

Briefing Note

Why we need to talk about military activity in the Arctic: Towards an Arctic Military Code of Conduct

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Introduction

Shortly before the 2019 Arctic Council Ministerial in Rovaniemi, the United States sharpened its rhetoric about the potential for strategic competition with China and Russia in the Arctic, prompting renewed concern for the possibility of armed conflict in the region.

The world has been here before. During the Cold War, Western and Soviet defence planners identified the strategic importance of transpolar routes for airborne nuclear warfare, and, later, intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. At sea, the development of nuclear submarines that could remain for long periods under Arctic ice provided a potent first- and second-strike capability. On land, NATO's northernmost member, Norway, and the Soviet Union shared an Arctic border. Both NATO and the Soviet Union undertook initiatives aimed at preventing the balance of power on the Northern Front/Flank from tipping in favour of the other.

During a visit to the Kola Peninsula in October 1987, the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev called for the de-escalation of military tensions in the Arctic and the transformation of the region into a 'zone of peace'. Finland seized the moment, launching the 'Rovaniemi Process' (1989). That resulted in the creation of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (1991), a cooperative framework for the eight Arctic states to address shared environmental challenges, which was the forerunner to the Arctic Council (1996). With the end of the Cold War and the demise of Russia's Northern Fleet, the Arctic had indeed become a zone of peace.

Russia's Arctic resurgence

Throughout the 1990s, faced with major structural economic problems, the Post-Soviet leadership was unable to capitalise on the peace dividend in the Arctic. It was not until the early 2000s that the Arctic started to be prioritised by the Kremlin as military security concerns and national

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economic interests converged. The Northern Fleet was in dire need of modernisation and the Kremlin was uneasy about NATO's enlargement in 2004 and the US' announcement that it would deploy anti-ballistic missile defence systems in Eastern Europe.

In the Arctic, the effects on West-Russia relations were not immediately discernible. In spite of speculation in the media about the potential for armed conflict in the Arctic, military competition in the region still felt like a distant prospect. NATO's interest in the region was greatly diminished as it refocused on operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Ilulissat Declaration (2008) promised an orderly settlement of outstanding disputes between the Arctic states. A short period of "perezgruzka" in US-Russia relations (2009-2012) was marked, inter alia, by sensible progress on Arctic military cooperation, most notably around joint search and rescue operations. This arguably reached its zenith between 2011 and 2012 as new forums, such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) and the Northern Chiefs of Defence Conference (NCDC) for the first time created formal spaces for military chiefs to build trust and confidence.

However, from the highs of 2012 it took fewer than two years for Arctic military cooperation to collapse. Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the subsequent outbreak of hostilities in eastern Ukraine led to the suspension of virtually all military cooperation between the West and Russia in the Arctic. That included the termination of joint exercises and the nascent NCDC, as well as Russia's withdrawal from the ASFR. Tensions with Russia across a range of issues has heightened Western perceptions that the country should be viewed through a competitive rather than cooperative lens. Under this atmosphere of ever-growing mistrust and confrontation, all major military exercises in the Arctic, conducted either by Russia ("Sever", "Tsentr") or the West ("Cold Response", "ICEX", "Trident Juncture"), are adding to tensions. The West has become increasingly critical of Russia for conducting unannounced 'snap' exercises, violating the national waters and airspaces of Nordic countries, simulating bombing attacks against NATO military installations, bases and exercise areas, and carrying out GPS signal jamming operations that pose a danger to civilian aircraft and sea navigation. Russia, in turn, has challenged the West over its manoeuvres in the Barents Sea Region and rebuked the US for announcing that it intended to carry out freedom of navigation operations in and around the Northern Sea Route.

A new era of strategic competition

Without a significant shift in the attitudes of both Washington and Moscow, the risk of heightened military competition (and, consequently, unintended armed conflict), is here to stay. The security situation in the Arctic cannot be considered in isolation because it is largely determined by developments in adjacent regions, as well as the broader dynamics of global military competition. In this regard, a major point of concern is the deterioration of the arms control regime, which is likely to also impact the Arctic. Meanwhile, the growing presence in the northern high latitudes of armed forces from non-Arctic states – that may also soon include China – could exacerbate tensions still further. The apparent uneasiness of many Arctic policymakers, experts, communities and other stakeholders show towards even entertaining discussions about military activity in the Arctic only heightens the risk of poor decision-making, and increases the risk of miscalculation and tactical error.

A common response to growing military activity in the Arctic has been to suggest that the time has come for the Arctic Council to expand its mandate to cover military matters. However, as

others have pointed out, there are very good reasons why that should not happen. The Arctic Council has proven its resilience in the face of deteriorating NATO-Russia relations in large part because it has focussed its effort on issues where circumpolar consensus can still be found. There is little reason to think that the Arctic Council could have remained immune to the fallout from the Ukraine crisis if military matters had been within its purview. Equally, NATO-Russia relations are such that we are unlikely to see the restoration of the NCDC or the return of Russia to the ASFR.

Nevertheless, the emergence of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACFG) amid the worsening geopolitical climate does provide a glimmer of hope. This forum provides Russia and the United States with an opportunity to maintain at least some dialogue on issues such as freedom of navigation along the Northern Sea Route. However, on its own, the ACFG is unlikely to be sufficient for insulating the Arctic from outside shocks.

Towards an Arctic Military Code of Conduct

With one eye on Russia's upcoming chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2021-23), we propose that another modest gain might be achievable: an Arctic Military Code of Conduct (AMCC). The purpose of such a document would be for all states with armed forces capable of operating in the Arctic to define, collectively, the red lines of military activities in the northern high latitudes, while also creating a dialogue mechanism that would promote greater transparency and lay the ground for a less conflict-prone relationship between NATO and Russia in the region.

The AMCC would not seek to prevent military activity in the Arctic, or even limit its growth. As defence and security scholars, we recognise that there is a wide array of defence and security needs that must be met in the Arctic, ranging from the protection of the state, to the exercising of sovereign jurisdiction, the securing of commercial assets, and support for local communities. Moreover, the logistical difficulty and expense of operating in the Arctic is such that there is an even greater need for armed forces to provide 'soft' security services in the region than elsewhere. Rather, the scope of the AMCC would be limited to defining what constitutes *acceptable* and *legitimate* military practice in the Arctic, with a view to reducing irresponsible military activity and brinkmanship, whilst preserving a 'low tension' Arctic environment.

We also recognise, however, that in the current geopolitical climate, it may not be possible to reach agreement on what constitutes *acceptable* and *legitimate* military practice in the Arctic, not least because the interests of states operating military forces in the Arctic vary widely in terms of goals, capabilities and geographical extent. Therefore, in the first instance, the principle task should be to define what constitutes *unacceptable* and *illegitimate* military practice. Here, policymakers might look for agreement that dangerous manoeuvres, simulated attacks, turning off transponders, jamming communications, surprise exercises, and the endangering of innocent civilians cannot be tolerated.

Such an initiative would likely be of interest to Russia, given that its posture in the Arctic is defensive and oriented towards preventing military conflict and deterring aggression. The Kremlin has repeatedly called for military confidence-building measures with foreign states in the Arctic; a sign, perhaps, that it appreciates the need to cooperate with the West to preserve regional stability and security. Showing willingness to moderate its military activity in the Arctic ahead of its Arctic Council chairmanship might further benefit Russia by prompting something of a rapprochement

with its Arctic neighbours. The negotiation of the AMCC could also be used as a mechanism for engaging China in a 'litmus test' of Beijing's willingness to abstain from uncontrolled military activity in the Arctic. The involvement of China might also help dispel the notion that the AMCC was positioning Russia alone against the rest.

The negotiations that produced a fisheries agreement covering the high seas portion of the Central Arctic Ocean could serve as a model of how Arctic and non-Arctic states might proceed with the negotiation of the AMCC. The 5+5 format gave seats at the table to the five Arctic Ocean littoral states ('A5') and those countries with ocean-going fishing fleets capable of operating in the Arctic (as well as the European Union). A similar approach could be applied with regard to the AMCC, where the A5 would be joined by those non-Arctic countries capable of conducting significant military operations in the Arctic, namely China, France, and the United Kingdom in an A5+3 format. Once the AMCC is agreed, all states actively involved in or considering military operations of whatever size in the Arctic would then be encouraged by the existing signatories to abide by the AMCC.

Popular refrains such as 'High North Low Tension' and 'Territory of Dialogue', which have been used to inculcate a spirit of cooperation between the Arctic states, are insufficient on their own. It is not enough to simply believe that armed conflict in the Arctic is impossible because of some notion that the region should be defined solely in terms of common or shared interests. The creation of the NCDC and ASFR in response to growing military activity in the Arctic tells us as much. Wherever it happens, increasing military activity, even for peaceful and cooperative purposes, is certain to bring about an element of risk in the form of a security dilemma, which needs to be managed carefully. That counts double when harder security interests are at stake.