



# How Sweden and Finland's membership in NATO affects the High North

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## 1

### Introduction

With Sweden and Finland as new members of NATO, the Arctic region becomes more prominent for the Alliance. Traditionally, the Arctic—or the “High North” as it is called in the NATO context—has primarily been managed by Arctic states such as Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Canada, and the United States. NATO as an organization has not been involved, aiming to create room for maneuver for the smaller states geographically close to Russia and to avoid the risk of unwanted escalation between Russia and the United States. Additionally, the absence of military threats in the High North after the Cold War has naturally minimized NATO's role.

However, this dynamic is changing now that Sweden and Finland have become new members of the Alliance. Referring to Russia's military buildup in the region, as well as China's ambitions to increase its investments and presence there, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has announced that “NATO must increase its presence in the Arctic.”<sup>1</sup> The chairman of NATO's Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer, pointed out in October 2023 that NATO could not be naïve about certain actors' intentions in the area and that the organization must be prepared for the unexpected.<sup>2</sup>

With their memberships, Sweden and Finland strengthen NATO's geopolitical position in the High North, which poses both challenges and opportunities for Sweden within the Alliance. This policy paper describes how NATO's presence in the High North is currently evolving, and then discusses the interests and issues that may form the basis of Sweden's orientation in NATO as an Arctic state. Furthermore, it addresses the value of building upon established defense cooperation with Finland and other Nordic allies.

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- 1 “USA und NATO Wollen Präsenz am Nordpol Starten,” Welt am Sonntag, August 28, 2022, [https://www.welt.de/newsticker/dpa\\_nt/infoline\\_nt/politik\\_ausland\\_nt/article240718019/USA-und-Nato-wollen-Praesenz-am-Nordpol-staerken.html](https://www.welt.de/newsticker/dpa_nt/infoline_nt/politik_ausland_nt/article240718019/USA-und-Nato-wollen-Praesenz-am-Nordpol-staerken.html).
- 2 “Arctic Remains Essential to NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture,’ Says Chair of the NATO Military Committee,” NATO, October 22, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_219529.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_219529.htm).

2

## NATO and the High North

“  
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- Jens Stoltenberg

”

NATO’s new “Strategic Concept” from 2022, which serves as NATO’s guiding document for the coming decade, mentions the High North only once, referring to it as a “strategic challenge” with regard to Russia’s ability to disrupt allied troop enhancements and freedom of navigation in the North Atlantic. Given the document’s scope, this could be interpreted as limited interest in the region. However, it is the first time that the High North has been addressed at all in a strategic concept, indicating an increased significance. A shift in this direction was already noticeable in NATO a few years ago, initiated by allies in the High North who wanted to draw the attention of other allies to the security developments in the region, including Russia’s military modernization and assertive behavior, as well as China’s increased presence. Although not part of the NATO Supreme Allied Commander’s area of responsibility, Canada is active in this context (hence, there is a distinction between the Arctic and the High North, which refers to the European Arctic). Traditionally, Canada has opposed a NATO role in the High North, arguing it is a national concern. Denmark has been cautious in supporting NATO activities in the region to avoid disturbing dialogue with Russia, while Norway has sought a more prominent role for the Alliance and worked with the United States to incorporate Arctic aspects into North Atlantic perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, the Danish intelligence service released an assessment that the security situation in the High North was expected to become less stable due to increased military activity, as well as the possibility of Russia and China strengthening their cooperation in the region.<sup>4</sup> While the foundation for the High North as a low-tension environment remains in the absence of immediate disputes and conflicts over territory or resources, uncertainty and lack of trust have increased.

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and the significantly deteriorated security situation in Europe have accentuated this trend of security policy reshaping in the High North, in which climate change also plays a prominent role. “We have always said that we have low tensions in the High North,” Stoltenberg stated at a November 2023 meeting with the Nordic Council in Oslo. “Unfortunately, that is no longer true, at least not in the same way.” This was the first time that NATO’s principal representative expressed this clearly. NATO has increased its presence to show that the High North “is not a place where NATO can be threatened or forced to act against its interests,” he continued.<sup>5</sup>

3 Jim Danoy and Marisol Maddox, “Set NATO’s Sights on the High North,” Atlantic Council, October 14, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/nato20-2020/set-natos-sights-on-the-high-north/>.

4 Eilis Quinn, “Denmark Promises Increased Focus on Arctic as It Takes over NORDEFSCO Chair,” Barents Observer, December 29, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/12/denmark-promises-increased-focus-arctic-it-takes-over-nordefco-chair>.

5 “No Longer Low Tension in the High North, Says NATO Secretary General,” High North News, November 1, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/no-longer-low-tension-high-north-says-nato-secretary-general>.

### 3

## Deterrence and defense

NATO is a defense alliance, which means its interest in the High North is primarily linked to opportunities and risks regarding the defense of its member allies. The following developments are of particular importance in this regard.

Since 2022, NATO has assessed that Russia poses the most significant and direct threat to the security of the allies and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, including the High North.<sup>6</sup> In recent years, Russia's military capabilities in the Arctic have increased through modernization and new construction of military facilities, improved command structures, and the introduction of modern weapon systems and long-range technology. Although Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to a significant reduction in the presence of Russia's army in the High North, its maritime and air forces are assessed to be mainly untouched. Russia's military activities in the region are estimated to be at about the same level as before the war, with extensive patrols by maritime and air forces, military exercises, submarine activity in the North Atlantic, and routine use of electronic warfare such as Global Positioning System disruption against NATO allies.

The "defense bubble" that Russia has built over the past decade, through its bastion defense to protect the base area on the Kola Peninsula and the Northeast Passage, has direct implications for the defense of NATO territory in the north, as well as for the protection of supply and troop reinforcement chains and underwater infrastructure in the North Atlantic, which risk disruption by Russian submarines and ships stationed in the region. Russia's strategic nuclear capability, which is largely stored in the base area on the Kola Peninsula and projected through submarines, also has direct implications for NATO's defense considerations.

Just as Gotland risks being drawn early into a conflict if Russia attempted to expand the defense bubble from Kaliningrad to secure operational freedom, the allies' northern territories risk being subjected to similar Russian attempts to expand the bubble from the Kola Peninsula. In a conflict, Russia also has an interest in securing free passage to the North Atlantic and making it difficult for NATO allies to operate there, with Russian submarines a key resource in this effort.

China has increased its activities in the High North, primarily in the areas of economics and research, although some military exercises with Russia have also taken place, albeit not at an advanced level. Chinese investments in dual-use resources such as satellites, sensors, and icebreakers, in combination with high ambitions to be present in the region, give NATO reason to closely monitor developments, but this has not led to any military planning.

6 "NATO Strategic Concept 2022," NATO, March 3, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_210907.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_210907.htm).

Based on its comprehensive assessment, the Alliance is shaping two main objectives in the High North: to deter Russia and to defend its allies. This is what the secretary general means when he emphasizes that the High North “is not a place where NATO can be threatened or forced to act against its interests.”<sup>7</sup> This is also why Stoltenberg emphasizes the importance of increased presence. Whoever is present has power and influence. Being absent when other global actors increase their presence in the High North can be interpreted as NATO having insufficient ambitions, which can weaken its ability to protect the allies in accordance with Article 5.



Strategic points of the Arctic region include the GIUK Gap and Svalbard archipelago. Shaded areas depict Russia's Bastion Strategy: darker shaded areas represent an ambition of control; lighter shaded areas represent an ambition of denial. *Courtesy of Kauko Kyöstiö, House of Commons Defence Committee 2018.*

7 “No Longer Low Tension in the High North, Says NATO Secretary General.”

## 4

### Military tasks and capabilities

NATO's military planning and activities in the High North can be broadly categorized in terms of presence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and combat capability.

Unlike on its eastern flank, NATO's increased presence in the High North has not been achieved through permanent troop presence, but through increased patrols and exercises, such as the extensive military exercise Trident Juncture 2018 and the Norway-led Cold Response 2022 and 2024.<sup>8</sup> These exercises aim to both enhance combat capabilities and send strong signals about NATO's commitment to the region and its security. NATO has also strengthened its command structure in the area through the establishment of Joint Forces Command Norfolk in Virginia.

Surveillance and reconnaissance are another central area for NATO in the High North in which further investments need to be made. The High North encompasses vast areas, few people, and sparse settlements. Activities can be difficult to detect due to darkness and ice. NATO has limited common surveillance resources, with the core being Airborne Warning and Control System planes, which means that individual allies' investments are crucial for the collective capability—such as Norway's and the United Kingdom's P-8 reconnaissance aircraft, which are also used for submarine hunting. It is worth noting that Germany has also purchased P-8 aircraft. In addition to hardware investments, the exchange of data and information between allies can be intensified to strengthen common situational awareness.

NATO is also working to strengthen the capability to fight in the High North under the harsh climate conditions that prevail there. Challenges include ensuring that soldiers and their equipment can withstand cold, snow, and darkness, as well as ensuring that infrastructure, communication, and logistics function properly and can be maintained. More broadly, operational plans for the High North and related capability development are evolving, as the regional defense plans that NATO adopted at the Vilnius summit in 2023 are now being implemented.

<sup>8</sup> The United States had permanently rotating troops in Norway from 2017–2020, and the United Kingdom has recently established Camp Viking in northern Norway as a base for British operations in the Arctic.

5

## Increased consensus and understanding

On the political side, NATO has strengthened its focus on developments in the High North by creating opportunities for allies to learn more about the conditions in the region and how the security dynamics are shaped in that context. This has been achieved, for example, through expert briefings to NATO ambassadors and by convening a meeting of security policy chiefs in Iceland. Although developments in the High North have not yet been a separate agenda item at any foreign ministerial meeting, that is likely to change.

With military resources tied up in the war in Ukraine, Russia increasingly relies on hybrid operations and threats of nuclear use (“nuclear posturing”), a kind of psychological warfare. NATO emphasizes the importance of being able to confront Russia’s ongoing hybrid warfare, even in the High North. A series of recent sabotage incidents have highlighted the significance and vulnerability of the extensive underwater infrastructure in the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea, which constitutes energy and data flows of great importance to the Alliance.

For instance, the sabotage of two Nord Stream gas pipelines from Russia to Germany in September 2022 highlighted the challenges European governments face in deterring and defending against hybrid threats in the underwater domain.<sup>9</sup> The gas pipelines were damaged by two explosions, initially suspected to be caused by Russia, though Western intelligence agencies have found evidence suggesting potential Ukrainian involvement.<sup>10</sup> More recently, in October 2023, damage to the Balticconnector gas pipeline and a data cable connecting Finland and Estonia raised suspicions of deliberate Russian actions. Formal attribution remains unconfirmed but, because the probable culprit is the anchor of a Chinese-flagged commercial ship bound for Russia, Russian involvement remains likely.<sup>11</sup> A communications cable between Sweden and Estonia was partially damaged around the same time.<sup>12</sup>

This has prompted NATO to establish a unit at headquarters specifically monitoring underwater infrastructure issues, as well as a communication center in the United Kingdom where private actors can report incidents. Additionally, Finland has increased its undersea surveillance capabilities, while NATO has intensified air and maritime patrols in the Baltic Sea and deployed additional minehunters to the region.<sup>13</sup> The High North is also being incorporated into NATO’s relatively new and growing work on climate security, as climate change disproportionately affects the Arctic and fundamentally alters the conditions for security and military operations.

9 Sean Monaghan, et al., “NATO’s Role in Protecting Critical Undersea Infrastructure,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 19, 2023, 2, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/natos-role-protecting-critical-undersea-infrastructure>.

10 “Who Is Sabotaging Underwater Infrastructure in the Baltic Sea?” Economist, October 22, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/10/22/who-is-sabotaging-underwater-infrastructure-in-the-baltic-sea>.

11 Charlie Duxbury and Claudia Chiappa, “Northern Europe’s New Naval Priority: Submarine Sabotage,” Politico, January 2, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/northern-europe-naval-priority-submarine-sabotage/>.

12 “Who Is Sabotaging Underwater Infrastructure in the Baltic Sea?”

13 Ibid.

6

## Challenges for NATO in the High North

As NATO turns its strategic gaze toward the High North, a number of challenges emerge. Indeed, the United States, whose resources always carry significant weight within the Alliance—especially in the High North—has updated strategies for the Arctic but lacks many of the resources required for their implementation. Increased presence is hampered by the fact that the United States only has one functioning icebreaker, compared to Russia's forty. The United States also suffers from deficiencies in communications equipment, infrastructure, and cold-weather combat capability.<sup>14</sup> Despite increased US focus on the High North, it is not prioritized on an overarching level, as evidenced by budget allocations and responsibility distribution within the US administration, where the Arctic is not treated as a separate region. Overall, investments in resources to ensure NATO's ability to meet its Article 5 commitment in the High North are costly, and it remains to be seen if the political will exists to match these.

On the political side, despite ongoing efforts, there is still limited awareness among the broader circle of allies about the security situation in the High North and the complexity surrounding security and defense in the region.

Politically, there is also a balancing act in the governance of Arctic issues within NATO. While the Arctic allies seek increased engagement from others, they want to maintain some national autonomy to navigate the complex international situation. NATO's deterrence should be firm, credible, and balanced. It should signal commitment, unity, and willingness to defend, without appearing aggressive. Communication channels with Russia must remain open to avoid misunderstandings and unwanted escalation.<sup>15</sup> Major powers such as the United Kingdom, France, and, to some extent, Germany have significant political and military resources to contribute but are not Arctic states, which can pose challenges. On the other hand, regional groupings within NATO that risk excluding other allies are not appreciated. This goes against the fundamental spirit of the Alliance and its 360-degree approach to threats and security.

14 Kehrt Sonner, "US Military Can't Sustain Arctic Operations, 'Let Alone Dominate,' Experts Say," War Horse, January 18, 2024, <https://thewarhorse.org/us-military-cant-sustain-arctic-operations-experts-say/>.

15 Karsten Friis, et al., eds., "Navigating Breakup: Security Realities of Freezing Politics and Thawing Landscapes in the Arctic," Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and Wilson Center, January 2023, 59, 62–63, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/MSR%20ASR%20Input%20Report%202023%20Navigating%20Breakup.pdf>.

## 7

### Sweden's approach—some starting points

With Sweden and Finland in NATO, the geopolitical center of gravity shifts northward within the Alliance, and the Nordic region gains a clearer and more cohesive profile. Because all Nordic allies are also Arctic states, the Nordic circle constitutes the natural hub for Sweden.

While it is important to be inclusive—not only toward other Arctic states like Canada and the United States, but also more broadly—there is acceptance within NATO that the Nordic countries lead issues related to the High North. In principle, it should be possible for all allies to monitor and express views on NATO's engagement in the High North. Informal regional groupings can drive progress, but the door must remain open to others.

The Nordic countries have long collaborated on Arctic issues, not least in the Arctic Council.<sup>16</sup> The goal of maintaining the High North as a low-tension area characterized by stability remains, shaping a common Nordic perspective. Similar sentiments are found in US and Canadian Arctic strategies. Russia is also assessed to fundamentally share this goal, as such an environment serves its extensive economic interests due to the region's natural resources.

However, it is challenging to maintain the low tension level when Russia behaves unpredictably and increasingly confrontationally. Russia's increased cooperation with China is also an uncertainty. "Can we still say we have low tensions without sounding naive?" an experienced Nordic diplomat asked when commenting on this topic.

Swedish initiatives regarding NATO in the High North could include the following.

- To create a stronger strategic outlook on the High North, in line with Swedish and Nordic interests, NATO should conduct a comprehensive assessment of the threat picture with the assistance of the International Staff, International Military Staff, and the committee structure, similar to the approach taken for Baltic security in 2015.<sup>17</sup> Such an approach should be broad and include both political and military aspects, as well as the hybrid dimension. The process would involve all allies and provide them with an opportunity to support the analysis. This is in line with the ambition to strengthen NATO's strategic consultations. Such an analysis could be embraced by the North Atlantic Council, for example, at the level of foreign ministers. It could then be regularly reviewed and updated.

16 In its construction, the Arctic Council does not work with military security.

17 Anna Wieslander, "NATO Must Engage in the Arctic," Defense One, September 16, 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/09/its-time-nato-arctic/159887/>.



- During such a process, Sweden can continue to offer lectures and briefings by experts on the High North, as Sweden has successfully done within NATO on the topic of Russia, which remains sought-after expertise within the Alliance. The offer can be made not only in NATO headquarters but in training sessions for officials from allied countries conducted at the NATO School in Oberammergau, the George C. Marshall Center in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, and the NATO Defense College in Rome. Sweden should also continue to invite representatives from allied countries on study visits to Sweden to increase awareness of High North-related issues.
- In the military domain, Sweden should continue to ambitiously offer advanced training and exercise opportunities in Arctic environments, in close cooperation with Nordic allies. The UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force and bilateral defense cooperation with the United States provide frameworks for qualified development in this regard. Exercises and training are crucial to increase interoperability and readiness, as well as to strengthen the capacity of allies to operate in cold-weather conditions.
- Sweden and the Nordic allies should develop the preparedness and capability to operate in the High North, without being too dependent on the United States in the initial stages. Initiatives in which the Nordic countries pool resources, such as the joint Nordic combat aircraft and the Swedish-Finnish battlegroup, should therefore be further developed within the framework of NATO's new regional plans and capability processes.
- Increasing the exchange and deepening cooperation between allies regarding surveillance, intelligence, and reconnaissance in the High North should be a priority area linked to capability development in accordance with NATO's capability process.
- The command structure for the High North is not fully developed, and Sweden should continue to be actively involved in alignment with the Nordic allies. The Swedish approach to supporting JCF Norfolk with personnel and military resources is important, so that the question of to which command Finland and Sweden should belong can have a long-term solution.

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