



# Navigating Relations with Russia in the Arctic

## A Roadmap for Stability

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This policy brief is a product of CNAS' Transatlantic Forum on Russia, an initiative designed to spur coordination between the United States and Europe on Russia-related policy across multiple issue areas. The policy briefs are informed by a series of dialogues with leading experts from both sides of the Atlantic. The analysis and recommendations in the memo reflect areas of agreement between U.S. and European experts. Where there are notable differences in perspective, we highlight those to better enable policymakers to navigate fissures that can hinder coordination. We thank all the experts who contributed to such fruitful dialogue, especially Rebecca Pincus, Mathieu Boulègue, Lawson Brigham, and Mike Sfraga for their research memos.

### State of Play

Until recently, the Arctic was largely immune to the geopolitical tensions that play out between Russia and the transatlantic partners in other regions and on other issues. Indeed, the Arctic is one area where the United States and Russia, together with the other Arctic states, have engaged in quiet cooperation on issues including search and rescue, scientific research, and the environment. Such pragmatic cooperation has been possible in part because bilateral irritants are diffused by shared and cross-cutting interests among all eight Arctic states, as well as the region's multilayered governance regime.<sup>1</sup> However, climate change and the Arctic's melting sea ice have opened access and allowed for increased human activity, which, in turn, has amplified competition in the region. At stake are core national interests for the Arctic states, ranging from economic opportunities to security and stability. The region's growing importance and level of activity, alongside the lack of trust and limited dialogue on military issues between Russia and the United States, raise the risk of conflict and instability in the region.

For Russia, its part of the Arctic, including an increasingly accessible Northern Sea Route, is central to core national security concerns and an important pillar of the economy and future development. To secure its interests, the Kremlin has taken numerous actions, many of them military, in the Arctic that are of shared concern to the other Arctic nations and NATO.

**Restoring and expanding its Arctic military infrastructure.** In a sign of the importance the Kremlin assigns to the Arctic, in 2021 Russia's Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command was upgraded to the fifth military district, with the responsibility of defending the country's northern borders and Moscow's evolving interests in the Arctic.<sup>2</sup> The Russian government has also been working to refurbish and construct new bases and airfields on its Arctic offshore islands. It has deployed advanced radar systems along the coastline and outlying archipelagos as well as area defense weapons systems in the Arctic. Increased Russian militarization is particularly pronounced in the Northern Fleet bastion in the Kola Peninsula and Barents Sea region, heightening the sense of threat felt among Nordic nations.

The U.S. Department of Defense and many experts assess that Russia views its military investments in the region as primarily intended to defend critical infrastructure and natural resources and control shipping through the Northern Sea Route.<sup>3</sup> Other analysts argue that Russian military activity in the Arctic is being underestimated and that the military buildup can no longer be seen solely as defensive, given that Russia's military posture in the Arctic facilitates its capacity to project power within and beyond the region.

**Intensifying its military activity.** Russia has increased the tempo and scope of its Arctic military activities, including exercises such as Umka-2021. These Arctic exercises have become more provocative, incorporating elements such as live-fire training and amphibious landings. Additionally, large Russian surface vessels, submarines, and long-range aviation flights are becoming more active. For instance, intercepts of Russian aircraft off Alaska have been more frequent in 2021 than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Russian submarine activity in the European Arctic (High North) is also at levels not seen since the Cold War. Russia has also carried out increasing numbers of reconnaissance patrols and missile launches in the Arctic, including the test-launching of a Tsirkon hypersonic missile from a submarine for the first time in October 2021.<sup>4</sup>

**Engaging in "gray zone" activities.** Russian actors are engaging in a wide range of malicious activities below the threshold of conflict. Russia has on a number of occasions jammed GPS signals, for instance during NATO's Trident Juncture exercise in November 2018, and in ways that disrupt life in parts of northern Norway. Such GPS jamming represents an aviation safety issue and interferes with emergency services on land. Norwegian and Alaskan fishing vessels are inconvenienced by Russia's frequent and often short-notice closures of maritime areas due to military activities. Such activities also take place in the Norwegian Sea, well south of the Arctic Circle. Russia is also using its presence in the Svalbard archipelago to put pressure on Norway and occasionally challenge Norway's exercise of coastal state jurisdiction in the surrounding waters. NATO has grown more concerned about the possibility that Russia could cut or tap submarine telecommunication cables that are critical for high-speed internet access to communities, which could increase tension and sow confusion in the Arctic and beyond.<sup>5</sup>

Concurrent with the rise in security tensions, paradoxically, cooperation between Russia and the seven other Arctic states continues. In the past two decades, there has been an unprecedented level of international dialogue and cooperation on Arctic maritime affairs, focusing on marine safety and environmental protection. Many entities have been engaged in these achievements: the Arctic states; the Arctic Council and its working groups; the Arctic Coast Guard Forum; international organizations such as the International Maritime Organization, International Hydrographic Organization, and World Meteorological Organization; and partnerships among Arctic and non-Arctic states culminating in arrangements such as the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean (CAO Fisheries Agreement). These collective efforts have addressed a wide range of environmental security and safety challenges associated with greater Arctic marine access and increasing marine operations and shipping. Russia has productively engaged across each of these cooperative ventures. The United States, too, has been a low-key leader, employing its diplomats and agency maritime experts to craft new Arctic governance and regulatory measures through broad, international consultation.<sup>6</sup>

Looking forward, Russia's current chairmanship of the Arctic Council, which continues until May 2023, presents a unique window of opportunity for Arctic diplomacy. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in his statement to the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in May 2021, articulated two key Russian goals: an Arctic leaders' summit and the resumption of military dialogue between the Arctic Chiefs of Defense. Russia likely seeks to use its chairmanship to be seen as a leader, on par with the United States, and to frame itself as a defender of Arctic stability. These are not inconsequential aims, and the United States and its Arctic allies should use this opportunity to work with the Russian chair to reduce tension and set in motion small steps toward stabilizing relations in the region.

## Shared Transatlantic Interests and Potential Points of Divergence

The United States and its European allies and partners—as well as Russia—share the overarching objective of ensuring peace and stability in the Arctic. In the wake of the June 2021 Geneva summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, U.S. President Joe Biden noted that he talked with Putin about ensuring that the Arctic remain “a region of cooperation rather than conflict.”<sup>7</sup> To this end, the United States and Europe share the following objectives for their relations with Russia in the Arctic:

***Increasing lines of communication with Russia, especially on hard security issues.*** After his meeting with his Russian counterpart General Valery Gerasimov, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley said that the United States and Russia should expand their military contacts to “avoid miscalculation and reduce the possibility of great power war.”<sup>8</sup> The Arctic is perhaps the most obvious venue for such efforts. By increasing transparency, openly discussing their concerns with Moscow, and putting in place mechanisms for deconfliction, the United States and its European allies can reduce the risk of conflict in the Arctic.

***Preserving functioning areas of cooperation with Russia.*** Although addressing security concerns is a high priority, it must not come at the expense of existing forms of cooperation with Russia. Mechanisms for ensuring human security in the region, such as search and rescue operations, are essential and must not be compromised. For this reason, the transatlantic partners should avoid bringing military security issues into such existing forums as the Arctic Coast Guard Forum. Looking forward, the Arctic member states, including Russia, face myriad challenges—ranging from climate change to the health and well-being of local communities to the preservation of fisheries and protection of the marine environment—and will need to share expertise to address them.

***Maintaining transatlantic cohesion.*** There are already ongoing bilateral and trilateral initiatives between Arctic member states and Russia. Nonetheless, the United States and Europe must stay united in their approach. This will require, among other things, a common picture of what is occurring in the region, to be achieved through greater intelligence sharing as well as a coordinated road map on the way ahead.

Despite these areas of transatlantic agreement, there exist differences of opinion both between the United States and Europe and among European states about how best to engage Russia in the Arctic. Potential points of divergence include:

***The role of dialogue.*** Despite transatlantic consensus on the need to increase communication with Russia, there is disagreement about the appropriate role of dialogue. Whereas some experts see dialogue not as a reward but as critical to maintaining stability, others assess that the resumption of dialogue that was halted post-2014 would be seen as a concession that the Kremlin would simply pocket. Instead, the latter argue, any engagement with Russia should be conditional on concrete changes in Moscow's actions at least in the Arctic if not also in Europe.

***NATO's role in the Arctic.*** Some analysts argue that NATO must respond to Russia's military posture, which threatens member states such as Norway, by maintaining a presence in the European Arctic and by demonstrating its capability to fight there, thereby strengthening deterrence. NATO's 2030 report, for example, calls for increased situational awareness across the European Arctic (High North).<sup>9</sup> Others,

however, worry that involving NATO in Arctic affairs would contribute to the Arctic's militarization. NATO therefore must calibrate its efforts to deter Russia in the European Arctic so that it avoids contributing to instability there.

## Recommendations

There are two sets of actions the United States and its Arctic allies and partners should pursue as they engage Russia in the Arctic: increasing guardrails on the relationship while also taking advantage of the considerable interests shared by the transatlantic partners and Russia. Enhancing guardrails will be critical to advancing the stability and predictability of relations with Russia that the Biden administration seeks. Any conflict with Russia in the Arctic would derail Washington's efforts to focus on more pressing challenges, such as China, climate, and COVID-19. There are few, if any, other areas where interests between the United States, its allies and partners, and Russia overlap to such an extent. The Arctic, therefore, provides opportunities for small doses of cooperation and other confidence-building measures with Russia that, over time, can be expanded upon in other areas and in other domains.

### **Increase guardrails: Restart military-to-military discussions between the Arctic nations.**

The Arctic nations need a venue to discuss security-related issues. Ongoing militarization, combined with the lack of trust between Russia and the other Arctic member states, uncertainty about intentions, and absence of mechanisms to manage an accident or incident, creates an unacceptably high risk of conflict in the Arctic. Arctic security and stability require consultation and cooperation; the United States and Europe should cooperate with Russia when doing so is in their national security interest, as it is in the Arctic. The following two recommendations provide an opportunity to enhance guardrails by addressing military and security issues in the Arctic.

***Develop a military (air, land, and sea) rules-of-the-road agreement for the Arctic.*** To provide transparency for military operations in the Arctic and to improve predictability and stability there, the United States and Russia should begin bilateral negotiations to draft and sign an agreement that lays out rules of the road for military conduct in the Arctic region. Other nations that deploy military forces to the Arctic region could sign on to the agreement once completed. At a minimum, such an agreement should seek to define unacceptable behavior and should stipulate that dangerous maneuvers, simulated attacks, turning off transponders, jamming communications, and the endangering of innocent civilians cannot be tolerated.<sup>10</sup>

As a part of such an agreement, the United States and Russia should create a bilateral Arctic security consultative commission to discuss any allegations that one of the parties had breached the agreement. All signatories to the agreement could participate as observers. The Arctic security consultative commission would be a consultative mechanism, not a standing body.

The rules-of-the-road agreement, with its commission and confidence-building measures described below, would bring stability, predictability, and transparency to the Arctic and lessen the chance that an accident would spark conflict or that the countries' misperceptions of one another would spark an Arctic arms race and a conflict spiral. Confidence-building measures such as annual or biannual consultations, snap inspections, and the presence of observers at exercises would ensure that there would be no surprises by either side in the security realm in the Arctic.

***Restart the Arctic Chiefs of Defense forum without Russia and condition Moscow's reentry on progress on the rules-of-the-road agreement for the Arctic.*** The Arctic member states, without Russia, should restart an Arctic Chiefs of Defense (CHODs) forum. The CHODs should meet twice a year to discuss Arctic security and share intelligence and views to help maintain a common picture of Arctic security dynamics. Importantly, the United States and its Arctic allies and partners should clearly communicate to Russia the potential for Russia to rejoin the CHODs forum, as well as the conditions Moscow would

have to meet to do so. The United States and its Arctic allies and partners should condition Russia's participation on the Kremlin's constructive engagement in drafting the rules-of-the-road agreement for the Arctic and its constructive engagement in an Arctic security consultative commission.

In conjunction with the Arctic CHODs, Arctic member states should also restart the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, which met at the one-star level as a means to support the Arctic CHODs effort operationally. This effort, too, would not include Russia unless and until other cooperation had been achieved.

**Build on shared interests: Enhance cooperation with Russia on Arctic maritime safety and security.**

The United States and its Arctic allies and partners should look to build on ongoing cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, especially in areas of practical maritime interest. While most of the following recommendations are being advanced in international organizations, each effort would benefit from high-level political support, especially greater diplomatic engagement and the allocation of attention and resources from individuals and agencies that bring broad maritime expertise.

**Implement and enforce the International Maritime Organization's Polar Code.** The transatlantic partners and Russia should develop and agree on a joint plan of action for implementation and enforcement of the International Maritime Organization's International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (IMO Polar Code), which entered fully into force in July 2018 and focuses on standards for ship safety, pollution prevention, and training. Both Arctic- and non-Arctic-flag (maritime) states are essential to the success of such an effort. In addition to increasing efforts to implement and enforce the IMO Polar Code, participating parties could also develop a more specific agreement on the sharing of real-time Arctic marine traffic information across borders in the Arctic Ocean. Such data could support enforcement of the code by both port and flag states. The data would also provide a holistic picture of changing marine traffic in the Arctic Ocean. Such an active, open, and joint domain awareness arrangement could build trust and greatly enhance cooperation in Arctic marine safety and environmental protection.

**Cooperate in support of the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement.** The Central Arctic Ocean (CAO) Fisheries Agreement provides opportunities for joint research and expeditions to support one of its key objectives: better understanding the marine ecosystem of the Central Arctic Ocean and its potential for expanded and sustainably managed fisheries. Another important aspect of the agreement is that it includes the transatlantic partners, Russia, and non-Arctic states that have global fisheries interests (notably China, Japan, and South Korea). In particular, the parties (nine states and the EU) will negotiate a long-term research plan to explore the Central Arctic Ocean; joint expeditions using advanced icebreaking research ships are very feasible and expected. Russian, the transatlantic partners', and other national research assets (including satellites, autonomous vehicles, ships, aircraft, and more) will be needed to conduct joint scientific operations in this remote marine region.

**Invest in support of existing treaties.** One of the challenges of fully implementing the Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic (2011) and the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic (2013) has been the continuing gap in marine infrastructure. Arctic marine infrastructure development (for communication systems, ports, navigation systems, hydrography/charting, icebreakers, environmental observations, response capacity, and more) is closely linked to both marine safety and environmental protection through prevention and response. Maritime experts from Russia and the transatlantic partners should explore feasible investment mechanisms and strategies, including joint state investments and public-private partnerships, perhaps with the maritime industry. Any infrastructure investments to support the Arctic treaties must address the potential short- and long-term environmental, economic, and social impacts on the marine and coastal regions and their communities.



**Support an international Arctic observing system.** A robust Arctic observing system is required not only to monitor (for climate research) the profound ongoing environmental transformations that are driven by anthropogenic climate change, but also to support the effectiveness and safety of expanded marine operations and shipping. Such a system or network of observations has been discussed at the Arctic Council, at Arctic Science Ministerial meetings, and in the Arctic research community. The Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Science Cooperation was signed at the Arctic Science Ministerial meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska, on May 11, 2017, and could provide additional impetus for coordinated observations; the treaty wisely includes language calling for links between its parties and non-parties. The sheer size of the Russian exclusive economic zone and potentially extended continental shelf under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea Article 76 suggest that Russia should link with other states to develop a comprehensive Arctic observing system. The transatlantic partners and Russia should jointly establish and support/fund routine observational transects (oceanographic and atmospheric), focusing on the Central Arctic Ocean. Transatlantic partner states and Russia should jointly study the feasibility of public-private partnerships, especially with the commercial satellite industry, for funding an international observing network.

## Conclusion

Russia's current chairmanship of the Arctic Council provides a window of opportunity for the United States and its transatlantic allies to both address the challenges that Russia poses in the Arctic and to engage with Moscow on maritime safety and research. Because the ground for cooperation with Russia is so limited, efforts to explore the potential for engagement with Moscow in the Arctic take on greater importance. By strengthening guardrails and engaging where interests overlap with Russia's, the transatlantic partners can advance their shared objective of ensuring that the Arctic remains a region of cooperation rather than conflict.

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