

# NATO Summit 2021: The Arctic Can No Longer Be an Afterthought

*Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

NATO's Brussels Summit on June 14 offers an opportunity for the Alliance to finally come to terms with the Arctic, a strategically important region for the Alliance.

The Alliance has rightly focused on bolstering collective defense in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea regions, yet still has not agreed on an Arctic security policy.

During the summit, NATO should officially acknowledge its role in the Arctic for the first time, and agree to work with allies to develop a NATO Arctic strategy.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on June 14, 2021, offers an opportunity for the Alliance to finally come to grips with the Arctic, a strategically important region toward which the Alliance has been slow to turn its attention. NATO has no agreed position on its role in the Arctic region, and past summits have largely skirted the issue on account of internal divisions in the Alliance.

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 United States) are Arctic countries, and each has territory above the Arctic

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6086>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Circle. In addition, two closely allied nations (Finland and Sweden) also have Arctic territory.

The Alliance has rightly focused on bolstering collective defense in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea regions in recent years, yet still has not agreed on a common policy concerning the security in the Arctic. It is past time for this strategic gap to be rectified, and NATO should do so at the upcoming Brussels Summit.

## NATO Is an Arctic Alliance

Norway is the leading voice inside the Alliance for promoting NATO's role in the Arctic. Norway is the only country in the world with permanent military headquarters above the Arctic Circle, and it has invested extensively in Arctic defense capabilities. In October 2020, Norway announced the reopening of the Olavsvern bunker, a mountainside submarine base near Tromsø, closed in 2002, which has "9,800ft of deep-water underground docks that can house and refit nuclear submarines."<sup>1</sup> The base is open to U.S. Seawolf-class nuclear submarines.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. has begun to pay increased attention to the Arctic theater in Europe in recent years. One way has been through a beefed-up military presence in Norway. In April 2021, the two nations signed the Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement, which in part allows the U.S. to build additional infrastructure at Rygge and Sola Air Stations in southern Norway, as well as Evenes Air Station and the naval base at Ramsund, both of which are located above the Arctic Circle.<sup>3</sup>

Construction at Evenes will support Norwegian and Allied maritime patrol aircraft in monitoring Russian submarine activity. Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soereide stated that the "agreement reaffirms Norway's close relationship with the U.S. and confirms Norway's key position on the northern flank of NATO."<sup>4</sup> In August 2020, the Marine Corps announced the end of heel-to-toe rotations of 700 marines to Norway, which began in 2017, opting for shorter, more sporadic, deployments.<sup>5</sup> The first new deployment in October 2020 consisted of 400 marines; the second deployment, from January to March 2021, consisted of 1,000 Marines, arriving for Arctic warfare training.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to ground forces, in February and March 2021, four B-1 Lancers were based at Ørland Main Air Station in southern Norway, the first time the aircraft have been based in Norway.<sup>7</sup> The Lancers conducted training exercises with allies Denmark, Germany, Italy, Norway, and Poland,<sup>8</sup> while also practicing landing and refueling at Bodø Air Base above the Arctic Circle.<sup>9</sup>

Canada has likewise invested heavily in Arctic defense capabilities. However, unlike Norway, Canada has stymied past efforts by NATO to play a larger role in the region. Generally speaking, there is a concern in Canada that a NATO 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 which 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.

## Russian Militarization of the Arctic Continues

Russia has a long history in the Arctic, and, as an Arctic nation itself, has interests there. However, Russia's ongoing militarization of the region, coupled with its bellicose behavior toward its neighbors, makes the Arctic a security concern.

Today, Russia is motivated to play an active role in the Arctic region for three reasons:

1. **Low-risk promotion of Russian nationalism.** Because nationalism is on the rise in Russia, President Vladimir Putin's Arctic strategy is popular among the population. For Putin, the Arctic is an area that allows Russia to flex its muscles without incurring any significant geopolitical risk. Just recently, in late May, Putin, referring to Russia's Arctic territory, threatened: "Everyone wants to bite off somewhere or to bite off something from us. But they should know, those who are going to do this, that we will knock out everyone's teeth so that they cannot bite."<sup>10</sup>
2. **Economic potential of the Arctic.** Russia is also eager to promote its economic interests in the region. Half of the world's Arctic territory, and half of the Arctic region's population, are located in Russia. It is well known that the Arctic is home to large stockpiles of proven, yet unexploited, oil and gas reserves. The majority of these reserves are thought to be located in Russia. In particular, Russia hopes that the Northern Sea Route (NSR) will become one of the world's most important shipping lanes.
3. **Russia's security interests in the Arctic.** Russia has invested heavily in the Arctic region in recent years, opening a series of Arctic bases, investing in cold-weather equipment, coastal defense systems,

underground storage facilities, and specialized training. Additionally, “Russian hardware in the High North area includes bombers and MiG31BM jets, and new radar systems close to the coast of Alaska.”<sup>11</sup>

Russia has also staged a series of statement activities in the Arctic. In 2007, Artur Chilingarov, then a member of the Russian Duma, led a submarine expedition to the North Pole and planted a Russian flag on the seabed. Later he declared: “The Arctic is Russian.”<sup>12</sup>

In July 2017, Russia released a new naval doctrine citing the alleged “ambition of a range of states, and foremost the United States of America and its allies, to dominate the high seas, including in the Arctic, and to press for overwhelming superiority of their naval forces.”<sup>13</sup>

In May 2017, Russia announced that its buildup of the Northern Fleet’s nuclear capacity is intended “to phase ‘NATO out of [the] Arctic.’”<sup>14</sup> Russia sought to send a clear message when, during an exercise in March 2021, three Russian ballistic-missile submarines punched through ice in the Arctic near the North Pole.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to an ongoing strong naval presence in the Arctic, Russia undertakes often-aggressive Arctic flights. In one instance 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.<sup>16</sup> In May 2017, 12 Russian aircraft simulated an attack against NATO naval forces taking part in the Eastern Atlantic Area (EASTLANT) exercise near Tromsø, Norway, and later that month, Russian aircraft targeted aircraft from 12 nations that were taking part in the Arctic Challenge exercise near Bodø.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

As an Arctic power, Russia’s military presence in the region is to be expected. Due to Russia’s pattern of aggression, however, the U.S. and NATO should view it with caution. 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 its members, it has a role to play in Arctic security.

Ignoring the importance of the Arctic region for collective security is shortsighted. Recently, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated:

Increased Russian presence, more Russian bases in the High North, has also triggered the need for more NATO presence, and we have increased our

presence there with more naval capabilities, presence in the air, and not least, the importance of protecting transatlantic undersea cables transmitting a lot of data.<sup>19</sup>

At the Brussels Summit, the Alliance needs to finally recognize the Arctic as a vital piece of the collective-security puzzle. To focus on Arctic security, NATO should:

- **Acknowledge NATO's role in the Arctic officially for the first time.** The 2021 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 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.
- **Encourage 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.
- **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.
- **Call for the next NATO summit to take place 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.

## Embrace NATO's Necessary Role in the Arctic

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 shortsighted. The U.S. should take the lead on rectifying this blank space and drive forward a greater role for the Alliance in the region.

**Luke Coffey** is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. **Daniel Kochis** is Senior Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Davis Institute.

## Endnotes

1. Bruno Waterfield, "Norway Reopens Submarine Base to Help US," *The Times*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/norway-reopens-submarine-base-to-help-us-hlmr3wv8s> (accessed June 1 2021).
2. Ibid.
3. Thomas Nilsen, "U.S. Navy to Build Airport Infrastructure in North Norway to Meet Upped Russian Submarine Presence," *Eye on the Arctic*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2021/04/16/u-s-navy-to-build-airport-infrastructure-in-north-norway-to-meet-upped-russian-submarine-presence/> (accessed June 2, 2021).
4. Terje Solsvik and Nerijus Adomaitis, "Norway to Allow U.S. Military to Build on Its Soil in New Accord," Reuters, April 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/norway-may-allow-us-military-build-its-soil-revised-cooperation-deal-2021-04-16/> (accessed June 2, 2021).
5. Philip Athey, "Marine Corps Announces End to Year-Round Deployment to Norway," *Marine Corps Times*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2020/08/13/marine-corps-announces-end-to-year-round-deployment-to-norway/> (accessed June 2, 2021).
6. "1,000 US Marines Arrive in Norway for Cold-Weather training," *Stars and Stripes*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/1-000-us-marines-arrive-in-norway-for-cold-weather-training-1.657845> (accessed April 28, 2021).
7. Brian W. Everstine, "First B-1 Deployment to Norway Shows Importance of Arctic, Cold-Weather Ops," *Air Force Magazine*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.airforcemag.com/first-b-1-deployment-to-norway-shows-importance-of-arctic-cold-weather-ops/> (accessed June 1, 2021).
8. Ibid.
9. Thomas Nilsen, "U.S. B-1 Bomber Makes First Landing Inside Norway's Arctic Circle," *The Barents Observer*, March 9, 2021, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/03/us-b-1-bomber-makes-first-landing-inside-norways-arctic-circle> (accessed June 2, 2021).
10. Paul D. Shinkman, "Putin Fires Back at U.S. Arctic Concerns: 'We Will Knock Out Everyone's Teeth,'" *U.S. News & World Report*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-05-20/putin-fires-back-at-us-arctic-concerns-we-will-knock-out-everyones-teeth> (accessed June 1, 2021).
11. Nick Paton Walsh, "Satellite Images Show Huge Russian Military Buildup in the Arctic," CNN, April 5, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/05/europe/russia-arctic-nato-military-intl-cmd/index.html> (accessed June 2, 2021).
12. Paul Reynolds, "Russia Ahead in Arctic 'Gold Rush,'" BBC News, August 1, 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/6925853.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/6925853.stm) (accessed October 1, 2019).
13. Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's New and Unrealistic Naval Doctrine," War on the Rocks, July 26, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/russias-new-and-unrealistic-naval-doctrine/> (accessed June 20, 2019).
14. 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 June 20, 2019).
15. Joseph Trevithick, "Three Russian Ballistic Missile Submarines Just Surfaced Through the Arctic Ice Together," *The Drive*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/39953/three-russian-ballistic-missile-submarines-just-surfaced-through-the-arctic-ice-together> (accessed June 2, 2021).
16. 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 20, 2019).
17. 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 20, 2019), and *ibid.*
18. "Russian Pacific Fleet II-38N MPA Practice ASW in Arctic," *Navy Recognition*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2018/april-2018-navy-naval-defense-news/6109-russian-pacific-fleet-ii-38n-mpa-practice-asw-in-arctic.html> (accessed June 20, 2019).
19. Kostya Manenkov and Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia's Northernmost Base Projects Its Power Across Arctic," AP News, May 18, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/arctic-europe-russia-business-technology-b67c5b28d917f03f9340d4a7b4642790> (accessed June 2, 2021).