

Boreas Rising

The ‘Wider North’ Dimension of Global Volatility

Jahangir E. Arasli

“Hope is no basis for a defense policy”

– [Margaret Thatcher](#), October 1988

The uncertainty of the global strategic environment increases as competition between powers and alliances intensifies, projecting insecurity in many parts of the world. One of the contested zones is the Arctic, a spatial and largely uninhabited region that once was considered by much of the world as a peripheral geography. The toxic perplexity of the renewal of a zero-sum mindset, new geoeconomic circumstances, emerging technologies, and the increasingly visible effects of climate change in the circumpolar north progressively shape settings for potentially destructive scenarios. An adjacent zone, the Baltic Sea region, has historically appeared to be different. It is an area engulfing a busy and crowded water basin, which became a theatre in two world wars, and where the Euro-Atlantic community maintains direct territorial contact with Russia.

But the long, open-ended European War (a.k.a., the war in Ukraine) has redesigned the geostrategic landscape of the Northern Hemisphere since its start in 2022. One of the most evident outcomes of all this uncertainty has been the conceptual merger of two abovementioned geographically disparate and historically divergent regions into a single strategic space—the *Wider North*—which stretches along an imaginary straight line drawn from the Baltic shores to the Alaskan coast across the North Pole.

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This IDD Occasional Paper analyzes in detail the factors influencing the ongoing and perspective security dynamics in the Arctic region and the Baltic Sea region. Furthermore, it establishes common denominators that merge two at first glance incongruent regions into a single mega-region. In addition, this paper defines patterns of competition between the involved actors, their capabilities, and potentially ensuing scenarios.

The Arctic: The Cold War in Cold Waters

The Arctic is one of the last uncharted areas of the human ecumene, in which real exploration started only in the late nineteenth century with the development of novel technologies at that time. For that particular reason, the region, shielded by its extreme natural environment, essentially avoided being part of the grand military collisions of the first half of the twentieth century—although not fully (recall the 1939-1940 Soviet-Finnish Winter War in Lapland, the battle of Narvik in 1940, the famous Arctic convoys, and other episodes of the Second World War).

The original Cold War and the advent of the nuclear age transformed the region into an area of actual standoff between two opposing politico-military blocks. In the hypothetical case of a nuclear exchange between the U.S. and the USSR, intercontinental ballistic missiles should have delivered their payloads, flying over—in both directions—the North Pole zone. The most powerful nuclear weapon ever produced (i.e., the Soviet “Tsar Bomb”) was detonated in the Novaya Zemlya test range in 1961. In addition, one of the critical threats feared by the Western block was a breakthrough of submarine wolfpacks of the Soviet Northern Fleet from their Arctic bases into the Atlantic, so they could effectively disrupt the planned U.S. military sealift moving reinforcements to Europe in the event of a hypothetical military confrontation. Thus, the then-emerging strategic significance of the Arctic resulted in its prompt militarization, an intensive buildup of military forces, an arms race, and regular wargames. For more than four decades, both sides considered the region to be a future war theatre—and nothing else.

After the end of the Cold War, the Arctic all but vanished from the military radar screen, only to reemerge again by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century in another context. This time, the climate change dynamic brought the peripheral region back to the strategic focus.

Climate-Geopolitics Nexus: The Ice Melt and the Meltdown of Security

Global warming is suspected of contributing to the intensive thawing of the Arctic Ocean’s ice cap. In the past four decades, its surface shrunk almost by half, [losing almost 13 percent in size](#) each decade. If such a tempo persists, then many previously impassable water passages in the region will become navigable and accessible for other human activities in the next few decades. The phenomenon of the “Big Melt” opens

immense geoeconomic opportunities while at the same time generates new challenges in the context of geopolitics and international security, leading to the transformation of the Arctic from nobody's water (*Aqua Nullius*) into a region increasingly contested by competing major powers.

There are evident reasons for such competition. The water body of the Arctic Ocean and the surrounding land make up [4 percent](#) of the Earth's surface, or 14.5 million sq. km. The ocean floor and the contiguous littoral areas contain enormous deposits of oil and natural gas: according to [U.S. Energy Agency](#) figures from 2011, the region holds 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30 percent of undiscovered natural gas deposits. Beyond that, the seabed conceals [deposits](#) of various rare earth minerals, which are indispensable for the hi-tech industry. Also, the large and relatively untapped marine biological resources of the Arctic are essential for global food security. Furthermore, the region preserves an almost pristine ecosystem and [influences weather patterns](#) for the whole of the Northern Hemisphere.

Furthermore, the "Big Melt" could considerably alter global trade and logistics patterns. Previously, the navigation seasons in the northern waters had been limited to certain areas and to a couple of summer months; now, shipping operations are possible almost all year round—although still assisted by icebreakers. The Northern Sea Route (NSR)—an approximately 5,600 km-long waterway located within Russia's exclusive economic zone—emerges as the shortest itinerary connecting East Asia with Europe. The [sea leg](#) between Rotterdam and Yokohama via the Suez Canal is some 20,000 km (22 days of sailing), while via the NSR it is 9,000 km (10 days of sailing). The Houthi maritime insurgency in the Red Sea makes shipping operations via Suez risky, and there is no assurance of similar troubles being able to be successfully dealt with in other chokepoints (e.g., the potential resurgence of piracy off the coast of Somalia or in the Malacca Strait).

Unsurprisingly, Russia has tried to promote the NSR as a viable alternative to traditional shipping lanes, which could save maritime industry operators' time and fuel and hedge them from commercial and security risks. Moscow has devised grandiose programs related to the development and exploitation of the NSR and the associated oil and gas projects. Those programs include the expansion of port infrastructure, the construction of LNG terminals, the building of ice-class vessels, the establishment of a constellation of earth observation satellites, and other elements.

However, a set of [technological, logistical, and political complications](#) delays the full operationalization of the NSR. Although Russia operates the largest icebreaker fleet in the world (over 40 vessels, including nuclear-powered ones), this is still insufficient to keep the weather-dependent route fully functioning. The NSR continues to suffer from "infrastructural dystrophy," the overcoming of which requires complex and sophisticated technological solutions that are not available due to the imposed Western sanctions

on Russia. Moscow's Arctic SPG-2 natural gas project, which was supposed to be a driver of the entire infrastructural development, is now on hold: Russia does not have enough money to finance the project itself while China is cautious to invest due to the risk of the West imposing secondary sanctions on it. Furthermore, the contracts signed with South Korean shipyards to build the ice-class LNG tankers for the NSR were suspended by Seoul, in apparent reaction for widening military cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang.

Meanwhile, the United States and Canada are looking for their own navigable Atlantic-Pacific route—the fabled “Northwest Passage”—that stretches along the northern coast of North America. Discovered in the mid-nineteenth century, that route may become steadily more accessible for commercial shipping. However, the U.S.-Canadian maritime border dispute and the deficiency of icebreakers and onshore infrastructure make its operational perspective less favorable in the time ahead, compared to the NSR.

Other international actors also indicate interest and claim their stakes in the circumpolar north. The first group is made up of the littoral and contiguous Arctic states (i.e., Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden). The second group is made up of extra-regional states that regard the Arctic as a part of the global commons and see themselves as having a right of presence. Most of the countries belonging to the latter group have already conceptualized their strategic priorities in the region. For instance, China calls itself a “near-Arctic-state.” It has initiated the “[Polar Silk Road](#)” (PSR) project, which would add a further dimension to its Belt and Road Initiative. For example, Beijing intends to cooperate with Russia on the NSR, already maintains a “scientific research base” at the Spitsbergen Archipelago, and is building a nuclear-powered icebreaker. The UK, France, Germany, Italy, and other European states—even landlocked Switzerland—are also exploring their economic opportunities. Japan and South Korea have officially codified their Arctic policies, built additional icebreakers, and sent expeditions to the region. Although located far from the region, India has not only built its first polar research vessel, but it also [regularly sends](#) army units and jet fighters to Alaska for cold-weather training with the U.S. military.

The region's only extant multinational framework is the [Arctic Council](#), which is made up of eight Arctic member states and 13 non-Arctic observer states. It [focuses](#) on environmental issues, climate change mitigation, sustainable economic development (the “blue economy” and the “green transition”), and the protection of indigenous people. However, competing national interests, overlapping sovereignty rights claims over the ocean waters and seabed, other legal controversies, and, foremost, the deepening crisis between the West and Russia have essentially paralyzed cooperation, dialogue, and the constructive exploration of common opportunities provided by the melting ice. The internationalization of the Arctic has turned into securitization and remilitarization.

The Second Cold War: The New Arctic Zero-Sum Game

Russia has claimed its rights on a portion of the Arctic continental shelf, including the geographic North Pole, since 2001 ([2.1 million sq. km](#) in total). At the same time, Moscow strongly rejects any international jurisdiction regime over its NSR. By 2009, it had resumed regular long-range bomber patrols over the Arctic area and nuclear submarine operations under the polar ice. After 2014, when relations with the West started to deteriorate, Russia visibly accelerated its military buildup in the region to hedge its interests and assets against the perceived Western threat. It reorganized its naval, air, and ground forces in the area, subordinating them to the new Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command, formed Arctic warfare-specialized units, and established forward operating bases on the arc of islands topping the Russian northern coast. Those bases, equipped with anti-ship missiles and protected by its air defense network, provided essential anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the claimed zones. With the delivery of new weapons, combat training became more frequent and intensive; it included a remarkable airborne drop precisely on the contested North Pole, senseless from a tactical perspective but spectacular from the standpoint of posturing and propaganda. More relevant became the testing of new strategic and sub-strategic weapon systems in the Arctic (submarine-launched ballistic missiles, hypersonic missiles, and long-range autonomous nuclear-capable underwater vehicles), regarded as an asymmetrical response to Western conventional military superiority.

Russia-West hostility reached a critical level in 2022. The need to shift military resources to the Ukraine war theater objectively weakens Russia's military posture in the Arctic zone. It had to optimize its command system, dissolving the abovementioned strategic command after ten years of its existence and handing its responsibilities to the newly formed Leningrad Military District. The entire 14th (Arctic) Army Corps and the Northern Fleet's naval infantry and combat aviation are now committed to the Ukrainian war theatre. The Fleet's warships, frequently deployed in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, suffer from a high operational tempo. More importantly, the Russian second-strike strategic nuclear capabilities, which is located in the Murmansk area is just a couple of hundred kilometers from the expanded NATO border, has become more acutely exposed to the dangers of a sudden strike in the event of the onset of a direct military conflict with the Alliance.

The United States also does its part in the militarization of the Arctic. The Pentagon's new [Arctic defense strategy](#) is about to arrive in the wake of the 2022 U.S. [National Strategy for the Arctic Region](#). The region falls under the responsibility of two unified commands: the U.S. European Command and the U.S. Northern Command. Alaska is a pillar of America's military power in its part of the Arctic, where the 11th Airborne "Arctic Angels" Division was activated in 2022—the first-ever formation of such kind raised since the end of the Second World War. Moreover, American special operations forces are intensively training for cold-weather warfare. In addition, the U.S. and Canada are jointly implementing Arctic domain awareness within the

framework of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), whose radars cover most of the circumpolar zone. Against such a backdrop, in late 2023, the U.S. declared the expansion of its continental shelf, claiming [520,400 sq. km](#) of the Arctic Ocean (an area the size of France).

On the other edge of the Arctic region, in northern Scandinavia and the Norwegian and Barents Seas, NATO has intensified its military activities by conducting serial wargames: both their frequency and magnitude approach the levels not seen since the end of the Cold War. One such event, codenamed Nordic Response 2024, involved some 20,000 military personnel, over 50 warships and submarines, and more than 100 aircraft and helicopters from 14 NATO member states, including Sweden and Finland (for the first time). The scenarios rehearsed during the drills reflect Article 5 collective defense settings. In addition to the formation of new infrastructure, previously closed military bases in Norway, Iceland, and Greenland have been re-opened. NATO naval forces exercise antisubmarine operations to prevent a breakthrough of Russian submarines from the Barents Sea into the open Atlantic Ocean through the notorious GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-UK) gap. In parallel, nuclear hunter-killer submarines belonging to the U.S. Navy and the UK Royal Navy play “cat-and-mouse games” with their Russian competitors under the Arctic ice.

The antagonism between Russia and the West is not limited solely to the Arctic; it is also projected into the Baltic Sea region. That condition intermingles those geographic theatres into a single strategic mega-theatre, where each side pursues similar strategic goals: to deter and preempt the perceived adversary.

The Baltic Sea: The New Strategic Status Quo

The onset of the European War in February 2022 politically and militarily revitalized NATO. One of the principal outcomes was that Finland and Sweden abandoned their traditional neutrality and joined NATO in 2023-2024. That event has fundamentally changed the strategic situation in the Baltic Sea region (BSR) and essentially consolidated the “Scandinavian Bridge” that geographically connects the Arctic with the Baltics.

Two new NATO member states represent a net gain for the Alliance. They each have well-trained militaries equipped with modern weapons, especially air and naval forces. Finland maintains a mobilization-based army that, in the case of contingency, can rapidly expand to over 200,000 men and women to implement a total defense doctrine. Finns are experienced in winter warfare (as they proved in 1939-1940), while Swedes have excellence in underwater defense. Both countries have developed defense industries producing a range of hi-tech weapons and equipment, including jet fighters and submarines (in the case of

Sweden), missiles, and radio-electronics. Particularly in the past five years, the production of ammunition in Finland has [increased tenfold](#). Stockholm and Helsinki are among the top international contributors to strengthening the defense capabilities of Ukraine. Moreover, they insist on [authorization](#) to use West-supplied weapons against military targets inside recognized Russian territory.

NATO strengthens its collective posture to deter the potential actions of the Russian-Belarusian coalition. While the three Baltic States procure more weapons, reinstall conscript military service, and fortify their border with Russia with counter-mobility constructions, their treaty allies augment these and similar moves with their own rotational deterrence forces (NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and Baltic Air Policing). For instance, Germany plans to deploy an armored brigade in Lithuania at its first military base abroad since 1945. In December 2023, the U.S. [secured agreements](#) to get access to 36 military bases and installations in Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, which will be used to reinforce the Baltic flank in case of contingency. Adjacent Poland [enhances its army](#) to 300,000 service members, targets to spend 4 percent of its GDP on defense, and introduces military training for civilians. Its impressive defense procurement programs include main battle tanks, armored vehicles, self-powered artillery, multiple launch rocket systems, air defense systems, jet fighters, attack helicopters, and other weapons. In May 2024, Poland, Norway, Finland, and the three Baltic States declared a plan to create a "[wall of drones](#)" – a complex surveillance system on their borders with Russia (the parameters of that system are not specified yet).

NATO doctrines envisage different threat response missions, including large-scale conventional armed conflict under Article 5 provisions. In January-May 2024, the Alliance conducted its [Steadfast Defender 2024](#) exercise, the largest one since the end of the Cold War. It engaged some 90,000 military personnel from all 32 member states. The particularly rehearsed scenario included the defense of the "attacked" Baltic States and the "Suwalki Corridor" that connects them with Poland, and the rapid deployment of reinforcements. Another training aspect was the joint air-naval blocking operations in the Danish straits. The mentioned scenarios and features are strongly reminiscent of exercises conducted during the Cold War.

As in the Arctic, Russia's posture in the BSR is weakening due to its engagement in Ukraine and NATO enlargement. Three hundred years after Peter the Great "carved a window to Europe" in the Baltic Sea, these waters became all but a "NATO lake." The sea communications between the Russian mainland and the Kaliningrad exclave are now de facto dissected and controlled from the Island of Gotland, the Swedish outpost in the Baltics. NATO air forces, including F-35 stealth combat aircraft operating from Finnish airbases, can potentially attack targets deep in the European part of Russia, not to mention the Kaliningrad region (which is entirely within NATO air and missile strike range), including the highly exposed main base of the Baltic Fleet. Another part of Russian naval capabilities in case of hostilities would

be bottled up in the Gulf of Finland by sea mines and shore-based anti-ship missiles (as happened in 1941 to Soviet naval forces). The air defense network protecting St. Petersburg [is weakened](#) by the redeployment of some of its assets to Crimea. The 11th (Kaliningrad) Army Corps and the newly formed 44th (Karelian) Army Corps are also presently located in the Ukrainian theatre, taking part in the offensive campaign near Kharkov. The 1,340 km-long Russian-Finnish border (a potential NATO-Russia line of contact) stays virtually unprotected on the Russian side, save for the rough terrain.

One Hypothetical Scenario: Preventive Escalation vs. Credible Defense

Thus, the strategic balance between Russia (and Belarus, which remains a wild card) and NATO is obviously in favor of the latter. NATO's defense posture appears credible. Paradoxically, the reverse side of Russia's relative military weakness is its assertive posturing. A crucially soft point on the Western camp's side is its incoherent collective political will. This leaves Russia with a space for the application of hybrid options to exploit asymmetrically Western [weaknesses, gaps, and divergences](#). Therefore, notwithstanding mismatched capabilities, the amalgamated Arctic-Baltic mega-theatre [could be a target](#) for Russian power projection, with the aim of *preventive escalation*. That escalation would aim to manipulate Western political will, perceptions, and fears to alter the cost-benefit calculus related to the continuation of support for Ukraine.

At the initial stage of the conceivable escalation, actions taken may include different hybrid practices and tools other than kinetic. They include, but are not limited to, the following avenues:

- Projection of information operations (“weaponized narratives”) against different target audiences in the West (governments, politicians, public opinion, ethnic minorities, migrant communities, etc.).
- Incitement of political turbulence in the Baltic States (similar to the 2007 “[Bronze Night](#)” riots in Estonia).
- Cyberattacks against governmental institutions, military command systems, and critical infrastructure.
- Challenging activities on state borders (such as directing illegal migrant flows to penetrate the territory of EU member states, as is already the case in [Poland](#) and [Finland](#); a [provocative plot](#) to change maritime borders with Finland and Lithuania; or the removal of [Estonian border markers](#)).
- Subversive actions against critical infrastructure installations, including:
 - Railway networks, seaports, and other transportation nodes that are used to supply and reinforce NATO forces in the Baltic States (Poland has already [detained](#) several alleged Russian sleeper agents in connection to acts of sabotage).

- Offshore and underwater infrastructure (oil and gas rigs, pipelines, interconnectors, wind power stations, internet cables, etc.).
- Other non-kinetic destabilizing acts (such as continuous [spoofing](#) of GPS signals by electronic warfare assets, which endangers civilian air traffic over the Baltic region).

Manipulating with an opponent's fears is an essential element of any hybrid warfare strategy, including Russia's. To that end, it systematically exploits the nuclear factor. Thus, some Russian political leaders deliver regular [warnings](#) on the "risk of nuclear war." Verbal statements are accompanied by actions. On 20 May 2024, Russian military forces started an [exercise](#) simulating the use of sub-strategic (a.k.a. tactical) nuclear weapons. A large part of the Baltic Sea region and Scandinavia is within the range of the delivery means of such weapons, such as the Iskander-M/K (SS-26) surface-to-surface missile. Missile brigades equipped with Iskander are stationed in Kaliningrad, Belarus, and near St. Petersburg; an additional missile brigade is forming now in Karelia. In quite an unusual move, the Russian Navy [tested the redeployment](#) of its Karakurt-class and Buyan-M-class missile corvettes from the Baltic Sea to the Lake of Ladoga via the Neva River. The Baltic Fleet has seven of those platforms, each fitted with eight Kalibr (SS-N-27/SS-N-30) cruise missiles. The mentioned weapon, depending on its modification, has a claimed range of up to 2,500 km and presumably can be fitted with nuclear warheads. That implies Russia can still keep that part of NATO territory in its crosshairs with sub-strategic nuclear assets deployed in safer inner waterways.

Overall, I would characterize the essence of Russia's hybrid strategy as resting on *unconventional, manipulative, non-kinetic actions below the level of a real attack. In its core is a 6-D set of applied tactics (disinformation, diversion, disruption, destabilization, distraction, and division), which should assure a cognitive closure of an adversary and arrest his political will through the projection of a threat of the use of force instead of its actual use.* The peril of such a strategy is that its threshold is not definite, and its trespassing (due to misperceived intentions, accidental developments, or other factors) could irreversibly spin the course of action out of control.

The abovementioned evidence of alleged Russian activities in the Baltic States region may indicate that it has *already started* low-key preventive escalation and a sort of testing of the waters. In my view, the future progression of escalation depends on two key determinants: the trajectory of the war in Ukraine and the outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential elections. Depending on these, Moscow will choose to up the ante or deescalate.

Synopsis

- The accelerating antagonism between the West in general and NATO in particular, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, merges the Circumpolar Arctic region and the Baltic Sea region into a homogenous strategic landscape—the Wider North.

- The “Scandinavian Bridge,” consolidated by the admission of Sweden and Finland to NATO, enables a physical connection between the aforementioned two regions.
- Such an inter-theatre structurization forms a new NATO-Russian strategic frontier, produces synergetic security logic, causes symbiotic instability effects, and generates shared risks and threats.
- One of the most critical present challenges is the militarization of the Wider North, which could eventually precipitate violent scenarios.
- The Scandinavian-Baltic cluster of the Wider North is an area subjected to the elevated risk of confrontation between Russia and NATO in the context of Ukraine.
- Russia is potentially able to challenge NATO’s Nordic flank with a preventive hybrid escalation below the threshold of the overt use of force, targeting primarily the West’s collective political will.
- However, such a virtual escalation could eventually transform into a real one, depending on the evolutionary trajectories of the war in Ukraine and its correlated effects.
- In the Circumpolar Arctic cluster of the Wider North, the competition for resources and connectivity routes could bring in extra-regional actors, foremost China, which may potentially strengthen its multidimensional partnership with Russia on anti-Western grounds.
- Any probable conflict in a particular area of the Wider North is likely to spread horizontally to its other zones through the spillover “domino effect.”

Carl Bildt, a former Prime Minister of Sweden, [defines](#) the northern dimension of the Western world in the following words: “A cohesive security region stretching from Narva in Estonia in the east to Nuuk in Greenland in the west and from Kirkenes in Norway in the north to Krakow in Poland in the south.” This description regrettably does not include Alaska and the Canadian Arctic, which it should. Hence, the Wider North properly understood builds a giant arc extending from the boundaries of the European continent to the edges of the Asia-Pacific, thus providing a convincing example of the globalization of international security. From a broader perspective, the Wider North stays embedded in the context of correlated “great games” proceeding in the Middle East, Africa, the Indo-Pacific, the Caspian-Central Asian region (a.k.a. the Silk Road) region, and other zones that form a [new area of strategic competition](#).

In Greek mythology, Boreas is the god of the violent north wind. Coincidentally or not, Russia designated the latest series of its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines as “Boreas.” Those “boomers” operate in the Arctic waters, conducting nuclear deterrence patrols. With hope, they will never fire in anger. Nonetheless, the competitive and uncertain global strategic environment, part of which is a security meltdown in the Wider North, expands the “Overton window” inch by inch.