



Policy Brief

# NATO's Policy and Posture in the Arctic:

Revisiting Allied Capabilities and Command Plans

---

Heather A. Conley | Sophie Arts

July 5, 2023

G | M | F

IDEAS | LEADERSHIP | HOPE

# NATO's Policy and Posture in the Arctic

---

July 5, 2023



July 5, 2023

**At the upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius on July 11–12,** the war in Ukraine and internal turmoil in Russia will rightfully take center stage. But as Finland participates in its first leaders' meeting as NATO's 31st member, and the alliance continues to pave the way for Sweden's accession, it will be important to assess how NATO can best leverage its enlarged Northern flank to boost capacity and enhance the allies' defense and deterrence posture in the Arctic.

Finland's accession constitutes a significant force multiplier for capabilities, structures, and readiness in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic. Nordic efforts to expand interoperability, readiness, and resilience, as well as the formal integration of highly capable Nordic Air Forces under NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD), will strengthen NATO defense planning and operations.

NATO's Nordic enlargement and the strengthening of its Arctic posture will require strategic decision-making. The alliance's planned revisions to its regional plans under the concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), which are part of the package of deliverables expected to come out of the summit, will provide an opportunity for the United States and its allies to lay the foundations to align and enhance their defense posture and readiness. Chair of the Military Committee Admiral [Rob Bauer announced on July 3](#) that NATO will approve three regional plans in Vilnius, including one led by Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk for the High North and the Atlantic. This will be an important step toward updating the alliance's threat analysis, streamlining the command structure, and creating a more robust NATO posture in the Arctic.

## Assessing the Threat Landscape

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has irrevocably altered security dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic region. Although the war has drained conventional Russian land forces and degraded the country's ability to pose a land threat to the Nordic countries (primarily Finland and Norway), for the time being, Russia's Arctic air and maritime forces and assets remain largely intact. Despite their preoccupation with Ukraine, the Kremlin and its military leadership remain focused on the Arctic region, and its military capabilities there continue to pose a challenge to NATO.

Because the Arctic remains central to Russia's economic development and national interest, and given that key assets of Russia's second-strike nuclear capability are located on the Kola Peninsula, the Arctic is existentially important to the Kremlin's security calculations. Domestic instability in Russia and setbacks affecting its war aims may further raise the Kremlin's risk tolerance as it seeks to demonstrate its military strength externally. This includes saber-rattling with its Arctic-based nuclear capabilities, which heightens instability in the region. In addition, Russia will likely rely even more on hybrid warfare tactics as its conventional capabilities are further degraded by economic limitations and sanctions affecting electronics and other hardware. This tracks with a recent uptick in sub-threshold attacks and economic and intelligence activities in Arctic countries, to include Norway, Finland, and Sweden. It will be important for present and future NATO members to gain a common understanding of this threat and to agree on appropriate response scenarios.

Allies will also need to adjust their planning and posture to expanding Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic. A series of groundbreaking bilateral agreements this spring have signaled Russia's growing willingness to provide Beijing greater access to the Northern Sea Route as it finds itself increasingly politically and economically isolated. NATO leaders will have to watch these developments closely and consider their implications for Russian sovereignty over its territorial waters and Chinese influence in the region.

July 5, 2023

Ultimately, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and changing Sino-Russian relations have exacerbated a dynamic of heightened tension and rising instability that started in the mid-2000s, and that most policymakers in Arctic capitals chose to ignore in the face of competing priorities. In turn, these developments have increased the urgency to address existing gaps in Arctic strategy, posture, and capabilities for NATO.

But the war in Ukraine has also provided insights into Russian tactics and military capabilities that NATO should assess closely to prepare for future conflict scenarios. Russia's use of hypersonic missiles and Ukrainian efforts to intercept attacks through missile defense systems hold important lessons for Arctic air defense. This warrants a detailed evaluation of the performance of the US Patriot and German IRIS-T systems, as well as the Iranian drones and ballistic missiles Russia uses. Moreover, the United States and NATO should monitor military and industry innovation driven by battlefield requirements in Ukraine that could shape the future of conflict and assess the implications for the North Atlantic and Arctic region. This review should include a closer look at the use of unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) and aerial drones in the North, Baltic, Black, and Azov Seas.

## Forging the Path Forward

Russian aggression and NATO's response highlight new pathways for NATO cooperation and provide an opportunity to build a stronger deterrence posture and an enhanced presence in the Arctic to meet existing and future challenges from Russia in the near term and China in the medium to long term. This will require a recalibration of the threat perceptions of the United States, whose Arctic priorities are shaped by longer-term views toward environmental changes, US-China relations, and strategic competition, and (Northern) European allies, whose priority is to defend against Russia's aggressive behavior and violations of their sovereignty.

The North American Arctic (the United States and Canada), and the European and Eurasian Arctic must agree on appropriate responses to deliberate escalation by Russia and reach a consensus on the strategic implications of China's increased presence in the Arctic (both North Pacific and North Atlantic). The Vilnius summit can provide the necessary impetus to begin a long overdue discussion around a NATO Arctic policy that bridges threat assessments and establishes strategic foundations on which the allies can build. Along the way, they will need to address capabilities gaps and command and control inefficiencies.

## Streamlining the Arctic Command Structure

To strengthen NATO's posture in the Arctic and manage the risk of horizontal escalation, NATO allies must streamline the multi-layered national and allied command structure for the European and North American Arctic. This involves determining the best way to integrate new Nordic Allies. For the time being, Finland has been integrated via NATO Joint Force Command (JFC) Brunssum. But with an eye to integrating and enhancing NATO's Nordic operations and readiness, there are strong arguments for integration via JFC Norfolk, which oversees Norway and the UK.

As the alliance sets out to reform command and control (C2), NATO staff and military leadership will have to work closely with individual allies, including the United States and Canada, to further integrate command plans across the US Total Force, NORAD, and NATO. In parallel, the United States will need to streamline its national command structure and update the Unified Command Plan (UCP) for the Arctic to address overlaps in areas of operation—including among the 6th Fleet based in Naples, the 2nd Fleet operating out of Norfolk, and US Joint Forces Command—and also to account for growing Sino-Russian alignment and greater Chinese engagement in the region.

Moreover, the United States and Canada must collaborate closely to further integrate and upgrade NORAD's capa-

July 5, 2023

bilities and operations to address severe gaps in coverage and prepare for high-stake scenarios that demand rapid responses, including those involving drones or hypersonic missiles. Over-the-horizon radar (OTHR), upgrades to the North Warning System, and improvements in integration of information networks will be essential to the ability of the United States and Canada, and by extension other NATO allies, to detect and defend against threats from the North.

## Using NATO's Comparative Advantage

NATO's revisions to its regional plans will allow the United States and its allies to align and enhance their defense posture and readiness. A key feature of these updates will be new force structure plans that outline specific needs for troops, capabilities, and equipment to defend against Russia and other threats across the Euro-Atlantic region. A regional defense plan for the High North that streamlines NATO's force posture to support Arctic operations, accompanied by greater defense integration and planning with the UK, the Baltic States, Poland, and Germany, will provide greater Arctic defense coherence.

NATO will also have to think innovatively about capability development and application and take stock of existing efforts to avoid duplication. A comprehensive assessment of existing government and private-sector Arctic-ready capabilities across the alliance would help highlight pathways to adapt military assets such as UUVs for new applications, while simplifying future military and commercial procurement choices. Beyond this, the Arctic 7 (Arctic allies, not including Russia), the UK, and Baltic states should continue to develop and upgrade joint deterrence and defense capabilities. An Arctic Security Initiative (ASI), modelled after the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), could provide an avenue to further strengthen public-private cooperation and drive a collaborative approach to R&D and procurement of capabilities designed for unique Arctic conditions.

## Bolstering Posture

A stronger Arctic posture will require enhanced presence. NATO should use its resources strategically to maximize outputs within budgetary restraints. Exercises including multinational efforts serve to demonstrate presence, test equipment, and optimize processes. US forces and NATO already routinely exercise in the Arctic region. However, unity of effort on operational coordination should be increased to create a persistent NATO presence that will ensure a more credible deterrence posture.

At the same time, enhanced presence will demand greater integration of joint intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (ISR) activities and domain awareness capabilities. Stronger intelligence coordination will not only provide the Arctic 7 a better understanding of Moscow's regional intentions, but also potentially deter malign Russian activities. These capabilities will, in addition, support joint operations in the air, sea, and land domains—for example through improved maritime surveillance of the GIUK gap and the North Atlantic.

Moreover, NATO allies should continue to utilize, revive, and upgrade existing infrastructure and increase efforts to improve interoperability, including through defense cooperation agreements. Investments beyond this should prioritize mobility and agile basing to enable rapid deployment.

## Conclusion

Given the volatile threat landscape and NATO's strengthened Northern capacity, allies should use the Vilnius meeting to set in motion ambitious processes that streamline and strengthen NATO's deterrence posture and strengthen defenses in the Arctic against security challenges posed by Russia and Sino-Russian cooperation. Existing resources must be strategically allocated. Others will require further investment and research and development. The most important step will be for North American and European NATO allies to bridge threat assessments, share information, and coordinate activities. Around these efforts, NATO should initiate a coordinated strategic communications plan to optimize communications with allies and partners and signal its unity and resolve to secure and protect international legal norms in the Arctic.

Findings in this paper are based on an unpublished report authored by Heather A. Conley, Mathieu Boulègue, Sophie Arts, and Kristine Berzina in May 2023 and sponsored by the Homeland Defense Institute. The views expressed in this publication and the original report do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Air Force Academy, North American Aerospace Defense Command and United States Northern Command, the Department of Defense, or the United States government.

# NATO's Policy and Posture in the Arctic

---

July 5, 2023



# NATO's Policy and Posture in the Arctic

July 5, 2023

**G | M | F**  
IDEAS LEADERSHIP HOPE

## About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a non-partisan policy organization committed to the idea that the United States and Europe are stronger together. GMF champions the principles of democracy, human rights, and international cooperation, which have served as the bedrock of peace and prosperity since the end of the Second World War, but are under increasing strain. GMF works on issues critical to transatlantic interests in the 21st century, including the future of democracy, security and defense, geopolitics and the rise of China, and technology and innovation. By drawing on and fostering a community of people with diverse life experiences and political perspectives, GMF pursues its mission by driving the policy debate through cutting-edge analysis and convening, fortifying civil society, and cultivating the next generation of leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany as a tribute to the Marshall Plan, GMF is headquartered in Washington, DC, with offices in Ankara, Belgrade, Berlin, Brussels, Bucharest, Paris, and Warsaw.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

As a non-partisan and independent research institution, GMF is committed to research integrity and transparency.

## About the Author(s)

[Heather A. Conley](#) | President, GMF

[Sophie Arts](#) | Program Officer, GMF North

Cover photo credit: [Nigel Jarvis](#) | [Shutterstock](#)

Washington, DC • Ankara • Belgrade • Berlin

Brussels • Bucharest • Paris • Warsaw

[gmfus.org](https://gmfus.org)