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Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Time to Get Serious About the Arctic

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on July 11 and 12 is an opportunity for the Alliance to finally focus on a region it has long ignored: the Arctic. Economic, oil and gas, and shipping opportunities are increasing in the region—as are Russian military capabilities. Even so, NATO does not have an agreed Arctic strategy. The U.S. should use the July summit to place the Arctic firmly on NATO’s agenda and ensure that the Alliance agrees on a common policy concerning the region’s security.

An Important Region

The Arctic, commonly referred to as the High North, is a strategically important region. The possibility of decreasing ice coverage during the summer months, and advances in technology, mean that shipping, natural resource exploration, and tourism will bring an increase of economic activity.

Although the Arctic region has been an area of low conflict among the Arctic powers, NATO should consider the implications of Russia’s recent aggressive military behavior. NATO is a collective security organization designed to defend the territorial integrity of its members. Five NATO members (Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the Unit-

ed States) are Arctic countries, and each has territory above the Arctic Circle. In addition, two closely allied nations (Finland and Sweden) also have Arctic territory.

Different Views

NATO has no agreed common position on its role in the Arctic region. The Warsaw Summit Declaration did not mention the word Arctic, and neither does the Alliance’s most recent Strategic Concept published in 2010.

NATO has been internally divided on the role that the Alliance should play in the High North. Norway is the leading voice inside the Alliance for 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, and it has invested extensively in Arctic defense capabilities.

Canada has likewise invested heavily in Arctic defense capabilities. However, unlike Norway, Canada has stymied past efforts by NATO to take a larger role in the region. Generally speaking, there is a concern inside Canada that an Alliance role in the Arctic would afford non-Arctic NATO countries influence in an area where they otherwise would have none.

As a sovereign nation-state, Canada has a prerogative to determine what role, if any, NATO should play in Canada’s Arctic region. However, as a collective-security alliance, NATO cannot ignore the Arctic altogether, and the Alliance should not remain divided on the issue.

Russia’s Increasing Presence

While the Arctic region remains peaceful, Russia’s recent steps to militarize the region, coupled

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with its bellicose behavior toward its neighbors, makes the Arctic a security concern. The Arctic-based Northern Fleet accounts for two-thirds of the Russian Navy. An Arctic command was established in 2015 to coordinate all Russian military activities in the Arctic region. Two Arctic brigades have been formed, and Russia is planning to form Arctic Coastal Defense divisions, which will be under the command of the Northern Fleet and stationed on the Kola Peninsula and in Russia's eastern Arctic.¹ Russia's Northern Fleet is building newly refitted submarines, and Russia announced in May 2017 that its buildup of the Northern Fleet's nuclear capacity is intended "to phase 'NATO out of [the] Arctic.'"²

Russia is developing equipment optimized for Arctic conditions like the Mi-38 helicopter and three new nuclear icebreakers to add to the 40 icebreakers already in service (six of which are nuclear).³ Air power in the Arctic is increasingly important to Russia; in January, the Northern Fleet announced it would "significantly expand the geography of the Arctic flights."⁴ These flights are often aggressive. In March 2017, nine Russian bombers simulated an attack on the U.S.-funded, Norwegian-run

radar installation at Vardø, Norway, above the Arctic Circle.⁵

Twelve Russian aircraft simulated an attack against NATO naval forces taking part in a May 2017 exercise, EASTLANT17, near Tromsø, Norway, and later that month,⁶ Russian aircraft targeted aircraft from 12 nations, including the U.S.,⁷ that took part in the Arctic Challenge 2017 exercise, near Bodø.⁸ In April 2018, Maritime Patrol Aircraft from Russia's Pacific Fleet for the first time exercised locating and bombing enemy submarines in the Arctic, while fighter jets exercised repelling an air invasion in the Arctic region.

Over the past decade, Russian investment in Arctic bases has resulted in 14 operational airfields in the Arctic along with 16 deepwater ports.⁹ Russia reportedly has placed radar and S-300 missiles on the Arctic bases at Franz Josef Land, New Siberian Islands, Novaya Zemlya, and Severnaya Zemlya.¹⁰ Last year, Russia activated a new radar complex on Wrangel Island.¹¹ Between 2019 and 2025, Russia plans to lay a nearly 8,000-mile fiber-optic cable across its Arctic coast, linking military installations along the way from the Kola Peninsula through Vladivostok.¹²

1. MarEx, "New Forces to Guard Northern Sea Route," *The Maritime Executive*, January 20, 2017, <http://www.maritime-executive.com/article/new-forces-to-guard-northern-sea-route> (accessed July 14, 2017).
2. Daniel Brown, "Russia's NATO Northern Fleet Beefs Up Its Nuclear Capabilities to Phase 'NATO Out of Arctic,'" *Business Insider*, June 1, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/russias-northern-fleet-beefs-up-its-nuclear-capabilities-phase-nato-out-arctic-2017-6> (accessed July 14, 2017).
3. Andrew Osborn, "Putin's Russia in Biggest Arctic Military Push Since Soviet Fall," Reuters, January 30, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-arctic-insight/putins-russia-in-biggest-arctic-military-push-since-soviet-fall-idUSKBN15E0W0> (accessed June 25, 2018).
4. Atle Staalsen, "Russian Navy Announces It Will Significantly Expand Arctic Air Patrols," *The Barents Observer*, January 2, 2018, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2018/01/russian-navy-announces-it-will-significantly-increase-arctic-air-patrols#Wkt86ZewoVM.twitter> (accessed June 25, 2018).
5. Thomas Nilsen, "Russian Bombers Simulated an Attack Against this Radar on Norway's Barents Sea Coast," *The Barents Observer*, March 5, 2018, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2018/03/russian-bombers-simulated-attack-against-radar-norways-barents-sea-coast> (accessed June 25, 2018).
6. Ibid.
7. Thomas Nilsen, "Arctic Challenge 2017 Set for Take Off," *The Barents Observer*, May 16, 2017, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2017/05/arctic-challenge-2017-set-take> (accessed June 25, 2018).
8. Nilsen, "Russian Bombers Simulated an Attack Against this Radar on Norway's Barents Sea Coast."
9. Robbie Gramer, "Here's What Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic Looks Like," *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/25/heres-what-russias-military-build-up-in-the-arctic-looks-like-trump-oil-military-high-north-infographic-map/?utm_content=buffer12641&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer (accessed June 2, 2017).
10. Trude Pettersen, "Northern Fleet Gets Own Air Force, Air Defense Forces," *The Barents Observer*, February 1, 2016, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2016/02/northern-fleet-gets-own-air-force-air-defense-forces> (accessed June 25, 2018).
11. Damien Sharkov, "Russia Deploys Air Radar on Arctic Wrangel Island," *Newsweek*, January 4, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-deploys-air-radar-arctic-wrangel-island-538527> (accessed June 25, 2018).
12. Thomas Nilsen, "Russia Plans to Lay Trans-Arctic Fiber Cable Linking Military Installations," *The Barents Observer*, April 24, 2018, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2018/04/russia-slated-lay-military-trans-arctic-fibre-cable#Wt-EVDOjIWI.twitter> (accessed June 25, 2018).

As an Arctic power, Russia's military presence in the region is to be expected. However, it should be viewed with some caution due to Russia's pattern of aggression. In March, EUCOM Commander General Scaparrotti testified saying, "Although the chances of military conflict in the Arctic are low in the near-term, Russia is increasing its qualitative advantage in Arctic operations, and its military bases will serve to reinforce Russia's position with the threat of force."¹³

The Brussels Summit and the Arctic

The July summit is the time to finally take seriously the need for the Alliance to recognize the Arctic as a vital piece of the collective-security puzzle. To become better focused on Arctic security, the U.S. and NATO should:

- **Officially acknowledge NATO's role in the Arctic for the first time.** The 2018 summit declaration should include a section devoted to the Arctic. This need not be a strategy, but it should acknowledge that the Arctic matters to the security of the Alliance.
- **Work with allies to develop a NATO Arctic strategy.** The Alliance should agree at the Brussels Summit that it is time 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 non-Arctic country to the Arctic Circle. 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 to participate in training exercises in the region.** Exercises above the Arctic Circle 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.
- **Call for the next NATO summit 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.

Time to Get Serious

In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security. Respecting national sovereignty in the Arctic would 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. Ignoring the importance of the Arctic region for collective security is short-sighted. The U.S. should take the lead on rectifying this blank space, and drive forward a greater role for the Alliance in the region. In addition, the military coordination and resources that NATO could contribute to the Arctic region would offer benefits beyond the Alliance, such as increased search-and-rescue capabilities.

Without American leadership, NATO will remain mute in the Arctic. This is not good for the Alliance or for the region.

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