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Keeping your cool: Arctic security challenges across time and space

Input Memo to the Arctic Security Roundtable at the 2026 Munich Security Conference

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Introduction

The dispute over Greenland has drawn broader attention to Arctic security among NATO allies, EU member states, and beyond. As the most immediate tensions related to Greenland may subside, heightened interest in — and awareness of — security challenges in the region will persist and warrants nuanced discussion and international coordination.

Although analysts and observers have long emphasized that new conflicts are unlikely to emerge *from* the Arctic over borders or resources, the region nonetheless reflects great power contestation, functions as an arena for hybrid threats, and is a likely military front in case of a future war. Russia's high concentration of nuclear weapons in the Arctic is, in itself, a cause for Western concern, as is the Russian capacity to project force into the North Atlantic from bases in the north.

Arctic security is therefore a critical topic, requiring both deeper understanding and carefully calibrated responses. However, the debates over Arctic security are sometimes clouded by imprecision along two dimensions: space and time. By *space,* we mean that risks and challenges differ significantly depending on the specific sub-region of the Arctic in question – something that policy discussions should be clearer about. With *time*, we refer to the tendency to blur or overlook the distinction between short- and long-term challenges, despite that these may require markedly different responses.

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Space

Developments and the security challenges in the Pacific part of the Arctic (Bering Sea and Strait) are often different from the developments in the Atlantic Arctic. Both areas are flagged in red on the map. What connects the two regions is Russia, which plays a role and represents a security challenge both places, albeit in different ways.

In the *Pacific* Arctic, recent years have seen growing China-Russia security-related coordination, including joint military patrols, exercises, operations in and near Alaska's Air Defense Identification Zone. U.S. defense and security documents outline concrete steps to enhance military presence and capabilities in Alaska — steps that require significant new investment. Canada has also increased its Arctic-related defense spending and has directed coast guard resources to monitor and shadow Chinese vessels in international waters off Alaska in 2024 and 2025.

In the *Atlantic* Arctic, the picture is different. There is no Chinese military presence there, neither at sea nor in the air. This may change over time, but any future Chinese operations in the Arctic would likely rely on access to Russian coastal infrastructure. So far, Russia has been reluctant to offer such services.

The Russian Northern Fleet has become more important for Russia in recent years, partly because naval operations have become more constrained for Russia in both the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. Modernization of the Northern Fleet is proceeding more or less as planned, and its operational patterns appear largely unaffected by the ongoing war in Ukraine. Russia continues to develop new weapons systems – including hypersonic missiles, uncrewed platforms and underwater capacities. Renewed capacity to target Western critical infrastructure on the seabed is of particular concern.

NATO-Allies with territories and roles in Arctic security have significantly increased their military presence in the region through operations and exercises in recent years. Defence spending is also rising in line with NATO's 3.5% pledge.

Physical changes in all parts of the Arctic due *to climate change* also have a spatial dimension. Some areas are likely to experience reduced ice cover, while others may see greater or more unpredictable quantities of ice. Popular conceptions of Arctic waters as uniformly "ice-free" need to be moderated and specified geographically in any grounded strategic discussion.

Time

Short-term and long-term security risks in the Arctic are often conflated. Some risks require immediate action, while others are unlikely to materialize for decades.

Short-term risks include the ongoing modernization of the Russian naval fleet and the developments of new weapons systems and subsurface capabilities. These trends require NATO countries to invest in maritime patrol aircraft with anti-submarine warfare capabilities, as well as new sensor systems — from the seabed to space — alongside unmanned and autonomous maritime vessels and strengthened capacities to protect critical underwater infrastructure.

Climate change is also rapidly making its impact visible in the Arctic, with melting glaciers and thawing permafrost. These short- to medium-term risks affect infrastructure and living conditions for residents in the Arctic, including Indigenous peoples. At sea, there is heightened attention to the growing prospects for activity – military operations, shipping, tourism, and fisheries — possible in and around an Arctic Ocean with overall diminishing ice cover.

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Coordination amongst the seven NATO allied states in Arctic security and governance since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has contributed to regional stability. Bilateral and regional multilateral agreements and arrangements, for example on shipping lanes, fisheries, circumpolar search and rescue responsibilities, serve to mitigate some of the immediate safety and security risks relating to heightened human activity.

Long-term risks open up for a multitude of potential developments and scenarios. The impact of retreating and changing sea ice patterns is a key medium- to long-term change. Discussions of sea ice retreat are often accompanied by highly optimistic projections of the potential for commercial maritime traffic, either along the Northern Sea Route or across the Arctic Ocean. These estimates tend to exaggerate speed and geography of climate change impacts, and hence the commercial viability of these sea-routes. Winter will remain dark, with cold temperatures, changing and unpredictable ice conditions, and limited SAR capacity in the foreseeable future for all parts of the Arctic, even if the navigable summer season will become longer.

Another long-term risk is a potential increased Chinese engagement in the region. China has been unable to gain a commercial foothold in the Arctic outside of the Russian territory. But investments in Russia may continue to increase. Also, should Russia's dependence on China as a political and economic ally increase, China may be able to impose its presence also with military assets in the future.

Conclusions

The renewed attention to Arctic security is positive, as the region's geopolitical importance is rising. But policy priorities must reflect the most serious pressing security concerns, not abstract future scenarios. To this end, a distinction between risks in the two main Arctic regions as well as between the short-term and long-terms risks can be useful. The immediate risks need to be dealt with first, even if some long-term risks also require calibrated attention and preparation.

Further reading

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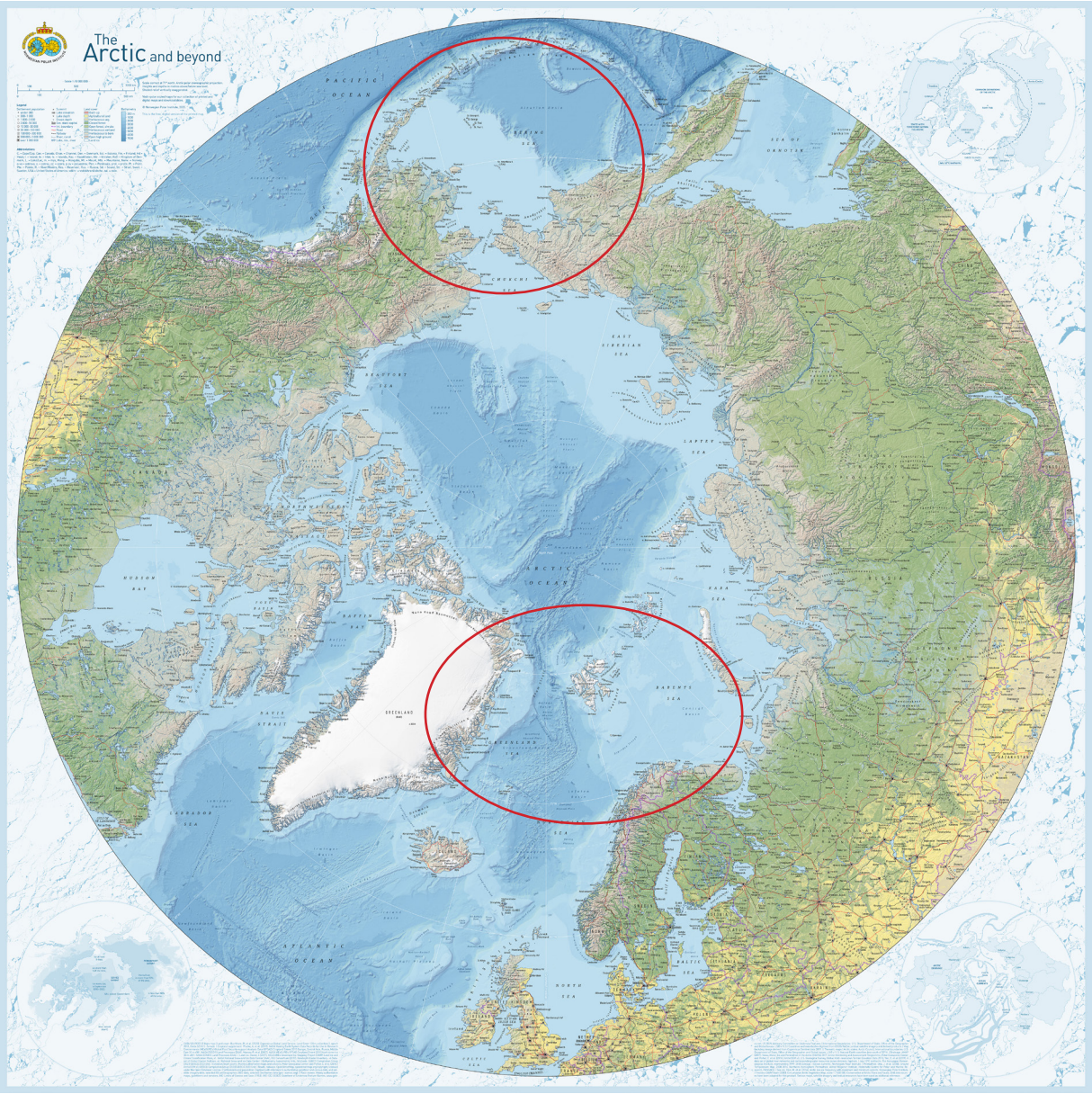

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Front page photo: NTB. Map: Norwegian Polar Institute (red circles added by the authors).

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