

# High North: NATO and Russia expand into the Arctic

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**Melting ice in the Arctic is opening the region to military activity, prompting littoral NATO members and Russia to shift their focus beyond Eastern Europe. *Jim Dorschner* reports**

After Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 NATO planners became focused on the alliance's volatile eastern frontier. However, global warming is now also shifting interest towards emerging security issues among the Arctic littoral states of Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the United States, as well as alliance partners Finland and Sweden.

The melting of Arctic ice is opening opportunities for lucrative commercial expansion as well as prompting aggressive Russian moves to expand the country's strategic reach in the region and build up military capabilities for this most challenging of environments. In response, NATO members and partners are examining specialised equipment, training, force structure, and doctrine, as well as their command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) infrastructure.



*HMCS Kingston sails in Lancaster Sound on 29 August 2019 during Operation 'Nanook' in the Canadian Arctic. This is Canada's signature northern operation, built around a series of joint, inter-agency, and multinational activities designed to "exercise the defence of Canada and secure northern regions". (Canadian Armed Forces/Corporal Simon Arcand)*

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The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's 2018 report described a global temperature rise of 1.5°C with significant impacts for the Arctic. Studies suggest vessels may be sailing between Europe and Asia in the summertime by 2030, with the Arctic possibly ice free in the summertime by 2050. As sea routes open maritime security concerns will increase, influencing search-and-rescue (SAR) requirements and sea-lane transit rights. Interest in fossil fuel exploration is already increasing, as seen in the Russian-led liquefied natural gas (LNG) initiative in the Yamal Peninsula and US government attempts to open northern Alaska to offshore oil drilling.

At a conference in the United Kingdom in December 2019 NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the importance of the Arctic is increasing for several reasons, including the enlarged Russian presence. "The melting of the ice means also that the whole geography is going to change because it will be easier to have economic activity, sea lines of communications, and so on," he said. In response, he said NATO must ensure its presence in the Arctic and that "some of the investments we make in new ships, maritime capabilities, surveillance capabilities, and aircraft capabilities are relevant" for the region.

Ongoing programmes among littoral countries include new Arctic patrol vessels, as well as specialised long-range patrol and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft and systems. This will be coupled with increasing land, air, maritime, and special forces operations and enhanced C3I. Equally important is the emphasis on training and equipment for forces operating in the Arctic.

## **Russian moves**

Russian efforts to develop military capabilities and reach in the Arctic began with a joint declaration by President Vladimir Putin and then Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in December 2013. "By 2015 there must be established a group of forces for the military security and protection of the national interests in the Arctic," they said.

A year later the Arctic Joint Strategic Command - North (JSC-North) was declared operational under Russia's Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command, with the mission to protect Russian territorial interests in the Arctic, including shipping on the Northern Sea Route and offshore hydrocarbon deposits. JSC-North's area of responsibility extends from Murmansk near Norway to Anadyr which is opposite Alaska on the Bering Sea.

The command has steadily expanded, with new and upgraded airbases, garrisons, and maritime facilities on Arctic island territories, including Novaya Zemlya, the New Siberian Islands, Wrangel Island, and Cape Schmidt. Force structure includes two army Arctic brigades, which were declared combat ready in 2015 and 2016 at Alakurtti near the Finnish border and in the northern Yamal-Nenets autonomous district. Previously a regiment, the enhanced 61st Independent Naval Infantry Brigade also operates from an upgraded base at Sputnik near the borders of Finland and Norway. Arctic-focused special forces units have also reportedly grown by 30%.

The upgraded main airbases of Severomorsk-1 and Severomorsk-3 on the Kola Peninsula can operate heavy bombers and transport aircraft, as can the airbases at Rogachevo, Novaya Zemlya, and at Naryan-Mar near the Barents Sea. The Nagurskoye airfield in Franz Josef Land now also has an extended runway to support MiG-31 multirole fighters, Sukhoi Su-34 strike aircraft, and Ilyushin Il-78 aerial refuelling aircraft. A new airbase on Kotelny Island in the New Siberian Islands opened in late 2018.

In early 2019 the Russian Aerospace Forces resumed airspace patrols around the North Pole with MiG-31BM long-range fighter interceptors and support from Il-78 tankers operating from Monchegorsk airbase on the Kola Peninsula and Nagurskoye airfield, which provide reach into the high Arctic and westward to the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap. Russia's Arctic airbases also support long-range Tupolev Tu-142 maritime reconnaissance bombers and Il-38 maritime patrol aircraft with strike capabilities.

**[Continued in full version...]**

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