



ARCTIC SECURITY BRIEFING PAPERS

Prepared by Ernie Regehr, O.C., Senior Fellow in Arctic Security and Defence

March 10, 2021

Combat “Spillover” – into and out of the Arctic

The likelihood that internal Arctic disputes would rise to crisis levels in danger of escalating to armed combat in any foreseeable future is by all accounts remote.¹ The worries about armed combat in the Arctic centre instead on the possibility that war between Russia and NATO away from the Arctic, somewhere in Europe, would spill into the Arctic. In an East/West war in Europe, combat could spill both into and out of the Arctic by virtue of each side seeking advantage by attacking the other’s war-making capacity away from the immediate theater of operations.

If it is likely that a European armed conflict would result in combat reaching into the Arctic, a prior question must be, how likely is such a conflict in the first place? There are, to be sure, serious drivers of East-West conflict in Europe, but deterrence and possibly even prudence are also in play to keep political conflict from breaking into armed conflict. It is, after all, quite certain that a Russia/NATO European war would deliver unmitigated mutual disaster to the Eurasian continent, even if it stayed conventional. In a rational world that reality should incline both sides towards assiduous efforts to avoid it. But the truth is that both sides of that re-emerging curtain are also assiduous in their ongoing preparations for just such a war – meaning that the prospect of war in Europe cannot be entirely ignored, and that in turn means the possibility of it spreading to the Arctic must be contemplated.

NATO would certainly see advantage in escalating any East/West armed conflict in Europe by attacking Russia’s considerable war-making capabilities in the Arctic, in hopes of preventing reinforcements from the Kola Peninsula reaching the theater of conflict. In addition, NATO would also see advantage in attacking Russian naval forces in their Arctic home waters to prevent them from reaching the North Atlantic to challenge NATO transportation and communications links with North America. Russia’s interests would be to keep the fighting out of the Arctic and to push substantial Arctic forces south to the North Atlantic in the hopes of disrupting North American support to NATO operations in Europe. Russia would also see advantage in launching conventional attacks on North America’s military infrastructure, to undermine both the materiel reinforcements and the political will needed to sustain participation in a European war.

Spilling military conflict into the Arctic

NATO’s interest in spilling a European armed conflict with Russia into the Arctic finds its way into US Navy training and its recent strategic blueprint, “A Blue Arctic.”² The latter does not put it that directly. Instead, it relies on the old chestnut that “peace comes through strength” to justify and demonstrate its capacity to escalate a European conflict into the Arctic through its anti-submarine warfare patrols near or in what are essentially Russia’s home (though international) waters of the Barents Sea. That is not only where Russia’s sea-based nuclear deterrent submarines patrol, but the nearby Kola peninsula is where the Northern Fleet’s attack submarines and a wide range of surface vessels are based for deployment into the North Atlantic and well beyond. Just how much of a provocation those US/NATO Arctic patrols are is illustrated when considering what American reaction would be if Russian anti-submarine warfare and land attack systems were to patrol the Virginia Capes Operating Area (VACAPES) – international waters off the coasts of Virginia and the Carolinas, that are treated by the US Navy and Air Force essentially as home waters and airspace, to be used by the Pentagon for various surface, subsurface, and air-to-surface exercises.³

The US Navy blueprint insists that its presence in the Arctic is essential to preventing Russia and China from directly challenging the region's "peace and prosperity," however, the "challenge" of most immediate interest to the Navy is Russia's characterization of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which runs through international waters within Russia's exclusive economic zone off its northern coast from the Barents Sea to the Chukchi Sea, as an historically Russian passageway. Russia thus regards the NSR as subject to its national laws, over the objections of the United States, which regards those waters as subject to the freedom of navigation norms of international law. It is a serious difference, but not one that is likely to rise to crisis levels, given Russia's over-riding interest in encouraging use of the NSR. The American maritime law expert, J. Ashley Roach, suggests that Russia will therefore probably be inclined to gradually bring its legal regime for the NSR into conformity with international law.⁴

Beyond that, the Navy's strategic blueprint warns that "unintended military accidents and conflict, and spill-over of major power competition in the Arctic all have the potential to threaten U.S. interests and prosperity" there. It therefore insists that "U.S. Naval forces must operate more assertively across the Arctic Region to prevail in day-to-day competition as we protect the homeland, keep Arctic seas free and open, and deter coercive behavior and conventional aggression." In other words, for fear of spillover of great power military confrontation into the Arctic, the US Navy is practicing to do precisely that.

In confirmation of that heightened assertiveness, in August 2020 a US Seawolf-class attack submarine surfaced off Norway's northern coast near Tromsø, where, under cover of "the narrow waters [and] high mountains along the coast," it changed the crew and took on supplies.⁵ In May 2020, "for the first time since the end of the Cold War," according to *DefenseNews*, a surface patrol by three American anti-submarine warfare destroyers, joined by a British Royal Navy frigate, sailed directly into the Barents Sea waters frequented by Russian strategic ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). Bryan Clark, a Hudson Institute analyst and former US submarine officer, is the one who compared that venture to Russia patrolling the VACAPes.⁶ He points out that the Russians have had that area of the Barents Sea largely to themselves and have come to see it as a bastion that is "a free zone for Russian submarine operations." By patrolling there, says Clark, the Americans are telling them, "this is not a free zone [for] submarine operations — these are international waters" — signalling that they would not be out of bounds in any NATO conflict with Russia.

Western analysts thus continue to argue the possibility of combat spillover into the Arctic. Defence analyst Per Erik Solli of Nord University in Bodø, Norway points out that the rationale for NATO pursuing Russia's Northern Fleet in a crisis would be to neutralize the fleet's capacity for conventional attacks on NATO territories with weapons like extended range cruise missiles. It is in NATO's interests, he says, "to challenge the Northern Fleet further north in case of an escalating global conflict."⁷ A 2020 Rand study sees the key reason for escalating the fight from another region into the Arctic is because that is where much of Russia's military and economic capacity resides. NATO leaders see advantage in the "horizontal escalation" of a conflict into the Arctic in light of "the strategic importance of the High North to Russia's Bastion Defence."⁸ In other words, when NATO warns of NATO/Russia conflict elsewhere spilling over into the Arctic, it means that NATO would do the spilling — in the hopes of disrupting Russia's Arctic resource/economic base, degrading its very substantial Arctic-based military capacity, and preventing Russian forces from moving into the North Atlantic.

What NATO finds challenging about Russia's current conventional military build-up throughout the Russian North is not that it poses a threat of Russian military adventurism against the territories of other states in the Arctic. Rather, it is that Russia's growing defensive infrastructure would undermine NATO's capacity, in the context of a conflict with Russia elsewhere, to spill conflict into the Arctic. Russia's current Arctic initiatives are oriented to "anti-access/area denial" (A2/AD) capabilities⁹ — that is, to regional surveillance, air defence, and maritime defence operations designed to restrict NATO/American military operations in the Arctic or, in other words, to prevent armed conflict from spilling into the Arctic.

Spilling military conflict out of the Arctic

Russia would thus seem to have little incentive to escalate a conflict elsewhere in Europe into the Arctic. Its interests are to keep its Arctic region out of any conflict and to keep its economic and strategic military forces there protected – the better to reinforce and sustain its war effort. That is why it focuses so heavily on defence upgrades in places like Franz Josef Land (Nagurskoye) to extend Russia’s anti-access/area denial objectives over the Barents Sea and into the Norwegian Sea toward the North Atlantic.

Russia’s interests in escalating a European conflict are, as already noted, in deploying its Arctic forces south into the North Atlantic to disrupt NATO’s transatlantic operations. Northern Fleet surface vessels and submarines moving south beyond the Bear Gap would “provide Russian ships and submarines with access to a critical naval chokepoint: the GIUK gap that plays an outsized role in NATO’s defense and deterrence strategy.”¹⁰ An additional focus of Russian interest would inevitably be the underwater trans-Atlantic cables running through that area, as the US State Department’s deputy assistant secretary for European and Eurasian affairs, Michael Murphy, told a Congressional Committee in 2020.¹¹

In addition, American military planners and strategic analysts worry about the potential deployment of new generations of weapons like medium-range cruise and ballistic missiles in Russia’s Arctic zone which would be capable of hitting US military targets in Alaska and Greenland, as well as targets in northern Europe. As well, hypersonic glide weapons deployed in Russia’s North could strike deeper into Europe or the American heartland.¹² North American defence analysts describe Russia’s development of a capacity to attack North America: “The development, acquisition, and deployment of stealthy air and sea-launched cruise missiles, and the modernization of the aircraft and submarines that deliver them [to which can be added aspirations about hypersonic missiles], has given Russian military planners their first true conventional capability to strike the Continental United States.” Furthermore, the charge is, “Russian political and military leaders have repeatedly made it clear in public statements that they intend to attack targets in the United States in the event of a conflict elsewhere.”¹³

The reverse is equally the case, of course. If one were to substitute references to US/NATO with Russia, and North America with the Russian Arctic, you would have a clear description of NATO/American interests in striking Russian targets beyond the theatre of war in the event of a European armed conflict with Russia.

The North American SHIELD plan¹⁴ is a response to the threat of a European conflict with Russia directly spilling into North America via conventionally armed hypersonic and cruise missiles. Russian conventional attacks on North American military targets are envisioned as a likely part of its efforts to undermine America’s capacity and political will to persist in a war in Europe.¹⁵ Both sides’ exploration of such escalatory strategies is driven by new generations of conventional weapons specifically designed for horizontal escalation, to strike at war-making capabilities and reinforcements away from the theater of war, without triggering a nuclear counterattack. Not for the first time, the big powers are in a technology-inspired competition, each side mirroring the moves of the other.

Two important lessons

Inasmuch as there are lessons to be drawn from the spillover threat, one must be that there is not an Arctic solution to the potential problem of great power conflict elsewhere escalating into the Arctic. The Arctic region has collectively shown itself to be adept at addressing and constructively managing conflicts that emerge within the region, but it is not the place where global competition beyond the region will be averted and geostrategic stability restored, and spillover thus avoided. That solution – namely, war prevention – will have to be found, or built, outside the region. And though preventing great power war may seem daunting, we do already have a pretty good understanding of what will not work – that is, the great powers will neither arm nor SHIELD their way

to strategic stability. A shield vs new generations of offensive weapons arms race is one that will not be settled by the emergence of a winner.¹⁶ Winning is not one of the available options – of those there are but three: the race will end in catastrophe; or it will end when the runners collapse in exhaustion; or it will end when the race marshals can agree that it is time to halt it in order to avert catastrophe.¹⁷

Notes

¹For example, a 2020 Rand study of Europe’s northern flank agreed that “there are relatively few internal drivers of potential conflict” in the Arctic, noting instead, that the longer term risk to the Arctic is that a crisis in another region, such as NATO’s eastern or southern flank, could escalate into the Norwegian and Russian Arctic. “Enhancing deterrence and defence on NATO’s northern flank,” *Rand Corporation*, 2020.

<https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/b6f5ea0d2d6248b4ae4131c554365e93/rand-rr-4381-enhancing-deterrence-and-defence-on-natos-northern-flank.pdf>

² [A Blue Arctic, A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic](#), The United States Department of the Navy, January 2021.

³ Virginia Capes Operating Area (VACAPES OPAREA), GlobalSecurity.Org.

<https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/vacapes.htm#:~:text=The%20Virginia%20Capes%20Operating%20Area,and%20the%20Submarine%20Transit%20Lanes>

⁴ J. Ashley Roach, “Freedom of the Seas in the Arctic Region,” *The Arctic and World Order*, Kristina Spohr and Daniel S. Hamilton, Editors, Jason C. Moyer, Associate Editor (Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 2020). Available for downloading at: <https://transatlanticrelations.org/publications/the-arctic-and-world-order/>

⁵ Thomas Nilsen, “U.S. Navy’s most advanced attack submarine surfaced outside Tromsø,” *The Barents Observer*, 25 August 2020.

<https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2020/08/us-navys-most-advanced-attack-submarine-surfaced-outside-tromso>

⁶ David B. Larter, “The US Navy returns to an increasingly militarized Arctic,” *DefenseNews*, 12 May 2020.

<https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/05/11/the-us-navy-returns-to-an-increasingly-militarized-arctic/>

⁷ Thomas Nilsen, “American flags in the Barents Sea are the ‘new normal,’ a defense analyst says.” *The Independent Barents Observer*, 12 May 2020. <https://www.arctictoday.com/american-flags-in-the-barents-sea-are-the-new-normal-a-defense-analyst-says/>

⁸ Rand Corporation, 2020.

⁹ Heather A. Conley and Matthew Melino, “America’s Arctic Moment: Great Power Competition in the Arctic to 2050,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2020. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Conley_ArcticMoment_layout_WEB%20FINAL.pdf?EkVudAIPZnRPLwEdAIPO.GlpyEnNzINx

¹⁰ The Bear Gap is the ocean area between the Norwegian North Cape and Spitsbergen, with Bear Island at the mid point, that separates the relatively shallow Barents Sea from the deeper Norwegian Sea. Thomas Nilsen, “American flags in the Barents Sea are the ‘new normal,’ a defense analyst says.” *The Independent Barents Observer*, 12 May 2020.

<https://www.arctictoday.com/american-flags-in-the-barents-sea-are-the-new-normal-a-defense-analyst-says/>

¹¹ Larter, 2020.

¹² Conley and Melino, 2020

¹³ Terrence J. O’Shaughnessy and Peter M. Fesler, “Hardening the Shield: A Credible

Deterrent & Capable Defense for North America,” The Canada Institute of the Wilson Center, September 2020.
www.wilsoncenter.org/canada

¹⁴ O’Shaughnessy and Fesler, 2020.

¹⁵ O’Shaughnessy and Fesler, 2020.

¹⁶ Although O’Shaughnessy and Fesler (2020) are not lacking in either optimism or audacity in their quest for a win: “By looking at vast quantities of historical data and trends over time, patterns of behavior will be established, making deviations from the norm stand out, allowing leaders at all levels to effectively see into the future. Armed with this data, decisions will be made at a pace necessary to achieve advantage; the speed of relevance in modern warfare.”

¹⁷ Among other diplomatic initiatives, Conley and Melino propose annual meetings of foreign and defence ministers of the eight Arctic states, outside of the Arctic Council meetings. Conley and Melino, 2020.