

## Careful precautions or dangerous misperceptions?

Analysing the militarization strategies of the Arctic countries following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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**Abstract:** *Following the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Arctic has evolved into a sensitive security environment. Uncertainty regarding the duration of the war in Ukraine, misperceptions around Arctic military exercises, and growing tensions among Arctic states have opened an opportunity for accidental encounters or spillover conflict. Therefore, this analysis seeks to explore the militarization strategies of NATO and Russia within the Arctic following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To supplement the analysis, this article will also examine military exercises as an indicator of militarization strategies by using the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Arctic Military Activity Tracker. Specifically, by quantifying open-source articles from prominent Arctic media outlets to record the most recent military events. The findings indicate that current perceptions of militarization do not match actual observed military activities. Specifically, military activities fell by nearly half following the Russian invasion of Ukraine compared to military activity before the conflict. In addition, NATO has returned to a Cold-War era doctrine that*

*focuses on Russian deterrence and containment. On the other hand, Russia has nearly completed its military modernization strategy in the Arctic and claims it is not interested in further military build-up. This implies that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has not only broken down Arctic cooperation, it also acted as a breaker of observed Arctic military activity by drawing away resources towards the frontlines and away from the Arctic.*

### 1 Introduction

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022, tensions among the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Russian Federation have become heightened. As countries react to the dynamic security environment, misperceptions regarding military capabilities and activity arise as a result. This analysis will seek to examine the militarization strategies of the Arctic countries following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Secondly, using the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Military Activity Tracker, a supplementary examination of the state of military activity in the Arctic will be quantified to gauge

activity before and after the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. From the initial data, it can be seen that prior to the conflict, military activity had been steadily growing. However, following the commencement of hostilities in February of 2022, Arctic military activity has been reduced by nearly half. This shows the resources and attention that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has required.

It is also clear that the invasion has eroded away the concept of Arctic exceptionalism,<sup>1</sup> seemingly no longer applying as external geopolitical realities have solidified the securitization of the Arctic from the perspective of the eight Arctic Council member states.<sup>2</sup> This has been reflected in the sudden breakdown of cooperation between NATO and Russia both within and outside of the Arctic. This has been prominently represented by the sudden end of diplomatic and scientific cooperation as seen for many decades in cooperative bodies like the Arctic Council, among other Arctic institutions. As a response, the conflict in Ukraine has strengthened NATO's resolve in the Arctic and unified previously neutral hesitant states in Sweden and Finland.

Finally, NATO is using the conflict in Ukraine as an opportunity to bolster their

military and infrastructural capabilities within the Arctic. This can be seen in the revision of maritime strategies to restore Cold War-era doctrines with the focus on deterring and containing Russia and an emerging China. With the impacts of climate change acting as a threat multiplier, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has increased the intensity of climate change's consequences. Countries have been forced to reallocate resources and shift focus from climate mitigation and adaptation efforts to military security. These environmental impacts seek to act as barriers to effective militarization of the region and potentially challenge conventional applications of strategies.

## **2 Russian Military Strategy**

In recent years, Russian President, Vladimir Putin has made a concerted effort to increase the Russian military's presence in the Arctic region. This has included the construction of new military bases, the deployment of additional troops and hardware to the region, and the establishment of a new Arctic command (Paul 2022). Putin has also been working to increase the Russian civilian presence in the Arctic, along with energy and transportation infrastructure in part to support the military's increased activity in

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<sup>1</sup> Arctic exceptionalism

<sup>2</sup> United States of America, Russia, Canada, Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark

the region. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia had nearly completed its military modernization process in the Arctic (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2022).

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The Russian Arctic region acts as a key strategic location for the Russian military. The region is home to Russia's northernmost military base, the Northern Fleet. The Northern Fleet is a critical component of the Russian nuclear triad, which is designed to ensure the Russian nuclear deterrent is invulnerable to a first strike (Paul and Swistek 2022). The Northern Fleet is also responsible for patrolling the Arctic Ocean and protecting Russian economic interests in the region, which are significant given the region's vast natural resources. The Northern Sea Route (NSR) acts as key transportation corridor and security barrier. In 2019, new air-defense missile systems, and S-350 surface-to-air missile launchers were installed along the NSR near Novaya Zemlya and Franz Josef Land among other archipelagos in the Arctic. (Bertelsen 2022)

From the Russian perspective, the decision for Finland and Sweden to formally join NATO in response to Russian actions in Ukraine is seen as a significant security

challenge and destabilizer in the region. This is because it increases the instance for misperceptions, accidental confrontation, or escalation of a security dilemma (Sergunin 2022). From Sweden and Finland's perspectives, this was a necessary defensive geostrategic measure to secure their long and short-term national defense interests. Despite these efforts, Russia argues that it does not want to further militarize the region upon the completion of its modernization process but focus on preserving peace and cooperation. Furthermore, Russia perceives its actions as working to maintain the regional power balance rather than deploying offensive potentials (P. W. Lackenbauer 2022).

### **3 NATO Military Strategy**

The NATO Arctic military strategy following the Russian invasion of Ukraine is focused on closing the capability gap by investing in new assets, scientific research, increasing military presence and visibility, and maintaining strong cooperation among Arctic allies to deter and contain any potential Russian aggression in the region. This includes both naval and air assets, as well as troops on the ground (Odgaard 2022). NATO is also working to improve its ability to operate in the Arctic, including in the event of a conflict. NATO has classified the region of both geostrategic and military interest due to the large proportion of Russian nuclear capabilities in the region. Furthermore, maritime chokepoints like the Greenland-Iceland-United

Kingdom (GIUK) gap and the chokepoint between Svalbard and Norway (Bear Gap) have come under mounting tensions due to the hostilities of Russia in Ukraine. Consequently, NATO strategists have recommended that Nordic states be tasked with leading alliance efforts to ensure sufficient situational awareness and reinforce regional resilience against adversarial behavior from Russia. (Buchanan 2022)

From a maritime security perspective, NATO has acknowledged that there is a need to update its Arctic/ High North strategy to reflect the dynamic geopolitical environment. As a result, NATO has also called for a return to the Cold War-era Atlantic Command. This focuses on featuring the High North as a prominent

theatre for deterring and containing any Russian military aggression (Buchanan 2022). This has been exemplified by individual country strategies, like the recent U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region 2022. As stated within the strategy, the U.S. aims to “maximize our cooperation with Arctic Allies and partners to enhance our shared security and deter aggression in the Arctic, especially from Russia.” (The White House Washington 2022)

In addition, Norwegian Armed Forces have also raised their level of military preparedness to reflect the “most serious security policy situation in decades” as the Norwegian Prime Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre emphasized. Furthermore, Canada and the United States have invested heavily in the North American Aerospace Defense

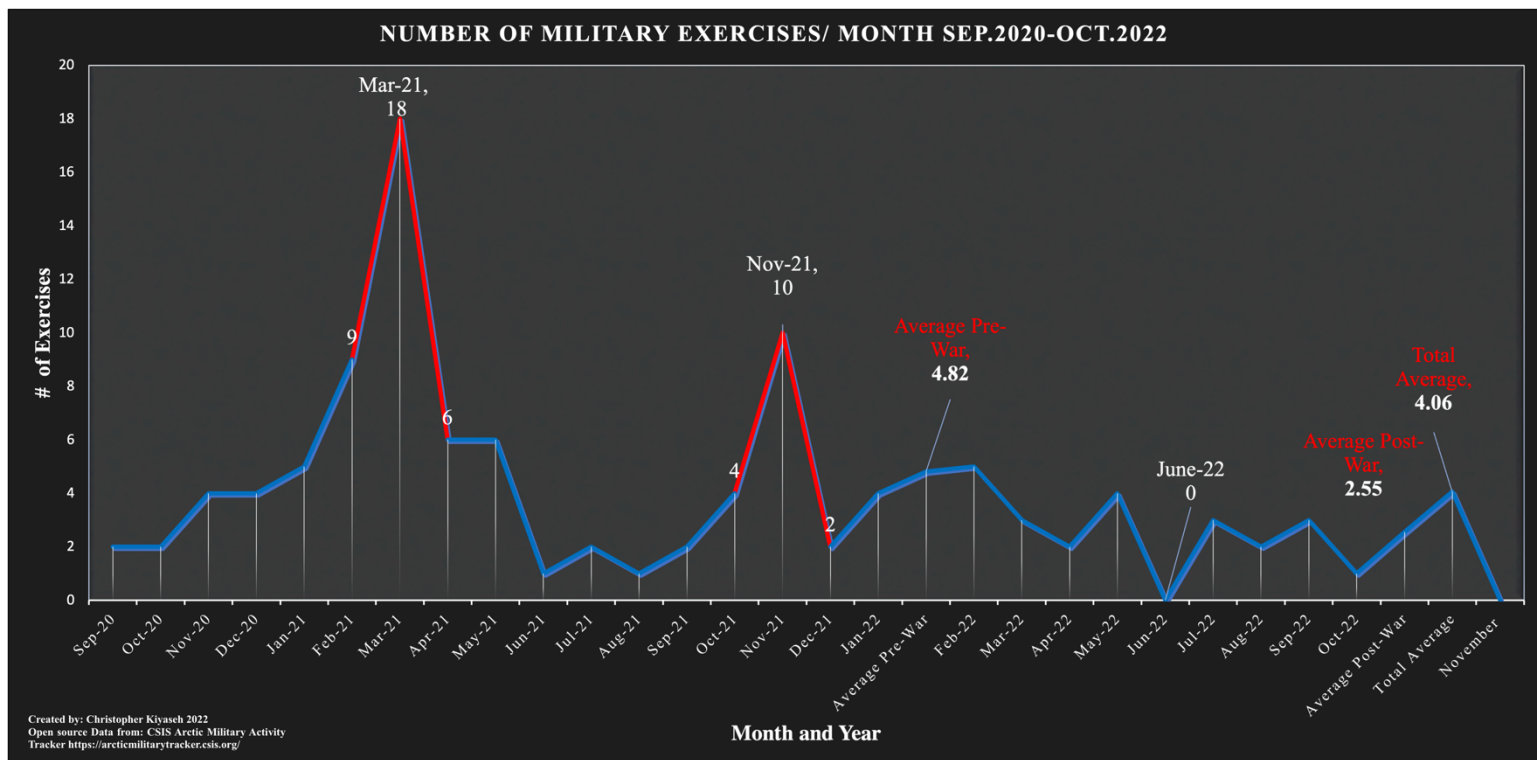


Figure 1: Created by: Christopher Kiyaseh 2022 using opensource data from CSIS Arctic Military Activity Tracker <https://arcticmilitarytracker.csis.org/>

Command (NORAD) and to ensure its modernization process makes NORAD a leader of NATO’s northern and western approaches. (NATO 2022) In addition, the Swedish Chief of Defense has recently called for the increase of its military presence in the northern regions of the country. Particularly, through establishing a new unit in the Kiruna municipality of upper Norrland (Gunn-Bye 2022). Finland has also reacted in a similar sense, stating that the Finnish Arctic policy “needs to adapt to the realities of a new Cold War”. (Humpert 2022)

#### 4 Analyzing the state of military activity

While NATO and Russia have outlined their respective militarization strategies in reports or documents, their behavior in the

Arctic beyond these constraints can be understood through military exercises and drills. These military activities give a unique insight that either contradicts or confirms the countries’ strategies and allows the measurement of military competition and capabilities in the Arctic. The Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C. based think-tank created the Arctic Military Activity Tracker (AMAT) which acts as an up-to date repository of strategic competition in the Arctic (Choi and Harris 2022). AMAT covers six different classifications of military activity and includes overflight, exercises and training, missile test, deployment, air defense operations, and air policing. Each event is dated, geolocated, categorized, and labeled with the type of equipment/capability recorded along with

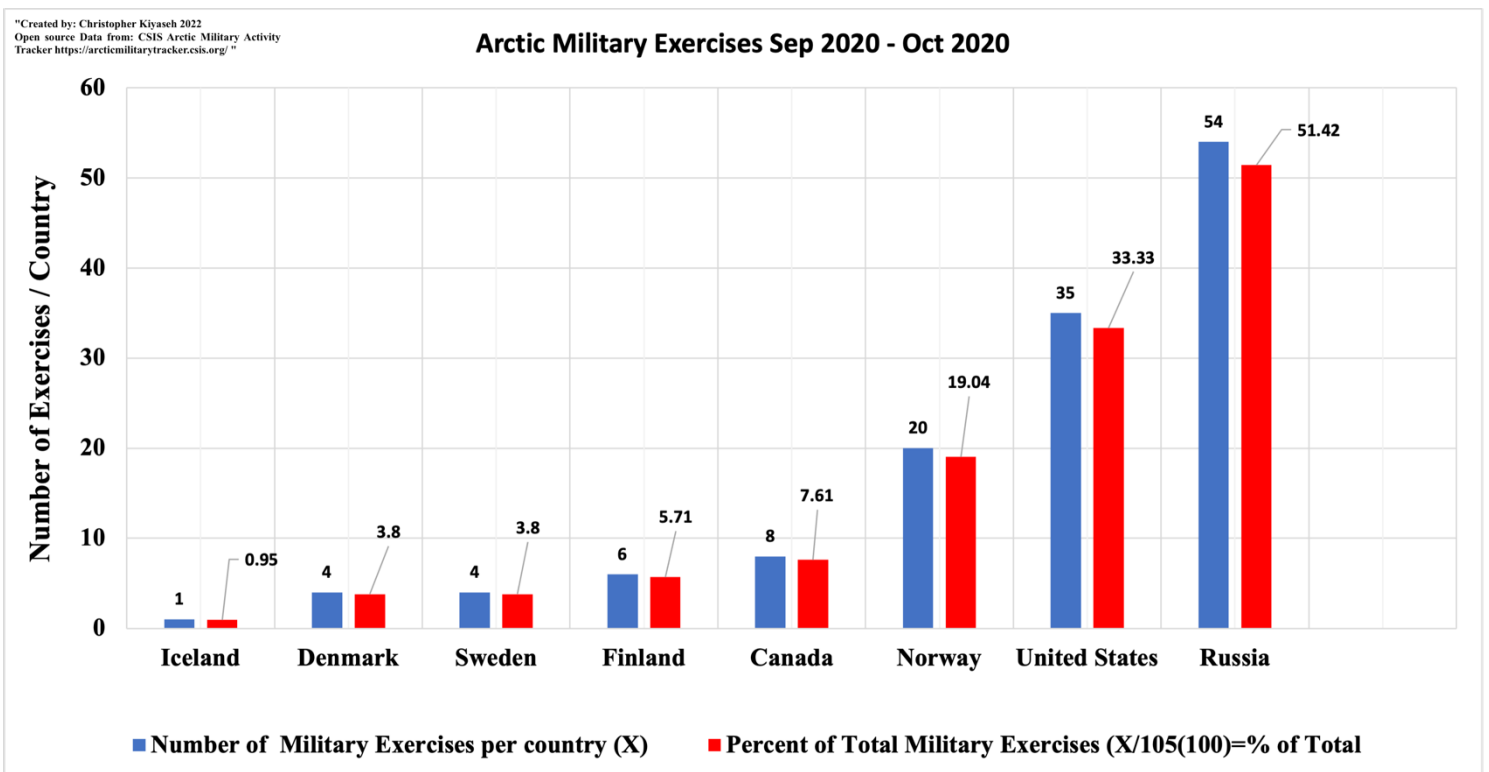


Figure 2: Created by: Christopher Kiyaseh 2022 using open-source data from CSIS Arctic Military Activity Tracker <https://arcticmilitarytracker.csis.org/>

participating countries and hyperlinked sources.

In total, between September 2020 and October of 2020, there have been 105 events recorded, with the following classifications, 53 exercises and training, 24 overflight, 15 missile test, 11 deployment, 1 air defense operation, and 1 air policing (figure.1). A noteworthy statistic is viewing the average monthly frequency of these exercises before and after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, (Sep.2020-Jan.2022) there were 4.82 exercises a month on average. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Feb.2022-Oct.2022) there were 2.55 exercises per month on average, for a difference of 2.27 exercises or approximately a 47% decrease.

This data offers a unique angle that illustrates the impact of the Ukrainian war on both NATO and Russian military resources. It also gives insight into how other conflicts outside of the Arctic could act as a potential decelerator to further military activity. In addition to viewing military activity on a country-by-country basis (figure 2) can expand our understanding of who is responsible for the most military action in the region. In proportion to the total 105 exercises, Russia is responsible for 54 activities or approximately 51% as opposed to the United States with 35 activities or 33%. This shows that there is not only a perceived gap within military capability but a visible

gap in military activity within the Arctic region between Russia and the United States. It also shows that the United States cannot stand alone in the Arctic, nor can other NATO allies. Notice that Combined NATO Military activities (78) outweigh Russia's (54) by a significant margin as opposed to being measured individually. If NATO is to navigate external shocks and potential spillover effectively and efficiently from Russia or China intervening in the Arctic, that they must do so as a coherent and singular unit.

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## 5 Looking forward

From this analysis, it can be understood how external geopolitical conflict can impact militarization and military activity within the Arctic region. It also allows us to pause and ponder the differences between observed military activity and perceived capabilities of NATO and Russia. From these conclusions, it is evident that further research needs to be conducted in this realm to inform both policymakers and scholars alike on the importance of accurately representing adversarial tensions or lack thereof. Perhaps the greatest danger in the Arctic is misperception, which in the past has contributed to the acceleration of several global conflicts.

Furthermore, the need for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the militarization strategies of different countries within the Arctic are crucial. Social scientists and policymakers must collaborate with natural scientists and climatologists in joint or multilateral efforts in order to accurately inform military strategies and associated risks. Understandably, the findings in this article could have been strengthened by additional data on other military capabilities in the Arctic but is limited due to the unavailability of the data or classified nature of the information.

For example, tracking the quality and frequency of military bases in the Arctic or deployment of offensive versus defensive capabilities can contribute to a greater understanding of Arctic militarization. This would help to act as a preventative measure against overinflated military posturing from countries like China who continues to disruptively lay claim to the region as a "near-Arctic state". Inaccurate resource or land claims to the Arctic left unvetted can act as dangerous landmines in each nation's geopolitical strategies. This can increase the likelihood for accidental or unaccounted for reactions to imagined threats. Continued communication and diplomatic efforts across political, scientific, and military mediums are crucial to maintaining peace in the region and deescalating military buildup. As a final note, caution and careful calculation can be the greatest ally to each respective nation

when faced with dynamic and emerging threats.

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