

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## NATO in the Arctic: Challenges and Opportunities

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The Arctic region is becoming increasingly important for a number of geostrategic reasons. Thawing ice allows lucrative shipping lanes to open and increases the possibility of natural resource exploration. Since four of the five Arctic littoral countries, in addition to Iceland, are also members of NATO, the alliance cannot afford to ignore the Arctic.

The U.S. should make the Arctic a higher priority for NATO while working to allay the concerns of Canada, which is wary of a stronger NATO presence in the Arctic.

**Arctic Challenges and Opportunities.** There is currently a very low threat of armed conflict in the Arctic, and it is in everyone's interest to keep it that way. Nevertheless, the potential challenges in the region remain great.

The Arctic region is home to some of the most unforgivable terrain and harshest climate anywhere in the world. Many of the shipping lanes currently used in the Arctic are a considerable distance from search and rescue (SAR) facilities, and natural resource exploration that would be considered routine in other locations in the world is complex, costly, and dangerous in the Arctic. Moreover, it is thought that the warming water in the Arctic is changing the migratory pattern of certain fish stocks. For some Arctic countries, national fishing zones are strategic resources.

However, the Arctic also offers many opportunities. Some estimates claim that up to 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and almost one-third of the world's undiscovered natural gas reserves are located in the Arctic region. As ice continues to dissipate during the summer months, new shipping lanes have offered additional trade opportunities.

For example, using the Northeast Passage along the Russian coast reduces a trip from Hamburg to Shanghai by almost 4,000 miles, cuts a week off delivery times, and saves approximately \$650,000 in fuel costs

per ship. Unlike in the Gulf of Aden, there are no pirates operating in the Arctic.

**Norway and the Role of NATO in the Arctic.** Although NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept was praised for acknowledging new security challenges for the alliance, such as cyber and energy security, Arctic security was not included. In fact, the word *Arctic* cannot be found in either the 2010 Strategic Concept or the 2012 Chicago NATO summit declaration.

While NATO sits on the sidelines, others are trying to elbow their way into the region. The Chinese have applied for Permanent Observer status in the Arctic Council, have sent high-level government visits to Arctic countries, and have established a small toehold on Svalbard. The Japanese are planning to send their icebreaker to explore the Arctic Ocean.

Although the security challenges currently faced in the Arctic are not military in nature, there is still a requirement for military capability in the region that can support civilian authorities. For example, civilian SAR and natural disaster response in such an unforgiving environment as the Arctic can be augmented by the military.

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Situational awareness above the Arctic Circle is also vital. To this end, air and maritime surveillance and reconnaissance platforms operated by the military could contribute significantly to Arctic security. Such an effort would require cooperation among all Arctic players. This is where NATO has a role.

Norway is a leader in promoting NATO's role in the Arctic. It is the only country in the world that has its permanent military headquarters above the Arctic Circle. Although Norway has contributed troops to Iraq, has more than 500 troops in Afghanistan, and was one of only seven NATO members to actually carry out air strikes during the Libya campaign, the primary force driver for its armed forces is still Arctic security. The Norwegians have invested extensively in Arctic defense capabilities. Norwegian officials, both military and civilian, want to see NATO playing a larger role in the Arctic.

**Canadian Concerns.** The Norwegian position regarding NATO's role in the Arctic is in contrast to Canada's. Like Norway, Canada has invested heavily in its Arctic defense and security capabilities. Unlike Norway, the Canadians have made it clear that they do not want NATO involved in the Arctic. Generally speaking, there is a concern inside Canada that non-Arctic NATO countries favor an alliance role in the Arctic because it would afford them influence in an area where they otherwise would have none.

It is likely that Canadian opposition was the reason why the Arctic region was not mentioned in the 2010 Strategic Concept or the 2012

Chicago summit declaration. As a sovereign nation-state, Canada has a prerogative to determine what role, if any, NATO should have in Canada's Arctic region.

**Russia: Militarizing the Arctic.** The Arctic region is one area where NATO and Russia can cooperate. In terms of SAR capability and training exercises, there has been good cooperation so far between NATO member states and Russia. For example, Norway just completed a joint training exercise with Russia in May that was by all accounts a success. In August, the U.S., Norway, and Russia will carry out another military exercise called "Northern Eagle 2012." Since Norway shares a border and history with Russia in the Arctic, bilateral cooperation with Russia is obligatory.

Nevertheless, there have been some alarming developments that show that Russia is increasingly militarizing the Arctic. Russian air and submarine patrol activity in the Arctic and the North Sea has hit Cold War levels. The North Sea Fleet is now the largest fleet in the Russian navy. Recently, it was announced that Russia was reopening airbases on archipelagos above the Arctic Circle that were closed at the end of the Cold War.

Russia has made its position on the Arctic very clear. In 2011, after announcing the creation of two new Russian "Arctic Brigades" to be deployed in the Arctic, Vladimir Putin said: "As for our own geo-political interests (in the Arctic) ... we shall be protecting them firmly and consistently."<sup>1</sup>

**The U.S. Needs to Push the Arctic up NATO's Agenda.** The

Arctic region deserves more attention from NATO than it is currently receiving. As an Arctic power, the U.S. should be promoting Arctic awareness in the alliance. To this end, the White House should:

- **Call for the next NATO summit in 2014 to be held above the Arctic Circle.** This would bring immediate awareness of Arctic issues to the alliance. Perhaps the Norwegian city of Tromsø would be most appropriate.
- **Work closely with Canada.** Canada has legitimate concerns regarding NATO's role in the Arctic. The U.S. should explain to its close partner why NATO could have a positive role in the region.
- **Build political support from NATO's non-Arctic members, such as the U.K.** Together, the U.S. and the U.K. can be an influential force inside NATO. Since 2010, the U.K. has placed a renewed focus on defense and security in the Arctic. The U.S. should work with the U.K. to promote Arctic security awareness inside NATO.

**Sovereignty and Security.** In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security. Respecting national sovereignty in the Arctic will ensure that the chances of armed conflict in the region remain low. Since NATO is an intergovernmental alliance of sovereign nation-states built on the consensus of all of its members, it has a role to play in Arctic security if it so chooses. The military coordination and resources that NATO could

1. Thomas Grove, "Russia Creates Two Brigades of Arctic Troops," Reuters, July 1, 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/07/01/russia-arctic-troops-idUKLDE76017D20110701> (accessed June 19, 2012).

contribute to the Arctic region would offer benefits beyond the alliance.

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