): 209–227, DOI: 10.1080/2154896X.2020.1799611.

11 For more information on UNCLOS, see 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos\\_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf).

12 Elizabeth Buchanan, *Red Arctic* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

13 The Northern Sea Route (NSR) is also known as the Northeast Passage of the Arctic Ocean. It is a maritime trade route that links Asia to Europe along the Russian Arctic coastline.

reordered strategic interests towards ensuring social development. Processes of digitalization and connectivity are priorities for Russia across its Arctic communities. The development of social infrastructure – housing, schools, community centres and medical facilities are all crucial foundations for making the region attractive to live in. After all, the Russian Arctic is energy project-heavy and these industries are labour-intensive. Without viable communities and attractive living conditions on offer, Russia will have trouble securing the necessary human resources to execute vast commercial objectives in the region.

The Russian Arctic strategy constantly moves along the cooperation-conflict continuum, and it can exploit and expose Western vulnerabilities in the Arctic theatre. As discussed, within the Arctic sphere, it is not in Russia's interests (for now at least) to plunge the region into conflict or to cultivate tensions. That said, a potentially destabilizing hybrid variant of the Russian Arctic strategy is the way in which regional stewardship is politicized. During the Trump presidency, Russia actively exploited global dissatisfaction with the Trump administration's climate-change inaction. This was sharpened in the Arctic context, with the 2019 Rovaniemi summit becoming the first ever Arctic Council meeting to fail to deliver a joint declaration. Trump administration officials and their Arctic Council colleagues reached an irreconcilable impasse in which US officials refused to allow 'climate change' terminology to appear in the declaration. This naturally illustrated the 'spoiler' and disruptive nature of Trump's US *within* the Arctic forum. Russia was able to exploit and manipulate this stalemate and position itself as the responsible climate actor.

After decades of ignoring (even denying) the climate-change reality, Putin has doubled down on environmental and climate-change rhetoric. During the Trump administration, Moscow was able to undermine Washington's credibility in the Arctic sphere by weaponizing the lax policy interest of Trump's US *within* the region. The US became the 'absent' Arctic stakeholder. That said, in June 2020, President Trump introduced a memorandum on plans to bolster the US polar footprint. This at least signalled that the US Arctic absence

was coming to an end. Then, the ushering in of the Biden administration in 2021 saw the re-entry of the US into global climate agreements. Of course, Washington's clear climate commitment to the Arctic sphere was underscored by the US's engagement at the 2021 Arctic Council ministerial meeting. For now, climate appears to be an issue on which Moscow and Washington can agree to work together.

A further example of the duality in the Russian Arctic strategy can be found in the application of international law. Geography affords Russia the largest Arctic Ocean frontier and therefore it is in Moscow's interests to ensure that the agreed international legal regime of the Arctic is promoted and protected. Indeed, picking and choosing from the 'menu' of international law is not a new phenomenon, nor limited to Russia. There are various examples of states using those aspects of international laws and norms that suit their strategic agenda, and tossing aside or frustrating other elements of agreed international law that do not serve state interests. This would suggest that Moscow employs adherence to international law such as UNCLOS to promote a façade of cooperation and to cultivate sentiments of a 'good global actor' in the Arctic context. The UNCLOS regime assigns maritime sovereign rights to Moscow, tipping the balance in Russia's favour in the Arctic. Through the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) mechanism, international law also affords Russia an avenue to claim some of the Arctic Ocean's continental shelf as an extension of its Siberian shelf. Should this claim, currently under consideration with the commission, be deemed scientifically sound, Russia would lay claim to the seabed and its hydrocarbon resources up to the North Pole. While this would be a windfall for Russia's nationalistic agenda, questions about commercial viability (not to mention international demand) make the exploitation and production of hydrocarbons in the North Pole Arctic sector rather infeasible – and improbable. For now, Russia's CLCS claim to the continental shelf overlaps with submissions under consideration by both Denmark and Canada. Since the CLCS cannot award territory, it is highly likely that these three states will be left to delineate the claims among themselves.

While it is clear that Russia appears to employ principles of international law and utilize legal regimes in the Arctic, it is less straightforward as to how far Moscow will go to ensure its rights under international law. The looming CLCS deliberations will be a watershed moment in many ways. This will pose a real-time test for the Russian Arctic strategy – teasing out Moscow’s ability (or perhaps interest) in navigating the constraints of international law in the Arctic if/when rulings do not fall in Russia’s favour. In any case, the duality of Moscow’s Arctic position is flexible enough to cater for a divergence in policy direction. For now, Russia will continue to manipulate the status quo in terms of international law in the region to maximize Moscow’s existing advantage. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Russia’s interpretation of UNCLOS Article 234. Otherwise known as the ‘ice rule’, this article allows coastal states to employ further restrictions on maritime passages due to environmental concerns or hazards posed by ice cover. Moscow has applied this interpretation to the NSR, implementing tolls and national laws covering the operation of the route. It further interprets Article 234 to essentially deny NSR access to foreign vessels – including by way of innocent passage.

### **Future scenarios for the Russian Arctic strategy**

Given the clear hybrid attributes of the Russian Arctic strategy, forecasting the future of the Russian Arctic Zone, and indeed plotting the trajectory of Arctic geopolitics, becomes quite challenging. Part of the problem lies in the reality that Arctic policy under Putin has remained rather pragmatic, unsurprising, and cooperative. Of course, understanding the duality of the Russian Arctic strategy helps rationalize potential divergences from this course. In light of these considerations, I offer three potential scenarios for the Arctic (fractured, fragmented, and functional) and calibrate the Russian Arctic strategy to each environment.

#### **1. Fractured**

The fractured Arctic states fall prey to connotations of ‘new’ Cold Wars and great-power games.

The Arctic becomes a flashpoint once more. Russia and China are driven closer together, while NATO formalizes its Arctic footprint and formally inserts itself into the regional dynamics. Prioritizing the economic strategic stake in the region, Russia moves to fortify its NSR to ensure LNG deliveries remain unaffected by congested Arctic waters and NATO blockades. To do so, Russian Arctic policy employs the Soviet Bastion strategy once projected out to the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap, along the entire Russian Arctic flank. With regional agendas muted by an Arctic arms race, dialogue between neighbours and within the Arctic Council forum wanes. Arctic tensions freeze global collaboration on climate change agendas and notions of sustainable development in the Arctic are supplanted by national economic targets. Russia employs the hard stick approach to defending its largest open (and active) frontier and in no time, operationally, Moscow has the upper hand in terms of its Arctic capability edge.

Indicators that this scenario may develop include, but are not limited to:

- US or NATO freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) is conducted within Russian Arctic waters.
- NATO develops a formal Arctic strategy or the maritime strategy is updated to include the High North/Arctic Zone as a defined area of operation.
- Arctic continental shelf delineations between Denmark-Russia-Canada are upended and no consensus is reached.
- Russia-China military partnership pivots from Asia-Pacific exercises to Arctic operations.
- US and NATO increase their Arctic presence in the European Arctic region.

#### **2. Fragmented**

In the fragmented reality, Arctic geopolitics remains on the current course. The US has rectified, since 2019, its ‘hands-off’ and absent Arctic strategy. Lines of division between the Arctic-rim states exist and quasi-blocks emerge within the region. The European Arctic stakeholders continue to engage primarily with their North American Arctic counterparts and the region’s largest actor,

Russia, remains sidelined as the 'other'. There is an uptick in Asian states and 'near-Arctic' actors seeking a seat at the Arctic Council table. Basic cooperation and collaboration continue between Russia and the 'rest' in environmental and socio-development spheres. Military-security affairs are still ignored in that there is no regional forum that includes Russia for such discussion. The Russian Arctic strategy navigates this scenario by drawing in Asian stakeholders to fund and form joint ventures in Arctic energy projects. Essentially, Russia adds more stakeholders to the region. Not only does this 'internationalize' the Arctic, but it also blunts Russia-US power competition in the region. Here, protecting and maintaining the commercial viability of Russian Arctic projects becomes a hallmark of Arctic policy for Moscow. National security conceptions are reimagined by Russia as multifaceted across the human, environment, economic and military elements.

Indicators for heading towards this scenario include, but are not limited to:

- US Arctic strategy and planning documents continue to lump Russia and China together as regional 'threats'.
- Non-Arctic states (India and China) increase their military presence (by way of infrastructure or indigenous capabilities to operate in the environment) in the region.
- Non-Arctic institutions (EU) increase their Arctic footprint.
- Russia ramps up disinformation campaigns to balance against formal Arctic engagement of NATO.

### 3. Functional

The functional future Arctic scenario sees the contemporary status quo and cooperative Arctic nurtured and enhanced. The Biden presidency sees the return of climate leadership and the instigation of a 'dialogue and deterrence' playbook when dealing with Russia. The two collaborate and work together on mutual interests, of which the Arctic region presents many opportunities to do so. Indigenous peoples of the Arctic-rim states are central to regional planning. The existing Arctic Council governance structure is recalibrated for the

21<sup>st</sup> century and aligned to respond to challenges agilely. As such, a forum is created for Arctic-rim states to discuss and deliberate military-security concerns in the Arctic Zone. In the functional scenario, the Russian Arctic strategy reflects the leadership role that Moscow finds itself in within the region. Keeping the region free of tension becomes a priority for Russia, but to do so, Russian policy becomes more about communication and collaboration than military-strategic interests and competitive behaviour.

Indicators for heading towards this scenario include, but are not limited to:

- Norway pushes back against increased US and NATO Arctic footprints in favour of not pressuring Russia.
- The Arctic Council is expanded in terms of remit, and military-security concerns are discussed.
- A new regional forum for dealing with military-security concerns is created.
- Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting communiqués are delivered.

### Conclusion:

#### Overcoming an Arctic 'meltdown'

Despite claims dating back to the 1920s, to date there has been no military conflict between the Arctic-rim states over Arctic territory. Given Putin's assertive and indeed, at times, aggressive foreign policy beyond the Arctic region, one must question how the Arctic remains a High North theatre characterized by low tension, particularly because the region sees Russia and the West square off directly. This chapter has argued that Russian strategic interests, at least for now, are best served by keeping the region free of tension and maintaining it as a space for collaboration and cooperation between Russia and the West. However, the chapter has also underlined the duality in the Russian Arctic strategy, which ultimately illustrates the hybrid nature of Russian Arctic ambitions.

Cooperation is about mutual benefit and is rather different from concepts like collegiality in terms of shared visions and responsibilities for the

Arctic. Increasingly, Arctic narratives appear to be constructed in terms of the latter. But this is a misconception of the geopolitical environment one is seeking to navigate. Russia will prioritize a cooperative Arctic agenda as long as its mutual interests and shared benefits are realized. Maintaining its export energy frontier and keeping it free of tension or conflict is a priority for 'Russia Energy Inc' – after all, providing its European and Asian customers with a secure supply line is an important component of any energy security strategy. Hence, while this may be evidence of 'cooperation', it is more likely indicative of a good 'commercial' strategy.

Arctic security is defined by delineated territories and maritime agreements, and thriving Arctic-rim state cooperation, all anchored by an agreed system of international legal architecture and a functioning body for regional governance. Russia's leadership in this environment is as important as it is perplexing, given Moscow's assertive foreign policy elsewhere, which is characterized by departures from international norms and laws. Maintaining awareness of the hybrid strategy employed by Russia towards and, indeed, within the region is crucial for navigating the twists and turns of Arctic geopolitics. This chapter has outlined various activities and indicators to watch for across three potential Arctic futures (fractured, fragmented, and functional). Perhaps the key take-away across all three scenarios is this: elements of each are apparent and all three futures are evolving by the day. Tenets of the fractured, conflictual Arctic are strengthening – including sharpened US Arctic policy rhetoric and indicators of further militarization to come. Yet at the same time, elements of the functional, collaborative Arctic are also getting stronger, as evidenced by the ongoing Arctic Council working group engagement and the upcoming Russian chairship agenda, which promotes unified sustainable development.

A clear comparison with Russia's Antarctic agenda can also be drawn from its activities in the Arctic. In the South Pole, Moscow also bases its

polar engagement (and indeed its identity) on its rights afforded by international law. Here, Russia's role in the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), as an original signatory to the Treaty, is utilized by Moscow as a special role in overseeing the management and future history of Antarctica. Yet the same hybrid threats are apparent in Russia's Antarctic agenda. Manipulation of consensus-based international agreements is commonplace, and most recently illustrated by Russia's veto of enhancing environmental maritime zones in Antarctica. Therefore, we see a pattern of public support for environmental and international cooperative agendas followed by frustrating and divisive actions within consensus-based contexts.

Undermining the rules-based international order and its mechanisms for delivering agendas is merely another face of hybrid activity. Russia is actively doing this below the threshold of aggressive policies or military action in the Arctic and Antarctica. The challenge entails recognizing hybrid activities early on in this international theatre. On the one hand, Russia's adherence to and promotion of current international law in the Arctic is promising. On the other hand, it is important to be vigilant and watch for the morphing of this cooperation into coercion. This is a long-term process that requires subject-matter expertise in the Arctic geopolitical picture and the drivers of Russian Arctic policy.

Moscow will continue to frame its Arctic goals in terms of legitimacy and global cooperation for as long as it serves Russia's interests to do so. It duly becomes imperative for Western states to grasp the reality that Russia in the Arctic can be both cooperative and combative – even revisionist – at the same time. The Arctic is a rapidly changing environment in which the global community is aware of its morphing physical nature resulting from climate change. Treating the Russian Arctic strategy in much the same way – as a fluid, ever-evolving and multifaceted force – is the key to understanding the implicit hybrid character of Moscow's Arctic intent.

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# NATO and the EU in the Arctic: Engagement with Russian and Chinese hybrid challenges

Patrick Cullen

## Introduction

Long considered governed by the principle of “high north, low tension”,<sup>1</sup> the Arctic and its geographical environs are currently experiencing a resurgence in attention to its geopolitical significance from states and international organizations alike. This emergence of the Arctic as a zone of strategic competition is being driven by changes in the *natural* environment as well as changes to the *political-security* environment across Europe and further afield. Climate change is accelerating the polar ice melt, opening up new possibilities (both current and projected) for exploiting the region’s extensive natural wealth in energy, strategic minerals, fisheries and other economic resources. The progressive seasonal decline in ice coverage is also expanding the viability of Arctic transit routes along the North American and Eurasian coastlines, creating a future potential for the Northeast Passage to become the fastest route between Asia and Europe. These *regional* environmental drivers are independently helping to unlock geopolitically competitive great-power dynamics between the United States, Europe, Russia, and China in the Arctic/High North.

At the same time, new Western security discourses and perceptions within the member states and organs of NATO and the EU on the changing nature of *global* competition and conflict – referred to here as the hybrid turn in security politics illustrated by the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 – are influencing NATO and EU views of Russian and Chinese actions in the Arctic. In this

sense, Russian and Chinese hybrid challenges in the Arctic/High North region are not unique, but are rather a regional manifestation of the wider global set of hybrid challenges that Moscow and Beijing pose for Europe, the trans-Atlantic community, and for the world as a whole. Although both Russia and China pose hybrid challenges that range from military/kinetic action and coercion to non-military activities such as subversion and malign cyber and disinformation campaigns *globally*,<sup>2</sup> the character of the hybrid challenges that Moscow and Beijing pose for the West in the Arctic/High North *specifically* are quite distinct.

Russia’s enhanced military build-up and force projection capabilities in this region present a series of military challenges – some of which can be a consequence of hybrid threats – that are fundamentally tied to NATO’s traditional mission as a transatlantic defensive military alliance geared towards deterring Russian military aggression. Alternatively, China’s expanding presence in the Arctic/High North is primarily occurring outside of the military domain. Beijing is engaging in economic activities including foreign direct investment (FDI) and a wide array of other scientific, educational, and cultural actions that are creating a series of non-military hybrid puzzles that are occurring outside of NATO’s remit, yet which sit squarely within the purview of the EU’s traditional focus on societal and non-military security matters. To demonstrate these Russian and Chinese hybrid challenges in the Arctic/High North, as well as NATO and EU responses to these risks, this report sets out to achieve three primary objectives:

1 For example, see Levon Sevunts, ‘NATO wants to keep the Arctic as an area of low tensions’, Radio Canada International, 5 April 2018, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2018/04/05/nato-wants-to-keep-the-arctic-an-area-of-low-tensions-stoltenberg/>. Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 7 July 2021.

2 This includes Russian non-military cyber and malign influence campaigns in the US and elsewhere, and China’s use of “little blue men” in kinetic, below-threshold operations in the South China Sea.

- 1) to explain the overlapping yet distinct ways in which NATO and the EU have come to understand hybrid warfare and hybrid threats, respectively;
- 2) to provide an understanding of the different types of hybrid challenges posed by Russia and China and how these challenges manifest in the Arctic/High North;
- 3) to describe how each organization perceives its role in responding to such challenges in general, and in the Arctic/High North specifically.

The rest of the report is organized as follows. Section two offers a brief history of NATO and EU approaches to tackling hybrid threats, examining how these approaches differ, and how they are intended to complement one another. Section three shifts to the EU in the Arctic, and shows how the EU's traditionally soft-power-centric Arctic strategy is being compelled by events to evolve and to take hybrid threats into account. Section four looks at the potential for Chinese hybrid threats in the Arctic and addresses how the EU can and should respond to Beijing. Sections five and six discuss NATO's role in the Arctic and provide a survey of Russia's new Arctic military posture and hybrid threat activities, respectively. The seventh section discusses NATO's military response to the Russian military build-up in the Arctic, and also identifies a number of ways in which the Alliance is explicitly countering hybrid threats outside of the military domain. The paper concludes with a short discussion of EU and NATO cooperation in countering hybrid threats.

## **NATO and EU approaches to the hybrid puzzle**

In order to understand NATO and EU approaches to hybrid challenges and to anticipate the likely trajectory of their responses to hybrid threat challenges in the Arctic, it is crucial to understand how

these organizations have developed their counter-hybrid approaches over the last decade. The application and usage of the terms 'hybrid threats' and 'hybrid warfare' by the EU and NATO must be understood in the context of the illegal Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014. This attack on Ukraine, combined with NATO perceptions that Russia had successfully deployed a novel method of warfighting, marked a radical shift in its view of the European security environment. Early on, NATO publicly applied the term "hybrid warfare" to this event and immediately set out to enhance its defence posture vis-à-vis Russia with a new hybrid warfare deterrence. This signalled a strengthened NATO ability to rapidly deploy a conventional military response to Russian military aggression, and provided reassurance to its Eastern members<sup>3</sup> as it also reflected NATO's core task and role as a military organization.

Yet some analysts also understood that this purely military response might also demonstrate that NATO was poorly equipped to respond to some of the newer and more challenging aspects of this Ukraine conflict. Specifically, they saw that Moscow's strategic use of non-attributability and anonymity, ambiguity, the coordinated use of non-military tools (e.g. political, economic, civil, informational), as well as the creative manipulation of detection, political decision-making and military response thresholds could complicate or slow down NATO's ability to invoke collective self-defence. To address this security gap, the Alliance drew on its early conceptual work on hybrid challenges conducted prior to 2012<sup>4</sup> by NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT) to call for greater security cooperation with the EU. Namely, NATO saw a need for the EU to take the lead on hybrid threat challenges that could be non-military in nature, and that could cause damage to the open societies of liberal democracies prior to or without the use of military force, precisely because this would fall below or outside of the political and legal remit of NATO defence responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

3 Atlantic Council, 'Breedlove: NATO Have Begun Shaping Rapid Response Force', *Commanders Series*, 17 September 2014, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/event-recap/breedlove-nato-has-begun-shaping-rapid-response-force/>.

4 Note that this work conducted by NATO ACT predates the Russian occupation of Crimea by years. Michael Miklaucic, 'NATO Countering the Hybrid Threat', NATO Allied Command Transformation, 23 September 2011.

5 Peter Pindjak, 'Deterring Hybrid Warfare: A Chance for NATO and the EU to Work Together?', *NATO Review*, 18 November 2014, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2014/11/18/deterring-hybrid-warfare-a-chance-for-nato-and-the-eu-to-work-together/index.html>.

By the beginning of 2015, NATO's early theoretical work on hybrid warfare's ability to exploit a variety of non-traditional security challenges to expose a security gap below the threshold of war that could not easily be addressed by the Alliance<sup>6</sup> – and that therefore required a transnational governmental response from the EU to directly counter this threat – was gaining wider acceptance. A new European security discourse on “the changed security environment, often described as hybrid warfare”<sup>7</sup> was being adopted from NATO and applied domestically within Europe by the EU leadership in the European Commission (EC). A rough consensus duly emerged between these two multilateral organizations on how to manage hybrid challenges; NATO would focus on the hard power military tasks associated with hybrid warfare, and the EU would engage with the emerging non-military security issues of economic and societal resilience associated with hybrid threats. In this fashion, NATO and the EU would work to collaboratively meet in the ‘grey zone’ of the conflict spectrum between peace and war, and close the security gap that hybrid threat challenges operate in.

### The EU and hybrid threats in the Arctic

Three EU members, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, have territories in the Arctic. Two more Arctic states, Norway and Iceland, are members of the European Economic Area (EEA). This makes the Arctic and High North a domestic political – and (hybrid) security – issue for a significant number of EU and affiliate EEA members. Furthermore, many other EU states as well as the EU itself have observer status in the Arctic Council, the premier institution of cooperative governance in the region. For these reasons, it should come as no surprise that EU policy focuses on a self-styled “European Arctic” that recognizes national interests, but is

premised on the importance of the Arctic as being of interest to Europe as a whole. In the words of Virginijus Sinkevičius, the EC's Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, “what happens in the Arctic, does not stay in the Arctic. It concerns us all. The EU must be at the forefront with a clear and coherent Arctic policy to tackle the challenges in the years ahead.”<sup>8</sup>

Originally outlined in 2008, the current iteration of the EU's Arctic policy dates from 2016 and is under review at the time of writing. Historically, and in line with its approach to security in other regions and thematic subject areas,<sup>9</sup> the EU has refrained from engaging in Arctic hard power security politics. Instead, it has focused on three softer security priorities that are relatively non-controversial and promote collaborative actions and collective public gains: 1) climate change and safeguarding the Arctic environment; 2) promoting sustainable development in the region; and 3) supporting international cooperation on Arctic issues.<sup>10</sup> Yet despite its emphasis on environmental safekeeping, responsible development and continued calls for the maintenance of low tensions and peaceful regional cooperation, the EU's Arctic narrative is nevertheless slowly evolving to address new geopolitical realities presented by Russian and Chinese assertiveness in the Arctic. Notably, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell recently stated:

“The Arctic is a rapidly evolving frontier in international relations. Climate change is dramatically transforming the region, and increasing its geopolitical importance, with a number of players seeing new strategic and economic opportunities in the High North... The European Union must be fully equipped to manage the new dynamics effectively, in line with our interests and values.”<sup>11</sup>

6 Michael Aaronson, Sverre Deisen, Yves de Kermabom, Mary Beth Long and Michael Miklaucic, ‘NATO: Countering the Hybrid Threat’, *PRISM*, Volume 2, Number 4, (2011): 111–124, [https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism\\_2-4/Prism\\_111-124\\_Aaronson-Diessen.pdf](https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_2-4/Prism_111-124_Aaronson-Diessen.pdf).

7 European Defence Agency, ‘Hybrid Warfare’, 2015, <https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/all-activities/activities-search/hybrid-warfare>.

8 European Commission, ‘Arctic policy: EU opens consultation on the future approach’, 20 July 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_1318](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1318).

9 Here I refer to the role of the European Commission's Directorates-General (DGs). DGs may be considered the EC equivalent of government ministries, and are organized by areas of responsibility, such as energy, migration and home affairs, maritime affairs and fisheries, etc.

10 European Commission, ‘Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: An integrated European Union policy for the Arctic’, 27 April 2016, 4, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/arctic\\_region/docs/160427\\_joint-communication-an-integrated-european-union-policy-for-the-arctic\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/arctic_region/docs/160427_joint-communication-an-integrated-european-union-policy-for-the-arctic_en.pdf).

11 European Commission, ‘Arctic policy: EU opens consultation on the future approach’.

Crucially, these new Arctic geopolitical “dynamics” driven by Russia and China entail the risk of hybrid threat challenges which, by their very nature, are propelling the three EU Arctic policy priorities into the realm of hard security politics – despite the fact that the EU had intentionally chosen these softer policy goals in part to avoid entanglement in hard security considerations. For instance, there is growing recognition that Chinese FDI aimed at port and communications infrastructure needs to be measured not only for its potentially negative environmental impact, but also for long-term and subtle negative security implications.<sup>12</sup> This observation, in turn, creates new security responsibilities to identify, and measure, monitor and respond to such hybrid threat challenges that had previously remained unaddressed or un-emphasized within the wider EU, and in the Arctic specifically. From a counter-hybrid threat perspective, as a result, EU bodies such as the EC Directorates-General on Energy or Maritime Safety that are responsible for these ostensibly soft power Arctic policy priorities may be compelled to be self-consciously aware of how their areas of responsibility might be threatened, targeted and otherwise negatively impacted by hybrid threats.

There appears to be growing evidence that the EU is acknowledging this issue. Indeed, by stating that “...the EU should contribute to enhancing the economic, social and environmental resilience of societies in the Arctic”,<sup>13</sup> the 2016 EU Arctic policy document (written two years after the invasion of Crimea) tellingly contains a core EU counter-hybrid threat policy goal of societal *resilience*. More recently in 2020 the EC drew attention to these new intersections between the EU’s emphasis on soft power issues (including in the Arctic/High North) and hybrid threats more pointedly, stating:

“...the era of a somewhat naive Europe has come to an end...we know that in today’s world, soft power, alone, is not enough. It is

even difficult to know when a power is soft or hard because the difference between the two is vanishing.”<sup>14</sup>

Although the EU has not explicitly outlined how it will respond to Chinese non-military hybrid threats in the Arctic – and is reticent to discuss Chinese behaviour in the Arctic/High North in such terms – it is possible to understand the EU’s perception of and possible future response to this regional threat from Beijing by extrapolating from broader EU efforts within Europe and applying this to an Arctic context.

### Chinese hybrid threats in the Arctic and options for the EU

China does not currently have a significant military presence in the Arctic, and as a result direct Chinese military threats in the region are limited. However, Chinese scientific and commercial Arctic and High North activities can and occasionally do have direct military applications that enhance the overall capabilities of the Chinese military – both today and in the future.

For instance, China’s version of the American satellite global positioning system, called BeiDou-3, relies on a satellite ground station at Norway’s polar scientific hub in Svalbard to provide it with critical global coverage.<sup>15</sup> It is used for missile positioning and timing and also plays a central role in Beijing’s cyber warfare and C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) capabilities.<sup>16</sup> China’s Arctic intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities have also been enhanced by its first polar observation satellite, “ice pathfinder”, which was launched in September 2019. Similarly, the Chinese Navy’s role in Beijing’s Arctic strategy has been embedded and thus hidden in plain sight within China’s polar science programme. China’s new polar science research vessel, Xue Long 2,

<sup>12</sup> Confidential interviews, Brussels.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, ‘Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: An integrated European Union policy for the Arctic’, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Remarks made by Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, EU Defense Washington Forum, 9 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jqQIVZhJZs>.

<sup>15</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, ‘Facing Up to China’s Military Interest in the Arctic’, Jamestown Foundation, 10 December 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/facing-up-to-chinas-military-interests-in-the-arctic/>.

<sup>16</sup> Brady, ‘Facing Up to China’s Military Interest in the Arctic’.

was launched in July 2019 and was built to Chinese Navy specifications that allow it to conduct bathymetric surveys that are a prerequisite for submarine operations in the Arctic – a long-term ambition for China’s submarine strategy.<sup>17</sup> The EU’s heightened concern about hybrid threats may compel it to assess the short- and long-term security risks associated with such Chinese dual-use military-civilian scientific endeavours in the Arctic, and to consider policy options designed to counter such risks.

While hybrid threats in the Arctic and High North associated with the Chinese *military* are relatively limited, Beijing’s ability to use its *economic* power through foreign direct investment (FDI) in this region is much more substantial. Further, although the harm from Chinese FDI may not be immediately apparent or overt, its consequences can nevertheless be far-reaching and serious. Chinese FDI can be used to inflict real damage on national security (or lay the groundwork for future damage to national security) through economic activity that is ostensibly conducted in the private sphere and thus supposedly apolitical, outside of the realm of the state, and unlinked to security concerns.<sup>18</sup> However, as Norway’s intelligence service has publicly warned, Chinese and Russian “intelligence and security services are heavily involved in all aspects of these two societies, and it makes little sense to distinguish between public and private interests and activities when making assessments that are significant to ... national security.”<sup>19</sup> According to Norwegian and other Western intelligence agencies, the net result of the Chinese Communist Party’s state control over and interference in Chinese economic (and cultural, scientific, etc.) activity is the active intrusion of Chinese intelligence services into every sector of a state’s society where Chinese FDI occurs.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of Chinese FDI hybrid threats specifically, the EU has discussed concerns over own-

ership of strategic assets including nuclear power plants, Beijing’s control over manufactured inputs into the supply chain of critical defence products, military/civilian dual-use technologies (such as semi-conductors), and other transfers of sensitive high-technology and knowledge to an authoritarian state whose values are unaligned with the EU, up to and including espionage and sabotage.<sup>21</sup> In an Arctic context, Beijing’s “One Belt, One Road” Initiative has been dubbed the “Polar Silk Road”, and continues China’s global trend of primarily focusing FDI on strategic transportation, communication, and energy projects. This includes Chinese proposals and projects across the Eurasian Arctic/High North for tunnel, seaport, and railway infrastructure, undersea fibre-optic cable lines, as well as the mining of strategic rare earth minerals.

The security risks associated with these projects in the economic sphere alone are myriad, and range from the purported debt traps associated with predatory Chinese project financing, to the leveraging of high-value project investments to increase and exert pressure on politicians in unsavoury political influence campaigns. Massive raw intelligence gains from Beijing’s ownership and/or operation of regional ports and other transportation infrastructure – as well as from anticipated cyber-espionage collusion between fibre-optic telecoms (e.g. Huawei) and the Chinese party-state – also constitute a hybrid threat. As a result, ambitions for Chinese FDI in the Arctic and High North have experienced some push-back, both domestically at the state level from national defence/intelligence agencies, as well as internationally in the form of diplomatic pressure from the United States for the EU Arctic member states to delay, review, and potentially stop such projects moving forward.<sup>22</sup>

As for the European Union itself, there are a number of opportunities for it to respond to Chinese hybrid threats in the Arctic and High North,

17 Brady, ‘Facing Up to China’s Military Interest in the Arctic’.

18 The fact that FDI is a legal economic activity has also shielded it from more rigorous attention from defence and intelligence agencies.

19 Norwegian Intelligence Service, ‘Focus 2020’, January 23 2020, 9, [https://www.forsvaret.no/aktuelt-og-presse/publikasjoner/fokus/rapporter/Focus%202020%20English.pdf/\\_attachment/inline/7bc5fcbd-e39c-4cb6-966a-0f7115205b44:d282e733ce4f5697c9e4a7afc5a63c16dab6c151/Focus%202020%20English.pdf](https://www.forsvaret.no/aktuelt-og-presse/publikasjoner/fokus/rapporter/Focus%202020%20English.pdf/_attachment/inline/7bc5fcbd-e39c-4cb6-966a-0f7115205b44:d282e733ce4f5697c9e4a7afc5a63c16dab6c151/Focus%202020%20English.pdf).

20 Norwegian Intelligence Service, ‘Focus 2020’.

21 Gisela Grieger, ‘Foreign Direct Investment Screening: a debate in light of China-EU FDI flows’, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2017, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI%282017%29603941](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI%282017%29603941).

22 Marc Lanteigne, ‘The Twists and Turns of the Polar Silk Road’, *Over the Circle*, 15 March 2020, <https://overthecircle.com/2020/03/15/the-twists-and-turns-of-the-polar-silk-road/>.

and each of these options can be seen as an extrapolation of options currently being used to counter hybrid threats in the wider EU. First, the EU can continue to advocate for member states to *regulate and report* on the security implications of Arctic FDI and how it may impact the EU. This can be facilitated by an EU foreign investment screening mechanism that became operational in October 2020.<sup>23</sup> Second, the EU can consider selectively making *strategic counter-investments*. Platforms such as the European Structural and Investment Funds, the European Investment Bank, and Investment Plan for Europe have been discussed as vehicles for Arctic investment – and could be used strategically for countering Chinese FDI in sensitive areas.<sup>24</sup> Third, the EU can extend efforts currently underway by the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell to raise awareness and provide early warning of hybrid threats within the EU into the Arctic region. This would involve Fusion Cell- coordinated cross-EU intelligence and information sharing, including by EC Directorates- General working in the Arctic and High North. Finally, cooperation with the NATO Hybrid Analysis Branch, which provides NATO member states with improved awareness of hybrid threats, could be used in an Arctic context.

### **NATO as a military alliance in the Arctic/High North**

Five of the Arctic Council's eight members are part of NATO – Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the United States. Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, at the political level, the appropriate role for NATO in the Arctic is more contested than that of the EU, even within NATO itself. While the text of the 1949 NATO Washington Treaty can easily be interpreted as including the Arctic land (and the continental shelf), territorial waters,

and exclusive economic zone of these five states, there is no consensus within NATO that the Arctic should be an area of military concern.<sup>25</sup>

NATO members have different ideas about the appropriate level of NATO engagement in the Arctic and different interpretations of whether or not Russia's military build-up in the region is primarily offensive or defensive in nature.<sup>26</sup> However, seen from an operational military perspective, NATO – which is first and foremost a military alliance – has a responsibility to maintain a robust armed deterrence against any *potential* Russian military aggression. Moreover, any offence/defence military interaction – even a purely *defensive* aim from Moscow (e.g. to militarily enhance its High North “Bastion Defence concept” by furthering protection of its submarine fleet's nuclear deterrence) – inherently includes an increased *offensive* military risk to NATO. Thus, irrespective of its internal politics, at the operational level, NATO military planners must be able to maintain (for example) its capability to reinforce Europe by sea and air during a military contingency with Russia, as well as plan for and respond to enhanced Russian military capabilities and force posture in the region. This core military imperative can be seen at work in NATO's original operational-level response to Russian hybrid aggression in Crimea: NATO's 2014 Wales Summit declaration to enhance NATO readiness with a new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force to reinforce NATO's Eastern border with Russia.<sup>27</sup>

Similar military imperatives exist for NATO in the Arctic and High North. NATO must be capable of deterring Russian armed aggression along the full spectrum of conventional and hybrid conflict, including (for example) the use of minimal and ‘ambiguous’ or difficult-to-attribute force to create a *fait accompli* in the Norwegian Svalbard archipelago in the Arctic along similar lines to the Russian

23 European Commission, ‘EU foreign investment screening mechanism becomes fully operational’, Press release, October 9 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1867](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1867).

24 European Commission, ‘Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: An integrated European Union policy for the Arctic’, 11.

25 Mark E. Rosen, Cara B. Thuringer, ‘Unconstrained Foreign Direct Investment: An Emerging Challenge to Arctic Security’, Center for Naval Analyses, November 2017, [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/COP-2017-U-015944-1Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/COP-2017-U-015944-1Rev.pdf).

26 These disagreements have included NATO Arctic states. Norway has called for a more robust NATO presence in Norwegian waters along “NATO's northern flank”, while Canada has been more cautious about a NATO Arctic presence and more sensitive to issues of national sovereignty and calls for continued de-militarization of the region.

27 For a brief elaboration of this point, see: NATO SHAPE, ‘NATO Response Force’, <https://shape.nato.int/nato-response-force--very-high-readiness-joint-task-force>.

annexation of Crimea.<sup>28</sup> For NATO, the hybrid puzzle complicates operational military planning in the Arctic because it requires finding new *military* solutions to possible future *military components* of creative or ambiguous hybrid aggression that are intentionally designed to complicate this operational planning process. Not only must NATO prepare for 'traditional' force-on-force military contingencies that constitute clear acts of war; now they must also prepare for hybrid aggression occurring further down the scale into the 'grey zone' of the peace-war conflict spectrum. New Russian military capabilities and possible hybrid concept experimentation complicate NATO Arctic and High North contingency planning.

## Russia in the Arctic and High North

### Presence and capabilities

From Moscow's perspective, the Northern Sea Route's (NSR) and Northeast Passage's increasing rate of ice melt creates economic opportunities as well as security risks. Increased access exposes Russia's northern flank to the prospect of a growing presence of foreign US and NATO military forces in the region. In principle, these challenges may originate from the East in the Bering Strait, or from the West from Norway or Greenland. At the same time, this maritime Arctic route is viewed by Moscow "as a source of substantial economic gains as well as a means for Moscow to promulgate the 'Great Eurasian Power' concept", with the former requiring an enhanced defence, and the latter enhancing the narrative of Russia's continued role as a global great power.<sup>29</sup> These factors are driving Russian enhancement of its military capabilities and firepower in the Arctic region, creating a multi-layered defence that appears designed to secure military dominance in the NSR.

Russian intentions aside, it is indisputable that Moscow has expanded its military force posture in the Arctic.<sup>30</sup> It has reinvested in Arctic military infrastructure, building new bases or reopening and upgrading older facilities that have been deteriorating since post-Cold War defence spending cuts in the 1990s. These upgrades include ten search and rescue bases, sixteen deep-water ports, ten new air bases (out of fourteen in all) and ten air defence installations.<sup>31</sup> Alexandra Land, an island in Franz Josef Land archipelago to the northeast of Norway's Svalbard, is home to Russia's northernmost permanent military facility. The island is the location of the Arctic Trefoil, a new 14,000 m<sup>2</sup> base equipped with a Sopka-2 radar dome capable of monitoring regional air traffic as well as surface and naval activity. Satellite data from 2020 shows that it is located near the Cold War-era Nagurskoye Air Base, which has itself undergone extensive upgrades to the length and quality of its runway, facilitating its use by tactical combat aircraft, bombers, refuelling planes, and maritime surveillance planes, significantly enhancing Russian military capabilities in the region.<sup>32</sup>

Russia has also increased its testing and deployment of new weapons systems in the Arctic. In September 2018, Russia demonstrated its enhanced readiness to control Arctic waterways and protect Russian Arctic archipelagos and coastal zone by launching supersonic Oniks cruise missiles from its upgraded bases in the region.<sup>33</sup> Moscow has also introduced several new weapons systems that were designed to militarily signal an end to unchallenged US military supremacy and introduce an era of a reinvigorated Russian military capable of using technological advances to "offset" US capabilities. These systems included the Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile, the Kinzhal hypersonic nuclear-capable air-launched ballistic

28 Michael Zimmerman, 'High North and High Stakes: the Svalbard Archipelago Could be the Epicenter of Rising Tension in the Arctic', *PRISM*, Volume 7, number 4 (2018), <https://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/1683880/high-north-and-high-stakes-the-svalbard-archipelago-could-be-the-epicenter-of-r/>.

29 Sergey Sukhankin, 'Completing the Arctic Shield: Russian activities on Wrangel Island', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 9 April 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/completing-the-arctic-shield-russian-activities-on-wrangel-island/>.

30 It is important to note that Russia's Arctic military presence is still under development and undercapitalized.

31 Janis Kluge and Michael Paul, 'Russia's Arctic Strategy through 2035: grand plans and pragmatic constraints', *SWP*, November 2020, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C57/>.

32 For example, see Joseph Trevithick and Tyler Rogoway, 'Image Shows Russia Extending Runway at Arctic Base, Could Support Fighters, Bombers', 21 August 2020, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/35899/russia-is-extending-the-runway-at-its-arctic-base-could-support-tactical-jets-bombers>.

33 Anthony Cordesman, 'Chronology of Possible Russian Gray Area and Hybrid Warfare Operations', Working Draft, CSIS, 8 December 2020, 42, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200702\\_Burke\\_Chair\\_Russian\\_Chronology.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200702_Burke_Chair_Russian_Chronology.pdf).

missile, the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle, and the nuclear-capable Poseidon torpedo.<sup>34</sup> Another Russian weapon design that stands out in a hybrid threat/warfare scenario is the Club-K missile. This containerized missile system conceals both the missile and launch system within a standard shipping container, allowing anti-ship and anti-submarine missiles to be hidden in plain sight on board civilian cargo vessels or seaports, and moved or stored without arousing suspicion or fear of a pre-emptive strike. Such systems could be fired from a container vessel, or from a port, and pose dilemmas of attribution and plausible deniability – a hallmark of Russian hybrid operations.

### Exercises

Russia has also put its new Arctic military resources to good use, demonstrating its presence in the region by substantially increasing both the scale and the tempo of its Arctic military exercises in the last few years. In 2018, Russia conducted the largest military exercise since the Cold War. Vostok-18 involved 300,000 troops in eastern Russia and the Bering Sea. In 2019, the Tsentr-19 and Grom-19 Arctic exercises ran military drills for the Northern Fleet that incorporated new Arctic military materiel. The latter drill included ten Russian submarines patrolling the so-called GIUK gap, a nautical choke between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom, the launch of two nuclear warheads into the Barents Sea, and other ballistic missiles.<sup>35</sup> Such military exercises demonstrate Russian capabilities to deny access to the NSR and signal intent to challenge control over the North Atlantic. From a hybrid warfare perspective, it is crucial to remember that Russia also uses military exercises as a coercive tool and as a way to conceal force deployment in preparation for its hybrid operations. This has been done in operations launched against both Georgia and Ukraine.

Although not occurring in the same numbers as during the Cold War era, Russia is also increasingly testing NATO readiness and responses to Russian

aerial probes of NATO territory in the North American Arctic and European High North. Russian strategic bombers, for instance, regularly approach Alaskan airspace across the Bering Strait, and similar occurrences are increasingly common in the Western Arctic.

### Hybrid challenges to NATO reinforcement

Russia's military modernization, reorganization and build-up in the European Arctic and High North also have significant force projection ramifications for NATO that extend beyond these regions. Specifically, Russia has increased its Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2AD) capabilities. This allows it to contest control over increasingly large areas of the North Atlantic. Russia's deployment of dual-capable (nuclear and non-nuclear) long-range precision-strike capabilities in the Western Arctic are a threat to North Atlantic sea lines of communication (SLOCs). This fact, combined with an aging NATO logistics transport fleet, has increased Moscow's potential to delay or deny NATO's capability to send reinforcements from North America to Europe by sea and air. This observation has not gone unnoticed by the Norwegian Navy, which has explored some of the operational and tactical hybrid military risks to North Atlantic SLOCs for NATO and the Norwegian littorals in particular. Not only does Russia's enhanced Northern Fleet capabilities threaten NATO SLOC High North blue water operations,<sup>36</sup> but its strengthened green and brown water force may cause Russia to attempt to leverage the Norwegian littorals to extend its coastal fleet's A2/AD capabilities during a contingency. Ulriksen and Østensen have elaborated as follows:

“There is an increase in Russia's potential to use hybrid tactics to disrupt, delay, and possibly deny activity in the waters around Norway. This includes jamming, sabotage, and the use of civilian shipping for irregular activities, such as mine-laying.”<sup>37</sup>

34 Jakub Godzimirski, 'Russian approaches to military technology: the Russian dimension', Policy Brief, NUI, 2020, <https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/handle/11250/2654325>.

35 For an excellent review, see Mathew Malio and Heather A. Conley, 'The Ice Curtain: Russia's Arctic Military Presence', CSIS, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/features/ice-curtain-russias-arctic-military-presence>.

36 For instance, in the expected increase in the number of Russian conventional diesel and possibly advanced-internal-propulsion submarines.

37 Ståle Ulriksen and Åse Gilje Østensen, 'Building on Strength: Proposals for US-Norwegian Cooperation on the Operational and Tactical Level', Concept Paper Series, Norwegian Defense University College, February 2019, 5.

These Russian modern land-based anti-air and anti-ship systems are highly mobile and can be moved by air or sea to forward strategic positions. Russia's Arctic Command ground forces are also training for amphibious operations,<sup>38</sup> suggesting the possibility of Russia deploying small teams to rapidly set up mobile missile systems on unprotected Norwegian littoral islets, thus extending Russian air and sea denial A2AD bubbles down the Norwegian coastline, and denying or attriting NATO forces before they reach European shores.<sup>39</sup> Russia has also pointedly announced plans to place Tsirkon hypersonic anti-ship missiles on board smaller and cheaper littoral patrol vessels to offset fiscal obstacles to blue water Navy modernization. This suggests its expanding conventional and hybrid warfare capabilities.<sup>40</sup>

## NATO responses to Russian Arctic and High North hybrid threat challenges

### Military

NATO's role as a military alliance should make it unsurprising that its response to the potential for Russian hybrid threat activity in the Arctic and High North is centred at the sharp end of the peace-war conflict spectrum. Indeed, to the extent that some see escalation dominance<sup>41</sup> as an enabler of Russian hybrid warfare, NATO must demonstrate its own potential to counter Russian hybrid warfare in the region by balancing or out-matching Russia's military capabilities and activities. In short, hybrid warfare complicates NATO's responsibility to deter a conventional military attack, and both NATO's assessment of Russian hybrid threat challenges and its response to them remains focused on conventional military force.

With this in mind, NATO is enhancing its own military capabilities, presence, and exercises in the

Arctic and High North. The signature demonstration of this commitment by NATO to its northern flank was its 2018 Trident Juncture exercise in the Norwegian and Barents Seas. This was the largest NATO wargame since the Cold War and was the first time that the US had sent an aircraft carrier to the Arctic Sea in decades. NATO has also relied on bilateral and multilateral national groupings of the Alliance to demonstrate its commitment to the region. The United States' stand-up of the previously disbanded North Atlantic's 2<sup>nd</sup> Fleet and its commitment to multinational naval patrols in the North Atlantic is a case in point. NATO is also using these multilaterals to pursue a rotational naval presence in the Arctic and High North. For instance, the US and UK navies have recently sent a surface action group of three American destroyers, a British frigate and a US supply ship into the Barents Sea for the first time since the Cold War in a week-long exercise dubbed Dynamic Trident.

NATO multilateral Air Forces are also proactively engaged in the region to counter Russian challenges to NATO member airspace and to show a regional presence. For instance, NATO's Quick Reaction Alert force at Bodø Air Base just inside the Arctic Circle in Norway is aimed at both identifying foreign aircraft and enhancing NATO situational awareness in the region. NATO is also using the international coordination of highly sophisticated air platforms such as US stealth bombers teaming up with Norwegian F-35s in the Norwegian Sea to signal presence.<sup>42</sup> More recently, there have been aspirational calls to set up a specialized NATO Arctic Rapid Reaction Force comprised of air, ground, and maritime assets from Canada, Denmark, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States, and others capable of responding to both military and humanitarian crises in the region.<sup>43</sup>

38 Ulriksen and Østensen, 'Building on Strength'.

39 Reports of an unusual number of Russian "military-aged men" applying for licences to pilot small watercraft in the Norwegian littorals have raised suspicion amongst Norwegian defence and intelligence officials of Russian planning for such contingencies. (Confidential conversations with Norwegian military officials.)

40 Katarzyna Zysk, 'Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic: to What End?', Center for Naval Analyses, September 2020, 15.

41 Escalation dominance refers to the ability to impose unacceptable costs on an adversary by escalating a conflict. It has been cited as a key component of Russian victories in the hybrid campaigns in both Georgia and Ukraine.

42 Thomas Nilsen, 'Geopolitics is changing as B2 again flies Arctic mission together with Norwegian F-35', Barents Observer, 18 June 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2020/06/arctic-geopolitics-changing-b-2s-again-flies-high-north-mission-together-norwegian>.

43 Jim Danoy and Marisol Maddox, 'Set NATO's Sights on the High North', 14 October 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/nato20-2020/set-natos-sights-on-the-high-north/>.

## Non-military

NATO has also stepped out of the purely military realm to counter hybrid threats a number of ways. First, in 2018, NATO created Counter-Hybrid Support Teams to offer assistance tailored to the specific needs of a NATO member at their request. Although information on their work is limited, NATO envisions these support teams focusing on a wider set of problems outside of NATO's military deterrence role, such as Russian disinformation and influence operations targeting the societies of member states.<sup>44</sup> According to the US Mission to NATO, these teams are comprised of experts and resources from across the NATO alliance organized and ready to respond to threats against NATO-member institutions and infrastructure and are specifically designed to strengthen NATO nation resilience to unconventional attacks and new threats.<sup>45</sup> This concept was operationalized in 2019 by a team deployment to Montenegro. Not only was this team tasked with countering Russian electoral interference, but also with studying Russian activities to better understand and counter future threats to the Alliance. It is clear that NATO sees such hybrid threats against democratic electoral institutions and infrastructure in Montenegro as part of an ongoing real-world laboratory experimenting with techniques that can be and may be replicated in the future – including in the Arctic and High North.

NATO has also taken the lead in countering certain hybrid threats, such as those aimed at taking advantage of the legal seams and infrastructure deficiencies within the EU that hinder NATO's military mobility for troops and materiel in times of crisis.<sup>46</sup> The EU and NATO have made improving mobility a priority and turned it into a flagship pro-

ject for cooperation. This coordination should be applied in the Arctic and High North and extended to include EU awareness of the potential for militarily deleterious consequences of Russian or Chinese ownership of strategic Arctic infrastructure. Finally, NATO has also created the Hybrid Analysis Branch, a small unit composed of NATO intelligence officers tasked with researching and raising awareness of unconventional hybrid threats – both military and non-military – that may negatively impact the Alliance.

## Conclusions

As outlined in the introduction to this paper, both Russia and China pose hybrid challenges in the Arctic and High North along the entire peace-war conflict spectrum. However, key differences in the resources of these two actors mean that plausible near-term Arctic hybrid threat scenarios look quite different when considering the two countries.

China's massive potential for economic activity and FDI in the region poses the most significant vector for hybrid threat development in the Arctic. Yet FDI is not the only non-military tool in Beijing's hybrid arsenal. The risk of Chinese hybrid threats is cross-sectoral, cutting across politics, media, economics, finance, education, scientific exploration and further afield. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) hybrid influence actions include alleged bribery of politicians<sup>47</sup> and agent penetration of political parties,<sup>48</sup> the online hacking of election infrastructure,<sup>49</sup> political harassment and control of the Chinese diaspora,<sup>50</sup> the covert systematic CCP purchase and control of global Chinese language media,<sup>51</sup> and leveraging investment in Western universities to silence 'anti-Beijing' academic free

44 Slobodan Lekic, 'First NATO counter hybrid warfare team to deploy to Montenegro', Stars and Stripes, 8 November 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/first-nato-counter-hybrid-warfare-team-to-deploy-to-montenegro-1.606562>.

45 See 'US Mission to NATO' Facebook page, accessed 12 January 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/USNATO/posts/what-are-counter-hybrid-support-teams-experts-resources-from-across-the-alliance/10156770630167313/>.

46 Robin Allers, 'Strengthening NATO's capabilities: embrace the bottom-up approach', European Leadership Network, 28 February 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/strengthening-natos-capabilities-embrace-the-bottom-up-approach/>.

47 Nick McKenzie and Chris Uhlmann, 'Big political donor named in Parliament over FBI bribery case and Beijing links', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/big-political-donor-named-over-fbi-bribery-case-and-beijing-links-20210202-p56vtg.html>.

48 Craig McCulloh, 'Labor, National tight-lipped on former Kiwi-Chinese MPs' departure', Radio New Zealand, 27 May 2021, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/443477/labour-national-tight-lipped-on-former-kiwi-chinese-mps-departure>.

49 Reuters staff, 'China targeting U.S. election infrastructure with cyberattacks, says O'Brien', *Reuters*, 9 August 2020.

50 Timothy Heath, 'Beijing's Influence Operations Target Chinese Diaspora', War on the Rocks, 1 March 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/beijings-influence-operations-target-chinese-diaspora/>.

51 For just one example in the radio sector, see Koh Gui Qing, 'Beijing's covert radio network airs China-friendly news across Washington, and the world', *Reuters*, 2 November 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-radio/>.

speech.<sup>52</sup> This is only a small selection of generic and global Chinese hybrid influence actions that one must expect to be applied in an Arctic context. Despite their illiberal nature and the costs inflicted on democratic society, the long-term negative security implications of these activities are harder to understand than, for instance, the Chinese FDI used to control a strategic maritime port. Moreover, many of these activities are legal, (e.g. taking advantage of the lack of government oversight of economic activity and weaknesses in campaign finance laws), thus handicapping counter-intelligence efforts and leaving Parliamentarians to play legislative catch-up to plug holes against hybrid threats that have already manifested.

It is critical for democratic governments to overcome the cognitive hurdles that have stopped them from seeing non-military hybrid threats hiding in plain sight. Sharing information and speaking publicly about such hybrid threats is an important first step. The EU can and should extend its efforts – in the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell and elsewhere – to help raise awareness within EU Arctic state members of the hybrid threat potential embedded in Chinese FDI and other non-military tools targeting this region.

Russia's increased military capabilities in the Arctic and High North will require a coordinated NATO response that is first and foremost military in nature. Older, more familiar NATO tasks such as defending transatlantic sea lines of communication need to continue. At the same time, NATO operational planning must be adapted to confront new hybrid challenges that complicate traditional defence tasks. For example, concrete counter-hybrid threat efforts must be embedded into NATO operational planning to detect and become resilient to non-military tools and actions that create hybrid threats capable of degrading NATO military readiness.

Finally, a challenge for both NATO and the EU will be their internal coordination to meet these Arctic hybrid challenges and, where appropriate and politically possible, to coordinate their counter-hybrid threat responses with each other. Such policy maturity will require these organizations to overcome their own internal member state-level disagreement over the resources and attention that should be given to the Arctic region as a whole and to hybrid threats in particular. This should include a political willingness by member states to discuss explicit hybrid threats publicly.

Moreover, it will require greater political willingness to see NATO and the EU cooperate in the security sphere. However, the roots of such NATO-EU collaboration are already in place, and need not wait for grand political gestures for practical work to begin. Venues for NATO-EU dialogue on countering hybrid threats, such as the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, create opportunities for knowledge sharing on a range of issues, including Arctic hybrid threats. At the grassroots level, pragmatic and forward-leaning cooperation between analysts at the NATO Hybrid Analysis Branch and the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell can also be applied to address the problem of hybrid threats in the Arctic and High North. The fact that various counter-hybrid threat architectures already exist across NATO and the EU – and the fact that they are already collaborating – suggests that this work can and should be extended to the specific task of countering Arctic hybrid threats. The Arctic will not find itself immune to hybrid threat activity, and NATO and the EU must work together to complement the strengths and weaknesses of the other, respectively, as they counter military and non-military hybrid threats below the threshold of war.

<sup>52</sup> UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 'A cautious embrace: defending democracy in an age of autocracies', 4 November 2019, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmfa/109/109.pdf>.

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# US and Canadian perspectives on North America's Arctic: Challenges, seams and hybrid threat vulnerabilities<sup>1</sup>

Paul Dickson and Gaëlle Rivard Piché

## Introduction

The Arctic as a region has within it multiple geographies, each with its own character, political, strategic and cultural importance, and dynamics. This chapter will explore the North American Arctic from the perspective of the two North American Arctic states: the United States and Canada.<sup>2</sup> It will focus on positioning the region in relation to Canadian and American strategic interests from a continental as well as a national defence and security perspective.

A fundamental concept in international relations studies is the “level-of-analysis problem”.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the Arctic region, levels of analysis and therefore issues also align with levels of sovereignty, authority and identity. In addition to the international (system), national, and regional (Arctic) levels, it is also important to recognize subregional and transnational dynamics when studying Arctic issues. For example, some of the dynamics in the Arctic are better understood as a collage of regions that vary widely from one to another.<sup>4</sup> The interplay between and at the intersection of levels also creates space for differences and therefore issues. Even in the North American Arctic, physical and strategic features differ between the Canadian Archipelago and the Chukchi Sea. A dichotomous categorization between domestic and international can also obscure transnational dynamics that are

equally important to understand, particularly regarding Indigenous peoples, climate change, and other environmental matters. Those dynamics, for example, are embedded in the structure and composition of the Arctic Council. Similarly, the range of issues requires a more expansive view of security, and how the concerns intersect. A narrow security lens can illuminate some issues while obscuring others, particularly when attempting to understand whether activities not traditionally viewed as risks could be security concerns by challenging existing norms, covering up some objectives or activities, and undermining national interests. Arguably, even the tension between different understandings of the policy space creates a vulnerability in the Arctic.

Defence and security vulnerabilities are a function of the nature of the threat and the interests of the state. This chapter and volume focus on hybrid threats towards the Arctic, and the vulnerabilities consequent upon the Arctic as a fractured space. How this chapter uses hybrid threats as an analytical concept are discussed in the introduction. Characterizing threats as hybrid threats is the result of identifying some distinguishing features.<sup>5</sup> Some of the most relevant features are the means and ways in which they deliberately target states’ and institutions’ systemic vulnerabilities. The challenges over how to respond are often the result of exploiting the seams between between internal and external,

1 The opinions and assessments in this paper are those of the authors, and do not represent the policies or opinions of the Government of Canada or the other Hybrid CoE participating states.

2 Thanks to Rebecca H. Pinkus, United States Naval War College for her comments and suggestions.

3 David J. Singer, ‘The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations’, *World Politics*, vol. 14, 1 (1961): 77–92, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2009557](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009557). Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 8 December 2021.

4 Andreas Østhagen, Gregory Levy Sharp and Paal Sigurd Hilde, ‘At Opposite Poles: Canada’s and Norway’s Approaches to Security in the Arctic’, *The Polar Journal* 8 (2018): 172.

5 The hybrid threat concept used for this paper draws on the sources as outlined in the introduction. For more information, see ‘Hybrid Threats’, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats/>.

military and civil, or public and private responsibilities and authorities. Hybrid threats can be understood and assessed for their threats to national security, but that distinguishing the threatening nature of activities is also a function of vulnerabilities and risk as well as consequences. Informed by that understanding of hybrid threats, the objectives of this chapter are threefold: to describe the Arctic<sup>6</sup> policies and strategic interests of the United States and Canada for the European reader; to identify the areas of common interest as well as the potential gaps and differences between the two states and their NATO allies; and to map the potential challenges and vulnerabilities resulting from policy, national objectives and possible adversarial intent, hybrid activities and capabilities.

## The North American Arctic: Background

In North American strategic studies, interest in Arctic security and defence ebbs and flows. Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interest was primarily a function of geography and technology, with human security and economic development gradually growing in importance. Since 2000, climate change (and consequent access), environmental consciousness, unexploited resources and human security have interacted to prompt increasing political and policy attention towards the Arctic in the two states. When combined with geopolitical competition generally, these considerations have led to a renewed, and potentially distinct, strategic interest and threat environment. These factors have manifested in distinct ways in Canada and the United States.

Prior to the Second World War, the Arctic was, to all intents and purposes, geographically isolated

and strategically, albeit not culturally or politically, irrelevant to Canada and the United States. The Second World War changed that perspective. Many of the features and contours of North American Arctic defence and security culture were formed, or their foundations laid, from 1940 on. Perhaps the most far-reaching was a declaration at Ogdensburg, New York – prompted by the reach of the Axis, driven by US concerns and anticipated by Canada – that for defence purposes, the continent was indivisible.<sup>7</sup> The North American defence infrastructure was built on that principle. The indivisibility of continental defence with the security of the US at its core became a key feature of defence and security activity in the North American Arctic. That was cemented with the establishment of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) in 1940, followed five years later by a Military Cooperation Committee and given substance through hundreds of bilateral agreements.<sup>8</sup>

During the war, the US embarked on projects, most notably the Alaska Highway, which were manifestations of the necessity for a continental perspective on US defence. For Canada, it cemented another theme of Arctic security and defence: ensuring sovereignty while providing America's own defence. This also took the form of shared defence responsibilities. In 1949, both states committed to European defence with the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), adding an additional Northern Flank element to defence and security concerns in the Arctic.<sup>9</sup>

The Cold War further cemented the indivisibility of continental defence, most pointedly with the formation in 1958 of the North American Air Defence Command, later called the Aerospace

6 The Arctic, or Arctic region, is a geographic region primarily but not exclusively north of the Arctic Circle that includes the Arctic Ocean and is centred on the North Pole. There is no definitive definition of the region as the southern boundary varies from state to state. The most common and basic definition of the Arctic denotes the region as the land and sea area north of the Arctic Circle (a circle of latitude at about 66° 34' North). Canada defines its political Arctic as roughly the 60th parallel north, but including Hudson Bay, northern Quebec and Labrador. This represents over 25% of the global Arctic and covers two zones: the Arctic and the Subarctic. The Arctic is sometimes referred to as the Far North. From a policy perspective, Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework reflects an expansive view that includes the Arctic and northern Canada. See Government of Canada, Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1560523306861/1560523330587>; the United States' view of its geographic Arctic derives from the Arctic Research and Policy Act of 1984, which includes territory north of the Arctic Circle and north and west of the boundary formed by the Porcupine, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers; the Aleutian chain; and adjacent marine areas in the Arctic Ocean and the Beaufort, Bering, and Chukchi Seas. Its political Arctic is limited to Alaska. See <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-office-of-ocean-and-polar-affairs/arctic/>.

7 Heather Exner-Pirot and Rob Huebert, 'Arctic Security: The Canadian Context', in *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security*, ed. Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, Marc Lanteigne and Horatio Sam-Aggrey (Routledge, 2020), 141–2.

8 Joseph T. Jockel and Joel J. Sokolsky, 'Continental Defence: Like Farmers whose lands have a common concession line', in *Canada's National Security in the Post-9/11 World*, ed. David S. McDonough (University of Toronto Press, 2012), 116–20.

9 Kenneth Eyre, 'Custos Borealis: The Military in the Canadian North', edited by Whitney Lackenbauer (NAADSN Monograph Series No. 1, 2019); see also Whitney Lackenbauer and Peter Kikkert, 'The Canadian Forces and Arctic Sovereignty: Debating Roles, Interests and Requirements, 1968–1974' (Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2010).

Defence Command (NORAD). A binational command organization, NORAD's mission has evolved to include aerospace warning and aerospace control for North America and, in 2006, maritime warning. After 11 September 2001, threats from within North America became a consideration for an organization postured for external defence. In 2002, the continent's operational command structure was reconceived, culminating in the latest changes in 2009 with a Tri-command structure, shared responsibilities between NORAD, US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), and the Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC).<sup>10</sup> Notably, another feature of North American Arctic defence and security became apparent: the capabilities to operate in the Arctic were positioned in the south. Arctic operations and exercises were essentially expeditionary in nature; indeed routine resupply in some areas was mounted as operations. A limited defence footprint, and infrastructure in general, required forward operating locations and supply hubs as the norm, an approach increasingly under scrutiny in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The military presence that did exist was integrated economically into small communities and represented an instance of sovereign presence. The debate about "presence" and the ability to operate in the Arctic became another feature of North American Arctic defence and security debates.

Throughout the Cold War, there were tensions over sovereignty, conflicting interpretations over exact boundaries, and the legal status of the Northwest Passage, as the international legal regimes on maritime and economic jurisdictions expanded as to what constituted international straits or internal waterways. The two states found a number of pragmatic accommodations, often for domestic consumption. In the 1970s, for example, Canada characterized its approach as "functional sovereignty", which put aside the legal resolution of the issue, but asserted jurisdiction to regulate certain

activities, notably those that impacted the environment. The goal was to bridge the divide between the US and Canada while addressing domestic concerns over the need to strengthen Canada's jurisdiction in the Arctic.<sup>11</sup> As defence concerns ebbed and flowed, consensus emerged in other areas, creating new frames and definitions for security in the North American Arctic. The US Arctic Policy Group, for example, reflected the focus of both states with a mandate on research and monitoring natural resources management, environmental protection, and human security. Canadian territorial integrity and sovereignty<sup>12</sup> remained a focus through the end of the Cold War, and mapping natural resources was balanced with growing environmental concerns. Security became increasingly tied to the implications of climate change. The pragmatic gradualist approach to resolving issues and disagreements faced new challenges as security concerns diminished at the turn of the century. However, in recent decades, new actors with ambitious agendas, and old actors with evolving perspectives and interests, have created new dynamics and security concerns in the Arctic.

## US Arctic policy

While the US is an Arctic state as defined by Alaska and by its membership of the Arctic Council, fewer than 68,000 Americans live above the Arctic Circle, and US popular interest in the region is limited.<sup>13</sup> This is reflected in the attention paid to its own Arctic as well as the Arctic region. Some US critics have characterized the past decade from an Arctic defence perspective, particularly when contrasted with first Russian, and then Chinese prioritization of the region. The characterization is notable as it suggests that the Arctic, while important, was not central to national security, or when measured by the development of capabilities and presence to operate in the region – in the form of icebreakers,

10 See 'A Brief History of NORAD', North American Aerospace Defense Command Office of the Command Historian (May 2016).

11 Lackenbauer, 'The Canadian Forces and Arctic Sovereignty', 21–26.

12 Sovereignty is used in this chapter as a political concept referring to authority and jurisdiction over recognized territory, including territorial waters. Asserting sovereignty refers to the use of recognized markers of sovereignty, for example the ability to exert control, secure citizens and defend territorial integrity. See, for example, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/sovereignty>; Christian Volk, 'The Problem of Sovereignty in Globalized Times', *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, February 2019.

13 Congressional Research Service, *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, 6 January 2021): 5.

for example.<sup>14</sup> However, US policy attention to the Arctic has evolved, shifting focus and broadening over the past decade and a half. In January 2009, the Bush administration produced a revised Arctic policy. The Obama administration released a National Strategy for the Arctic Region in 2013, notably focused on implementation with the establishment of an Arctic Executive Steering Committee. President Obama signalled his interest when he visited the Arctic in 2015, becoming the first sitting president to do so.

A suite of US defence and military service documents followed. The emphasis balanced a focus on the consequences of climate change (working with Canada) with concerns about Russia after 2014. Defence was the central theme of the revised Arctic policy and strategies during the period from 2018 to 2021, but China emerged as requiring increased attention in the region, and in general. The Arctic had been integrated into the US's national security assessment, albeit unevenly. The US National Security Strategy of December 2017, for example, mentions the Arctic once, amongst a list of global commons, space and the digital realm, where the regulation for rules-based order depends on a "range of international institutions" and multilateral forums, in which the US must lead and engage to shape the rules.<sup>15</sup> In addition, as Congress noted, the Arctic was "conspicuously missing" from the 2018 US National Defense Strategy. China and Russia, on the other hand, were not. The return of great-power competition and the observable "resilient but weakening post-WWII international order" and implications for the Arctic prompted the centrality of the region in the US government's national security policy.<sup>16</sup>

Driven by the Trump administration's concerns over China, and an increasingly vocal Congress, the emphasis on the Arctic was manifested in two developments. Lawmakers asked Secretary of Defense James Mattis to submit an update on the 2016 assessment for the Arctic no later than 1 June

2019; and in May 2019, in a speech the day before the formal meeting of the Arctic Council, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo signalled both the new focus as well as the harder edge of the US Arctic policy. He declared as a fundamental principle that the "United States is an Arctic nation", an interest that predated the Alaska purchase. He observed that "the region has become an arena for power and for competition". More specifically, he declared China and Russia competitors, and suggested that the continuation of a cooperative Arctic governance regime focused on science, culture and the environment could only continue if the eight Arctic states and observers supported fair and transparent free trade, and recognized sovereign rights.<sup>17</sup>

China was the primary target of the speech, and its emphasis on fair and transparent trade practices reflected the wider trade war then underway between the Trump administration and China. The Biden administration has continued this targeting, although the rhetoric has been toned down. Russia's military buildup was also deemed a concern, particularly given its behaviour in the Ukraine and Crimea. However, the speech was also notable for outlining those activities that were perceived to be threats: investment in critical infrastructure that establishes a security presence; military posture and intelligence-gathering disguised as scientific research; debt coercion; corrupt local government; sovereign claims gradually undermined; irresponsible environmental practices; and assertions over waterways that the US deemed international.<sup>18</sup>

The June 2019 Department of Defence Report to Congress built on those themes, laying out in more detail the roadmap to realizing a reinvigorated Arctic security strategy.<sup>19</sup> This was reflected in the subsequent defence and security strategies that followed. The 2019 DoD Arctic Strategy objectives for the Arctic were "a secure and stable region in which U.S. national security interests are safeguarded, the U.S. homeland is defended, and

14 Heather A. Conley and Matthew Melino, 'The Implications of U.S. Policy Stagnation toward the Arctic Region' (Centre for Strategic and International Affairs, May 2019): 2–3.

15 United States Government, National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, December 2017): 40.

16 United States Department of Defence, 2018 National Defence Strategy Summary (Washington, 2018): 2.

17 Michael Pompeo, Secretary of State, 'Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus', Speech to the Arctic Council, 6 May 2019.

18 Ibid.

19 Congressional Research Service, Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress (Washington, 6 January 2021).

nations work cooperatively to address shared challenges". It alluded to the importance of the region as an access point and throughway: "protecting U.S. national security interests in the Arctic will require the Joint Force to sustain its competitive military advantages in the Indo-Pacific and Europe, identified in the National Defence Strategy (NDS) as key regions of strategic competition, and to maintain a credible deterrent for the Arctic region." Its three capability requirements underlined the goal of being able to rebuild the capability to understand what was happening in and around the region, the ability to operate in the Arctic and to promote the rules-based order in the region.<sup>20</sup> In sum, from the DoD's perspective, the return of great-power competition and advances in missile technology, particularly the development of hypersonic speed and guidance systems, created what was considered a US – and North American – vulnerability that required from the DoD the ability to quickly identify threats in the Arctic, respond promptly and effectively to those threats, and shape the security environment to mitigate the prospect of those threats in the future.<sup>21</sup>

The US Administration, Congress, and the Department of Defence moved quickly through 2020 and into 2021. The 2020 National Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year included a number of provisions relating to the Arctic, including requirements for further information on Russian and Chinese military activities in the region, an independent study on Chinese foreign direct investment in the Arctic countries, as well as reports on US military and security infrastructure in the region. The report also directed officials to address the training and resources for cold-weather operations, particularly joint operations and cooperation

with the Coast Guard, as well as with local, state and federal governments.<sup>22</sup>

Two other points caught public attention – the elevation of a future port as strategic and a "strong" recommendation to construct six polar-class icebreakers in the next decade, but "as expeditiously as possible".<sup>23</sup> The Trump administration followed this with executive direction in June 2020, urging the secretaries of defence, commerce, energy, and homeland security (in addition to the Office of Management and Budget) to review the US icebreaking capacity in the Arctic and Antarctic regions.<sup>24</sup> The memorandum also called for four bases, two domestic and two international, and expanded the operational mission of the proposed icebreakers to include a "full range of national and economic security missions", including maintaining maritime domain awareness using drones. The memorandum brought into focus three key aspects of the US current Arctic policy: it has been overwhelmingly military in focus, attention has centred on closing a perceived gap with Arctic competitors, and the measure of Arctic (and Antarctic) seriousness was polar icebreaking capacity and capability.<sup>25</sup> The Administration and Congress agreed on the need for six new "polar security cutters" (PSC) to close the icebreaker gap, and an ambitious military exercise programme in Europe and North America was enhanced to expand cold-weather operational capabilities. It is not yet clear how the Biden administration will engage with Congress on the issue of resourcing icebreaker acquisition.<sup>26</sup>

The US military services have followed apace, releasing Arctic outlooks and strategies,<sup>27</sup> reflecting policy and departmental objectives and assessments. The strategic competitors are named together – Russia and China. Similarly, they reflect

20 United States Government, Department of Defence Report to Congress: Arctic Strategy, 2019.

21 Bureau, 'US lacks Defences Against Hypersonic Weapons: NORAD General', *Defence World*, 20 Oct 2020, [https://www.defenseworld.net/news/28198/US\\_Lacks\\_Defences\\_Against\\_Hypersonic\\_Weapons\\_NORAD\\_General#.YAUuOy0RqL8](https://www.defenseworld.net/news/28198/US_Lacks_Defences_Against_Hypersonic_Weapons_NORAD_General#.YAUuOy0RqL8).

22 United States Congress, One Hundred Sixteenth Congress of the United States of America, H. Rept. 116–333 of December 9, 2019 on S. 1790, FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act, <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/s/1790/BILLS-116s1790enr.pdf>.

23 Ibid.

24 White House, Presidential Memoranda, Memorandum on Safeguarding U.S. National Interests in the Arctic and Antarctic Regions, National Security & Defense, 9 June 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/memorandum-safeguarding-u-s-national-interests-arctic-antarctic-regions/>.

25 Polar Class Ice Descriptions (based on WMO Sea Ice Nomenclature) are used to designate relative capability to operate in a range of ice conditions. The race is marked by the pursuit of PC 1, year-round operation in all polar waters and PC 2, year-round operation in moderate multi-year ice conditions. Unified Requirements for Polar Class ships, International Association of Classification Societies (IACS), April 2016.

26 Memorandum on Safeguarding U.S. National Interests in the Arctic and Antarctic Region.

27 United States Government, Department of the Navy, Chief of Naval Operations, the United States Navy: Strategic Outlook for the Arctic (January 2019); United States Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook (April 2019); Department of the Air Force: Arctic Strategy (July 2021); Department of the Navy, A Blue Arctic: US Navy Strategy (January 2021). The US Army Arctic Strategy is anticipated in 2021.

the strategic logic of focusing on the North American Arctic and where and how it fits into US strategic interests. For example,

the Department of the Air Force Arctic Strategy, released in July 2020, articulates a traditional vision of the Arctic region as a “strategic buffer” and an “avenue of threat”. Its strategic importance derived from the view that the region resided at “the intersection between the US homeland and two critical theatres, Indo-Pacific and Europe”. The erosion of the regional buffer was a function of the increased demand for resources and technological advancements that furthered the reach of strategic competitors. The US Air Force would focus on the ability to project power and expand the buffer.<sup>28</sup>

The US Navy’s Arctic Strategy – A Blue Arctic – released in January 2021, was equally focused on peer, or near-peer, competition and the new threats derived from access, whether the result of climate change or technology. Its maritime focus took a broader view of security to include environmental risk, resource competition and human security. It noted that increased military activity by China and Russia was of concern, highlighting revisionist approaches that attempt to “alter Arctic governance” and undermine the rule of law for the maritime environment, an allusion to hybrid threats generally and China specifically. An increased naval presence and enhanced partnerships were highlights. The degree to which China animated the shifts was highlighted, perhaps unintentionally, when the US Navy press release announcing the strategy characterized China as an “Arctic state”.<sup>29</sup>

In March 2021, the US Army released its service strategy – The Arctic Strategy – a first, which echoed the importance of the Arctic as a vital area, its defining feature being to regain Arctic dominance, an acknowledgement of the real and perceived gap with Russia.<sup>30</sup> It positions the development of the army’s Arctic capabilities in the context of its Total Army strategy and being capable of operating for extended periods in a multi-domain environment in extreme conditions. It envisions

partnering with “Arctic allies” in order to secure national interests in the region. The strategy lays out plans to enhance its footprint in Alaska, but seems focused on regaining “its cold-weather dominance”, projecting power across the Arctic region, expeditionary capabilities, conducting exercises to provide shared understanding of the region’s military challenges, and establishing an operational two-star headquarters to lead the development of capabilities to conduct extended Arctic operations.

The US Arctic policy developments since 2019 are notable for several features. First, the Arctic’s importance as a region is a function of the general acknowledgement of the competition from Russia and China. Second, China is elevated as a military threat comparable to Russia, even though the scale of the immediate Chinese military threat, particularly in the Arctic, is eclipsed by Russia’s rebuilding and renewal of its northern defence force posture, command organization and enhanced strategic reach. China’s threat is also characterized as undermining existing Arctic governance and legal regimes, with the military threat also a function of its investments. The completion of Beijing’s new Xue Long 2 icebreaker, for example, or investments in Greenland, have prompted concerns over China’s Arctic ambitions in a region where the US does not view China as a legitimate stakeholder.<sup>31</sup> Third, the US focus on the Arctic under Trump was primarily military, in contrast, for example, to the Obama administration’s focus on the environment and climate change. This US perspective on the challenges it faces in the Arctic was signalled, according to some, by the 2020 appointment of James DeHart as US Coordinator for the Arctic Region in the US Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs. Fourth, establishing a greater military presence, and reinvigorating the Arctic fighting capabilities and commitment to icebreaking capabilities represented a concrete response to match policy goals. Finally, the ongoing role of domestic politics is of importance. Alaska shapes much of the US political conversation on Arctic policy.

28 United States Government, Department of the Air Force: Arctic Strategy (July 2021): 2.

29 United States Government, Department of the Navy, A Blue Arctic: US Navy Strategy (January 2021): 2–4; Hilde-Gunn Bye, ‘US Navy Mentions China as Arctic State’, *High North News*, 7 January 2021, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/us-navy-mentions-china-arctic-state>.

30 See [https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/about/2021\\_army\\_arctic\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/about/2021_army_arctic_strategy.pdf).

31 Jason Li, ‘A Shifting Focus of US Arctic Policy: China and Security’, *Front and Center*, The Arctic Institute, 21 August 2020, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/shifting-focus-us-arctic-policy-china-security/>.

The question remains as to whether the renewed focus on the Arctic is permanent or an example of the historical norm in which the promise of more attention is unfulfilled. According to Heather Conley, “high-level calls for a modernized and strengthened U.S. icebreaking fleet are not new”.<sup>32</sup> Neither was attention to a lack of US capabilities and presence in the polar regions. She has suggested that this was simply another “Arctic moment”.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Alaskan Senator Lisa Murkowski recently observed that while progress has been made – re-establishing a special representative position and re-opening the consulate in Nuuk, Greenland – the US remained one of the only Arctic countries without an Arctic ambassador. The absence of “Arctic capable diplomats” and advocates was notable; recent actions only highlighted what she characterized as the “slow and uncertain path of establishing robust and consistent American diplomatic Arctic leadership”.<sup>34</sup>

The Biden administration has so far signalled that the focus on renewing a military capability in the Arctic would be re-balanced with environmental and scientific pursuits. In September 2021, when announcing the “re-activation” of the Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC), it was described as a mechanism to both advance US Arctic interests and coordinate Federal actions in the Arctic. The administration also announced it would lead with scientific expertise in general and a focus on the Arctic’s impact on climate change in particular, introducing a new slate of expert appointees. It also hoped to foster a multilateral and cooperative approach, particularly with Indigenous peoples and Arctic residents and communities.<sup>35</sup>

## Canadian Arctic policy

The Government of Canada’s (GC) approach to the circumpolar Arctic reflects its perception of the Canadian Arctic. Canada’s current Arctic policy

is centred on the exercise of sovereignty, which assumes a requirement to ensure defence, human security and safety. Through a series of documents and policies, the GC emphasizes the importance of exercising its sovereignty over a region that represents 40% of its land mass (including the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon, and the northern parts of several provinces), but that is home to only 150,000 people.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the Arctic remains essential to Canadians’ vision of their nation. Canada’s vision for the Arctic pertaining to security and defence is reflected in three main policy documents: the 2016 Ocean Protection Plan (OPP), the 2017 Defence policy, Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE), and the 2019 Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF). The chronology of the documentation is, to a degree, in inverse order.

Published last, the ANPF provides overarching direction to the GC, determining priorities, activities, and investments in the Arctic to 2030 and beyond. Spearheaded by Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, the ANPF is based on a broad consultation process with government partners, northern communities, and Indigenous peoples. An objective fundamental to the ANPF is to redress the profound inequalities between the Canadian North and the rest of the country. It promotes an inclusive approach that distributes governance and policy development and implementation. Holistic in nature, the document includes a chapter on security and defence matters, as well as one on international policy. The security and defence chapter posits that a safe, secure, and well-defended Arctic is a necessary precondition for the well-being and prosperity of Northerners.<sup>37</sup>

The ANPF attempts to integrate these security and defence priorities within a comprehensive domestic and international framework. Domestically, it means providing northern communities with the same services and opportunities as southern populations, whether in terms of economic activity

32 Heather Conley, ‘Is the United States Having an “Arctic Moment” on Icebreaker Acquisition’, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 21 June 2020, [https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-having-arctic-moment-icebreaker-acquisition?gclid=EAlalQobChMlmsLBpvnt7AIVDG-GCh2ayAe-UEAAYASAAEgI0xPD\\_BwE](https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-having-arctic-moment-icebreaker-acquisition?gclid=EAlalQobChMlmsLBpvnt7AIVDG-GCh2ayAe-UEAAYASAAEgI0xPD_BwE).

33 Ibid.

34 Lisa Murkowski, Arctic Exceptionalism: ‘Can the Arctic’s unique distinction as a zone of peace be maintained?’ “The Arctic Senator” explains what it will take’, *The foreign service journal*, May 2021, <https://afsa.org/arctic-exceptionalism>.

35 See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ostp/news-updates/2021/09/24/biden-harris-administration-brings-arctic-policy-to-the-forefront-with-reactivated-steering-committee-new-slate-of-research-commissioners/>.

36 See <https://arctic-council.org/en/about/states/canada/>.

37 Government of Canada, Canada’s Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1560523306861/1560523330587>.

and investments, food security, education, health or environmental protection. At the same time, physical and strategic changes in the region have called for an increased presence of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Canadian Coast Guard in the Arctic over the long term in cooperation with allies and partners.<sup>38</sup> If the ANPF does not identify specific threats to Canada in the Arctic, it does point to growing interest in the region and speaks of “increased competition and risks created by a more accessible Arctic.”<sup>39</sup>

The ANPF also includes an international chapter, which projects the GC’s domestic vision of its own Arctic in its international goals and objectives.<sup>40</sup> The chapter sets out foreign policy priorities pertaining to the Arctic: to strengthen the rules-based international order; to increase engagement with Arctic and non-Arctic states; and to more clearly define Canada’s Arctic boundaries.<sup>41</sup> In the Arctic like elsewhere, Canada has benefited immensely from the rules-based international order. A strong Arctic governance structure enables Ottawa to sit at the same table as Russia and the United States to voice its priorities and concerns. Furthermore, while Canada is at best a “middle power” globally, the country is a major stakeholder in the Arctic: its territory comprises 20 per cent of the region, and its jurisdiction over the North West Passage – while contested – makes Ottawa a necessary counterpart for any state with economic and strategic interests in the region.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike the United States, Canada has traditionally been reluctant to name threats to its strategic interests globally, and the Arctic is no exception. However, some changes have occurred since 2017. For one, the SSE document issued that year acknowledged NATO’s role in the Arctic, a departure

from Ottawa’s historical position on the matter. For example, Canada had until then promoted a bilateral approach to participation in its northern exercises, focusing on individual Alliance states rather than NATO as an institution. The SSE, however, stated that, as an objective, Canada would “[c]onduct joint exercises with Arctic allies and partners and support the strengthening of situational awareness and information sharing in the Arctic, including with NATO.”<sup>43</sup> This was clearly a result of concerns about Russia’s recapitalization of its Arctic military force posture, as well as the way in which the reach and evasion capabilities of new weapons systems forced reconsideration of the defence of North America’s Arctic and European High North as separate spheres. Concrete expressions of this shift were Canada’s contribution of 2,000 personnel and multiple air and sea platforms to Trident Juncture 2018. More recently, a Canadian took command of Standing NATO Maritime Group One.

The GC has since made its threat assessment in the region clearer. A 2019 report by a parliamentary committee looking into Canada’s policy in the Arctic in the coming decades affirms: “Canada and its NATO allies need to do a better job of understanding Russia’s military intentions in the Arctic and to consider the most appropriate and measured response.”<sup>44</sup> In March 2020, the former Canadian Chief of Defence Staff, General Jonathan Vance, stated publicly that Russia poses the most immediate military threat to Canada “because of its proximity, particularly its massive buildup in the Arctic to take advantage of rapidly melting ice that will open those waters to shipping.”<sup>45</sup> In doing so, he matched in tone and substance the Commander of NORAD, US General Terrence J. O’Shaughnessy,

38 Ibid.

39 Government of Canada, Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: Safety, security, and defence chapter, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1562939617400/1562939658000>.

40 Peter Kikkert & P. Whitney Lackenbauer, ‘Canada’s Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: A roadmap for the future?’, Briefing Notes, Arctic Yearbook, 2019, <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2019/2019-briefing-notes/332-canada-s-arctic-and-northern-policy-framework-a-roadmap-for-the-future>.

41 Government of Canada, Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy: Exercising Sovereignty And Promoting Canada’s Northern Strategy Abroad, 2019, [https://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/climate-change/files/Arctic-Resources/Arctic-Council/01\\_02\\_Canadas%20statement%20on%20arctic%20foreign%20policy%20%28booklet%29.pdf](https://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/climate-change/files/Arctic-Resources/Arctic-Council/01_02_Canadas%20statement%20on%20arctic%20foreign%20policy%20%28booklet%29.pdf).

42 Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, ‘Enhanced Arctic Capability’, Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Strategy (Ottawa, 2017): 113.

43 Ibid.

44 Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, ‘Nation-Building at Home, Vigilance Beyond: Preparing for the Coming Decades in the Arctic’, April 2019.

45 Robert Fife, ‘Gen. Vance calls for grand strategy to confront China and Russia’, *The Globe and Mail*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-gen-vance-calls-for-grand-strategy-to-confront-china-and-russia/>; Jonathan Vance, ‘Jonathan Vance Speaks at 2020 Ottawa Conference’, CDA Institute, March 4, 2020, <https://cdainstitute.ca/jonathan-vance-speaks-at-2020-ottawa-conference/>; Michelle Carbert, ‘Russia poses most immediate military threat to Canada, top general says’, *The Globe and Mail*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-russia-poses-most-immediate-military-threat-to-canada-top-general/>.

who had warned weeks prior that Canada and the United States had lost their military edge against Russia in the Arctic. General Vance has also cautioned against China's malign activities and tactics. Since then, the Canadian government has blocked the takeover by Chinese interests of a gold mine in Nunavut following a national security review. Ottawa's decision is perceived as a strong signal against Chinese investments in the country and could signal the resolve to maintain full sovereignty over its natural resources.<sup>46</sup>

The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) are set to acquire eight Arctic Offshore Patrol Vessels that will increase Canada's reach and presence in the Arctic over the navigation season. It is worth noting that the Canadian archipelago presents some of the most challenging navigation conditions in the region and is mostly inaccessible over the winter.<sup>47</sup> However, by other measures of concern, such as the construction of heavy icebreakers to enable access and promote sovereignty, Canada continues to face budget and commitment challenges. In February 2019, the GC announced that its next-generation heavy icebreaker would only be delivered in 2029. Such delays could mean that the Canadian "backyard is at stake."<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, however, Canada's challenge in the Arctic is to achieve a balance between the promotion of economic security while maintaining environmental safeguards, security awareness and sovereign decision-making over resource extraction.

### **Canada and the US: Issues, challenges and seams**

As detailed above, the US and Canada have cooperated in the Arctic on defence for decades. There are policy differences and disagreements over the interpretation and application of international law, but accommodations – the decision to agree to disagree – have held. Disagreements have been approached as conditions to manage, rather than

as divisive problems requiring solutions. This section will explore major areas of national policy and strategy differences between the two states that create potential vulnerabilities to be exploited.

There are distinctions between Canada and the US on the nature and extent of the threat in the Arctic and its management. Those distinctions are evident at the seams of the most significant security challenges facing the Arctic, and in the different perspectives on what constitutes security: environmental and human. These are soft security challenges, and distinct perspectives are potential vulnerabilities that can be targeted by hybrid threat activities. The differences over how to address other Arctic challenges – changes to access through and to the Arctic, maritime and continental shelf claims, Indigenous self-determination, and the scale and scope of the challenges posed by adversaries and competitors – can also be developed into more divisive issues through exploitative measures and covert activities. Left unaddressed, and in the aggregate, seams are, or could become, vulnerabilities and fault lines in transatlantic and transnational relations, which could then be exploited by adversaries to gain a strategic advantage between Arctic regions and states. Nationally, the levels of sovereignty, authorities and responsibility intersect in the Arctic, creating an environment that is conducive to hybrid threat activities.

### **Views on governance and managing security differences in the Arctic**

The management of differences between Arctic states, as well between forums and organizations that represent Arctic states and those who consider themselves stakeholders, is increasingly challenging. It reflects the growing geo-strategic tensions elsewhere, but also the diverse range of defence and security perspectives within and on the Arctic. The divergent appetites for change to the existing governance structures in place to navigate conflict and competition across the region

46 Walter Strong, 'Ottawa blocks Chinese takeover of Nunavut gold mine project after national security review', CBC, December 22, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/canada-china-tmac-1.5851305>.

47 Gaëlle Rivard Piché and James Brun, 'The Strategic Contribution of the Harry DeWolf Class to Canadian Defence and Security', *Canadian Naval Review* 15(1), (2019): 17–22.

48 Nick Taylor-Vaisey, 'Can Canada keep up with a global icebreaker boom?', *Macleans*, 17 Dec 2020, <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/can-canada-keep-up-with-a-global-icebreaker-boom/>.

constitute an issue that reflects deeper disagreement over the nature and extent of the threat, as well as the character of security, particularly in a hybrid threat environment.

From a transatlantic security perspective, but focused on North America, the ability of Arctic governance to address defence and broad security issues is divided regionally and nationally.

A key issue is the lack of an Arctic regional forum to discuss security and defence matters that includes the Arctic Eight.<sup>49</sup> Cooperation among Arctic states occurs mostly through regional forums for collaboration such as the Arctic Council (AC), rather than multilateral international organizations with established authorities, mandated responsibilities and, ideally, the means to pursue and execute their responsibilities. As a result, dialogue and cooperation on Arctic and High North issues has depended on the goodwill of participating states. This had not been considered a major issue until the past decade. In 2008, for example, the five Arctic coastal states agreed in the Ilulissat Declaration that the existing international legal framework was sufficient to govern the Arctic Ocean and manage disputes and disagreements between them.

This consensus appears to be broken. Within North America, Canada describes the AC as “the leading multilateral forum through which Canada advances its Arctic foreign policy and promotes Canadian Arctic interests internationally.”<sup>50</sup> This statement also reflects Canada’s promotion of multilateralism in principle as well as in practice. The US position on the AC is in a state of flux. The Trump administration reduced a number of environmental regulations, seeking to facilitate the exploration and exploitation of natural resources, particularly oil and gas, and signalled the importance of Greenland for North American defence. The Biden administration is reversing those environmental

decisions. Diplomatically, the US took a more assertive stance, exemplified in Pompeo’s Rovaniemi speech, in contradiction to the spirit of cooperation enshrined in the Ilulissat Declaration.<sup>51</sup> As noted, the US was not alone in questioning the current governance model as possibly inadequate to the challenges it faces. The long-term impact on the AC specifically remains to be seen, but questions about the adequacy of the existing governance regime in addressing emerging security dynamics in the Arctic will likely be a central challenge. In general, however, Canada and the US can diverge on the relative importance of multilateralism and this may prove to be a factor in addressing governance challenges in the Arctic.

If the possibility exists for divergent views on the role of the AC in security matters, both states appear closer on the exclusive status of Arctic states that membership of the AC imbues, and the view on the exceptional nature of the Arctic that it reflects. In May 2019, for example, a US official was categorical that the US “reject[s] attempts by non-Arctic states to claim a role” in Arctic governance. The alternative state category as laid out by the Arctic states is non-Arctic states, a category in which the AC can grant – and suspend – Observer status.<sup>52</sup> However, this consensus can also be exploited and complicated by diverging views of the nature and scope of the threats and challenges. Since the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, Russia has been excluded from all Arctic security forums, with the exception of the Arctic Coast Guards Forum. Neither NATO nor the EU engage Russia on defence issues.<sup>53</sup> The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, a military-to-military forum, also excludes Russia.<sup>54</sup> Moscow’s exclusion demonstrates the implications of ad hoc structures for managing crucial regional issues. Its continuing isolation on Arctic security and defence issues may contribute to growing regional tensions.

49 United States, Russia, Canada, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark.

50 See, for example: <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/corporate/international-affairs/partnerships-organizations/arctic-council.html>.

51 Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo at the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting, Rovaniemi, Finland, 7 May 2019, <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/2409>; Ilulissat Declaration, 2008, <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2008-Ilulissat-Declaration.pdf>.

52 Arctic Council, Role of Arctic Council Observers. “Observers shall be invited to the meetings and other activities of the Arctic Council unless SAOs [Senior Arctic Officials] decide otherwise. Observer status shall continue for such time as consensus exists among Ministers. Any Observer that engages in activities which are at odds with the Council’s [Ottawa] Declaration [of September 19, 1996, establishing the Council] or these Rules of Procedure shall have its status as an Observer suspended.”

53 Anna Wieslander, ‘NATO Must Engage in the Arctic’, *Defense One*, September 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/09/its-time-nato-arc-tic/159887/>.

54 Abby Tingstad, ‘Today’s Arctic Diplomacy Can’t Handle Tomorrow’s Problems’, *Defense One*, 29 January 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/01/todays-arctic-diplomacy-cant-handle-tomorrows-problems/162719/>.

The question of spillover into the Arctic of tensions between Russia and the West in other areas is also actively challenging the conception of the region as an exceptional one of consensus and peace, and how to balance prudent defence and security measures while maintaining a shared view of existing security arrangements and governance divisions. For example, Russia has also traditionally been opposed to the inclusion of non-Arctic states in regional matters, and nominally promotes Arctic exceptionalism. Its strategy is premised on this Arctic exceptionalism – the assertion and aspiration that the Arctic region is one of cooperation not conflict – a theme that is also sometimes characterized as a “meta-narrative”<sup>55</sup> in Russia’s political, diplomatic, media and scholarly discourses aimed at international audiences.<sup>56</sup> News reports on Russia’s statements as it assumed the chair, and the initial AC forum in May suggest the promotion of this exceptionalism, and Russia’s advocacy of this cooperative spirit will also be used to promote its disinformation narratives on NATO aggression, and serve as a lever to open dialogue and discussions to re-integrate Russia into forums closed to it since 2014.

The themes were evident across a number of recent interviews given by Nikolay Korchunov, Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic and Senior Arctic Official of the Russian delegation to the AC, and echoed by others. For example, in a Kommersant interview in early 2021, Korchunov advocated the restoration of the annual meetings of the Chiefs of the Armed Forces in the Arctic. He also blamed NATO and non-Arctic NATO member states for increasing tensions in the region, suggesting for example that “the voyage into the Barents Sea in early May 2020 by NATO forces under the pretext of ‘securing the safety and freedom of navigation of trade’ was clearly provocative”.<sup>57</sup> In some interviews, he also tied the achievement of Russia’s and the AC’s goals to the removal of obstacles constraining Russia’s standing in the international

community, noting, for example, that sanctions were a constraint “on our way to sustainability”. He also implied that sanctions threatened Russia’s Arctic inhabitants, adding that challenges to sustainable development potentially hurt the “socio-economic component of the Russian Arctic with direct implications for the Arctic inhabitants, including Indigenous peoples”.<sup>58</sup>

Russia benefits from the promotion of Arctic exceptionalism, but there are risks for the Transatlantic Alliance in that it compartmentalizes the Arctic, including indirectly legitimizing Russia’s annexation of Crimea and aggressive behaviour, and obscuring Russia’s real interests in the Arctic. Russia also uses a polarizing narrative of threats to Arctic exceptionalism, contrasting Western militarization of the Arctic with Russia’s determination to maintain the spirit of cooperation in the region. Russia’s promotion of exceptionalism and its desire to compartmentalize the Arctic from geopolitical tensions is a notable implied objective of its strategic communication as it chairs the Arctic Council from May 2021.

US and Canadian policymakers do not perceive Russia and China as natural allies in the Arctic. Russian leadership has expressed concerns over the control of the Northern Sea Route. Chinese leadership aims to create a Polar Silk Road as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, Russian activities that threaten the current international system, and the consequent continuation of sanctions against Russia, inability to access Western technology to further develop the North, and the overall attractiveness of the Chinese market for primary commodities exports might force the two powers closer, as prolonged isolation could force Moscow to seek formal cooperation with Beijing. It is notable that the Russian leadership has dismissed the United Kingdom’s characterization as a “near Arctic” state while ignoring similar Chinese characterizations.

55 Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili and Iona Mackenzie Allan, ‘Arctic Narratives and Political Values. Russia, China and Canada in the High North’, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, September 2018.

56 Jakub M. Godzimirski and Alexander Sergunin, ‘Russian Expert and Official Geopolitical Narratives on the Arctic: Decoding Topical and Paradigmatic DNA’, *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, (January 2020): 11–22.

57 Atle Staalesen, “Russia will not talk militarization during its chairmanship in Arctic Council”. But we will call for resumption of annual meetings between leaders of the Arctic countries’ general staffs, says Russia’s Arctic Ambassador Nikolai Kurchunov’, *The Barents Observer*, 13 May, 2021, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2021/05/russia-will-not-address-militarization-during-its-chairmanship-arctic-council>.

58 Elizabeth Buchanan, ‘Russia and the High North: Interview with Nikolay Korchunov’, *Modern War Institute*, 5 July 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/russia-and-the-high-north-interview-with-nikolay-korchunov-russian-ambassador-at-large-for-arctic-cooperation/>.

Both Canada and the US now regard Russia and China as the main geopolitical challengers in the Arctic, but they do not share a policy consensus on the degree and nature of the challenge and threat. Canada's promotion of Arctic exceptionalism has traditionally manifested in a separation of its Arctic defence and hard security concerns by continent. It has resisted a NATO role in the Arctic regional security discussions, focusing instead on NORAD. A divergence in views and priorities could provide opportunities for adversaries for whom this ambiguity about intentions is the objective of their hybrid activities. Until recently, this had, for example, manifested in a divergence between the two states on NATO's engagement in defence of the North American Arctic and stake in Arctic issues.<sup>59</sup> It was also reflected in the concern over Chinese investment and influence in Greenland, and its implications for North American defence. As threats and challenges to North America become less conventional and recognizable, cooperation between Canada and the United States will be essential to identify, deter and counter these threats.

In general, the transatlantic allies have struggled with China's claims to "near-Arctic" status. For example, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Iceland welcomed Chinese investments and closer cooperation. In collaboration with China, Iceland has since actively supported the creation of alternative forums for discussions on Arctic issues, ones open to non-Arctic states, as well as non-state stakeholders. Iceland has also authorized the development of Chinese-funded transportation infrastructure on its territory, raising concerns over potential Chinese covert military activity in the North Atlantic. To a lesser extent, Chinese investments in Greenland also raise concerns. These developments highlight tensions between Arctic stakeholders about the challenge posed by the growing Chinese presence and the Polar Silk Road Initiative. Greenlanders see in China an opportunity for self-determination and autono-

my; Copenhagen, charged with defence issues, is concerned about undue foreign influence in its domestic affairs. An issue that intersects security and economic development is challenging. From a North American perspective, such developments are concerning since they take place in areas that are increasingly essential to the continent's defence posture, particularly with improvements in the speed and reach of new weapons and surveillance systems. Canadian ships and vessels on their way to the Arctic Archipelago stop in Nuuk every year to refuel, an area where China announced the intention to develop a satellite ground station in 2017. China's influence and presence brings with it the risk of infrastructures and capabilities serving military and intelligence purposes. China's history of turning research, knowledge and infrastructure into influence and claims, notably in the Antarctic, has raised concerns.<sup>60</sup>

China is also interested in the resource development of the Canadian North. A 2019 parliamentary report on Arctic Security observed that the GC needs to engage with Beijing to better understand China's growing interest in the Arctic.<sup>61</sup> The question of whether Chinese investment and pressures constitute interference or influence is, in some cases, a question of legal definition, but also requires a fuller examination of activities in local communities, particularly covert attempts to influence local leaders. The ANPF plans to develop northern infrastructure and support strong, diverse and sustainable Arctic economies, while China is willing to increase its investment footprint in the Canadian Arctic through mining ventures and the development of internet infrastructures like Huawei.<sup>62</sup> However, despite China's massive economic potential, the relationship between the two countries has now soured. Safeguarding national security interests could potentially conflict with economic security in the Canadian Arctic, raising hard questions for national, regional and local authorities.

59 Wieslander, op. cit.

60 Rebecca Pincus and Walter A. Berbrick, 'Gray Zones in a Blue Arctic: Grappling with China's Growing Influence', *War on the Rocks*, October 24, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/gray-zones-in-a-blue-arctic-grappling-with-chinas-growing-influence/>.

61 Michael Levitt, Chair, 'Nation-Building at Home, Vigilance Beyond: Preparing for the Coming Decades in the Arctic', Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, April 2019, 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament, 1st Session. Government of Canada, 2019.

62 Jessica Shadian and Erica Wallis, 'When it comes to Canada-China relations, it is time to look north', *Policy Options*, 7 July, 2020, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/july-2020/when-it-comes-to-canada-china-relations-it-is-time-to-look-north/>.

## Views on international law and mechanisms

Both Canada and the US support the rule of law and maintain that the international mechanisms to adjudicate legal disagreements in the Arctic are sufficient. There are differences in policy towards the extent of the application of international law relative to the rights of sovereign states to operate in areas characterized as global commons. Differences in sovereignty claims in the Arctic constitute the most apparent division between Canada and the US. The disagreements stem from differing interpretations of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>63</sup> The most prominent is that concerning Canada's Northwest Passage. Canada bases its legal argument over the Northwest Passage on the UNCLOS definition of its baselines around the edges of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, as well as the historical use, making the waterways internal waters over which Ottawa has complete sovereignty. The US is not a signatory to UNCLOS and given its global position on freedom of navigation, it is understandable that it refuses to accept the Canadian position. In 1988, Canada and the US achieved a political, but not legal solution, the Canada-US Arctic Co-operation Agreement (ACA).<sup>64</sup> The US said it would seek Canada's consent for any transit but maintained that this did not mean it agreed with Canada's position and considered it an international waterway. The GC even went as far as to rename the Northwest Passage the "Canadian Northwest Passage" in 2009 to underscore its sovereignty. This disagreement was rendered dormant with the ACA, but growing international interest in the Arctic and its potential sea routes mean that the issue is no longer just a bilateral one.

Other issues that require resolution include the definition of the continental shelf and overlap in maritime boundaries. Canada and the United States disagree over the determination of the border in the Beaufort Sea. The Canadian position

is that the maritime boundary should follow the land boundary. The American position is that the maritime boundary should extend along a path equidistant from the coasts of the two nations. The resolution of the latter issue will give one of the nations an additional 6,250 square nautical miles of the Beaufort Sea, as well as access to the energy resources under it. The challenges of exploiting these resources – technological, physical environmental, and local – limit the urgency. However, as a matter of precedent and formalization of norms, its significance could grow, as could the risk of the lack of norms and agreement, and enforceable resolutions becoming a vulnerability. The other notable outstanding, but friendly, dispute concerns the one between Denmark and Canada over Hans Island.

## Expanding conceptions of security

The receding and changing ice coverage has meant that the mix of land, internal waters, territorial seas, exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and international waters that characterizes states' claims above the Arctic Circle is increasingly an economic and strategic issue, as well as one of the principle of sovereignty. The issue also lies at the intersection of a number of geopolitical challenges and assertions of stewardship over the Arctic as a global region of interest. For example, it has implications for Chinese ambitions in the Arctic, as recently signalled in the 26 January 2018 Arctic Policy<sup>65</sup> document, as well as for the principles underlying Chinese claims in the South China Sea. China stated that it believes both the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route are international straits. A strong Canadian regulation regime over the North West Passage could pose a significant challenge to China's Polar Silk Road Initiative. Transit issues are also intimately tied to resource exploitation, and the potential environmental consequences of increased shipping. Similar issues are at play for Russia and the Northeast Passage.<sup>66</sup>

63 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982, Document, [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm).

64 David Steinfield, 'The U.S. – Canada Northwest Passage Dispute', *Brown Political Review*, (April 2020), <https://brownpoliticalreview.org/2020/04/the-u-s-canada-northwest-passage-dispute/>.

65 China's Arctic Policy: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, January 2018, First Edition, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm).

66 See [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2019/05/06/mike-pompeo-canada-northwest-passage\\_a\\_23722364](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2019/05/06/mike-pompeo-canada-northwest-passage_a_23722364).

A more expansive definition of security creates an overlap between a range of human security issues and challenges. The divisions over the nature and sufficiency of solutions can also be exploited by hostile actors. Food security and economic security can intersect with federal responsibility for national security, sustainable development and environmental concerns. These can manifest as security concerns over foreign direct investments, resource exploitation and sustainable development policies. The issue of investment is made more challenging in a region where sovereignty is distributed between Indigenous communities and different levels of government, and is tied to the pursuit of economic self-sufficiency. Chinese investment in resource extraction, for example, is an increasingly contentious issue, with no consensus between the European and North American states on whether China is a threat, or a competitor, albeit one with a significant market advantage and a willingness to use it. Even within Canada and the US there are differences of opinion, although a consensus appears to be emerging in the US.<sup>67</sup> The issue is further complicated by the fact that governance in Canada is increasingly devolved to local and regional authorities. For example, the Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada views “the Northwest Passage as part of Inuit Nunangat, our Arctic homeland”, as stated in a press release on 8 May 2019, which illustrates the further overlap with indigenous self-determination and security.<sup>68</sup> However, indigenous views on the links between sovereignty and security are not monolithic across the Arctic regions and can create seams between states as well as regions. For example, one study suggests that Canadian Inuit representatives use securitization language as a way to frame environmental and social challenges as security issues; Norwegian-based Sámi peoples do not employ securitizing language, in part because of a harder division between national security and human security.<sup>69</sup>

By and large, Canada and the US have shared a common approach to environmental issues and

human security. In 2016, under the Obama administration, they issued a US-Canada Joint Statement on Climate, Energy, and Arctic Leadership.<sup>70</sup> It promoted a vision of a shared Arctic leadership model with a principled commitment to environmental stewardship, while balancing a number of factors: conserving Arctic biodiversity while building a sustainable Arctic economy and communities through careful science and traditional knowledge-based management, and the promotion of the region’s natural resources. Under the Trump administration, this consensus was tested, and there was disagreement over the balance between environmental protection and resource extraction. The Biden administration appears to be restoring the balance between the two, but Canada’s framing of human security as one that requires hard security does not appear to be shared at the policy level. This manifests in different ways, for example in disagreements over how much to constrain foreign investments in communities that require investments, to the need to reinvest in Arctic defence infrastructure, which can raise environmental concerns.<sup>71</sup>

### Conclusions: Potential vulnerabilities to hybrid threats

The concept of the Arctic and what constitutes Arctic security varies considerably, often based on local realities and subregional dynamics, but also at national and international levels. These differences – seams – can provide fertile ground for exploitation by hybrid threats.

At a transatlantic level, the challenges and diverse authorities for an expanding range of defence and security issues create a potential deterrence gap. The traditional transatlantic lines of communication can be held at risk. New cruise and hypersonic missile technology, and Russian launch capabilities from aircraft and submarines, can now avoid older detection and intercept capabilities designed, leaving North America vulnerable. The hard

67 See <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/canada-china-tmac-1.5851305>.

68 Siri Gulliksen Tømmerbakke, ‘Canada is pushing back at Pompeo’s assertion that Canada’s claim to the Northwest Passage is “illegitimate”’, *High North News*, 16 May 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/canada-pushing-back-pompeos-assertion-canadas-claim-northwest-passage-illegitimate>.

69 Wilfrid Greaves, ‘Arctic (in)security and Indigenous peoples: Comparing Inuit in Canada and Sámi in Norway’, *Security Dialogue* (September, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010616665957>.

70 US-Canada Joint Statement on Climate, Energy, and Arctic Leadership, 10 March 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/10/us-canada-joint-statement-climate-energy-and-arctic-leadership>.

71 Government of Canada, CSIS Public Report 2019 (Ottawa, 2019): 16–17.

security risk is exacerbated by the vulnerability to coercive behaviour by a hostile actor. Similarly, the greater range of security concerns requires further work to align the multiple forums responsible for the regions security between North America and Europe.

With North America, a diffuse responsibility for security between the two and within the two countries can also create issues that become vulnerabilities. Recent policy developments in the US have highlighted defence and security. In Canada, Arctic policy and debates speak to a wide range of themes, including national security and safety, but also reconciliation, infrastructure, traditional knowledge, environmental protection and biodiversity conservation, as well as sustainable and diversified economies.<sup>72</sup> Canada also distributes sovereignty and decision-making to multilateral organizations, with agenda-setting and circumpolar dialogue involving new actors. The defence lens now includes NATO. Canada, however, is focused on the Arctic as essentially a domestic and continental concern and treads a fine line between applying its view of the North American Arctic issues and accepting the growing reality that the defence issues in the circumpolar Arctic are an international concern. The US, from a policy perspective, generally understands the relative importance of the

Arctic through an international lens, a reflection of global geopolitical issues, although increasingly recognizing that the local dimensions create a unique dynamic.

The subtle but real differences in perceptions, policy and the role of multilateral organizations and forums in managing international competition could be exploited by hybrid threat actors, particularly at the levels and intersection points where governance, norms, the rule of law, authorities and dispute mechanisms are insufficient or constrained. However, even the belief in the region's exceptionalism – manifesting in cooperative forums, dialogue, mutual interest and respect for Indigenous rights – could be a vulnerability to be exploited as a threshold by actors willing and able to discern regional and national differences and amplify disagreements across a range of domains. For instance, foreign investments deemed essential to food security by some stakeholders could be deemed undue foreign influence and security risks by another level of government. Understanding and addressing the range of vulnerabilities requires imaginative appraisals of the possible consequences posed by new and evolving hybrid threats, and how they interact with the real differences between the Arctic regions.

72 Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 'Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework', September 9, 2019, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1560523306861/1560523330587>.

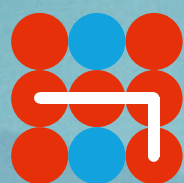
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