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Russian Military Activity in the Arctic: A Cause for Concern

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While the West has primarily been focused on Russia's recent actions in eastern Europe, Moscow has continued with its plans to militarize the Arctic. Russia's strategic goals in the Arctic are to secure current and potential energy resources located in the region and to maintain military superiority above the Arctic Circle. Although the threat of armed conflict among the Arctic powers remains low, the U.S. should consider the implications of Russian militarization in the region in light of Moscow's recent aggression in Ukraine.

Russia Is Militarizing the Arctic

The Arctic region is quickly becoming strategically important. The possibility of decreased ice coverage during the summer months and advances in technology mean that shipping, natural resource exploration, and tourism will increase economic activity.

Vladimir Putin has made it clear that Russia must maintain a strategic advantage in the region. Earlier this year he told his Security Council:

More often the interests of the Arctic powers, and not only them, cross here—countries that are far away from this region are also expressing

interest [in the Arctic]. In these conditions we must take additional measures not to fall behind our partners, to keep our influence in the region and in some aspects be ahead of our partners.¹

Although the current security challenges of the Arctic are not yet military in nature, military capability in the region can be used to support civilian authorities. Both civilian search and rescue (SAR) and natural disaster response in such an unforgiving environment as the Arctic can be augmented by the military. However, Russia has taken steps to militarize the Arctic for what can be only for non-civilian purposes.

It is Russia's prerogative to place military assets inside its national territory as it wishes. However, these actions concern the U.S. because Moscow has shown its willingness to use its military force to achieve its national objectives outside its national borders. One must assume the Arctic region would be no different. The ultimate goal is for Russia to deploy a combined arms force in the Arctic by 2020, and it appears they are on track. Some of Russia's recent actions in the Arctic include:

- Russia's Northern Fleet, which makes up for two-thirds of the Russian Navy, has been based in the region.
- A new Arctic command was established in December 2014 to coordinate all Russian military activities in the Arctic region.²
- Russia is increasing the number of marines assigned to the Northern Fleet by one-third. The

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force will eventually be equal to the size of another brigade and will be located near Pechenga, Russia—less than 10 miles from the border to Norway.

- Two new so-called Arctic brigades will be permanently based in the Arctic region over the next few years.
- Soviet-era military facilities in the Arctic region are being reopened after nearly 30 years.

NATO Is Divided

The role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the Arctic is the source of ongoing debate for the alliance. 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 2014 Wales NATO summit declaration.

Inside NATO, different U.S. allies view the Arctic differently. 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 and 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.

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 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.

As a security alliance, NATO is committed to defending the territorial integrity of all its members, including any territory in the Arctic. This is why the alliance must work hard to overcome its internal differences on NATO's role in the Arctic region.

No Time for Complacency

The U.S.'s security concerns in the Arctic are derived from the fact that it is an Arctic power and through its membership in NATO. As Russia continues to develop military capabilities in the region the U.S. must:

- **Work with allies to develop a NATO Arctic strategy.** It is time for NATO to develop a comprehensive Arctic policy to address security challenges in the region. This should be done in cooperation with non-NATO members Finland and Sweden.
- **Work with NATO's non-Arctic members, such as the U.K. and the Baltic states, to promote an Arctic agenda.** The U.K. takes an active interest in the Arctic. Geographically, the U.K. is the world's closest country to the Arctic Circle without actually being an Arctic country. The Baltic states work closely with the Nordic countries, which are Arctic powers. The U.S. should leverage its relationships with these countries to advance an Arctic agenda inside NATO.
- **Continue participating in training exercises in the region.** Exercises above the Arctic Circle, such as Cold Response 2014, are vital to ensuring that the alliance is prepared to meet potential threats to Arctic security. The U.S. should also consider hosting NATO exercises in Alaska.
- **Ensure that the U.S. maintains robust capabilities in the region.** The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) has the primary responsibility for the Arctic waters of the U.S. Currently, the USCG is not properly funded to carry out the tasks that are required to keep America's Arctic region secure and to enforce U.S. sovereignty in the region.

1. Alexei Anishchuk, "Russia's Putin Wants Beefed-Up Presence in Arctic," Reuters, April 22, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/22/us-russia-putin-arctic-idUSBREA3L1BN20140422> (accessed December 10, 2014).

2. Dave Majumdar, "Russia to Standup New Arctic Command," *USNI News*, February 18, 2014, <http://news.usni.org/2014/02/18/russia-standup-new-arctic-command> (accessed December 10, 2014).

Sovereignty Equals Security

As Russia continues to develop and increase its military capabilities in the Arctic region, the U.S. and its allies must closely monitor these activities. In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security and stability. Respecting the national sovereignty of others in the Arctic while maintaining the ability to enforce one's own sovereignty will ensure that the chances of armed conflict in the region remain low.

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