Discussion Article

Towards total defence and security: Threats IN, TO, and THROUGH the North American and Nordic Arctics

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Abstract

The IN, TO, and THROUGH methodology categorises threats affecting the circumpolar Arctic. Scholars such as Lackenbauer, who developed the methodology for the North American Arctic, and Østhagen, in applying it to the European High North, identify and categorise different threats that fall under the broad umbrella of 'Arctic Security'. Comparing the European High North with the North American Arctic, we observe that the sub-regions face shared and distinct pressures, with kinetic and "hybrid" threats TO the High North presenting less risk to the North American Arctic. The subregions share common IN threats driven by climate change, as well as THROUGH threats driven by strategic competition and technological change. Our commentary gestures to areas of common alignment on "total defence" and comprehensive security approaches, as well as opportunities to bolster strategic deterrence and political stability in a region that is no longer viewed as exceptional.

Keywords

the Arctic, the North America, Canada, Europe, security, defence

Introduction

Scholarship investigating Arctic security from just over a decade ago focused on climate change opening the region to global actors and influences concerned with natural resources and shipping routes that could disrupt local ways of life. Arctic security was framed as one region dominated by human security concerns driven primarily by climate change. Since then, new approaches have broken down this 'one Arctic' and the drivers animating it, such as the "in, to, and through" methodology. This method notes that geopolitics is the primary driver of threats for Arctic security, but that they vary according to where in the region. Our reading of this suggests that the North American Arctic must deal primarily with threats passing through it, while the European High North must be more focused on addressing threats in and to it. P. Whitney Lackenbauer developed his "in, to, and through" methodology in 2020 to detangle the generic concept of 'Arctic Security'" (Dean, 2020). The opaqueness of this idea led many commentators to conflate it with other concepts such as human, national, or international security, causing them to speak past one another when discussing the topic (Lackenbauer, 2021). Lackenbauer's goal was to clarify drivers and detangle threat dynamics in Arctic security studies. Originally designed to interrogate levels of analysis, the framework breaks the circumpolar Arctic into a series of geostrategic theatres or sub-Arctics. He then applies a methodology of categorising threats from inside these regions, oriented to these regions, or passing through them.

Threats *in* the Arctic originate within the region and are oriented towards it. An example of a threat in the Arctic is a cruise ship running aground, requiring a search and rescue response that could overwhelm the capacity of a local community. Threats *to* the Arctic are those that emanate from outside but are targeted to region itself. Examples include a hybrid attack on critical Arctic infrastructure vital for early-warning or surveillance that originates outside the Arctic. Threats passing *through* the Arctic originate outside of the region but pass through or over it to strike targets also outside of it. For example, a ballistic missile from Russia would likely pass through the North American Arctic before striking a target in continental Canada or the United States.

Some threats can also fall between the in, to, and through categories of the framework. Climate change is caused by activities from the south and can thus be a threat to the Arctic, while regional and local climate dynamics in the region, such as extreme weather, can be classified as an in threat. What is important is that this framework provides a conceptual exercise around threats that can help to determine appropriate scales rather than wrapping them all together into 'Arctic security.' For example, the threat of climate change to the Arctic can be addressed through multilateral mitigation measures, but climate threats in the Arctic are best dealt with through local adaptation. It also helps distinguish what driver is behind the threat, such as geopolitics or climate change.

Østhagen also expressed frustration with many observers who asserted that the Arctic was a political region on the precipice of geopolitical competition and conflict despite low tensions and continued cooperation. Østhagen sought to explain why, despite growing turmoil between Russia in its bilateral relations with other Arctic states, and its inflaming of geopolitics, the Arctic seemed insulated from these tensions – that it was somehow exceptional. Drawing on foundational work by Kenneth Waltz, Østhagen shifted the levels of analysis up from the individual to the national, regional (Arctic), and international level of analysis, thus aligning with Lackenbauer's work. Østhagen saw this as continuation of David Singer's classic level of analysis problem, with him viewing the Arctic as a "good" region trapped between the "bad" of international politics, and the downright "ugly" bilateral politics between the Nordic states and Russia (. The central question was how much could the Arctic as a good political region be insulated from the bad and ugly events happening elsewhere Østhagen, 2024)?

Russia's renewed 2022 invasion of Ukraine greatly undermined the notion of Arctic exceptionalism. The cooperation of the Arctic as a political region was damaged, with many fora ending or curtailing their operations, most notably the Arctic Council (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). By 2023, Østhagen and Lackenbauer were collaborating on mapping the new security dynamics across the Arctic and how it fit into domestic and international politics (2023). This commentary provides a comparative analysis of threats *in, to,* and *through* the North American Arctic and European High North, which both have different geographic, political, and cultural considerations which analysts must account for when discussing threats to Arctic security.

North American Arctic

IN: Threats in the North American Arctic tend to fall on the safety and security side of the spectrum of threats. This means that government departments and agencies other than the military lead responses to "these" threats such as environmental or humanitarian disaster response, search and rescue, espionage, organised crime, and other illegal activities. The Canadian Armed Forces are often uniquely positioned to provide support given their logistical capacities in "this" sparsely inhabited "region" characterised by a dearth of infrastructure. The effects of climate change on infrastructure also have implications for domestic military operations in the region.

Adversaries often seek to exacerbate and exploit North-South and Indigenous-State divisions through disinformation campaigns. For example, longstanding inequalities in transportation, energy, communications, employment, community infrastructure, health services, and education continue to disadvantage Northern residents compared to the South. Poor socio-economic and health indicators also point to significant gaps between northern Canadian communities and their southern counterparts, explaining higher rates of human insecurity in the Canadian North. This is one of many ways the information domain can be weaponised as a threat in the region.

TO: Threats to the North American Arctic can include precursors to broader attacks through the region. For example, critical military infrastructure, such as early-warning sensors and surveillance architecture for NORAD's aerospace warning, aerospace control, and maritime warning missions, is located throughout Alaska and the Canadian North. An adversary would seek to disrupt or destroy this infrastructure, undermining all-domain situational awareness, to damage the American or Canadian militaries' ability to operate in the sub-region, and undermine their abilities to detect, deter, and defend against threats to the continent. Such attacks are inherently linked to paving the way for threats travelling through the sub-region.

Climate change creates new challenges with associated permafrost thaw, coastal erosion, wildfires, and melting ice for the North American Arctic. Furthermore, the region is inherently tied to globalisation and growing interest in large-scale development of natural resources. This means more activity in the Arctic, ironically driven by the perception that climate change is opening the region to new actors.

The increasing prevalence of hybrid threats and tactics below-the-threshold of armed conflict poses myriad security challenges to the North American Arctic that demand the engagement and response of various governments, rightsholders, and stakeholders. These include interference in critical infrastructure (including information systems), the use of fishing vessels as cover for intelligence gathering and other malign activities, and marine scientific research as a platform for dual-use science and intelligence collection. Other threats include lawfare, cyber-attacks, and academic espionage originating from outside the region. Chinese acquisitions of mining operations at strategic locations or as part of a global strategy to control resources and critical mineral value chains also pose a threat to the North American Arctic. Lastly, threats include 'tourists' using drones and photography to gather

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information about specific locations.

THROUGH: Threats through the North American Arctic have historically fallen within the remit of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), which has defended against bomber and missile threats approaching from the North since 1957. The binational command is the cornerstone of the Canada-US defence relationship. Current North American defence modernisation efforts have amplified the debate about the nature of Arctic security in Canada and implications for policy and investment. In 2020, then-NORAD Commander General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy argued that "geographic barriers that kept our homeland beyond the reach of most conventional threats" no longer guarantee North America as a "sanctuary," and "the Arctic is no longer a fortress wall … [but] an avenue of approach of advanced conventional weapons and the platforms that carry them." O'Shaughnessy insisted that "Russia has left us with no choice but to improve our homeland defense capability and capacity. In the meantime, China has taken several incremental steps toward expanding its own Arctic presence" (O'Shaughnessy, 2020).

NORAD modernisation includes layering new sensor and defeat systems and improving the reach and mobility of the American and Canadian militaries in the Arctic. NORAD highlights the importance of advanced sensors that can detect, track, and discriminate advanced cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, hypersonics, and small uncrewed aerial systems, including the platforms that carry these weapons. Accordingly, hardening the North American shield will enable projection of a credible deterrent against conventional and below-the-threshold attacks through the Arctic.

Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat) is geographically North American, sharing a sense of place, culture, and tradition with Inuit in Nunavut, northwest Alaska, and coastal regions of Russia on the Bering Sea. Additionally, Greenland is home to vital early-warning and surveillance sensors for threats passing through it to deeper into North America. US Pituffik Space Force Base houses a ballistic missile early warning radar, space surveillance capabilities, in-flight refuellers for the Eastern Canadian Arctic, and supports resupply for Canadian Forces Station (CFS) Alert.

In June 2025, US President Trump issued an executive order moving the eastern boundary of US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) to include Greenland, which had previously fallen within European Command's area of responsibility. "In a sense," Canadian commentator Andrea Charron (2025) notes, "Greenland is now in USNORTHCOM's front yard whereas it was in EUCOM's backyard." The change makes sense operationally, given Greenland's geographic proximity to North America. However, Greenland's role in continental defence has been compounded by President Trump's threats to annex Greenland, with the new US National Security Strategy outlining the "Trump Corollary", which vows to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere (White House, 2025). In January 2026, Trump declared that the US must own Greenland. "It is vital for the Golden Dome that we are building," the US president insisted, and "if we don't do it, Russia or China will take over Greenland, and we're not going to have Russia or China as a neighbour" (Henley & Roth, 2026). It was not until the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos later that month that Trump ruled out the use of force to take Greenland and agreed to a framework deal brokered by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte that seeks to meet US security demands while protecting the sovereignty of Greenlanders (Kola, 2026).

The detect, deter, defend functions of NORAD are integral to the global US goal of achieving integrated deterrence. Furthermore, Alaska holds the northern approaches to the continent, where detecting threats from Russia and the People's Republic of China that would pass through the North American Arctic as far away as possible is critical to defence. Given the flight trajectories for advanced strike weapons, threats to continental security through the North American Arctic are growing in scope, providing more options for Russia and China to hold the continent at risk in the event of conflict in

their spheres of influence. This threat reality makes NORAD modernisation a top priority for continental defence planners, with the Arctic region a key theatre for strategic defence-in-depth.

European Arctic and High North

IN: The European Arctic and High North face significant threats driven by geopolitics in Europe. Østhagen notes how northern Norway and Finland share borders with Russia, with strategic Russian forces just across the frontier on the Kola Peninsula (Østhagen, 2024). The European High North thus faces a wide spectrum of threats ranging from hybrid warfare to invasion. For example, Russia had stationed a marine regiment and motor-rifle brigade along the Norwegian border in the early 2010s, possibly to seize the northern coast as part of a larger Bastion Strategy designed to protect their nuclear ballistic missile submarines of the Northern Fleet and maintain a deterrence by punishment capability in the event of general war. However, fears of partial invasion have diminished as Russia redeployed those forces to Ukraine and has not reconstituted them as that war grinds on. Finland and Sweden formally joining NATO, thus expanding the border along which Russian forces would be needed, compounds the challenge for the Kremlin's Arctic defence posture (Bouffard et al., 2025).

This suggests that threats in the European High North will be mostly focused around below-threshold hybrid tactics and, should kinetic conflict erupt, long-range precision fires. The shift in emphasis from the Northern Fleet to the Leningrad Military District suggests that Russia is reorienting from using these hybrid and kinetic threats in support of offensive operations towards more of a defensive posture (Nilsen, 2024). On this higher end of conflict, long-range fire from the Russian Arctic into the High North would likely seek to eliminate Nordic strike fighters, command and control installations, radar, and anti-submarine warfare platforms such as maritime patrol aircraft and ships. Finland and Sweden joining NATO, as well as heightened Nordic defence cooperation, increases defence-in-depth and dispersion of forces, which help to mitigate the threat posed by Russian long-range fires.

Russia continues to deploy hybrid tactics in the European High North to accomplish two objectives. The first is to create uncertainty in local communities, undermining their resilience. Second, hybrid tactics provide a venue for Russia to engage in strategic messaging to the Nordics and beyond of dissatisfaction with certain policies and actions, ramping up the threat of conflict. Global Position System (GPS) jamming in Northern Norway and Finland, cyber-attacks, the cutting of seabed fibre-optic cables, drone incursions, and mounting information influence operations are prime examples. Outside of a more general war in the region, we anticipate that hybrid warfare within the region will continue to be Russia's preferred coercive tool in the European High North.

Human security threats in the European High North are not as salient as those posed to the North American Arctic. Both subregions face substantial pressure driven by acute climate change, roughly four times faster than the global average. However, the European High North is much more resilient to this change due to substantially higher infrastructure supporting this smaller and more densely populated subregion.

TO: Russian capabilities based outside of its Arctic can be projected to threaten to the European High North. For example, Russia can use additional disinformation, cyber, and electronic capabilities to achieve hybrid warfare objectives in the region, while long-range aviation, cruise missiles, and hypersonic glide vehicles based deep within Russia bolster its long-range fires deployed in the Arctic. Lastly, while ground forces stationed in the Russian Arctic have been depleted since 2022, Russia could bring in additional forces to its borders in the European High North to limit Nordic freedom of action and disrupt NATO resupply and reinforcement in the event of kinetic conflict.

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THROUGH: Threats through the European High North are aimed deeper into Europe or into the North Atlantic, which represents a strategic sea lane of communication between the continent and North America. Russia continues to invest heavily in long-range fires, including nuclear-tipped long-range systems to which the Kremlin attaches tremendous value for prestige and deterrence. While an extreme-case scenario, conventional long-range fires from Russia could pass through the European High North to strike at infrastructure in Denmark and the southern parts of Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

Russia has not only made significant investments in developing new long-range fires, but also new submarines and ships to carry them. While these vessels could pose a threat to navies and shipping in the North Atlantic, they are heavily outnumbered by NATO. In the event of conflict, they are likely to remain within the Russian Bastion to defend their second-strike capability and fire their long-range weaponry from this stand-off position into the North Atlantic. These weapons would be supplemented by land-based weapons, drones, and unmanned underwater and aerial vehicles.

Common alignments between North American and the European High North

IN THREATS: Geopolitically driven kinetic or hybrid threats are more acute in the European High North than in the North American Arctic. Instead, the shared threat in both subregions is posed by climate change. Because the threat is well beyond either subregion to address directly, they are left with developing new ways of locally adapting to the effects of climate change. The local adaptations help to build societal resiliency across the North American Arctic and the European High North and sharing these methods could benefit both subregions. However, the North American Arctic is colder, far more sparsely populated, and lacks much of the infrastructure that can be found in the European High North. This could affect the adaptation options available compared to the European High North.

TO THREATS: The European High North and North American Arctic do not share much common alignment on the kinetic threats posed to them. This is largely due to the disparity of military forces and infrastructure stationed between the two subregions. Rather, alignments exist around responding to hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns, as well as climate mitigation measures.

While minimal greenhouse gases are emitted in either subregion, the southern parts of Canada, the United States, and the Nordics are relatively high per capita polluters. Cooperation between these states on reducing their overall emissions below internationally agreed to standards – while politically unlikely – could, in theory, help to mitigate the threat climate change is posing to both the North American Arctic and European High North. Ultimately, stopping this threat will require a global response that geopolitics is currently thwarting.

The increasing prevalence of hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns creates a multitude of shared security challenges to both the North American Arctic and the European High North. While hybrid warfare poses more of a threat to the European High North while disinformation plagues the North American Arctic. The sharing of intelligence and experience with both modes of mobilising disinformation, as well as hybrid tactics between both subregions could help to bolster their resiliency to both threats to them.

THROUGH THREATS: The most in common threats that the North American Arctic and European High North share are the ones that would pass through both subregions. These are across the full spectrum of threats, from cyber to subsurface and aerial drones, through the gauntlet of cruise missiles and glide vehicles, and culminating with nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. Both Lackenbauer and

Østhagen emphasise that these weapons are all geostrategic in orientation, or at the international level of analysis, and have little to do with drivers emanating from Arctic regional dynamics (Lackenbauer 2021 & Østhagen, 2024).

The threats through both the North American Arctic and European High North are predicated on the geographic realities of the regions sitting along the great circle route, the shortest avenue of approach from one hemisphere to the other. Russia poses the 'proximate' threat to both subregions, with advanced strike weapons in the aerospace domain aimed deeper south into North America and Europe to target vital economic, industrial, critical infrastructure, or military sites. These targets could include financial hubs in metroplexes, strategic industries, infrastructure nodes for telecommunications or electricity, or a depot supporting military operations. Detecting these through threats as far away as possible provides ample time for decision-makers to consider all non-kinetic and kinetic options at their disposal.

Lackenbauer and Østhagen suggest these through threats have geostrategic end goals not implicitly tied to Arctic or regional security considerations (Østhagen and Lackenbauer, 2023). Instead, the region is home to critical early-warning and surveillance infrastructure to detect launches as fast as possible. To achieve space and time to counter through threats, former NORAD/USNORTHCOM Commander Glen Van Herck outlined this process in three parts: 1) all-domain awareness through sensors and systems from subsurface to space and cyberspace for complete battlespace awareness; 2) information dominance through a cloud-based computing system using artificial intelligence and machine learning to quickly display and disseminate data quickly to decision-makers; and 3) attaining decision superiority, providing seniors leaders with non-kinetic options to dissuade or diminish competitors' objectives with "proactive measures made possible with the expanded decision space." This three-part strategy allows for the NORAD/USNORTHCOM Commander to deter in competition, de-escalate in crisis, and defeat in conflict, as critical infrastructure can increasingly be targeted to draw attention away from global theatres as a distraction (Van Herck, 2021).

In North America, this surveillance architecture is being modernised through Canada's commitments to upgrade NORAD. This includes new Arctic and Polar Over-the-Horizon Radar (the former to be based on the Australian Jindalee Network) to replace the North Warning System, a classified Crossbow sensor network, and the Defence Enhanced Surveillance from Space project will include a new synthetic aperture radar to improve upon Canada's existing RADARSAT and Epsilon 1 and 2 projects. The US is also updating its long-range surveillance radar with the installation of the Long-Range Discrimination Radar (LRDR) in Clear, Alaska, and is currently assessing options for four new Homeland Defense Radars in the northwest continental United States.

Early-warning and surveillance systems in the European High North include national and NATO components. Norway, Sweden, and Finland all utilise ground-based radars, with Oslo and Stockholm purchasing the Lockheed Martin TPY-4 designed to detect, track, and classify aerial threats from UAS' to ballistic missiles. Norway is developing microsatellites for maritime surveillance and is collaborating with the US on a satellite station at Andøya Air Station in Northern Norway to detect cruise missile launches. Similarly, Finland has signed a letter of intent to acquire a satellite for surveillance and identification. Additionally, Norway participates in NATO's Airborne Early Warning & Control Force program with an E-3A Sentry forward-based at Ørland Air Station. Sweden has ordered up to four SAAB GlobalEye which, in addition to its AEWC function, has electronic and signals intelligence functions. Denmark, in partnership with the Faroe Islands, is exploring a Faroese air warning radar and drone surveillance positioned towards the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap. At the same time, the four Nordic nations are deepening air force cooperation to enhance situational awareness and joint planning,

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command, training, and exercises through the Nordic Airpower Concept (NAC). Achieving all-domain awareness and real-time surveillance serves as a combined force multiplier.

The North American Arctic and European High North are increasingly linked in a global threat environment with advanced weapons systems via the North Atlantic. Indeed, this connection is bound through the establishment of NATO Joint Forces Command Norfolk which is responsible for patrolling the sea lanes of communication and resupply from Florida to Finnmark. The North Atlantic also serves as a maritime chokepoint for launch platforms from the Russian Bastion to strike either continent with strategic delivery systems that would pass through the Arctic: a Cold War-era threat that has re-emerged with the proliferation and development of advanced long-range strike weapons.

Conclusion

Russia's illegal and unjustified invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 ended the idea of the Arctic as an exceptional region separate from the geopolitical drivers that affect the rest of the world. Cooperative governance institutions have been strained or suspended, and analysts have grappled with how 'Arctic security' fits within international and domestic political considerations. The in, to, and through framework for analysis has enabled Lackenbauer and Østhagen to tackle the empirical evidence of the 'who, what, where and how' that informs preconceived notions and ideas labelled as 'Arctic security'.

The framework allows for a deliberate and careful analysis and examination of distinct sub-regions of the Arctic, each with their own geographic, political, and cultural contexts. This framework also helps distinguish what driver is behind the threat, such as geopolitics or climate change. These drivers influence policy decisions and responses within the broader context of the international system's effects. The framework also suggests that the circumpolar Arctic is far more susceptible to a crisis outside of it erupting but spilling into the region.

Both subregions have similar through threats, though the scale of the threat is far more of a concern for the North American Arctic. If a general war were to erupt, Russia's deterrent is largely based on its ability to strike through the great circle route at a wide range of targets across North America. Given the proximity of Russia to the High North, the region could face a deployment of the full spectrum of threats from disinformation through hybrid tactics to land battles and even nuclear strikes. In North America, to threats include the targeting of critical infrastructure which enables global power projection that could serve as a precursor to attacks through the region. Far more likely are disinformation campaigns to the region that will sow division and reduce resiliency to escalating conflict. Ultimately, the North American Arctic must deal with through threats while the European High North faces threats to and in its Arctic.

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