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document 1 of 1



## NATO/ARCTIC: Evolving alliance may refocus on north

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### Abstract (summary)

The Arctic's emergence as a NATO strategic priority.

The impact of global warming has turned the Arctic into an area of significant economic potential, particularly in terms of shipping and resource extraction. However, opportunities also bring challenges, in terms of increased risks of accidents and environmental disasters. Further down the line, there is a risk of geopolitical competition in the region between Western actors and other states such as Russia and China. NATO, which until now has played a relatively minor role in the region's affairs, may soon have to play a larger role as the Arctic grows in strategic significance over the coming years.

### Full text

SUBJECT: The Arctic's emergence as a NATO strategic priority.

SIGNIFICANCE: The impact of global warming has turned the Arctic into an area of significant economic potential, particularly in terms of shipping and resource extraction. However, opportunities also bring challenges, in terms of increased risks of accidents and environmental disasters. Further down the line, there is a risk of geopolitical competition in the region between Western actors and other states such as Russia and China. NATO, which until now has played a relatively minor role in the region's affairs, may soon have to play a larger role as the Arctic grows in strategic significance over the coming years.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

Several countries, including Russia and non-Arctic states such as China, are exploring ways of strengthening their Arctic presence.

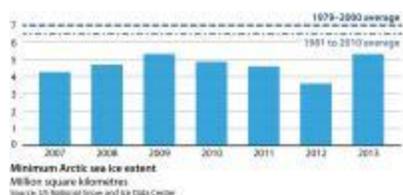
NATO still has a limited presence in the Arctic, but its regional strategic interests are growing.

It is likely that NATO may play a larger role in the future, including providing for maritime security and disaster response.

It could also form a platform for military cooperation with other regional players.

The impact of global warming has turned the Arctic region into an area of significant economic potential. Compounding the Arctic's strategic importance in coming years is the potential for resource exploration, shipping, fishing and tourism (see INTERNATIONAL: Record ice melting is policy challenge - September 26, 2012).

According to a May 2008 report by the US Geological Survey, the Arctic could hold 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and as much as 30% of its undiscovered natural gas reserves, in addition to other mineral resources such as copper, iron ore, zinc and rare earths. Resource extraction in the region is aided by technological advances in offshore drilling and ocean floor exploitation, as well as the growing global demand for commodities. However, once developed, oil platforms and pipelines in the region would entail enhanced maritime security and protection efforts.



Melting Arctic sea ice also opens up the prospect for commercial shipping in the region. Compared to conventional routes connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific, trans-Arctic shipping routes offer economic advantages by shrinking distances and reducing fuel costs. Arctic routes also offer strategic benefits, allowing ships to by-pass the congested and dangerous Gulf of Aden and Malacca Straits. According to South Korea's Maritime Institute, 25% of the cargo between Asia and Europe will use Arctic shipping routes by 2030.

However, navigation in the region will remain difficult and the local port infrastructure and search and rescue capabilities are currently miniscule ( see RUSSIA: Foreign cooperation could help open up Arctic - October 20, 2011).

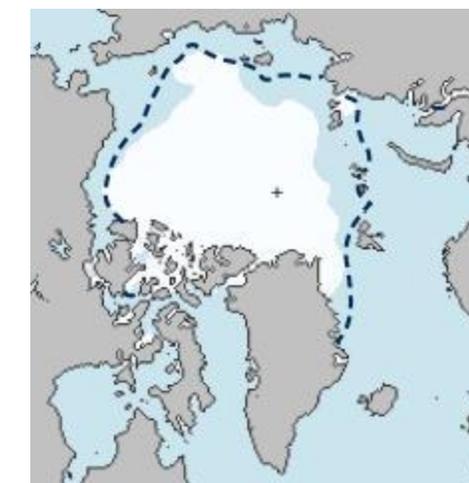
#### Growing strategic significance .

The new intensity as regards Arctic issues prompted by the potential opening of the region for commerce and resource extraction has also reinforced the Arctic's geostrategic significance. Several emerging powers, such as Russia and China, are currently seeking to strengthen their presence.

#### Russia.

Ever since a Russian expedition planted a Russian flag on the North Pole's seabed in 2007, Moscow has taken concrete steps to reaffirm its strategic interests in the Arctic. This and other Russian actions, such as regular naval patrols along shipping lanes in its Arctic territory -- combined with the country's on-going military modernisation -- have given rise to regional concerns, particularly in the Nordic countries.

#### China.



Sea ice extent, September 2013

-- Median 1981-2010

Source image: US National Snow and Ice Data Center

In addition to countries in the Arctic's immediate vicinity, other non-Arctic actors, such as China, Japan and South Korea, have showed interest in being involved in the region. Among these, China is the most influential actor. Although its approach until now has been to tread carefully, China is seen in the West as gradually stepping up its presence in such regional players as Iceland ( see ICELAND/CHINA: Land deal sparks concern - September 21, 2011). China has an interest in both Arctic shipping and resources. In August 2013, the first ship to sail from China to Europe through the Northern Sea Route along the Russian littoral was Chinese. This summer, China gained observer status in the Arctic Council. China also has

interests in tapping into the region's oil and resource reserves. At some point, Beijing may even feel a need to expand its military presence in the Arctic to protect security of supply should the country grow increasingly dependent on the region's resources and sea-lanes for its economy.

NATO's current role .

Despite the Arctic's growing strategic relevance, NATO's role in the region is fairly limited. Since 2008, the organisation has been conducting an air-policing mission over Iceland. The alliance has also conducted several exercises in the Nordic region -- most recently, 'Arctic Challenge'.

Despite some calls that NATO should do more in the region, Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recently downplayed such plans, saying that NATO had no intention of raising its presence and activities in the "High North". Rasmussen further stressed that regional tensions and potential disputes over sovereign rights to the region's resources should be handled through dialogue. From a NATO perspective, it is important not to be seen as promoting militarisation of the Arctic.

Possible future roles.

It will be hard for NATO to remain on the sidelines as countries' interest in the Arctic intensifies, possibly also giving rise to geopolitical pressure. NATO's interests in the Arctic are significant. Among them are:

ensuring the maintenance of freedom of navigation and maritime trade routes;

safeguarding energy flows;

protecting marine resources and environmental safety; and

maintaining the Arctic as a peaceful, non-militarised region.

Outlook.

It is probable that NATO gradually will increase its presence in the region. Areas where NATO might be called upon to make a contribution include: assisting with search and rescue, disaster response, and air and maritime surveillance of key shipping routes. NATO will also be able to counter illicit trade and potential security threats such as terrorism and piracy.

Cooperation between regional states and other actors will be key to address current and future challenges. Here, NATO could serve as a platform for cooperation and fostering new military partnerships with non-Arctic countries such as Japan, alongside the Arctic Council, which focuses on non-military issues. Ultimately, a more robust NATO presence in the Arctic could also help allay fears that the region would turn into a geopolitical hotspot with several actors vying for control over its supposed vast resources.

**CONCLUSION:** The coming end of the Afghanistan mission in 2014 is forcing NATO leaders to review the alliance's strategic role -- and may also serve as an impetus for strengthening NATO's presence in the Arctic. The loss of appetite for costly and difficult overseas missions means that NATO will be less a global expeditionary military alliance and more of a 'security community,' engaging regional powers on critical security problems in the wider Euro-Atlantic zone.

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