



RUSSIA IN THE HIGH NORTH

Russian Strategy and Escalation Risks in the High North
After the Russia-Ukraine War

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About This Report

In this report, we examine Russian strategic objectives, threat perceptions, and military posture in the High North with an emphasis on changes since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war. We also assess the risk of escalation in the region, including the identification of potential escalation scenarios, and discuss implications related to the postwar reconstitution of the Russian armed forces and Russian military strategy in the coming years.

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Summary

In recent decades, the High North has played an increasingly important role in Russia's strategic thinking. The region—which hosts an array of Russian military capabilities, including many of the country's nuclear assets—also provides a rich resource base for the Russian economy. The High North offers a gateway to strategically important sea lines of communication and transit routes that Russia expects will become increasingly contested because of the effects of climate change. Meanwhile, the accession of Finland and Sweden to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—on April 4, 2023, and March 7, 2024, respectively—has more than doubled Russia's land border with the NATO alliance and led some observers to characterize the Baltic Sea, which Russia can access only via Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg, as a "NATO lake." This has contributed to changes in Russian perceptions of the risk of escalation and military confrontation in the High North, prompting shifts in Russia's stated strategic objectives and military posture in the region. In light of these changes in the security environment, we examine in this report the Russian perspectives on the High North and consider the risk of escalation in the region in the coming years.

Approach

We reviewed primary and secondary source information—in the Russian, English, Danish, and Norwegian languages—on Russian strategic objectives, threat perceptions, and military posture in the High North. This included official statements by Russian officials, Russian military scholarship, Danish and Norwegian military scholarship on and other Western analyses of Russian military strategy and Russian interests in the Arctic region, and Russian and Western media sources and industry reporting.

We also conducted discussions with experts on Russia, including researchers at think tanks; intelligence, foreign affairs, and defense officials; and government advisers in the United States, Norway, Sweden, and Finland. In these discussions, which were conducted between October 2024 and February 2025, we aimed to better understand regional perspectives on Russian military strategy and to identify plausible escalation scenarios in the High North.

Using this research, we identified a variety of escalation scenarios involving a conflict between Russia and the West in the High North. We conducted two virtual workshops with participants from the United States, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom who have expertise in Russian foreign and national security policy or Arctic affairs. Workshop participants analyzed potential Russian interpretations of and reactions to the incidents depicted in a variety of scenarios to identify factors that could contribute to escalating—or mitigating—the situation.

Key Findings

- Russia's overarching strategic objectives in the High North include **defending its national security and territorial integrity** by preserving strategic stability, guarding against perceived NATO encirclement, and protecting critical infrastructure in the region; **asserting its status as a major power**, including through its claims to control the Northern Sea Route, its presence in Svalbard, and its submissions to the United Nations regarding the extension of its continental shelf; and **protecting the economic potential of its Arctic resource base**, including through industrial development and infrastructure development, which it sees as critical to maintaining state revenue in an economy that is still largely dependent on hydrocarbon extraction.
- From a military perspective, **Russia's top priority in the High North is bolstering and protecting its strategic deterrent**, which has become increasingly important given changes in Russian nuclear doctrine since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war.
- Since summer 2022, when official discussions of Finnish and Swedish membership in NATO were initiated, **Russian threat perceptions in the High North have been heightened** in recognition of two trends: (1) NATO enlargement, which has increased the risk of escalation and military confrontation in the High North, and (2) the growing interconnection of military and economic threats in the High North.
- Despite these heightened threat perceptions, **the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war will be a more pressing priority for Russia**. The war in Ukraine has led Russia to divert personnel and capabilities from the High North, which has resulted in the hollowing out of the country's Arctic-capable ground units. The conclusion of hostilities in Ukraine would allow Russia to reinvest in its military posture in the High North.
- Our analysis of potential escalation scenarios suggests that, even after the conclusion of the Russia-Ukraine war, **Russia might be disinclined to militarily escalate a crisis or confrontation that arises from an incident that is limited to the High North**. Although the High North is no longer the low-tension area it might have been in the past, it no longer generates the types of flashpoints that can easily escalate into war. However, **sudden changes in U.S. and allied military activities might be perceived as more threatening than incremental improvements in capability** that are perceived as a continuation of anticipated trends.
- The region will also **serve as an important litmus test for assessing Russian priorities in the years after the end of the Russia-Ukraine war**. Having deprioritized investments in the High North in favor of funding its war with Ukraine, the extent to which Russia makes planned or new investments in the High North could signal whether Russia intends to honor the termination of hostilities in Ukraine as the beginning of a durable peace in Eastern Europe. **The economic potential of the High North could then be harnessed to bolster Russia's economy as it transitions to a peacetime economy at the conclusion of combat operations in Ukraine**.
- Despite Russia's diplomatic isolation since February 2022, **opportunities still remain for limited cooperation between Russia and U.S. allies in the High North**, and our analysis

suggests that, despite Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, the High North remains a region of relative stability.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent decades, the High North has played an increasingly important role in Russian strategic thinking, due in part to trends related to shifting geopolitical dynamics in the region and the effects of climate change.¹ The region—which hosts an array of Russian military capabilities, including many of the country’s nuclear assets—also provides a rich resource base for the Russian economy. The High North offers a gateway to strategically important sea lines of communication and transit routes that will become increasingly contested because of the effects of climate change. Meanwhile, the accession of Finland and Sweden to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—on April 4, 2023, and March 7, 2024, respectively—has more than doubled Russia’s land border with the Alliance and led some observers to characterize the Baltic Sea, which Russia can access only via Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg, as a “NATO lake.” This has contributed to changes in Russian perceptions of the risk of escalation and military confrontation in the High North, prompting shifts in Russia’s stated strategic objectives and military posture in the region.

In light of these changes in the security environment, we examine in this report the Russian perspectives on the High North and consider the risk of escalation in the region in the coming years.

Research Questions

Our first goal in this analysis was to understand how Russian threat perceptions in the High North have changed since the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO and how the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war—and efforts to reconstitute the Russian armed forces after the end of that conflict—might complicate Russia’s ability to achieve its strategic objectives in the region. Our second goal was to identify potential escalation scenarios in the High North and assess how Russia would likely perceive and respond to these scenarios. We asked the following questions:

- What are Russia’s strategic objectives in the High North, and do ongoing and planned military reconstitution efforts serve these strategic objectives?
- What military capabilities has Russia historically had in the High North, and how has Russia’s military posture in the region changed since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war?

¹For the purposes of this report, we use the term *High North* to refer to the European Arctic region stretching from Greenland to the border of Norway and Russia near the Barents Sea. The related term *Arctic* can be defined in different ways, the most common referring to areas north of the Arctic Circle, which is at a latitude of about 66.3 degrees north. At times, we use such phrases as the *Russian Arctic*, *Russia’s Arctic zone*, or the *Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation* (AZRF) when describing Russia’s strategic objectives in and policies toward the High North and the *Arctic* when discussing policies in the broader geographic region.

- How has Russia historically viewed threats emanating from the High North, and how have Russia's threat perceptions in the High North changed in recent years?
- What are the most-concerning potential escalation scenarios involving a conflict between Russia and the West in the High North, and what are the implications for Russian decisionmaking after the war in Ukraine ends?

Research Methodology

In the first stage of developing this report, we reviewed primary and secondary source information—in the Russian, English, Danish, and Norwegian languages—on Russian strategic objectives, threat perceptions, and military posture in the High North. This included official statements by Russian officials, Russian military scholarship, Danish and Norwegian military scholarship on and other Western analyses of Russian military strategy and Russian interests in the Arctic region, and Russian and Western media sources and industry reporting.

As part of our analysis, we conducted discussions with experts on Russia, including researchers at think tanks; intelligence, foreign affairs, and defense officials; and government advisers in the United States, Norway, Sweden, and Finland. In these discussions, which were conducted between October 2024 and February 2025, we aimed to better understand regional perspectives on Russian objectives and military strategy in the High North.

Identification and Development of Potential Escalation Scenarios

Using this research, we then turned to potential escalation scenarios in the High North. We identified (1) past events in the Arctic that have prompted a hostile Russian reaction; (2) existing sources of tension between Russia and other countries in the Arctic, with a particular focus on those that do not have well-established mediating or resolution processes; and (3) broader patterns of Russian behavior in the High North.² Our discussions with experts from the United States, Norway, Sweden, and Finland also yielded insights into potential crisis scenarios and escalation pathways.

To identify key sources of tension in the High North, we started from the assumption that Russia would be particularly sensitive to any action or event that threatens the realization of its strategic objectives in the High North. We also considered more-recent developments that might influence Russian threat perceptions and likely Russian responses to regional challenges: the Russia-Ukraine war, which has aggravated long-standing tensions between Russia and other Arctic powers while draining Russia's supply of Arctic-capable ground forces in the High North, and the ongoing expansion of cooperation between Russia and China.

² This analysis drew, in particular, on two RAND reports: Stephen Watts, Bryan Rooney, Gene Germanovich, Bruce McClintock, Stephanie Pezard, Clint Reach, and Melissa Shostak, *Deterrence and Escalation in Competition with Russia: The Role of Ground Forces in Preventing Hostile Measures Below Armed Conflict in Europe*, RAND Corporation, RR-A720-1, 2022, Table 4.2 ("Conditioning Influence of Continuity on the Apparent Effects of U.S. Forward Posture"); and Stephanie Pezard and Ashley L. Rhoades, *What Provokes Putin's Russia? Deterring Without Unintended Escalation*, RAND Corporation, PE-338-A, January 2020.

In identifying scenarios for consideration, we sought to include scenarios involving both intentional changes in U.S. and allied behavior and scenarios involving accidents and unauthorized actions, such as environmental and technological disasters and actions by nongovernmental activists. Because of extreme weather conditions and multiple hazards that can limit visibility and maneuverability and extend response time, there is a high risk of accidents in the High North. It is also difficult to maintain situational awareness of events given the vast distances, harsh terrain, and communications limitations in the region. These natural and technical barriers have worsened with the reduction in communications between Russia and other Arctic nations since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.³ These factors not only increase the likelihood of an accident in the High North but also magnify the consequences if an accident does occur. We therefore sought to explore in our scenarios how environmental, communications, and policy factors might complicate efforts to manage tensions and control escalation.

The selected scenarios are intended to be illustrative rather than predictive. In other words, we sought to identify *plausible* scenarios but did not limit those under consideration to the *most-probable* escalation scenarios. We followed two additional rules in selecting scenarios:

- First, we sought to ensure the internal consistency of each scenario. We did not combine events or actions that could not logically happen together or that would contradict each other.
- Second, within each scenario, we sought to combine events and actions that have a high likelihood of taking place in conjunction with each other (in the sense that one happening increases the likelihood of the other one happening).

Our preliminary analysis identified 17 potential escalation scenarios. We selected a subset of those scenarios—implicating a variety of Russian military, political, and economic interests—for closer consideration in workshops held in February and March 2025. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the selected scenarios and identifies the Russian interests implicated in each scenario.

³ Some communications have been maintained at the operational level, such as between the Norwegian Coast Guard, U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), and their Russian counterparts.

Table 1.1. Workshop Scenarios

Scenario	Interests Implicated								Other Critical Developments and Dynamics	
	Defend National Security and Territorial Integrity			Assert Status as a Major Power		Promote Economic Development				
	Preserve Strategic Block NATO Encirclement	Protect Infrastructure	Northern Sea Route (NSR)	Svalbard	Continental Shelf					
1: A U.S. freedom-of-navigation operation (FONOP) forces Russia's hand.	X	X	X			X		X		
2: An ecological catastrophe demands quick action.	X	X				X			X	
3: Russian continental shelf extension claims are denied.				X		X			X	
4: Yamal's liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure is under threat.		X				X		X		
5: A Russian commercial vessel resists arrest in the Fisheries Protection Zone (FPZ).				X		X				
6: A Norwegian environmental group infiltrates Russia's floating nuclear plant.		X				X				
7: Enhanced submarine surveillance occurs on a Greenland-Norway line.	X	X	X							
8: A U.S. bomber goes astray.	X		X						X	
9: A U.S.-Russia maritime collision occurs.							X		X	
10: Finland improves its precision strike capability.	X	X	X							
11: A submarine accident fuels distrust and disinformation.		X							X	

Scenario Workshops

We considered these scenarios in two workshops that we convened virtually in February and March 2025. The workshop participants were 20 subject-matter experts based at 13 institutions in the United States, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.⁴ They were recruited based on their expertise in Russian foreign and national security policy or Arctic affairs. The workshop participants were asked to describe Russian perceptions of and responses to a series of potentially provocative incidents involving the United States, U.S. allies, and nongovernmental actors in the High North. Each scenario was set in spring 2027. By providing insight into Russian threat perceptions, sensitivities, and possible response options, as well as the military, political, economic, and environmental factors that could either heighten or dampen potential Russian threat perceptions and responses, the workshops allowed us to identify activities, disputes, and other friction points that would make deconfliction particularly difficult or increase the likelihood of unwanted escalation. The workshops served a secondary purpose of validating the plausibility and relevance of the scenarios identified in our preliminary analysis.

The purpose of the workshops, as explained to participants, was to identify potential escalation pathways by

- assessing how Russia might perceive and respond to specific U.S. and allied activities in the High North
- identifying potential Russian courses of action for responding to perceived provocations in the High North
- identifying factors that might heighten or dampen Russian threat perceptions and responses.

In each workshop, moderators facilitated a rapid-fire discussion of the selected scenarios, with participants considering as many scenarios as possible during a two-and-a-half-hour period. The moderators introduced each scenario and then led participants in a discussion of Russian perceptions of and responses to the events described. There was not a set duration for the discussion of each scenario; rather, the length of discussion was dependent on participant interest and the complexity of the scenario. Five scenarios were addressed during the first workshop in February 2025, and six additional scenarios were discussed during the second workshop in March 2025. Each workshop lasted three hours.

To isolate the implications of the specific events or activities described in each scenario, participants were asked to assume a continuation of existing regional and international trends. They were further asked to state whether Russia's response would be contingent on shifts in the regional or international security environment. We asked participants to make the following assumptions regarding the international security environment for each scenario:

- Combat operations in Ukraine have ceased and the reconstitution of Russian military capabilities is ongoing, although substantial progress toward stated reconstitution goals has been made.

⁴ The first workshop, held in February 2025, had eight participants; the second workshop, held in March 2025, had 12 participants. We sought to maximize the number of institutions represented in each workshop. Some workshop participants were affiliated with the militaries of their countries.

- Relations between Russia and the European Union remain strained.
- Russia has continued to engage in military, economic, and political cooperation with China.
- The United States is still a major contributor to NATO, and U.S. forces remain postured in Europe.

We asked participants to make the following two additional assumptions regarding the regional security environment for each scenario:

- The Arctic Council is now chaired by Denmark and Greenland. It maintains a low level of activity at the working group level, but political-level meetings have not yet resumed.
- Russia and China are still undertaking occasional joint deployments of their navies and coast guards in the Arctic.

For each scenario, we posed the following questions to participants:

- How might Russian leaders interpret this event? What Russian interests are implicated?
- How might Russia respond? What would Russia's objectives or priorities be in responding?
- Could this escalate any further?
- What would have made this scenario more dangerous (e.g., more unpredictable or likelier to escalate)?

In a concluding section of each workshop, we asked participants the following three additional questions:

- Which of the scenarios are the likeliest to occur?
- Which scenario would be the most difficult to manage?
- Are there other high-risk or high-probability scenarios we should consider?

After each workshop, we sent participants a questionnaire in which we asked them to rank the scenarios presented in the workshop (1) from most to least plausible and (2) from most to least likely to lead to military confrontation.

Report Structure

The remainder of this report proceeds as follows. In Chapter 2, we detail Russian strategic objectives, threat perceptions, and military posture in the High North. We also consider how Russia's existing military posture and ongoing military reconstitution efforts align with its strategic objectives. In Chapter 3, we analyze 11 potential escalation scenarios in the High North, including Russian perceptions of and responses to each scenario. In Chapter 4, we conclude with a discussion of our key findings and the implications of our analysis.

Russia's Strategic Objectives, Threat Perceptions, and Military Posture in the High North

What are Russia's goals in the High North? How does Russia view threats in the High North? And how have Russia's goals and threat perceptions informed its military posture in the region? To address these overarching questions, we first provide an overview of Russia's strategic objectives in the High North. Next, we examine Russian threat perceptions related to the High North, with a focus on how the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has led to an evolution of Russia's threat perceptions. We conclude by detailing Russia's military capabilities in the region, including how the structure and organization of Russian forces and capabilities in the High North have changed since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war and Russia's goals for its future force in the region. This analysis is intended to provide insight into whether Russian activities and investments in the High North, particularly since February 2022, align with stated strategic objectives, and to assess what this means for Russia's military reconstitution and demobilization processes after the end of the war in Ukraine.

Russia's Strategic Interests and Objectives in the High North

The High North and the broader Arctic region have long played a significant role in Russian strategic thinking and socioeconomic development. Official Russian strategic documents have identified Russian interests in the High North, the most-salient challenges and threats facing Russia in the region, and the strategic objectives that underpin Russian activities and investments in the High North. We focus on the following four official documents—published between 2020 and 2023—that, taken together, provide insight into Russia's strategic objectives in the High North:

- *Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035*, which we refer to as the *Arctic Policy*, was published in March 2020 and amended in February 2023.⁵

⁵ President of Russia, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 05.03.2020 g. No. 164: Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktyke na period do 2035 goda" ["Decree of the President of the Russian Federation Dated 05.03.2020 No. 164: On the Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035"], March 5, 2020a.

- *Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Provision of National Security for the Period up to 2035*, which we refer to as the *Development Strategy*, was published in October 2020 and amended in February 2023.⁶
- *Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, which we refer to as the *Naval Doctrine*, was published in July 2022.⁷
- *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, which we refer to as the *Foreign Policy Concept*, was published in March 2023.⁸

These strategic documents underscore the importance of the High North in Russian policy, including both foreign and domestic policy. The *Foreign Policy Concept*, for example, provides a prioritization of Russian objectives across different regions. The Arctic is listed second, behind only Russia's Near Abroad and ahead of China, Europe, and the United States.⁹ Similarly, the *Naval Doctrine* describes the Arctic Basin as a "vital area of national interest" for Russia. The *Naval Doctrine* provides its own prioritization scheme, which lists the Arctic as its most strategically important region for the Navy, ahead of the Atlantic region (which includes the Azov, Baltic, Black, and Caspian seas and the Pacific Ocean).¹⁰

The assignment of high priority status to the Arctic in these strategic documents reflects its importance not just to Russia's national security but also to the country's economic and broader societal goals. This is highlighted in the *Development Strategy*, which notes that more than 80 percent of the country's natural gas resources, 17 percent of its oil reserves, and major strategic mineral reserves come from the AZRF, which is depicted in Figure 2.1. The *Development Strategy* also underscores the role of the NSR as an increasingly important transit corridor for both domestic and international trade, noting that the importance of this route to global trade will only grow, given the anticipated effects of climate change.¹¹ The *Development Strategy* further emphasizes that the Arctic is home to indigenous groups and culturally important heritage sites while providing a potential base for large-scale investment projects that can facilitate both regional and national economic growth. Finally,

⁶ President of Russia, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 26.10.2020 g. No. 645: O Strategii razvitiya Arkticheskoy zony Rossiyskoy Federatsii i obespecheniya natsional'noy bezopasnosti na period do 2035 goda" ["Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 26.10.2020 No. 645: On the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Provision of National Security for the Period up to 2035"], October 26, 2020c.

⁷ President of Russia, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 31.07.2022 g. No. 512: Ob utverzhdenii Morskoy doktriny Rossiyskoy Federatsii" ["Decree of the President of the Russian Federation Dated 31.07.2022 No. 512: On Approval of the Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation"], July 31, 2022.

⁸ President of Russia, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 31.03.2023 g. No. 229: Ob utverzhdenii Kontseptsii vnesheyn politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii" ["Decree of the President of the Russian Federation Dated 31.03.2023 No. 229: On Approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation"], March 31, 2023b.

⁹ President of Russia, 2023b.

¹⁰ President of Russia, 2022.

¹¹ One expert interviewed for this study noted that, although Russian discourse on the effects of climate change often trends toward denial or skepticism, Russia is in fact "much more prepared than we think" for climate change. Russian defense and national security officials are "aware that climate change will influence conditions" and have made preparations and investments accordingly. However, the expert further acknowledged that the Russian state has a "dysfunctional administration, so it [was] not impossible that they will fail" (expert on Russia, videoconference interview with the authors, November 25, 2024).

the *Development Strategy* notes that, because key structures of Russia's strategic deterrence forces are in the High North, the region is a critical linchpin in preventing aggression against Russia and its allies.¹²

Figure 2.1. Map of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation



List of Territories

1. Murmansk Oblast	4. Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug	7. Komi Republic
2. Nenets Autonomous Okrug	5. Republic of Karelia	8. Krasnoyarsk Krai
3. Chukotka Autonomous Okrug	6. Arkhangelsk Oblast	9. Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)

SOURCE: Adapted from Troy J. Bouffard, "Authoritarian Administration: An Environmental Paradox in the Russian Arctic," in Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot, eds., *Arctic Yearbook 2018: Arctic Development in Theory and in Practice*, 2018, p. 395.

The importance of the High North for Russian national security, economic development, and societal goals informs the identification of Russia's core national interests in the region, according to the *Arctic Policy*. These core interests include ensuring Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, developing the AZRF as a strategic resource base, developing the NSR, promoting the region's

¹² President of Russia, 2020c.

socioeconomic development, protecting the environment, and preserving the Arctic as a “territory of peace, stability, and mutually beneficial partnership.”¹³

Russian strategic documents also outline key challenges to the country’s interests in the High North. These challenges stem from both internal factors and external factors. In terms of internal or domestic challenges, Russia sees such trends as population decline and the slow pace of infrastructure development as threats to socioeconomic well-being in the region. In terms of external challenges, Russia is particularly sensitive to foreign actors’ economic, political, legal, informational, and military efforts to undermine and discredit Russia’s territorial claims, particularly those related to the NSR and Russian activities in the Arctic.¹⁴ The *Arctic Policy* further highlights how foreign military buildups pose danger by increasing the risk of conflict in the region.¹⁵

The *Arctic Policy* enumerates a wide variety of strategic objectives intended to counter these challenges and advance Russia’s interests in the region. These objectives encompass the social, economic, political, and military domains, but they can broadly be understood as efforts to ensure Russia’s sovereignty over its territory, including the NSR; defend its national security; and promote stable socioeconomic development. In the military domain, Russia’s stated Arctic objectives include increasing the combat capabilities of its armed forces; constructing and modernizing military infrastructure; and improving integrated control over air, surface, and undersea activities. Other objectives specifically address border security, including the necessity of upgrading border control infrastructure, improving air space intelligence, and constructing a modern fleet of aviation-capable ice-class vessels and aircraft.¹⁶

Beyond the military domain, the *Arctic Policy* enumerates a variety of strategic objectives intended to advance socioeconomic development in the region. These objectives include the provision of quality health care, education, housing, and social infrastructure for Russia’s Arctic population.¹⁷ But as some experts have highlighted, even these ostensibly peaceful pursuits nonetheless serve Russia’s security interests by increasing the effectiveness and sustainability of Russian military operations in the High North. These socioeconomic objectives are intended to provide for the populations that constitute and support Russia’s Arctic military presence. Additional stated objectives blur the line between civilian and military functions, including the expansion of Russia’s fleet of icebreakers and other vessels, as well as the development of such dual-use infrastructure as ports, rail lines, airports, and landing fields.¹⁸

Later amendments to the *Arctic Policy* generally preserve the objectives outlined previously, but they suggest that Russia’s strategic outlook has increasingly moved away from an approach that emphasizes cooperative multilateral engagements with other Arctic states. The original *Arctic Policy*, released in 2020, characterized “strengthening goodwill bilateral relations with the Arctic States” as

¹³ President of Russia, 2020a.

¹⁴ President of Russia, 2020a; President of Russia, 2022.

¹⁵ President of Russia, 2020a.

¹⁶ President of Russia, 2020a.

¹⁷ President of Russia, 2020a.

¹⁸ Pär Gustafsson, “Russia’s Ambitions in the Arctic Towards 2035,” Swedish Defence Research Agency, October 2021.

one of Russia's primary objectives in the region.¹⁹ In the amended 2023 version of the *Arctic Policy*, this sentiment was downgraded, with the updated document merely stating that "building bilateral relations with foreign states" was a priority for Russia and explicitly adding that these relationships would take "into consideration the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic."²⁰ The same paragraph removed references to multilateral regional fora, such as the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council.²¹

Taken together, these strategic documents suggest that Russia has the following three overarching strategic objectives in the High North, which reflect military, political, and economic interests:

- Russia seeks to **defend its national security and territorial integrity** by preserving strategic stability, guarding against perceived NATO encirclement, and protecting critical infrastructure in the region.
- Russia seeks to **assert its status as a major power**, including through its claims to control the NSR, its presence in Svalbard, and its submissions to the United Nations regarding the extension of its continental shelf. These efforts serve Russia's economic interests while also enhancing Russia's prestige.
- Russia seeks to **protect the economic potential of its Arctic resource base**, including through industrial development and infrastructure development that it sees as critical to maintaining state revenue in an economy that is still largely dependent on hydrocarbon extraction.

Russia's Threat Perceptions in the High North

In this section, we provide a baseline assessment of Russian threat perceptions in the region, which have undergone a substantive shift in Russia since the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO.²² Importantly, the enlargement of NATO has not substantially changed Russian perceptions of the strategic orientations of Finland and Sweden.²³ Russia does, however, view the Alliance's expansion as escalatory and perceives that primarily the United States has initiated and driven this expansion. NATO enlargement has contributed to Russian perceptions that the High North has been transformed from a zone of peace and cooperation to a region marked by intense rivalry and military tension.²⁴ Although Russia deems the prospect of direct NATO aggression in the region unlikely in

¹⁹ President of Russia, 2020a.

²⁰ President of Russia, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 21.02.2023 g. No. 112: O vnesenii izmeneniy v Osnovy gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2035 goda, utverzhdennyye Uzakom Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 5 marta 2020 g. No. 164" ["Decree of the President of the Russian Federation Dated 21.02.2023 No. 112: On Amendments to the Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035, Approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation Dated March 5, 2020 No. 164"], February 21, 2023a.

²¹ President of Russia, 2023a.

²² Our analysis in this section draws principally on Russian military scholarship and Russian-language expert commentary and media sources.

²³ As a Finnish defense official explained, Russia has "always seen Finland [and Sweden] as a threat," and observers "should not overemphasize NATO membership" as shaping Russian threat perceptions (Finnish defense official, interview with the authors, Helsinki, Finland, February 10, 2025).

²⁴ V. N. Konyshov and A. A. Sergunin, "Voyennaya Bezopasnost' V Arktike: Novyye Ugrozy Dlya Rossii" ["Military Security in the Arctic: New Threats for Russia"], *Lomonosov World Politics Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2024.

the near term, the initiation of official discussions regarding Finnish and Swedish membership in NATO in summer 2022 led to important shifts in Russian threat perceptions.²⁵

Russia's Foundational Threat Perceptions Related to NATO in the High North

Throughout the post-Soviet period, Russian observers have characterized NATO's military presence in the High North as a threat to Russia's defensive posture in the region and, in particular, to Russia's ability to defend its nuclear deterrent capability in the Kola Peninsula.²⁶ This perception has persisted, as evidenced by a 2021 article in which a Russian military expert characterized the potential for military escalation in the region as stemming primarily from NATO's military buildup and increased activity in the High North.²⁷ Russian military scholarship has described this perceived threat in terms of three key areas of concern: (1) NATO efforts to advance the logistical and operational capabilities of the Alliance in the High North, (2) the advancement of NATO forces toward Russia's borders, and (3) the growing level of interoperability among NATO member and nonmember states.²⁸ Russian military experts generally acknowledge their country's weakened conventional deterrent relative to the NATO alliance in the High North, with an overarching perception that the United States has been the leader of an expansionist agenda in the region.²⁹ The establishment of NATO's Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm, Germany, in 2018 and Allied Joint Force Command Norfolk, which is oriented to the North Atlantic sea lines of communication, in 2019 has been portrayed in Russian military scholarship as offensive in nature, designed to facilitate the transfer of U.S. troops to Europe and to ensure sustained transatlantic and underwater communications in the High North.³⁰ From Russia's perspective, this structure meant that NATO's military presence in the High North posed a threat to Russia's access to the region's resources.³¹

Historically, Russian threat perceptions in the High North largely centered on the prospect of a NATO military buildup along Russia's borders, which Russia viewed as a threat in light of the region's strategic importance and economic potential.³² Both official and nonofficial Russian sources

²⁵ I. O. Kostyukov, "Deyatel'nost' NATO kak glavnyy istochnik voyennyykh ugroz Rossii" ["NATO Activities as the Main Source of Military Threat to Russia"], *Voennaya Mysl' [Military Thought]*, May 2024, p. 35.

²⁶ Kostyukov, 2024, p. 29.

²⁷ Igor A. Arzhanov, "Russia, NATO and the Arctic: Rivalry, Security, Possible Scenarios of Geopolitical Competition," *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2021.

²⁸ Valery P. Zhuravel, "Novyye ugrozy natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossii v Arktike: problemy protivodeystviya" ["New Threats to Russia's National Security in the Arctic: Issues of Counteractions"], *Nauchnyye trudy Vol'nogo ekonomicheskogo obshchestva Rossii [Scientific Works of Russia's Independent Economic Society]*, No. 226, 2020.

²⁹ Kostyukov, 2024.

³⁰ Kostyukov, 2024.

³¹ Anatolii Khomkin and Timur Vil'danov, "Voyennyye ugrozy v Arktike" ["Military Threats in the Arctic"], *Arsenal Otechestva [Arsenal of the Fatherland]*, No. 5, 2021, p. 87.

³² President of Russia, 2020a. See also "Prognoziruyemye vyzovy i ugrozy natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii i napravleniya ikh neytralizatsii" ["Forecasted Challenges and Threats to National Security of the Russian Federation and the Direction of Neutralizing Them"], *Voyennaya akademiya General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation]*, 2021.

emphasized the growing risk of foreign interference in the region's resource base, as well as the threat posed by other countries gaining access to Russian maritime routes—notably the NSR.³³ These concerns included a fear of the internationalization of the NSR, the prospect of conflict related to the delimitation of the continental shelf and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the Arctic region, and the potential for other countries to establish more-permanent presences around the NSR in the future.³⁴

Therefore, the prevailing Russian view in recent decades has been that Russia was taking a reactionary or defensive stance in response to Western encroachment in the High North. Russian experts acknowledged that the focus of the *Arctic Policy* had shifted since the 2000s, when it was more focused on soft security issues, but justified this shift based on the growing threat to Russian interests in the region.³⁵ As explained in a 2021 report from the Russian General Staff's Military Academy, most existing and potential problems related to the High North could be resolved peacefully and without resorting to military force. From the General Staff's perspective, the United States' commitment to its Freedom of Navigation Program was the likeliest factor to exacerbate U.S.-Russia relations in the High North. The General Staff pointed in particular to U.S. and allied military exercises that were conducted in the Barents Sea within the Russian EEZ in 2020, as well as the potential for the United States to have a presence in the NSR in the future.³⁶ However, the General Staff considered the prospect of military escalation to be unlikely, characterizing the military situation in the region as "not critical."³⁷

Russia's Threat Perceptions in Response to Finland and Sweden Joining NATO

The initiation of official discussions of Finnish and Swedish membership in NATO in summer 2022 reinforced some of Russia's enduring threat perceptions in the High North related to NATO and NATO expansion. From a Russian perspective, Finland and Sweden's membership in NATO marked a substantial escalation in the High North and in the Baltic region, particularly from a military standpoint. Finland and Sweden both have established military and civilian Arctic capabilities and infrastructure.³⁸ Finnish and Swedish ground forces routinely train in Arctic conditions to

³³ Khomkin and Vil'danov, 2021, p. 86.

³⁴ V. V. Kruglov and M. A. Lopatin, "O strategicheskem znachenii Severnogo morskogo puti" [On the Strategic Meaning of the Northern Sea Route"], *Voennaya Mysl* [Military Thought], Vol. 29, No. 3, September 30, 2020.

³⁵ "Prognoziruyemye vyzovy i ugrozy natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii i napravleniya ikh neytralizatsii" [Forecasted Challenges and Threats to National Security of the Russian Federation and the Direction of Neutralizing Them"], 2021, pp. 462–478.

³⁶ "Prognoziruyemye vyzovy i ugrozy natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii i napravleniya ikh neytralizatsii" [Forecasted Challenges and Threats to National Security of the Russian Federation and the Direction of Neutralizing Them"], 2021, p. 471.

³⁷ Khomkin and Vil'danov, 2021, p. 86.

³⁸ Abbie Tingstad, Scott Savitz, Benjamin J. Sacks, Yuliya Shokh, Irina A. Chindea, Scott R. Stephenson, Michael T. Wilson, James G. Kallimani, Kristin Van Abel, Stephanie Pezard, Isabelle Winston, Inez Khan, Dan Abel, Clay McKinney, Yvonne K. Crane, Katheryn Giglio, Sherrill Lingel, and Lyle J. Morris, *Report on the Arctic Capabilities of the U.S. Armed Forces*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1638-1, 2023, pp. 32–33.

maintain specialized ice capabilities. Both countries also operate fighter aircraft and command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft capable of monitoring Arctic areas around Finland, Sweden, Norway, and the Gulf of Bothnia. Both countries also possess their own icebreakers for clearing ice in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Baltic Sea, although they are unarmed. Finland operates joint Swedish-Finnish-class icebreakers, while Sweden operates diesel-electric submarines in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Baltic Sea.³⁹

Because of these capabilities, even before Finland and Sweden joined NATO, Russia perceived both countries as aligned with the West and the NATO alliance. Therefore, Russian perceptions of Finland and Sweden's general alignment have not changed since their accession to NATO. Rather, Russia views the enlargement of NATO—with Finland and Sweden as new members—as symptomatic of an increasingly aggressive and interventionist alliance. Still, many Russian experts were surprised by the Finnish and Swedish decisions to abandon their long histories of neutrality and nonalignment.⁴⁰ As one expert explained, NATO enlargement was the “best thing that ever happened” because it “vindicated” Russia’s push to “secure [the] High North.”⁴¹ Russian strategic thinking had “mythologized . . . the threat of NATO expansion,” which “has become real.”⁴²

Russia was also already concerned about the growing level of interoperability among NATO member and nonmember states prior to Finland and Sweden joining the Alliance. In March 2022, for example, the growing cooperation and interoperability between NATO member and nonmember states on display during the Norwegian-led Cold Response exercise, which featured significant Swedish and Finnish participation, was of particular concern to Russian observers.⁴³ Interestingly, the Russian expert community has not explicitly linked the country’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine to the Finnish and Swedish decisions to join NATO, despite public statements to the contrary from both Helsinki and Stockholm.⁴⁴ Rather, Russian experts have framed NATO enlargement in the context of the United States’ and its allies’ efforts to transform the Arctic region into a potential theater of military operations.⁴⁵ From a Russian perspective, U.S. foreign policy increasingly prioritizes resolving international issues through the use of military force—both its own and that of its allies—while aiming to prevent Russia from reestablishing itself as a great power.⁴⁶ This accords with

³⁹ Tingstad et al., 2023, pp. 32–33.

⁴⁰ Yevgeniia V. Korunova, “Resheniye prinyato: dolgaya istoriya prisoyedineniya Shvetsii i Finlyandii k NATO” [“Decision Made: The Long Story of Sweden and Finland Joining NATO”], *Lomonosov World Politics Journal*, No. 3, 2024.

⁴¹ Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

⁴² Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

⁴³ A. V. Morozov, A. A. Zubarev, and A. D. Khryapov, “Sovremennyye vyzovy voyennoy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike” [“Contemporary Challenges to Military Security of the Russian Federation in the Arctic”], *Voennaya Mysl’* [Military Thought], No. 12, 2022.

⁴⁴ Tobias Billström, “Why Sweden Joined NATO—A Paradigm Shift in Sweden’s Foreign and Security Policy,” transcript of address given at Selwyn College, Cambridge, April 16, 2024; Trine Jonassen, “Finnish President Sauli Niinistö: ‘The End of the Era of Finnish Non-Alignment,’” *High North News*, January 4, 2023.

⁴⁵ “Arkticheskiye Ambitsii Nato Ne Ubyvayut” [“NATO’s Arctic Ambitions Are Not Going Away”], *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red Star], No. 190, December 16, 2024.

⁴⁶ N. A. Yevmenov, V. V. Puchnin, and Ya. V. Yeshchenko, “Osnovnyye tendentsii izmeneniya kharaktera i soderzhaniya voyennyykh ugroz Rossiyskoy Federatsii s okeanskikh i morskikh napravleniy” [“Main Trends in the Changing Nature and Content of Military Threats to the Russian Federation from Oceanic and Naval Directions”], *Voennaya Mysl’* [Military Thought], Vol. 32, No. 3, September 30, 2023.

the Russian view that the expansion of the NATO alliance has been initiated primarily by the United States.⁴⁷

The integration of Finland and Sweden has not only brought NATO military infrastructure closer to Russia's northwestern borders; it has also created a perception that NATO is encircling Russia in the Baltic region. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has effectively removed a buffer zone between Russia and the Alliance. The length of Russia's land border with NATO has doubled, and NATO now encircles nearly the entire Baltic Sea region, often referred to in Russian media as a "NATO lake."⁴⁸ As a result, Russia's Baltic Fleet in Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg have become completely isolated.⁴⁹ From a Russian perspective, these developments are evidence of NATO's increasingly confrontational stance toward Russia, which also heightens the risk of military conflict—including the potential for nuclear confrontation—with the West.⁵⁰ In Russian strategic thinking, this perspective has contributed to a shift toward conceptualizing the Barents Sea theater and the Baltic theater as connected.

Russian military scholarship suggests that Finland's accession to NATO raises unique concerns because of its proximity to Russia and the long shared border between the two countries. In Russian thinking, Finland represents a threat to Russian military capabilities on the Kola Peninsula, with Russian experts raising concerns about Finland's potential use of manned or unmanned aerial assets to obtain comprehensive intelligence on Russian nuclear assets.⁵¹ The logistical significance of the Kola Peninsula, including both its connection to the isolated Baltic Fleet and its railway connection to St. Petersburg—the only major transport artery suitable for the rapid transfer of large military equipment and components in the event of a conflict⁵²—only serves to heighten Russian threat perceptions.⁵³ Russian military experts are particularly concerned about the possibility of the further eastward extension of NATO assets, including the forward deployment of military capabilities, the permanent stationing of conventional assets, and the rotation of NATO forces in Finland and Sweden.⁵⁴ These concerns have been heightened by bilateral security agreements that permit the United States to deploy military resources and personnel to Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ P. Ye. Smirnov, "The Accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO: Geopolitical Implications for Russia's Position in the Baltic Sea Region," *Baltic Region*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2023.

⁴⁸ Kostyukov, 2024. p. 32.

⁴⁹ Konyshhev and Sergunin, 2024, pp. 127–152. See also President of Russia, 2022, points 22 and 27.

⁵⁰ See, for example, "Yadernaya konfrontatsiya v Arktike iz-za vstupleniya Shvetsii i Finlyandii v NATO rastet-uchenyi" ["Nuclear Confrontation in the Arctic Due to Sweden and Finland Joining NATO Is Growing—Scientist"], TASS, March 1, 2024.

⁵¹ E. Galimullin, Y. Matveenko, and M. Maiorov, "NATO in the Arctic: Evolution of the Alliance's Policy in the Region and New Security Challenges," *PolitBook*, No. 1, 2025, pp. 55–56.

⁵² Yevmenov, Puchnin, and Yeshchenko, 2023; Galimullin, Matveenko, and Maiorov, 2025, pp. 55–56.

⁵³ However, a contrary view suggests that Kola Peninsula's strategic importance to Russia is declining, due in part to emerging alternatives to submarine-based nuclear second-strike capabilities; developments in air-launched ballistic missile capabilities, which call into question the future of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) as delivery vehicles; and the increasing importance of nonnuclear deterrence in Russian strategic thinking.

⁵⁴ One example of such a concern that was reported in Russia at the end of 2024 is the NATO base in Lapland, which is under Swedish command.

⁵⁵ Konyshhev and Sergunin, 2024.

Although the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has not had a notable impact on Russian perceptions of those countries' level of interoperability with other NATO member states, Russian thinkers have expressed concerns that Finnish and Swedish materiel and capabilities will be more easily integrated into NATO formations. This includes Finland's icebreakers, which would considerably enhance U.S. capabilities in the region.⁵⁶ At the same time, however, NATO enlargement provides Russia with a degree of clarity that might streamline Russian planning efforts; with the accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance, Russia no longer "needs to worry" about how Finland or Sweden would behave in a crisis or conflict and can better anticipate how a confrontation with NATO in the High North would unfold.⁵⁷

As noted previously, Russian experts have characterized NATO enlargement as the result of Washington's long-standing objectives to achieve a greater U.S. presence in the Baltic region.⁵⁸ This perspective underscores a crucial aspect of Russian threat perceptions: Russia and Russian military thinking tend to overlook the agency of smaller states, such as Finland, Sweden, and Ukraine; instead, they analyze regional developments from the perspective of perceived U.S. interests and goals and through the prism of the U.S.-Russia relationship. Now, with the enlargement of the Alliance, this threat has grown to encompass the Arctic and Baltic regions. The perception that the United States now poses a greater threat to Russian interests in the Arctic and Baltic regions has been one factor motivating Russia's leadership to reevaluate the country's military structure and reorganize military districts in the region, which we discuss later in this chapter in the section "Russia's Military Posture in the High North."⁵⁹

Russian Perspectives on the Interconnection of Military and Economic Threats

Russia has also been growing increasingly concerned with the blurred lines between military presence and economic interests in the High North. This trend is especially concerning for Russia because of its heavy reliance on the region's economic resources, making the combination of Western military and economic pressure particularly significant in Russian threat perceptions.

The Arctic resource base and economic potential of the NSR remain among the highest priorities for Russian national security in the High North.⁶⁰ Because Russia's economy is so dependent on extractive industries, access to the oil and gas resources in the region is central to Russian economic

⁵⁶ Jason C. Moyer and Rickard Lindholm, "Icebreaking Explained—Finland: Europe's Icebreaker Superpower," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, November 12, 2024. See also Galimullin, Matveenko, and Maiorov, 2025, p. 54.

⁵⁷ Finnish defense officials, interview with the authors, Helsinki, Finland, February 10, 2025.

⁵⁸ Smirnov, 2023, p. 48.

⁵⁹ In February 2024, the President of the Russian Federation signed a decree that updated the administrative boundaries of the country's military districts, effective March 1, 2024 (President of Russia, "Ukaz Prezidenta RF o voyenno-administrativnom delenii Rossiyskoy Federatsii" ["Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on the Military-Administrative Division of the Russian Federation"], Suvorovskii Natisk [Suvorov's Onslaught], No. 8, March 1, 2024a).

⁶⁰ A. V. Mit'ko and V. K. Sidorov, "Osnovnye narrativy vzaimootnosheniya tsirkumpolyarnykh gosudarstv v gosudarstv v sovremennoy geopolitike" ["Main Narratives of the Interrelations of Circumpolar States in Contemporary Geopolitics"], *Arktika XXI Vek* [Arctic XXI Century], No. 4, 2024.

planning.⁶¹ Russia believes that the United States and its allies aspire to achieve dominance in the region by limiting Russia's access to the resources and vital sea lines of communication that run through the High North; from Russia's perspective, these aspirations are the single most important threat to its interests in the region.⁶² Russia has historically characterized interference with its economic interests in the region as a central threat, which has not changed since 2022.⁶³ The Russia-Ukraine war, however, has prompted Western countries to make a series of political decisions that have been perceived collectively as signifying an increasingly aggressive and threatening stance toward Russia. These decisions include the application of legal, economic, and military pressure—which Russia perceives as interconnected—in the High North.⁶⁴ The imposition of economic sanctions on Russia and the de facto exclusion of Russia from the Arctic Council are frequently cited as examples of this trend.⁶⁵ Another frequently cited example is the June 1, 2022, Danish referendum, which repealed a provision that had previously excluded Danish participation in the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. Russia viewed this as a politically aggressive move, especially in the context of Finnish and Swedish bids to join NATO, and a de facto expansion of the NATO alliance.⁶⁶ This perception has been reinforced by the view that NATO countries are conducting an aggressive propaganda campaign that demonizes the image of Russia.⁶⁷ As a result, Russia perceives that threats in nonmilitary domains can easily translate into military threats, making diplomacy, economic sanctions, and military deployments interconnected elements of a competition for Arctic resources between Russia and the West.

Russian Perspectives on International Cooperation in the High North

Related to Russian threat perceptions, recent Russian scholarship provides additional insight into Russia's perspective on prospects for cooperation in the High North. According to some Russian experts, cooperation in the Arctic is "unproductive" because it conflicts with Russia's interest in preserving its economic rights to the NSR and protecting its nuclear potential.⁶⁸ Under this view, the further development and reclamation of areas in the Arctic could lead to conflict.⁶⁹ The war in Ukraine has naturally reduced Russia's cooperation with the West in the High North, particularly given increased tensions related to Russia's perception that NATO is militarizing Finland and Sweden. This is evidenced by the cessation of interactions among senior diplomatic leaders of the

⁶¹ Expert on Russia, interview with the authors, Helsinki, Finland, February 10, 2025.

⁶² See President of Russia, 2022, points 22.1 and 22.2.

⁶³ Natalia Moen-Larsen and Kristian Lundby Gjerde, *Changing or Frozen Narratives? The Arctic in Russian Media and Expert Commentary, 2021–2022*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2023.

⁶⁴ See, for example, the discussion of the link between military presence and commercial opportunity in Andrey Gubin, "Military Aspects of Russia's Stance in the Arctic," Russian International Affairs Council, September 23, 2022.

⁶⁵ Konyshov and Sergunin, 2024.

⁶⁶ Smirnov, 2023.

⁶⁷ Konyshov and Sergunin, 2024.

⁶⁸ S. N. Mazhuga and V. V. Tolstykh, "Characteristic Features of Present-Day International Relations and Their Influence on Interstate Cooperation," *Voennaya Mysl' [Military Thought]*, Vol. 33, No. 1, March 31, 2024.

⁶⁹ Mazhuga and Tolstykh, 2024.

eight Arctic Council states since March 2022, although, according to Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ambassador-at-Large Nikolai Korchunov, virtual meetings at the working group level resumed on April 3, 2024.⁷⁰ One exception to this decrease in cooperation has been in the area of search and rescue, in which cooperation has been ongoing throughout this period, although Russia's participation in the Arctic Coast Guard Forum has been suspended since 2022.⁷¹

Although Russian cooperation with the West in the High North has declined in recent years, Russia has become increasingly dependent on economic and technological support from its partners in Asia—specifically China. Russian leaders have characterized cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic as a stabilizing force. For example, in July 2024, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitrii Peskov emphasized that cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic is “never directed against any third parties and groups of third parties” and “can only contribute to an atmosphere of stability and predictability in the region.”⁷² In practice, however, Russia remains wary of the risks that China’s increased presence in the High North—particularly in the European High North—pose to Russia’s security interests. According to one expert, Russia has “shown some adaptability in accepting Chinese intelligence operations in the Baltic [region],” for example, but it is less willing to accept similar activities in its Arctic zone.⁷³

According to public polling data, Russian citizens are generally in favor of increased cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic region. In December 2023, Russian Field, a research and polling group, conducted a telephone poll of 1,600 respondents across Russia, asking, “With whom should Russia conduct economic development in the Arctic?” More than one-third, or 37.2 percent, of respondents stated that Russia should partner with “China, India and other friendly nations” in the Arctic; 28 percent stated that Russia should conduct such activities “independently, without anyone’s support”; 27.8 percent indicated that Russia should partner with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan; and 24.9 percent responded that the Arctic should be developed alongside members of the Arctic Council. In addition, nearly two-thirds, or 62.3 percent, of respondents said that they supported cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic. Just more than half, or 53 percent of respondents—more often men and older citizens—supported Russia placing military forces and weapons in the Arctic.⁷⁴

Russia’s Military Posture in the High North

The threat perceptions detailed in the previous sections inform Russia’s military posture in the High North. Since the Cold War era, the Arctic region has been home to Soviet, and then Russian, military personnel and capabilities. The enlargement of NATO has given new urgency to Russia’s efforts to reinforce its military posture in the High North—even as the continuing Russia-Ukraine

⁷⁰ Ivana Saric, “Arctic Council Members Suspend Participation over Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” Axios, March 3, 2022; Yelena Chernenko, “Neproshenyy Arkticheskii sovet” [“Unwelcome Arctic Council”], *Kommersant*, March 30, 2024.

⁷¹ Norwegian defense experts, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024; “The War in Ukraine Is Reverberating in the Arctic,” *The Economist*, June 9, 2022.

⁷² Yelena Chernenko and Karine Sepoyan, “Superkholodnaya voyna” [“Supercold War”], *Kommersant*, July 24, 2024.

⁷³ Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

⁷⁴ Chernenko, 2024.

war has prevented Russia from fully realizing these goals. On February 7, 2024, Russian Ministry of Defense Press Secretary Maria Zakharova announced that Russia would not ignore NATO's attempts to "increas[e] its military potential near [Russian] borders and [would] take equal defensive measures to mitigate threats to [Russia's] national security."⁷⁵ Later that month, on February 26, 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an executive order that split the Western Military District into the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts.⁷⁶ The executive order cited threats arising out of NATO's eastward expansion and the development of new NATO military infrastructure near Russia's borders.⁷⁷ According to Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, the new districts formally began operations on March 1, 2024.⁷⁸ Later that month, after Sweden joined NATO, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Russia would deploy additional weapon systems to the High North.⁷⁹ President Putin later emphasized that Russia needed to concentrate its military units in the Leningrad Military District.⁸⁰ The impetus for this reorganization, however, is not entirely clear; Finnish defense officials interviewed for this study emphasized, for instance, that Russia's military reorganization is "not totally responsive to [changes in] NATO membership."⁸¹

As part of these organizational changes, Russia also disbanded the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command, stripping the Northern Fleet of its status as a military district and doing away with the Northern Military District. Russia has now resubordinated all fleets to the Russian Navy and assigned responsibility over the Leningrad Military District to the Northern Fleet.⁸² Some experts have assessed that these changes have led to the deterioration of Russia's former position of strength in the Arctic and the weakening of Russia's military posture in some areas. As one expert in Norway explained, "[M]erging weaknesses does not create a position of strength" for Russia.⁸³ Other experts have said, however, that expanding the command structure—from the Northern Military District to the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts—"to prepare for an expanded force structure seems

⁷⁵ "RF ne ostavit bez otveta narashchivaniye voyennoy aktivnosti NATO u svoikh granits—Zakharova" ["RF Won't Leave Unanswered the Increase in NATO's Military Activity Near Its Borders—Zakharova"], TASS, February 7, 2024.

⁷⁶ The Western Military District was created in 2010 by combining the Moscow Military District and the Leningrad Military District, so the February 2024 decision represented a return to an earlier status quo rather than a wholly new organizational scheme.

⁷⁷ "SSHA rasschityvayut s pomoshch'yu F-35 vskryt' rossiyskuyu sistemu PVO v Arktike—ekspert" ["USA Is Planning to Use the F-35 to Hack the Russian Air Defense System in the Arctic—Expert"], TASS, March 31, 2024.

⁷⁸ "Shoigu: Moskovskiy i Leningradskiy voyennyye okruga s 1 marta pristupili k vypolneniyu zadach" ["Shoigu: Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts Began Accomplishing Their Tasks on 1 March"], Interfax, April 23, 2024.

⁷⁹ "SSHA rasschityvayut s pomoshch'yu F-35 vskryt' rossiyskuyu sistemu PVO v Arktike—ekspert" ["USA Is Planning to Use the F-35 to Hack the Russian Air Defense System in the Arctic—Expert"], 2024.

⁸⁰ Natalia Portiakova, "Prinimay ikh, Suomi-krasavitsa" ["Accept Them, Beautiful Suomi"], *Kommersant*, August 22, 2024.

⁸¹ Finnish defense officials, interview with the authors, Helsinki, Finland, February 10, 2025.

⁸² President of Russia, 2024a; "Vladimir Putin podpisal ukaz o novom voienno-administrativnom delenii strany" ["Vladimir Putin Signed a Decree on New Military-Administrative Division of the Country"], *Novosti: Rossiiia*, April 10, 2024; "Ofitsial'nyi Otdel" ["Official Department"], *Morskoi sbornik*, No. 12, December 31, 2023; defense expert in Norway, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024.

⁸³ Defense expert in Norway, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024. In March 2024, several members of the Northern Fleet were brought up on corruption charges. See Yurii Senatorov, "V modernizatsii vooruzhennyi nashlos' mesto dlya khishcheniy" ["There Was Room for Theft in Modernizing Weapons"], *Kommersant*, March 18, 2024.

logical,”⁸⁴ and reassigning the Northern Fleet’s responsibility actually gives the Northern Fleet more power than it had before, through combined arms.⁸⁵ This improvement would be significant for the Northern Fleet, which, according to one estimate, commands 60 percent of Russia’s seaborne strategic nuclear weapons, especially because earlier plans to field new “wonder weapons” (e.g., the RS-28 Sarmat nuclear ICBM) have not panned out.⁸⁶ The ultimate effect of these organizational reforms is unclear, particularly so long as the Leningrad and Moscow Military Districts remain focused on fighting in Ukraine. For now, many of the new units created from the reorganization remain empty.⁸⁷ Still, these organizational changes are a sign that Russia ultimately intends to reinforce the High North with greater capabilities and put its command structure on a more equitable footing with Russia’s other military districts, underscoring the region’s importance.⁸⁸

Some experts have said that Russia is sensitive to the fact that the Russian Navy is not really an Arctic fleet and that this sensitivity explains why the assistant to the Russian President Nikolai Patrushev has recently stressed improvements to the combat readiness and equipment of Russian naval forces. These improvements include a focus on shipbuilding, the development and manufacture of new types of naval technology, and additional training for naval specialists.⁸⁹ In August 2024, Putin ordered the creation of the Maritime Forum of the Russian Federation, which would be responsible for creating a new naval development strategy. The new strategy would increase the effectiveness of the Russian armed forces in executing Russia’s national maritime policy and conducting maritime activities. The Maritime Forum would consist of three committees, focused on (1) developing a new naval strategy, (2) protecting Russian national interests in the Arctic, and (3) ensuring Russia’s maritime security.⁹⁰

In a September 2024 interview, Lavrov vowed that Moscow would defend its interests in the Arctic using both diplomacy and military means.⁹¹ For more than a decade, Russia has made efforts to clean up its Arctic territories and build up civilian and military infrastructure in the Arctic to support civilian life, scientific exploration, and a growing military presence. Russia has maintained a military presence across its Arctic region to protect its national interests, sea lines of communication, and the NSR and to ensure effective border enforcement and domain awareness.⁹² These activities did not

⁸⁴ Jonas Kjellén, “Russia’s Revamp of Military Districts: Back to a Centralized Future?” Swedish Defence Research Agency, June 2024.

⁸⁵ Harry Kemsley and Sean Corbett, “The High North—Important and Overlooked?” *World of Intelligence* podcast, July 16, 2024.

⁸⁶ Danish defense expert, videoconference interview with the authors, October 28, 2024; BBC News—Russkaya Sluzhba, “Pochemu u Rossii ne poluchayetsya ‘Sarmat’?” [“Why Can’t Russia Do ‘Sarmat’?”], video, September 24, 2024.

⁸⁷ Finnish foreign affairs officials, interview with the authors, Helsinki, Finland, February 11, 2025.

⁸⁸ In 2023, Shoigu also directed the formation of a new Russian Army corps in Karelia (“Shoigu: Moskovskiy i Leningradskiy voyennyye okruga s 1 marta pristupili k vypolneniyu zadach” [“Shoigu: Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts Began Accomplishing Their Tasks on 1 March”], 2024; Sampo TV 360, “Sergey Shoigu poruchil sformirovat’ armeyskiy korpus v Karelii” [“Sergei Shoigu Ordered Creation of the Army Corps in Karelia”], video, January 17, 2023).

⁸⁹ Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

⁹⁰ “Patrushev: NATO narashchivayet voyennyy potentsial vblizi morskikh granits RF” [“Patrushev: NATO Is Increasing Its Military Potential Near the Russian Federation’s Maritime Borders”], Interfax, August 16, 2024.

⁹¹ “Lavrov Vows Russia to Defend Its Arctic Interests,” U.S. News and World Report, September 19, 2024.

⁹² Tingstad et al., 2023, Appendix B.

cease with Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, although Russia has redirected resources from the High North to support its war effort in Ukraine, which has affected its military posture in the region.

Russia's Military Posture in the High North and the Role of Its Strategic Deterrent

Russia's military posture in the High North is consistent with its objectives in the region: to strengthen its military capabilities and infrastructure to adapt to a strategic landscape that is changing because of the effects of climate change—notably, melting ice—and NATO enlargement.⁹³ Russia remains sensitive to the U.S. presence in the western Russian Arctic, especially with the addition of new NATO members, Finland and Sweden, near Russia's border. Russia's military capabilities in the High North, referred to as its *Northern Bastion*, provide an array of multidomain capabilities, including airfields, customs stations, military bases, intelligence monitoring stations, early warning radar assets, and air defense systems. Figure 2.2 shows Russia's key military facilities across its Arctic zone.

Since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, and amid the continued melting of ice in the region, Russia's military capabilities in the High North have been focused on ensuring the survivability of Russia's sea-based nuclear second-strike capability. Russia's increasing reliance on its nuclear deterrent is driven, in part, by its conventional inferiority to Western capabilities, a trend that has intensified amid the further degradation of its conventional forces in Ukraine.⁹⁴ The growing role of Russia's nuclear weapons is evident in the country's nuclear doctrine, updated in November 2024, which ostensibly lowered the threshold for nuclear use. Whereas the previous version from 2020 reserved Russia's right to use nuclear weapons in retaliation against an attack involving weapons of mass destruction or when the use of conventional forces threatened "the very existence of the state," the new doctrine allows for nuclear retaliation against a conventional attack that merely poses a "critical threat to [Russia's or Belarus's] sovereignty and/or territorial integrity."⁹⁵ It should be noted that, in addition to serving strategic aims, this shift also provides a justification for increased Russian investment in nuclear infrastructure.⁹⁶

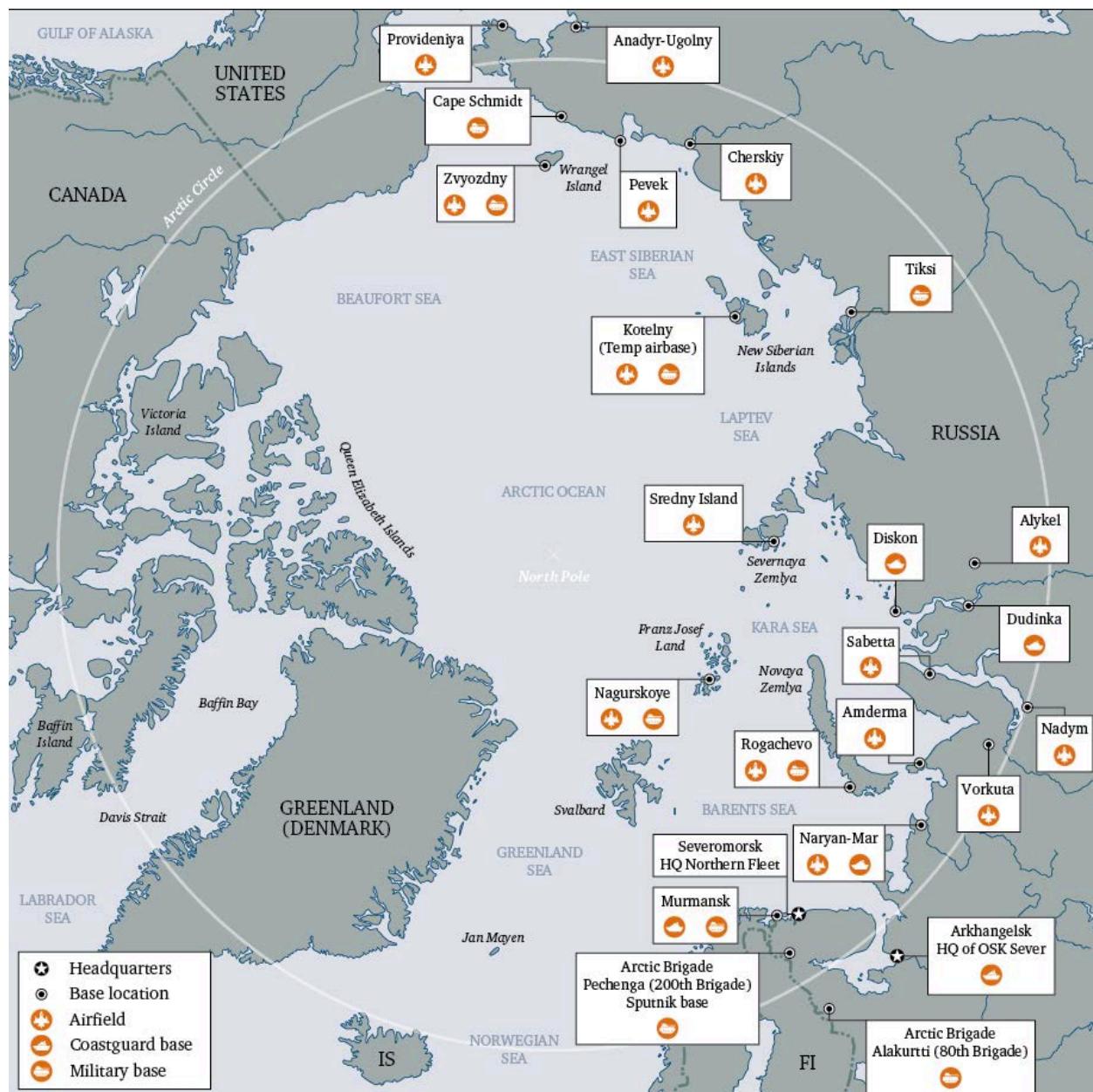
⁹³ Norwegian defense officials, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 13, 2024.

⁹⁴ Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2021; Foreign Policy Research Institute, *Nuclear Stability and Escalation Risks in Europe*, July 2023; Norwegian defense officials, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 13, 2024.

⁹⁵ President of Russia, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 19.11.2024 g. No. 991: Ob utverzhdenii Osnov gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v oblasti yadernogo sderzhivaniya" ["Decree of the President of the Russian Federation Dated 19.11.2024 No. 991: On Approval of the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence"], November 19, 2024b; President of Russia, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 02.06.2020 g. No. 355: Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v oblasti yadernogo sderzhivaniya" ["Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 02.06.2020 No. 355: On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence"], June 2, 2020b.

⁹⁶ Finnish defense officials, interview with the authors, Helsinki, Finland, February 10, 2025.

Figure 2.2. Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic



SOURCE: Reproduced from Mathieu Boulègue, *Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a "Low Tension" Environment*, Chatham House, updated October 15, 2024, p. 15. Copyright © The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2019. Reproduced with permission of The Licenser through PLSclear.

NOTE: HQ = headquarters.

Russia has thus prioritized the modernization of its strategic nuclear submarine fleet by replacing some of the fleet's aging submarines and by growing the fleet, even amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. As of 2025, the Russian Navy has Delta IV-class and Borey-class missile submarines with around 600 nuclear warheads in total. Recent upgrades to the Delta IV-class nuclear submarines have

increased the vessels' ability to launch more-capable submarine-launched ballistic missiles.⁹⁷ Russia has also kept up production of its Borey-class ballistic missile submarines, six of which have entered service in the Northern and Pacific Fleets since late 2024, with an additional four to be deployed by 2027.⁹⁸

Historically, Russia has postured its Arctic forces with a variety of strategic objectives in mind: to protect Russia's Arctic territory; to deny aerial, maritime, and land access to NATO and U.S. forces; to support the flow of maritime traffic through the NSR; and to support search-and-rescue operations across the Arctic region.⁹⁹ Although Russia's Arctic conventional ground forces have been sent to fight in Ukraine, limiting its ability to achieve these objectives, its strategic forces in the High North have remained "more or less intact," according to observers.¹⁰⁰ This includes Delta IV-class submarines at the Gadzhiyev submarine base and Borey-class submarines in Severodvinsk, as well as naval vessels, long-range air defense systems, and electronic warfare capabilities, which have remained postured on the Kola Peninsula.¹⁰¹ Russia has also moved some of its strategic bombers from Engels Air Force Base in Saratov (which is southeast of Moscow) to the Olenegorsk Air Base (which is south of Murmansk) to protect them from Ukrainian drone attacks.¹⁰² Other Arctic bases, however, have been stripped of their air defense assets (e.g., S-300), while Russian border forces stationed in the High North have been sent to Ukraine, and Arctic fighter jets have been moved within striking distance of the Russia-Ukraine border.¹⁰³ Since the beginning of the Ukraine war, Norwegian security services have observed a significant reduction in the order of battle of infantry fighting vehicles and transport vehicles at two Russian bases—Alakurtti Air Base and Pechenga—on the Kola Peninsula. Satellite imagery showed 100 fewer vehicles at Alakurtti (which houses the 80th Mechanized Infantry Brigade), and equipment from Pechenga (which houses the 200th Mechanized Infantry Brigade) was sent to Kharkiv.¹⁰⁴ Russia's remaining coastal defense troops are postured for defensive operations to protect the Kola Peninsula and the country's strategic deterrent in the High North.¹⁰⁵ The decision to move significant

⁹⁷ Janes, "Russian Federation," updated September 30, 2024a.

⁹⁸ Danish defense expert, videoconference interview with the authors, October 28, 2024; Janes, 2024a. Russia has modernized four new Tu-160M Blackjack nuclear bombers and modified Su-25 aircraft to carry tactical nuclear ordnance. Russia has also been conducting annual exercises in which Russian forces conduct tactical nuclear drills, and long-range aviation applies nonstrategic nuclear weapons. See, for example, Janes, "Russia's Evolving Nuclear Policy Very Likely to Increase Political Threats and Pressures Against Ukraine and NATO's Northeastern Members," November 5, 2024b.

⁹⁹ Scott Savitz, Yuliya Shokh, Scott R. Stephenson, James G. Kallimani, Michael T. Wilson, Kristin Van Abel, Benjamin J. Sacks, Abbie Tingstad, Irina A. Chindea, Stephanie Pezard, Yvonne K. Crane, Lyle J. Morris, Isabelle Winston, Inez Khan, Dan Abel, Clay McKinney, Katheryn Giglio, and Sherrill Lingel, *Report on the Arctic Capabilities of the U.S. Armed Forces: Appendixes*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1638-3, 2023, Appendix B; expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Defense expert in Norway, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024; Norwegian defense officials, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 13, 2024; Thomas Nilsen, "Land Forces at Kola Reduced to One-Fifth, Norwegian Intelligence Says," *Barents Observer*, February 13, 2023.

¹⁰¹ Nilsen, 2023.

¹⁰² Nilsen, 2023.

¹⁰³ Defense expert in Norway, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024; Danish defense expert, videoconference interview with the authors, October 28, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Norwegian defense officials, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 13, 2024.

ground forces to Ukraine while retaining just enough forces in the High North to protect high-priority assets suggests that, although Russia seeks to protect its interests in the Arctic, it has viewed the ongoing conflict in Ukraine as a greater military priority than a potential conflict with NATO in the High North.¹⁰⁶ Table 2.1 provides a summary of Russian military capabilities in the High North and their associated locations.

This reprioritization of existing resources and planned investments away from the Arctic and toward Russia's war effort in Ukraine has been particularly evident in Russian efforts to augment its icebreaker fleet. Before the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia had planned to make significant improvements to several of its Arctic military capabilities, but these planned improvements have also been carefully prioritized to achieve effects in niche areas while under sanctions.¹⁰⁷ For example, Russia has planned to build approximately 18 new icebreakers (11 for Russia's civilian icebreaking fleet and seven for Russia's Navy and Coast Guard); as of 2025, two are in the process of transitioning to operational units, one is undergoing operational testing, and one is in the slipway phase of construction.¹⁰⁸ Plans for some additional icebreakers—intended to be used for both civilian and military purposes—have been either canceled or postponed. This includes pre-Ukraine war plans to build a “super icebreaker,” which have been scrapped.¹⁰⁹ It is unclear whether Russia will be able to field the four nonnuclear icebreakers and five nuclear icebreakers that were expected to come online through 2030, four of which were for the Russian Navy.¹¹⁰ According to some experts, however, these cancellations and delays might not significantly reduce the strength of Russia's icebreaker fleet; the growing effects of climate change in the High North mean that icebreakers are becoming increasingly unnecessary in the

¹⁰⁶ Swedish experts on Russia, interview with the authors, Stockholm, Sweden, January 14, 2025; Kemsley and Corbett, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ As one Finnish official explained, Russia is still “building new things in the Arctic, but some things are on hold because of the war” (Finnish national security official, interview with the authors, Helsinki, Finland, February 10, 2025).

¹⁰⁸ Defense expert in Norway, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024; Norwegian defense officials, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 13, 2024; Kemsley and Corbett, 2024; Maxim Shepovalenko, “*Leđokol'nyy flot Rossii: sovremennoye sostoyaniye i perspektivnyy razvitiya*” [“Russia's Icebreaker Fleet: Current State and Future Developments”], *Eksport Vooruzhenii* [Arms Export], September–October 2024. The Russian Navy's first combat icebreaker, *Ivan Papanin*, began operational testing on June 29, 2024, and was slated to transition to the Northern Fleet in summer 2025. The patrol ship *Nikolai Zubov*, also intended for the Russian Navy, was launched in December 2024. A Federal Security Services' coast guard ship, *Purga*, has also transitioned to Sakhalin, in eastern Russia near the Sea of Okhotsk. *Purga* is the first weaponized ship of its kind. See “*Patrul'nyy korabl' Ivan Papanin' proyekta 23550 nachnet sluzhbu letom 2025*” [“Patrol Ship ‘Ivan Papanin’ of Project 23550 Will Begin Service in Summer 2025”], *Media Paluba*, [Media Deck], November 5, 2024; “*Admiralteyskiye verfi' OSK spustili patrul'nyy korabl' ledovogo klassa 'Nikolay Zubov' proyekta 23550*” [“Defense Manufacturing Company ‘Admiralty Shipyards’ Launched Ice-Class Patrol Ship ‘Nikolay Zubov’ of Project 23550”], *Media Paluba* [Media Deck], December 25, 2024; “*Devyatyy patrul'nyy korabl' proyekta 22120 'Purga' zavershil mezhflotiskiy perekhod, pribyv na Sakhalin*” [“Ninth Patrol Ship of Project 22120 ‘Purga’ Completed an Interfleet Transition, Arrived in Sakhalin”], *Voennoe Obozrenie* [Military Review], October 10, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ One Russian commentator has described the super icebreaker as an icebreaker that is “twice the size and more powerful than any [other icebreaker] in existence” (Alexandr Bartosh, “*Arktika prevrashchayetsya v teatr mirovoy gibridnoy voyny*” [“The Arctic Is Becoming a Theater for Global Hybrid Warfare”], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* [Independent Military Review], November 23, 2023).

¹¹⁰ Expert on Arctic security issues, videoconference interview with the authors, October 29, 2024; Bartosh, 2023. According to one account of the state of Russia's icebreaking fleet, Russia leads in key areas necessary for construction of icebreakers, such as materials sciences and nuclear energy; however, it has been lagging behind in import substitution of the microelectronics necessary for the control of electronic motors and medium-speed diesel engines for Arctic-class icebreakers, as well as several other areas (Shepovalenko, 2024, p. 73).

region.¹¹¹ More notable, however, is Russia's militarization of the newest icebreakers being delivered to the country's Navy and Coast Guard. These icebreakers are being equipped with standard and optional missile artillery and aircraft weapon systems.¹¹² The Northern Fleet's cruisers, moreover, are equipped with Tsirkon hypersonic missiles, providing them with an advantage over U.S. naval forces.¹¹³

The Russia-Ukraine war has also revealed vulnerabilities in Russia's air defenses in the High North. In July 2024, for example, Ukraine reportedly conducted drone strikes on the Olenegorsk Air Base, a major Russian reconnaissance base on the Kola Peninsula. Russia had moved some of its strategic bombers from Engels Air Force Base to Olenegorsk to protect them from drone strikes. The July 2024 strikes hit a Tu-22M3 strategic bomber based at the airfield.¹¹⁴ This episode should indicate to Russian defense officials that Russian air defenses are "more fragile than previously assumed," as one expert interviewed for this study explained. The conclusion of the Russia-Ukraine war will provide an opportunity for Russia to rethink its air defenses in the High North.¹¹⁵

Table 2.1. Summary of Key Russian Military Capabilities in the High North

Location	Facility	Military Capabilities
Kola Peninsula	Gadzhiyev (Russia's main submarine base)	The base has defensive and offensive assets, Bulava nuclear missile bunkers, and Delta IV-class submarines.
	Severomorsk-1 (Northern Fleet HQ)	The base has a 3,000- to 3,500-m runway and can house about 40 bombers and several fighters. It has Borey-class submarines, naval vessels, long-range air defense systems, and electronic warfare capabilities.
	Plesetsk Cosmodrome	The facility conducts testing for RS-24 Yars ICBMs.
	Alakurtti (80th Mechanized Infantry Brigade)	The base has armored fighting vehicles, medical vehicles, automatic grenade launchers, mortars, antitank guided missile systems, rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine guns, a self-propelled howitzer, and a command-and-control vehicle.
	Pechenga (200th Mechanized Infantry Brigade)	The base has a tracked all-terrain amphibious carrier, armored fighting vehicles, automatic grenade launchers, mortars, antitank missile systems, rocket-propelled grenades, a self-propelled howitzer, and a command-and-control vehicle.
Murmansk	Olenegorsk Air Base	The base has helicopters, early warning radar, search-and-rescue aircraft, and strategic bombers.

¹¹¹ Defense expert in Norway, discussion with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024.

¹¹² For example, the heavy icebreaker *Il'ia Muromets* of the Northern Fleet is equipped with a helicopter landing pad and an area for placing 30-mm artillery systems (Shepovalenko, 2024, p. 73).

¹¹³ "SSHA rasschityvayut s pomoshch'yu F-35 vskryt' rossiyskuyu sistemu PVO v Arktyke—eksperf" ["USA Is Planning to Use the F-35 to Hack the Russian Air Defense System in the Arctic—Expert"], 2024.

¹¹⁴ Jordyn Dahl, "Ukraine Drones Reportedly Hit Russian Airfield in Arctic," Politico, July 28, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

Location	Facility	Military Capabilities
Novaya Zemlya	Belush'ia Guba	The facility has S-300PM and S-400 air defense systems.
	Rogachevo	The base has MiG-31BM and radar, electronic warfare, and signals intelligence forces and equipment.
Alexandra Land (Franz Josef Land)	Nagurskoye	The Trefoil military compound has two airfields and 334 facilities, including 59 buildings and facilities for personnel of a radar unit and aviation guidance center. ^a

SOURCES: Features information from Savitz et al., 2023, Appendix B; Kemsley and Corbett, 2024; Janes, “Map: Russian Federation Land, Air, and Sea Bases,” accessed on July 29, 2025.

^a Also known as the Arctic Clover facilities because their shape resembles a three-leafed clover.

Russia’s Combat Training in the High North

Prior to February 2022, Russia was conducting year-round military training and exercises and routine air and sea patrols across its Arctic zone—including multidomain, joint, and snap exercises—and testing new equipment and the ability of Russian personnel to coordinate across military domains and types of forces. In announcements related to these exercises, the Russian Ministry of Defense would often characterize the focus of the exercises as conducting training in a “realistic environment.”¹¹⁶ Before the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia also conducted bilateral and multilateral exercises in the High North with Japan, Canada, and Norway.¹¹⁷

The geographic focus of Russian exercises has changed in the past three years, as has Russia’s choice of exercise partners. Since February 2022, Russia has conducted exercises in the northern (Arctic Ocean) and western (eastern Barents Sea near the NSR) areas of the AZRF.¹¹⁸ In the eastern Arctic, Russia has increasingly conducted bilateral exercises with China as part of their maritime security cooperation agreement.¹¹⁹ In 2024, a study conducted by the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment found that, before February 2022, Russian exercises in the Arctic were most frequently conducted in Russia’s and Norway’s EEZs in the Barents and Norwegian Seas and near Finnmark. Since February 2022, however, Russia has conducted exercises mainly in or near the Barents Sea; in addition, exercise areas have become larger, and exercises themselves have become longer.¹²⁰ These changes in exercise patterns have coincided with more-aggressive Russian behavior in the region.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, “Komanduyushchiy SF Proveril Gotovnost’ Arkticheskikh Podrazdeleniy K Ucheniyu” [“Commander of the Northern Fleet Inspected Readiness for Training of Arctic Units”], *Na Strazhe Zapoliar’ia* [Guarding the Arctic], No. 31, August 28, 2015.

¹¹⁷ Savitz et al., 2023, Appendix B.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Natalia Yelenina, “Kryl’ya nad Arktikoy” [“Wings over the Arctic”], *Na strazhe Zapoliar’ia* [Guarding the Arctic], No. 13, April 14, 2023; “Otrabotana oborona beregovykh obyektov” [“Defense of Coastal Assets Worked Out”], *Na strazhe Zapoliar’ia* [Guarding the Arctic], No. 36, September 22, 2023; Kristian Åland, Thomas Nilsen, and Torbjørn Pedersen, “Bolstering the Bastion: The Changing Pattern of Russia’s Military Exercises in the High North,” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2024.

¹¹⁹ Norwegian defense experts, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024; Norwegian defense officials, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 13, 2024. In the past two years, some of Russia’s routine air and sea patrols in the Pacific Ocean have also included China.

¹²⁰ Norwegian defense experts, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024; Åland, Nilsen, and Pedersen, 2024.

According to Norwegian observers, as of late 2024, there were more provocations from Russia in the High North than there had been three years earlier.¹²¹ Moreover, Russia had conducted 13 annual routine Arctic expeditions between 2013 and 2024. These expeditions, which are conducted both for military purposes and to facilitate scientific exploration, typically begin in August and last about two months.¹²²

Russian military officials have claimed that Russia's experiences in Ukraine are being applied to military exercises in the High North. Many of the instructors at these exercises are combat veterans from Ukraine, and, according to Shoigu, they have incorporated lessons learned on that battlefield, including their experiences employing unmanned aerial systems. Shoigu has also reported that Russian Army units are improving their "level of training of military personnel and command bodies" through these exercises.¹²³ However, some experts believe that, when Russian troops return from Ukraine, it will take four to five years to provide them with adequate training to operate in the Arctic environment (e.g., learn to ski, hold and use a weapon in the cold), equip them, and advance them from battalion- to regiment- to division-level exercises. This suggests that, at the earliest, Russia would have an Arctic-trained force by 2030.¹²⁴ Other experts disagree, arguing that, were it not for existing military requirements in Ukraine, Russia's Arctic troops would be well positioned to adapt to melting ice in the High North, and changing climate conditions in the region could represent an opportunity for Russia to gain an advantage there.¹²⁵ In particular, Russia's security services, border troops, and emergency preparedness troops have had more than a decade to acclimate to working in Arctic conditions, despite the recent diversion of many of them to Ukraine.¹²⁶

Conclusion

In June 2024, Russia's Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov characterized the High North as "an area of low tension," adding that Russia was "decisively advocating for the [region] to remain peaceful and nonmilitarized."¹²⁷ Russia's military posture in the High North suggests that Russia views the Ukraine conflict as a more pressing priority than the threat posed by NATO in the High North. Recent Russian military scholarship, as discussed earlier, has characterized the enlargement of NATO, the Alliance's military buildup near Russia's borders, and aggressive U.S. behavior in the

¹²¹ Norwegian defense experts, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024.

¹²² Savitz et al., 2023, Appendix B. This analysis was based on data contained in press releases from the Russian Ministry of Defense and Russian scholarship and reporting on Russia's expeditions in the Arctic. See, for example, Yuliya Kozak, "Dlya obespecheniya zashchity interesov v Arktilke" ["To Assure the Defense of Interests in the Arctic"], *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red Star], No. 97, September 1, 2023.

¹²³ "Shoigu: Moskovskiy i Leningradskiy voyennyye okruga s 1 marta pristupili k vypolneniyu zadach" ["Shoigu: Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts Began Accomplishing Their Tasks on 1 March"], 2024.

¹²⁴ Kemsley and Corbett, 2024.

¹²⁵ Norwegian defense experts, interview with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024.

¹²⁶ Savitz et al., 2023, Appendix B; Tingstad et al., 2023, pp. 25–28; expert on Russia, videoconference interview with the authors, November 25, 2024.

¹²⁷ "Rossiya budet uchityvat' izmeneniye politiki Kanady v Arktilke—posol v Ottave" ["Russia Will Consider Changes in Canada's Policies in the Arctic—Ambassador in Ottawa"], TASS, June 12, 2024.

Arctic as among the primary factors that will affect the “direction and pace of global changes in contemporary global politics, which can influence the forms and means of modern conflicts.”¹²⁸

Experts have debated the significance of Russia’s decision to divert resources from the High North to Ukraine, which has had the effect of hollowing out the majority of the country’s Arctic-capable ground units. Some experts view this shift as a sign that Russia’s former position of strength in the High North has been permanently weakened, while others see it as merely a temporary pause of Russia’s long-term plans to invest in and develop its capabilities in the region. One Swedish expert interviewed for this study noted that, in the years before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia had already built up sufficient military infrastructure in the Arctic to support its objectives, so it is natural that it would invest less in the region now.¹²⁹

Amid the degradation of Russian conventional forces in Ukraine and changes in Russia’s nuclear doctrine during the Russia-Ukraine war, the High North—as the base for much of Russia’s strategic deterrent forces—will likely play an increasingly central role in Russian strategy in the coming years.¹³⁰ This is particularly true given that Russia believes that other nations plan to challenge its interests in the High North—as evidenced, it has claimed, by U.S. and United Kingdom nuclear submarines mapping the Arctic floor—which will demand a Russian Navy that is capable of responding to threats using a wide variety of capabilities, including Russia’s nuclear deterrent.¹³¹

¹²⁸ A. A. Bartosh, “Escalation Models of Modern Military Conflict,” *Military Thought*, Vol. 33, Nos. 2–3, June 30, 2024.

¹²⁹ Swedish experts on Russia, interview with the authors, Stockholm, Sweden, January 14, 2025.

¹³⁰ Norwegian defense experts, interviews with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 12, 2024; Norwegian defense officials, interviews with the authors, Oslo, Norway, November 13, 2024.

¹³¹ N. A. Fattakhova and T. P. Avenosova, “Razvitiye Yazykovoy Kompetentsii u Kursantov Voyenno-Morskogo Vuza na Osnove Proyektirovaniya i Primeneniya Vizual’nykh Sredstv Obucheniya” [“The Development of Language Competence in the Naval Institute Based on the Design and Application of Visual Learning Tools”], *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk* [Bulletin of the Academy of Military Sciences], Vol. 4, No. 89, 2024.

Potential Escalation Risks in the High North

The potential for events in the High North to spark a wider militarized crisis or confrontation is a significant concern for the United States and other Arctic countries. Yet the specific economic, legal, military, or other activities or events that could trigger a crisis are not widely understood. In this chapter, we explore potential drivers of escalation through a series of notional scenarios—varying from discreet shifts in U.S. and allied policy to military crises—that implicate Russian interests in the High North. Through a series of subject-matter expert workshops held virtually in February and March 2025, we analyzed potential Russian interpretations of and reactions to these scenarios to identify factors that either constrain or contribute to the likelihood of unwanted escalation in the region. First, we explored potential sources of tension that have historically existed between Russia and other Arctic nations. We connected these sources of tension to the Russian strategic objectives they could threaten. Next, we presented plausible scenarios that provide a view of sources of tensions with Russia and how they could combine, or be triggered, into a potential conflict situation.

Some limits to this approach, however, should be highlighted. First, we did not examine the potential for escalation beyond Russia's initial response in each scenario. This means that we are effectively looking only at the "first round" of escalation rather than taking the next step of hypothesizing about counterresponses from the United States and its allies and the potential for these counterresponses to provoke further escalation from Russia. Second, we noted that events elsewhere could have repercussions in the Arctic and lead to escalation. For example, a sudden spike in Norway's level of military support to Ukraine could prompt Russia to retaliate by jamming airline communications over Norway. However, we examined only scenarios in which the potential triggering event *itself* takes place in the Arctic.

Assessing Escalation Risks

In this section, we present our analysis of the 11 scenarios considered in our workshops. For each, we introduce the scenario and any relevant background information; then, using insights from our workshops, we detail Russian threat perceptions and potential Russian responses. We also consider the risk of further escalation and identify aggravating factors that could escalate each scenario. For the purposes of our workshops, each scenario was set in spring 2027.

Scenario 1: A U.S. Freedom-of-Navigation Operation Forces Russia's Hand

Scenario Description

Russia demands that foreign vessels, including warships, seek advance permission from Russian authorities before traversing the NSR, which it uses to transport fossil fuel from Arctic facilities and hopes to transform into a major international shipping corridor. The United States has disputed this interpretation, arguing that these requirements undermine the principle of freedom-of-navigation.¹³² To demonstrate its stance, in spring 2027, the United States orders a U.S. Navy vessel, led by the icebreaker USCGC *Healy*, to sail through areas of the NSR. Russian military intelligence reports that the route followed by the U.S. ship is dangerously close to Russia's Polar Express subsea cable project and suspects that the ship is mapping the cable's route.¹³³

Scenario Analysis

Workshop participants agreed that this scenario has the potential to be highly escalatory but ultimately concluded that it would be unlikely to result in armed conflict. Several participants stressed that Russian leaders would likely view a U.S. FONOP in the NSR as highly provocative because it is a stark departure from the U.S. practice of not conducting FONOPs in that particular area—although the United States has threatened to do so on several occasions. The FONOP could be expected to heighten Russian sensitivities about NATO forces' proximity to Russian strategic assets and to worsen what one participant described as "preexisting anxieties" about potential U.S. and NATO encroachment in the NSR. Participants noted that that the inclusion of U.S. Navy vessels would be of particular concern to Russian observers, who would presume that the FONOP was a pretext for either improving or exercising specific U.S. offensive capabilities in the one region where Russia believes that it maintains a maritime advantage. Although workshop participants agreed that a USCG transit would be less inflammatory, they suggested that Russia could view the USCGC *Healy*'s transit as a U.S. attempt to establish a precedent for a larger U.S. FONOP in the future. One participant noted that Russia would likely interpret the FONOP as preparation to enable SSN (nuclear-powered submarine) operations in the Arctic, regardless of the specific capabilities deployed or observed in transit during the FONOP.¹³⁴ Workshop participants expressed disagreement as to whether the FONOP would cause Russia to worry about potential U.S. sabotage to its undersea cables.

In a discussion of potential Russian responses to the U.S. FONOP, workshop participants concluded that Russia would feel compelled to respond. They expected that Russia's response would be calibrated to convey Russia's opposition to the FONOP, reassert Russian claims to the NSR, and deter additional U.S. operations in the area. Within the NSR, Russia would likely engage in "active

¹³² For additional insight on past U.S. FONOPs in the Arctic and how they might be perceived by Russia, see Megan Eckstein, "Navy May Deploy Surface Ships to Arctic This Summer as Shipping Lanes Open Up," USNI News, January 8, 2019; Ben Kesling, "Cold War Games: U.S. Is Preparing to Test the Waters in Icy Arctic," *Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2019; and Rebecca Pincus, "Rushing Navy Ships into the Arctic for a FONOP Is Dangerous," *Proceedings*, Vol. 145, No. 1, January 2019.

¹³³ The Polar Express subsea cable is a major project designed to connect Murmansk to Vladivostok along the NSR. It is scheduled to be completed in 2026. See Gleb Stolyarov, "Russia Starts Operation to Lay Undersea Fiber Optic Cable Through Arctic," *Reuters*, August 6, 2021.

¹³⁴ Indeed, one workshop participant suggested that a signals intelligence ship would generate greater concern than a combat vessel would.

“pursuit” and harassment of the transiting U.S. vessels to reassert Russian territorial claims, reduce maneuverability, and observe any U.S. efforts to engage in seabed mapping. Russia would also likely increase activity off Bear Island in Svalbard and conduct its own tit-for-tat exercises in waters as close as 12 nm to Alaska, although participants disagreed whether Moscow would prefer to conduct these exercises unilaterally or to conduct bilateral exercises with China. Russia’s military response would be paired with a public messaging campaign targeting NATO member countries and countries in the Global South that intended to cast the United States as the provocateur and discredit the legitimacy of the FONOP. This messaging would likely highlight the fact that the United States has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (1982). Russia would also develop a messaging strategy aimed at its own domestic audience.

One workshop participant suggested that Russia might similarly challenge Canadian maritime interests by dispatching a ship through a far western part of the Northwest Passage. However, participants generally agreed that Russia would concentrate its efforts on contesting U.S. territorial claims and avoid behaviors that might alienate Canada, which it views as generally aligned with Russia on matters related to the NSR. Instead, Russia’s public messaging campaign might aim to drive a wedge between the United States and Canada, making it clear to the Canadian public that, if the United States contested Russia’s proclaimed rights over the NSR, Russia might contest Canada’s claims over the Northwest Passage.

Although participants agreed that Russia would view the U.S. FONOP as provocative—and that unsafe maneuvers by Russian training vessels could cause an inadvertent or accidental confrontation with the United States—they concluded that the likelihood of escalation to conflict was very low. Although Russia would oppose the U.S. FONOP, the threat to Russian interests would not be viewed as sufficiently severe as to risk military confrontation with the United States. This was especially true, participants noted, given that Russia’s military reconstitution would likely be incomplete in spring 2027.

Some workshop participants questioned the plausibility of this scenario, expressing skepticism that the United States would attempt to conduct a FONOP given significant U.S. capability constraints and the risk of a counterproductive malfunction or accident.

Scenario 2: An Ecological Catastrophe Demands Quick Action

Scenario Description

Since 2023, Russia has authorized oil tankers with nonreinforced hulls to sail through the NSR to deliver oil from its extraction sites in the Russian Arctic to China.¹³⁵ In spring 2027, a Russian oil tanker experiences a technical malfunction in the Chukchi Sea, leading to a catastrophic oil spill as tens of thousands of tons of petroleum flow into Russian waters. Russia’s response to this disaster is slow and appears ineffective at containing the spill, which is now threatening the Bering Strait and U.S. waters. In response, the United States announces that it will intervene to help contain and resorb the spill.

¹³⁵ David Sheppard, Chris Cook, and Anastasia Stognei, “Russia Routes Thin-Hulled Oil Tankers Through Arctic for First Time,” *Financial Times*, September 15, 2023.

Scenario Analysis

Workshop participants concluded that this scenario, in contrast to the U.S. FONOP, would present technical challenges but was unlikely to destabilize U.S.-Russia relations. There are established protocols for disaster-stricken countries to request help and for other states to coordinate to provide assistance. These protocols are built into the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic, which was signed by the eight Arctic states in 2013 and would provide Russia and the United States with a framework for resolving the environmental disaster.¹³⁶ This existing framework would also lend a degree of predictability that would reduce the likelihood of catastrophic misinterpretation by either the United States or Russia. The length of time required to organize a U.S. response to the incident—given both the distances involved and the need to transport equipment not typically stored in the vicinity of the spill—would also provide substantial time for the United States and Russia to communicate, avoiding a scenario in which a surprised leadership reacts rashly under time pressure. Workshop participants also noted the historically “cooperative and constructive” relationship between the U.S. and Russian Coast Guards, suggesting that existing communication links would serve as a deconfliction mechanism.¹³⁷

Whether Russia would accept U.S. assistance in this scenario, however, is less certain. Workshop participants noted that, in the past, Russia has accepted international help in similar circumstances, although at times too late to prevent catastrophic losses—as in the case of the *Kursk* accident in 2000.¹³⁸ Russian bureaucratic inertia—in particular, whether Russian leaders would view such an incident in faraway waters as a peripheral or minor concern—as well as Russia’s desire to limit international embarrassment by first attempting to conceal the extent of the damage, could also delay any response. Ultimately, participants agreed that whether Russia would accept U.S. help would depend on the extent of prior warning, the extent of the damage or risk to Russian economic activities in nearby waters, the status of U.S.-Russia relations at the time of the accident, and the U.S. messaging strategy. They noted that Russia would be likelier to resist U.S. overtures—and respond more harshly to U.S. intervention—if U.S. messaging assigned blame for the accident to Russia or politicized the incident for U.S. domestic audiences. In turn, Russia might launch an aggressive public messaging campaign accusing the United States of exploiting a supposedly minor incident to encroach on Russian territorial waters.

Overall, there was general agreement among workshop participants that there was limited potential for escalation in this scenario. At the end of the workshop, however, participants were in broad agreement that, of the first five scenarios, this scenario would be the likeliest to occur and the most difficult to manage because of the affected countries’ limited capabilities for oil spill management and the extent of the damage that could be caused.

¹³⁶ Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic, May 15, 2013.

¹³⁷ Workshop participants highlighted an instance in 2011 in which a Russian icebreaker helped deliver fuel to Nome, Alaska, when Nome got caught in ice and was otherwise inaccessible (Alex DeMarban, “Russian Icebreaker to Deliver Fuel to Nome, Highlighting Shortage of U.S. Icebreakers,” *Anchorage Daily News*, December 5, 2011).

¹³⁸ Fatima Tlis, “Two Decades On, Russian State Media Omits Facts About the Kursk Submarine Disaster,” Voice of America, August 15, 2019.

Scenario 3: Russian Continental Shelf Claims Are Denied

Scenario Description

The United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) adjudicates competing submissions presented by Canada, Denmark, and Russia regarding their extended continental shelves. In spring 2027, in close succession, two CLCS recommendations recognize scientific evidence presented by Canada and Denmark. A third CLCS recommendation rejects a substantial part of Russia's submission, adjudicating in favor of Canada and Denmark and leaving Moscow with only half the area it originally claimed. Russia announces that it will resubmit additional evidence, which would constitute its third submission for the same area before the CLCS.

Canada and Denmark denounce what they allege to be Russian delay tactics. They announce the immediate start of bilateral negotiations to delineate their respective continental shelves in overlapping areas, particularly around the Lomonosov Ridge and the Alpha-Mendeleev Ridge, both of which are claimed by Russia. Chinese diplomats in Moscow communicate that Beijing will support Russia in opposing the settlement.¹³⁹

Scenario Analysis

Workshop participants characterized this scenario as both realistic and concerning because of the extent of Russia's claim and the gains that all parties would expect from an increase in the size of their continental shelves. They noted that Canadian and Danish negotiations on their own would be insufficient to prompt a Russian military response, although Russia would likely respond diplomatically to contest the CLCS's recommendation, delay or impede Canada-Denmark negotiations, and deter either party from cementing its claims. They suggested, however, that Russia might respond more forcefully if Canada or Denmark were to take actions that could be perceived as asserting their sovereignty or cementing their physical control of the contested territory, such as by beginning new construction, increasing the frequency or scale of patrols, or beginning exploration for undersea mining. Potential Russian responses to more-forceful Canadian or Danish activities could include surfacing submarines, planting the Russian flag on the ocean floor, or sending Russian ships to the area.¹⁴⁰ Russia would also likely respond through actions in the gray zone, which would allow it to undermine and disable Canadian and Danish activities in the area without necessarily confronting them directly. Participants disagreed, however, on the likelihood that the scenario would escalate to this point, particularly because the area is icebound for most of the year, which limits the countries' abilities to operate. Indeed, their common capability gaps could curtail the risk of military escalation by limiting the dispute to the diplomatic level.

The prospect of Chinese support might expand Russia's economic and diplomatic options, but workshop participants concluded that Chinese support would be unlikely to cause Russia to revise its

¹³⁹ A similar scenario was developed for a RAND workshop that took place in Oslo, Norway, in January 2018. For our workshop, we reframed that scenario to create a situation that Russia could perceive as inflammatory and added a reference to diplomatic relations between Russia and China. See Stephanie Pezard, Abbie Tingstad, and Alexandra Hall, *The Future of Arctic Cooperation in a Changing Strategic Environment: Insights from a Scenario-Based Exercise Organised by RAND and Hosted by NUPI*, RAND Corporation, PE-268-RC, May 2018.

¹⁴⁰ The notion of planting the Russian flag on the ocean floor derives from a similar action that took place in 2007 (C. J. Chivers, "Russia Plants Underwater Flag at North Pole," *New York Times*, August 2, 2007).

objectives. Participants were uncertain whether China would want to become embroiled in a complex international legal dispute or to play a part in any diplomatic or military escalation of the dispute. They suggested that China might provide messaging and diplomatic support in international forums, which would be consistent with its broader strategy of contesting frameworks it views as benefiting the United States and U.S. allies. Chinese funding, however, could enable Russia to begin new economic operations on the area of the seabed that it claims, a maneuver that would test Canada and Denmark's willingness to enforce their own claims. Given Russia's icebreaker fleet and the capabilities of the Northern Fleet, Russia could de facto claim the areas under dispute more effectively than Canada or Denmark could. Such an outcome would pose difficult choices for Norway, which might fear establishing a legal precedent for the waters near Svalbard, although workshop participants did not speculate on Oslo's potential reactions to the scenario.

Overall, the potential for escalation in this scenario was seen as highly dependent on whether Canada and Denmark chose to assert rights over the area claimed in the Russian submission. In the past, Russia has followed UNCLOS guidance in relation to this matter. Ensuring that others do the same might be Russia's primary focus, and Russia would be likely to pursue legal action to settle the dispute, particularly given the long time frame for resource extraction in the area.

Scenario 4: Yamal's Liquefied Natural Gas Infrastructure Is Under Threat

Scenario Description

In spring 2027, a series of explosions takes place in the Yamal Peninsula in northwest Siberia. There are no casualties, but parts of the port infrastructure and LNG terminal at Sabetta are severely damaged. A previously unknown activist group calling itself *Bring Ukrainian Children Home* claims responsibility for the explosions.¹⁴¹

Scenario Analysis

Workshop participants swiftly concluded that Russia would either assume that Ukraine was responsible for the attacks or use the incident as justification to conduct further attacks on Ukraine. Given the limited information provided in the scenario, some participants suggested that the attack could even be a Russian false-flag operation aimed at weakening Western support for Ukraine; however, others noted that Russia would be unlikely to damage such a valuable facility or reveal a vulnerability that might invite future hostile action.

The importance of the LNG infrastructure on the Yamal Peninsula and the presumed link between the attacks and Ukraine would likely lead Russia to conduct tit-for-tat attacks on Ukrainian targets outside the High North. Workshop participants identified Ukrainian energy infrastructure and grain export terminals as attractive targets, provided that the initial round of attacks did not hurt other Russian interests in its ongoing ceasefire with Ukraine. However, if the damage to the Yamal facilities were more extensive, if the Ukrainian government claimed responsibility, or if Russian leaders determined that the attackers received Western support, participants noted, the Russian military response might be even more forceful. To deter future attacks on its energy infrastructure in the

¹⁴¹ A development along similar lines was proposed by participants in a RAND tabletop exercise that took place in March 2024.

Yamal Peninsula or elsewhere, Russia might also conduct clandestine or information operations to highlight vulnerabilities in NATO energy infrastructure, particularly in Norway.

Workshop participants also considered how China, which partially funded the Yamal LNG project and is interested in preserving access to Russian energy exports, would respond to the incident. They debated whether China was likelier to respond independently or in coordination with Russia. Ultimately, participants were unsure whether the damage to the Yamal facilities would lead Beijing to worry about its future gas supplies, with some noting that having some alternative pipelines would dampen the effect.¹⁴²

Scenario 5: A Russian Commercial Vessel Resists Arrest in the Fisheries Protection Zone

Scenario Description

Norway asserts its sovereignty in the waters around Svalbard by regulating economic activity in the FPZ, a legal regime that Russia officially rejects as illegitimate but accepts in practice. In spring 2027, the Norwegian Coast Guard arrests a Russian commercial vessel for suspected illegal, unreported, or unregulated fishing practices, as the Norwegian Coast Guard has done on numerous occasions.¹⁴³ Norwegian Coast Guard personnel board the ship, but the crew forcefully resists inspection. The confrontation turns violent, and a Norwegian Coast Guard officer is shot. A pursuit ensues through the FPZ into Russia's EEZ toward Murmansk.

Scenario Analysis

According to workshop participants, both Norway and Russia would be incentivized to resolve the incident and cooperate to avoid a recurrence. Some participants suggested that Russia might try to exploit the incident in messaging for its domestic audiences, but they expected that this would likely be a limited, knee-jerk response rather than the product of a coherent strategy to achieve broader regional objectives. Norway and Russia share common interests in the region, such as fishing, and would likely view the incident as an isolated event, particularly given the productive working relationship between their coast guards. Therefore, participants concluded that the standoff would not rise to the level of a strategic issue but that Norway and Russia might use discussions regarding the incident to open a new dialogue aimed at preventing future incidents.

Notably, one workshop participant questioned the plausibility of the scenario on the grounds that the Norwegian Coast Guard is highly incentivized—and maintains protocols—to defuse such a confrontation. The participant posited that the Norwegian Coast Guard likely would have disembarked before a standoff could turn violent. Other participants noted, however, that a standoff

¹⁴² In 2020, 60 percent of Chinese natural gas imports came from pipelines and 40 percent came from LNG. Overall, less than 3 percent of Chinese natural gas imports come from Russia (Michael Ratner and Heather L. Greenley, *Power of Siberia: A Natural Gas Pipeline Brings Russia and China Closer*, Congressional Research Service, IF11514, April 21, 2020).

¹⁴³ See, for example, Andreas Østhagen, "Managing Conflict at Sea: The Case of Norway and Russia in the Svalbard Zone," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, Vol. 9, 2018, pp. 108–111.

could escalate rapidly, whether because of Norwegian errors in judgment or because of the Russian crew's decisions in the moment.

Scenario 6: A Norwegian Environmental Group Infiltrates Russia's Floating Nuclear Power Plant

Scenario Description

Environmental groups in coastal Arctic states have been denouncing Russia's use of a floating nuclear power plant—the Akademik Lomonosov—off the coast of Siberia, citing the risk of accidents that could lead to the contamination of Arctic waters.¹⁴⁴ Rosatom, the Russian state-owned nuclear energy corporation, maintains that the technology is sound and safe and that the Akademik Lomonosov is an efficient means of bringing power to remote Arctic communities and supporting mining projects in the AZRF.¹⁴⁵

Three members of a small Norwegian environmental group, the Nuclear-Free World Front, infiltrate the crew of the Akademik Lomonosov to attempt to document onboard hazards and violations of safety rules. The group members are discovered by the crew and arrested.

Scenario Analysis

Russia could perceive this scenario as particularly sensitive because it risks bringing attention to Russia's poor environmental record. In discussing potential Russian responses, workshop participants recalled that, when Greenpeace activists climbed up the Prirazlomnaya oil platform in 2013, Russia treated them harshly to deter other activists from undertaking similar actions.¹⁴⁶ Participants identified three factors that would likely influence Russia's response to the incident. The first factor is whether the activists' infiltration of the floating nuclear power plant has been made public. If it has not been made public, the Russian government might try to avoid negative publicity and attempt to resolve the matter quietly with Norway—which participants emphasized has a long tradition of seeking to maintain low tensions with Russia. However, if the event is already all over the news, Russia would likely try to take control of the narrative. For instance, Russia could seek to discredit members of the Norwegian environmental group. The second factor is whether Russia believes that it could use the event to extract concessions from Norway—for instance, the lifting of Norwegian sanctions—in which case Russia would likely respond more harshly. The third factor is whether some link could be established between the activists and the Norwegian government. If such a link could be established, Russia would be likelier to use the event to try to extract concessions from Norway. Some participants noted that Russia could also leverage the Russian community in Svalbard to retaliate against the Norwegian government, but others disagreed that this would constitute a plausible Russian response.

¹⁴⁴ Jan Haverkamp, "5 Reasons Why a Floating Nuclear Plant in the Arctic Is a Terrible Idea," Greenpeace, May 2, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, "Floating Nuclear Power Plant Fuels Russia's Arctic Ambitions," *Financial Times*, November 30, 2021.

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Steven Lee Myers, "Greenpeace Activists May Face Russian Piracy Charges," *New York Times*, September 24, 2013.

Scenario 7: Enhanced Submarine Surveillance Occurs on a Greenland-Norway Line

Scenario Description

After negotiations with the Greenlandic and Danish governments, in spring 2027, the United States begins the construction of a second military base on the eastern coast of Greenland. The base is on Scoresby Sound. From this location, the United States would conduct maritime patrols with Norway. The United States also plans, in cooperation with Norway, to lay down a cable with sensors from Greenland to the Norwegian coast via the island of Jan Mayen to detect submarine activity in the area.

Scenario Analysis

Workshop participants did not view this scenario as particularly provocative, noting that it represents only a marginal change from the existing situation. Denmark, Greenland, and Norway already conduct patrols, which Russia might not like but accepts as routine, having grown accustomed to such surveillance since the Cold War. The enhancement in U.S. underwater sensing implied by the placement of new sensors triggered a similarly muted reaction from participants. Although Russia likely would suspect that the sensors had a clandestine military or intelligence purpose, the planned project would only confirm existing Russian assumptions regarding U.S. capability and intent.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, there was broad agreement among participants that, although Russia would not welcome the placement of additional NATO capabilities in the Arctic, the planned construction would not trigger a major Russian response because Russia does not view the area around Greenland as vital to protecting its interests in the High North. Participants also questioned the plausibility of the United States building a base on the eastern coast of Greenland given the challenges of the local climate and the lack of infrastructure in that area.

Russia's response to the planned construction might change, however, if Moscow determined that the United States planned to use the new facility to support offensive operations. If the base appeared to be simply part of a broader Western effort to erect a defensive barrier against Russia in the North Atlantic, workshop participants suggested, the Russian response would likely be muted. Evidence of a more offensive intent—such as concurrent or planned increases in joint patrols by the United States and Norway in northern waters; increases in the tempo of U.S. and United Kingdom submarine operations in the area; the deployment of U.S. or Danish F-35s or other aircraft with antisubmarine warfare capabilities, such as P-8s, to Pituffik Space Base; or increased basing of unmanned surveillance aircraft—would heighten Russian threat perceptions. More broadly, participants suggested that Russia could view any uptick in normal maritime patrol operations as potential preparation for a larger operation or, at the very least, as an attempt by the United States and its NATO allies to apply pressure on Moscow. Although Russia is accustomed to Norwegian P-3 patrols in northern Norway, such a shift could encourage Russia to try to intercept patrolling vessels in the expanded operating area.

¹⁴⁷ One workshop participant noted, however, that, if this cable enabled NATO to conduct operations against the Bastion, Russia would see this as a red line.

Absent these aggravating factors, workshop participants agreed that Russia would be likelier to respond in the gray zone. Russia might, for instance, seek to leverage pacifist and environmental activist movements in Greenland to stir opposition to the new U.S. base or engage in Global Positioning System (GPS) jamming against U.S. or NATO patrols. If the tempo of NATO patrols in the area grew, Russia might seek to increase its own presence in the area by sending vessels to show a Russian presence and scope out the situation. This, in turn, might increase the risk of accidental escalation as the area gets busier and Russia feels potentially threatened.

Scenario 8: A U.S. Bomber Goes Astray

Scenario Description

In spring 2027, a U.S. B-52 bomber experiences a major technical failure while training with Finnish F/A-18 Hornet fighters in Finnish airspace. The U.S. bomber strays off its intended path and crosses into Russian airspace.¹⁴⁸

Scenario Analysis

Because of the B-52's well-known nuclear mission and its proximity to the Kola Peninsula, workshop participants quickly agreed that the aircraft's entry into Russian airspace would raise alarms in Russia and would prompt a major Russian military response. Russia likely would have already been tracking the exercises in Finnish airspace, and the incursion into Russian airspace would be identified quickly. Indeed, some participants suggested that the exercise itself would have alarmed Russian observers, who might fear that the United States and its allies were preparing for a larger offensive operation; they would be taking a lesson from Russia's own playbook, such as when a Russian exercise was used as cover for the invasion of Crimea.¹⁴⁹ The incursion into Russian airspace, however, would likely lead Russian observers to worry that an attack on Russian strategic locations could be imminent. Russia would be expected to muster a military response, varying from dispatching aircraft to inspect the bomber in flight to ordering air defense units to take down the plane.

Workshop participants noted that the scenario would lead to a high degree of instability because Russian decisionmakers would be under extreme time pressure to determine whether an attack was imminent and, if so, to determine the appropriate response, including debating whether to order the aircraft to be downed. If there were other indicators of an accidental incursion—such as communications from U.S. or Finnish pilots or evidence that escorting aircraft remained in Finnish airspace—Russian air forces might trail the bomber and even force it to land to capture the aircraft and gain a bargaining chip with the United States. Participants discussed what procedures might be in place on both the Russian and U.S. sides if the plane were forced to land in Russian territory. They

¹⁴⁸ This scenario was inspired by a 1984 incident involving a Russian target missile that violated Finnish and Norwegian airspaces and landed in Lapland, as well as a 1995 incident involving the firing of a rocket that Russia mistook as an ICBM. For additional context on the routine training of U.S. bombers with Finnish fighters and the presence of U.S. bombers in Arctic exercises more generally, see Astri Edvardsen, "US, UK and Norwegian Air Forces Exercise in the High North: F-35s Integrate With B-52," *High North News*, December 5, 2024.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Jonathon Cosgrove, *The Russian Invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, 2014–2015: A Post–Cold War Nuclear Crisis Case Study*, Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, 2020.

agreed that this would create a tense situation that Russia would try to exploit, potentially detaining the U.S. crew for a long time.¹⁵⁰

According to workshop participants, multiple intervening factors would increase the likelihood that the malfunction would be misinterpreted as an intentional violation of Russian airspace or even the precursor to an attack on Russian strategic targets. Participants noted that the context would be particularly important, with action against the aircraft likelier in the context of high tensions with the United States and less likely in the context of a ceasefire in Ukraine. Participants disagreed as to whether local air defense personnel might act independently; skeptics noted that this decision likely would be pushed up the chain of command, while others argued that such an unusual event could create a situation in which unauthorized personnel would be likelier to act rashly. Pointing to the example of the Soviet Union's downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 in 1983, all workshop participants agreed that the risk of misinterpretation would be high.¹⁵¹

Scenario 9: A U.S.-Russia Maritime Collision Occurs

Scenario Description

In spring 2027, following a U.S. FONOP in the South China Sea, four Chinese and three Russian ships—including two destroyers and a guided-missile cruiser—are signaled in the U.S. EEZ near the Aleutian Islands in Alaska.¹⁵² The USCG dispatches a cutter to assess the situation and shadow the Russian vessels as they cross through the U.S. EEZ. One of the Russian ships asks the USCG cutter to keep a safer distance, claiming that it is too close. A few minutes later, the Russian ship collides with a nearby U.S. fishing vessel, killing one person aboard the fishing vessel. The Russian captain claims that his vessel accidentally hit the fishing vessel while he was trying to avoid a collision with the USCG cutter.

Scenario Analysis

In this scenario, workshop participants posited that Russia's primary objective would be to avoid providing the United States a justification to build up U.S. military capabilities in the region. Accordingly, Russia would avoid linking the incident to other aspects of the U.S.-Russia or Russia-China relationship and would instead seek to promote a narrative that characterized the confrontation as an isolated accident. Russia would attempt to calibrate its messaging to avoid inflaming domestic audiences in the United States. Participants suggested that the Russian ships likely would cooperate

¹⁵⁰ Workshop participants mentioned the precedent of a U.S. Navy EP-3 making an unauthorized emergency landing on Chinese territory in 2001 following a midair collision. This resulted in a major diplomatic incident between the United States and China. The U.S. crew was interrogated and detained for several days while Chinese authorities stripped the plane of its classified and intelligence equipment (Naval History and Heritage Command, "EP-3 Collision, Crew Detainment, Release, and Homecoming," webpage, October 10, 2024).

¹⁵¹ Peter Grier, "The Death of Korean Air Lines Flight 007," *Air Force Magazine*, January 2013.

¹⁵² This scenario is based on recent joint activities conducted by Chinese and Russian ships in the vicinity of Alaska. See, for example, USCG, "U.S. Coast Guard Encounters People's Republic of China Military Naval Presence in Bering Sea," press release, July 10, 2024; and Nathaniel Herz, "Inside the U.S. Coast Guard's Aleutian Encounter with China's Military—and What It Means," *Alaska Beacon*, July 16, 2024.

with the USCG and assist in a search-and-rescue operation in conjunction with a messaging strategy intended to deflect blame and defuse tension.

Workshop participants noted, moreover, that both the United States and Russia have established procedures in place that would help to manage the situation and reduce the likelihood of escalation. Because Russia has conducted similar operations near the U.S. EEZ before, both countries' coast guards have developed and have experience using established channels of communication. This incident could result in the development of more traffic separation policies or better search-and-rescue policies. The behavior of China in the aftermath of the accident was also called into question. Participants expected that China would support the Russian narrative and make a statement conveying that all parties in the area should engage in safe navigation. Both Russia and China would seek to coordinate their messaging to prevent further escalation.

Scenario 10: Finland Improves Its Precision Strike Capability

Scenario Description

Finland's program to upgrade its M270 multiple-launch rocket systems progresses, enabling the systems to fire next-generation munitions. Accordingly, in spring 2027, the United States authorizes the sale of precision strike missiles (PrSMs) to Finland, which, on delivery, will provide Finland a new ground-based capability that can hit targets more than 300 miles away. Finland describes this acquisition as an essential part of its defensive posture and a "deterrence boost" against potential threats to its territorial integrity.¹⁵³

Scenario Analysis

Workshop participants agreed that this scenario was highly plausible because Finland and other Nordic countries have already publicly discussed potential PrSM purchases. Although Russia would likely perceive the planned improvement in Finnish long-range strike capabilities as threatening, however, participants concluded that it would likely be viewed by Russia as a continuation of long-term trends in NATO capability development.¹⁵⁴ Accordingly, Russia would likely fall back on established practices to protest the sale; this could vary from public messaging that depicts Finland and NATO as aggressors to gray-zone activities intended to dissuade other countries from purchasing PrSMs or to complicate and delay the delivery. Participants agreed, however, that Russia would not be able to do much to prevent Finland from eventually acquiring this system. The incremental improvement in Finnish strike capabilities might also "tighten the jaws" of Russian military planners and incentivize Russian efforts to strengthen air and missile defenses.

¹⁵³ This scenario is based on several recent developments in Finnish defense acquisitions from the United States (Finnish Defence Forces, "Upgrade of the MLRS Fleet to Ensure Long-Range Fires Capacity," press release, December 22, 2023; Darrell Ames, "Successful Precision Strike Missile Production Qualification Test," U.S. Army, February 13, 2025; Phillip Walter Wellman, "Army Gets New Long-Range Missile to Replace Aging ATACMS," *Stars and Stripes*, December 11, 2023).

¹⁵⁴ For example, Finland's prior acquisition of Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile—Extended Range (JASSM-ER) missiles for its F-35s would precondition Russia to view the PrSM deal as part of a broader suite of enhancements in Finnish long-range strike capabilities ("Finland Acquiring Long-Range JASSM Cruise Missiles," YLE, June 4, 2024).

Workshop participants highlighted several allied actions that would heighten Russia's threat perceptions and potentially prompt more-assertive responses from Russia. They noted that similar Swedish purchases or other evidence of Nordic cooperation on the PrSM sale would be perceived as precursors to more-sweeping changes in the military balance in the region. Similarly, live-fire exercises would "ratchet up" Russian threat perceptions, particularly if the PrSMs were paired with other new capabilities that could threaten Russian strategic assets off the Kola Peninsula. Similarly, evidence that the United States had negotiated access to or use of these capabilities in Finland would alarm Moscow.

Scenario 11: A Submarine Accident Fuels Distrust and Disinformation

Scenario Description

After a setback in their nuclear modernization program, the Russian Navy becomes more reliant on aging Soviet-era submarines to meet growing demand for patrols in the High North. In spring 2027, on one such patrol, a Russian *Antey*-class (Oscar-class) guided-missile SSN assigned to the Northern Fleet suffers a series of technical malfunctions. Multiple explosions cause severe damage, and the vessel sinks to the sea floor, killing all of the more than 100 service members on board. Russian nationalist media personalities and military bloggers blame the accident on NATO sabotage, with some calling it an act of war. Concurrently, Western governments release intelligence indicating that the accident resulted from a combination of technology failures and Russian crew error.

Scenario Analysis

Workshop participants drew direct parallels between this scenario and Russian reactions to the August 2000 *Kursk* submarine disaster, in which an Oscar II-class submarine participating in a naval exercise inside the Arctic Circle sank to the bottom of the Barents Sea, killing its entire 118-person crew. All participants agreed that Moscow's primary response would include information operations intended to conceal or, if necessary, deflect responsibility for the accident. Several participants noted that the *Kursk* disaster reinforced Russian leaders' beliefs in the importance of controlling the Russian media and suggested that Moscow has developed both greater determination and greater confidence in its ability to conceal similar accidents. This stems from the extent to which Putin has linked his personal prestige with the country's submarine and naval forces. According to participants, the accident in this scenario might hurt Russia's relationship with China and cast doubt on some of Russia's more-technologically advanced programs.

However, workshop participants agreed that, if evidence of such a disaster became public, Russian leaders would seek to exploit the disaster. Russia could make allegations of sabotage as part of a broader anti-Western messaging campaign or engage in scapegoating of senior Russian military leaders as part of a broader campaign to purge unwanted officials. If the accident were publicly reported, Russia might also use warships to establish a quarantine around the area to prevent international access. This quarantine could be combined with changes in the alert status of regional facilities and harassment of NATO naval vessels operating in the area as part of a strategy to probe potential Western responses and intent. Lastly, participants concluded that Russia would likely refuse

U.S. and regional offers of assistance, either because of concerns about preserving Russia's status or related to allegations of U.S. responsibility for the incident.

Conclusion

The scenarios detailed in this chapter represent hypothetical chains of events. Our workshops were not designed to emulate Russian decisionmaking mechanisms under pressure, and although escalation is always possible, it is never certain. Historically, there have been significant cases in which Russian strategic interests were implicated, Russia issued threats of escalation, and escalation still did not occur. One recent example that is germane to our analysis in this report is the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. In 2022, Russia had indicated that, if Finland joined NATO, Russia "[would] be forced to take retaliatory steps, both of a military-technical and other nature, to neutralize the threats to its national security."¹⁵⁵ Russia issued a similar threat regarding Sweden's potential accession to NATO.¹⁵⁶ Yet when Finland and Sweden eventually joined NATO, there was no meaningful retaliation on the part of Russia.¹⁵⁷ This serves as a reminder that our analysis of potential escalation scenarios is necessarily speculative, and although each scenario presents credible sources of tensions that could spiral into conflict, various other military, diplomatic, and economic factors could come into play to counterbalance these tensions. Meanwhile, some more-minor sources of friction (e.g., fishery management in the Barents Sea) could lead to escalation in ways that might be difficult to predict. In the next chapter, we discuss overarching insights from our analysis of these scenarios and discuss the implications for U.S. policy and planning in the coming years.

¹⁵⁵ "Finland Nato: Russia Threatens to Retaliate over Membership Move," BBC, May 12, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ "Russia Says It Will Take Military-Technical Steps in Response to Sweden's NATO Accession," Reuters, February 28, 2024. See also Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia Warns of Nuclear, Hypersonic Deployment If Sweden and Finland Join NATO," Reuters, April 14, 2022.

¹⁵⁷ Other examples of nonescalation on the part of Russia include Russian reactions to the accession of the Baltic states to NATO in 2004 and 2009 and to the "color revolutions" of 2003 to 2005 (Pezard and Rhoades, 2020, pp. 10–11).

Findings and Implications

The prospect of an end to the Russia-Ukraine war raises questions about how Russia will reorient its strategies and investments in the aftermath of the conflict. Although Russian strategic documents characterize the High North as a high priority, the demands of more than three years of Russian military operations in Ukraine have come at the expense of planned investments in the region.

Although Russia's strategic assets remain in place in the High North, many of its Arctic-capable ground units have been sent to Ukraine, and investments in capabilities necessary for operations in the Arctic—such as icebreakers—have slowed or been put on hold. These dynamics pose challenges for the post-Russia-Ukraine war reconstitution of the Russian armed forces. Despite the stated strategic importance of the High North, Russia might decide that rebuilding its forces in the High North is less important now that it must reconstitute those capabilities that have been significantly attrited in the war in Ukraine. This might be particularly true if Russia views the likelihood of conflict in the High North as relatively low and seeks to hedge against the possibility of renewed hostilities with Ukraine or a new conflict with NATO outside the High North. This suggests that the potential for escalation in the High North will likely be one driver of Russian decisionmaking on the postwar reconstitution of its military and the country's broader postwar defense strategy.

We conclude with a discussion of key findings from our analysis of Russian strategic objectives, threat perceptions, and military posture in the High North and potential escalation scenarios in the region. We also discuss the broader implications of our analysis for regional affairs.

How Does Russia View the High North?

Since the Cold War era, the High North has been a region of military and economic importance, first for the Soviet Union and later for Russia. **Russian strategic documents underscore the High North's importance to Russia, as a matter of both foreign policy and domestic policy.** The high priority assigned to the High North in official documents reflects its perceived importance not just to Russia's national security but also for the country's economic development. **Russia's overarching objectives in the High North include the defense of its national security and territorial integrity, maintenance of its status as a major power, and the protection of the economic potential of its Arctic resource base.** On this last point, the AZRF provides an important base for large-scale investment projects. As we discuss in the next section, the region's economic potential could prove especially significant as the Russia-Ukraine war winds down and Russia transitions back to a peacetime economy.

Even before 2022, when official discussions of the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO began, Russian threat perceptions focused on the prospect of a NATO military buildup along Russia's borders in the High North. **The recent enlargement of NATO has heightened Russian threat**

perceptions in the High North; Russia views the enlargement of the Alliance as an escalatory move that has been driven by the United States. Importantly, however, it has not substantially changed Russian perceptions of the strategic orientations of Finland and Sweden. Russia does appear to view Finland's accession to NATO as particularly concerning given its proximity to Russia and the long shared border between the two countries.

The enlargement of NATO has given new urgency to Russia's efforts to reinforce its military posture in the High North, although the war in Ukraine has prevented Russia from fully realizing these goals. The recent reorganization of Russian military districts suggests that Russia might be trying to shift resources toward the High North in preparation for a future fight, but the ultimate effect of these organizational reforms is unclear. This is particularly true as long as personnel from the Leningrad and Moscow Military Districts remain focused on fighting in Ukraine. Meanwhile, although Russia's Arctic-capable conventional ground forces have been sent to fight in Ukraine, its strategic forces in the High North have remained in place. **The decision to move conventional forces from the High North to Ukraine suggests that Russia views the ongoing conflict in Ukraine as a greater military priority than a conflict with NATO in the High North would be.**

Finally, Russian views on cooperation in the High North reflect broader geopolitical trends related to shifting alliances since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war. Russian cooperation with the West in the High North has declined in recent years, while Russia has become increasingly dependent on economic and technological support from China. Indeed, Russian leaders have characterized cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic as a stabilizing force.

Assessing Escalation Risks in the High North

In light of Russian perspectives on the High North, how should we characterize the risk of escalation in the region? The scenarios detailed in the previous chapter offer two categories of insights for U.S. and allied planners and strategists. First, they illustrate trends in Russian threat perceptions and behavior by illuminating factors that might shape Russian responses to future crises and confrontations in the High North. The scenarios provide a basis for calibrating U.S. and allied messaging and deterrent activities to reduce the likelihood of unwanted escalation in the region. Second, by capturing potential flashpoints and testing whether an incident involving them would actually lead to escalation, the scenarios highlight areas of tension in the High North that Russia could use to advance its regional interests, making these tensions deserving of additional scrutiny. The following insights pertaining to the risk of escalation in the High North emerge from our analysis of the scenarios.

Our analysis suggests that **Russia might be disinclined to militarily escalate a crisis or confrontation that arises from an incident that is limited to the High North, absent evidence of a broader change in the regional balance of power.** Although the High North is no longer the "low tension" area it might have been in the past, participants' responses to the presented scenarios suggest that Russia might still be predisposed to view events in the region through a regional lens. Participants suggested that this proclivity would reduce the likelihood that Russia might misperceive a limited incident as evidence of a broader trend. As a result, Russia might perceive that it has more room to maneuver and might not confront the same pressure to respond quickly or as provocatively as it might

to events in other regions. This reinforces the consensus among experts that wars are likelier to spill into the High North than to begin in the region.¹⁵⁸

With the notable exception of the scenario involving a stray U.S. bomber entering Russian airspace—which might raise Russian fears of an imminent attack on its strategic assets—in the scenarios we considered, Russia would be likelier to refrain from dramatically escalating the situation. Even when workshop participants were asked what could have escalated a given scenario, they were likelier to identify factors that would heighten Russian threat perceptions but not necessarily lead to a Russian military response. Scenarios involving incremental improvements in U.S. or allied capabilities, such as a U.S. arms sale to Finland or enhancements in U.S. underwater sensing and access, were unlikely to be interpreted as grave threats to core Russian national interests. To the contrary, Russian leaders would likely view these scenarios as limited regional incidents that could be effectively resolved through diplomatic and economic channels. However, Russian reactions might be more significant if Russian leaders perceived evidence that regional incidents were directly linked to other unwanted events. Russian reactions likely would be severer if Russia perceived that the discrete changes in U.S. and allied capabilities presented in these scenarios were precursors to or reflections of a longer-term shift in the military balance that threatened Russian interests.

However, sudden changes in U.S. and allied military activities (e.g., a FONOP or stray bomber) might be perceived as more threatening than incremental improvements in capability (e.g., PrSM sales, undersea sensing) that are perceived as a continuation of anticipated trends that have already been factored into Russian calculations. The scenarios assessed to be the most threatening were those involving military actions that deviated from expected trends in U.S. and allied behavior or capability development and could be interpreted by Russia as evidence that the United States and its allies were preparing some decisive action. By contrast, participants did not see an increase in NATO military capability near Russia, such as the sale of PrSMs to Finland, as being likely to provoke a particularly inflammatory reaction from Russia because, as they suggested, Russian leaders already believe that Finland, as well as Norway and Sweden, will acquire additional long-range fire capabilities. Such a sale would conform to existing Russian expectations that are likely already informing Russian planning. This variation suggests that the predictability of an incident might shape Russian responses separately from actual changes in the operating environment.

Our analysis further suggests that **geography plays an important role in shaping Russian perceptions of and responses to potential provocations**. Incidents in areas that Russia perceives as within its zone of influence (e.g., the NSR, Svalbard, or Siberia) might generate a more intense response than incidents in the North American Arctic (e.g., Greenland), where Russian status claims and strategic interests are more attenuated. Geography can also shape Russian responses by placing practical constraints on Russia's ability to leverage its full suite of military and economic response options. For instance, the harsh environmental and ecological conditions along the continental shelf likely prevent Russia from using tactics, such as artificial island building or other construction, that other states have leveraged to assert territorial claims in contested maritime areas. Conversely, Russia might be more emboldened to harass vessels transiting the NSR because it retains an advantage in

¹⁵⁸ See, for instance, Elías Thorsson, "ASC24: The Risk of Conflict Spillover Looms in the Arctic, as Hybrid Threats Grow," Arctic Today, September 13, 2024; and Mathieu Boulègue and Duncan Depledge, "The Face-Off in a Fragmented Arctic: Who Will Blink First?" Royal United Services Institute, May 24, 2024.

icebreaking capabilities and believes that the United States is limited in its ability to operate in the area.

Across the scenarios we considered, **workshop participants anticipated that Russia would default to a series of common behaviors** intended to demonstrate capability, reinforce established claims, reduce international support for perceived opponents, and conceal or deflect attention from accidents or vulnerabilities that might incite domestic criticism. These common responses include military activities designed to signal capability or intent rather than inflict costs; intelligence and surveillance activities; and new or intensified gray-zone activities (e.g., harassment of other militaries' deployments, GPS jamming, sabotage). Table 4.1 summarizes the elements of this Russian playbook for responding to incidents in the High North. The only scenario in which participants could foresee a major military response beyond these common parameters was the U.S. bomber incident, in which Russian decisionmakers would face significant time pressure to respond to what could be perceived as an imminent attack.

Table 4.1. Russia's Response Playbook in the High North

Domain	Reactions
Military	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Military exercises that mirror U.S. and allied military activities in contested waterways• Demonstrations of the capability to operate in Arctic conditions to “show the flag” and reinforce territorial claims (e.g., surfacing submarines, increasing or expanding patrols)• Surveillance of U.S. and allied military activities• Harassment of ships or aircraft in disputed areas
Diplomatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cooperation with select Arctic states (e.g., Canada, Norway) to resolve disputes and avoid ruptures that might benefit the United States
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Messaging to domestic audiences to conceal accidents and deflect attention from setbacks• Messaging to international audiences to portray the United States or its allies as aggressive or in violation of international norms

Despite Russia's diplomatic isolation since February 2022, **there remain opportunities for limited cooperation between Russia and U.S. allies in the High North**. In our workshops, participants highlighted areas of tactical or explicit convergence between Russian and Canadian or Norwegian interests. In a crisis or confrontation, these U.S. allies would be incentivized to contain disputes and resolve disagreements using diplomatic, rather than military, means. Moreover, existing deconfliction channels maintained by regional coast guards might also serve as brakes to prevent unwanted escalation in the region.¹⁵⁹

Taken together, our analysis suggests that, **despite Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO, the High North remains a region of relative stability**. Although we identified a large menu of

¹⁵⁹ It should be noted that, although these deconfliction mechanisms exist at the operational level, there are not similar mechanisms at the political level between Russia and NATO members in the High North; ideally, both mechanisms would be in place to prevent unwanted escalation (Finnish national security official, interview with the authors, Helsinki, Finland, February 10, 2025).

potential flashpoints that could inflame tensions in the region, very few of these triggered military responses from Russia. Instead, Russian responses reflected a desire to maintain stability in the High North and a degree of confidence in the ability of existing deconfliction mechanisms to manage escalation risks. This reflects a common understanding—shared by the United States, its allies, and Russia—that, in a generally inhospitable region and amid efforts to manage more-combustible flashpoints elsewhere in the world, all parties are incentivized to avoid the costs of war in the High North.

Thinking Beyond the Russia-Ukraine War

To conclude, we discuss the implications of our analysis for Russian strategic decisionmaking in the postwar period. Because Russia's conventional ground forces have experienced significant attrition on the battlefield in Ukraine, there is an expectation that Russia will put greater emphasis on and invest more heavily in nuclear capabilities, particularly while the reconstitution of its military is in progress. This reflects recent changes in Russian nuclear doctrine, which suggests that "Moscow [will] be much more dependent on its strategic and nonstrategic nuclear weapons to compensate for its lack of conventional capabilities and planning options."¹⁶⁰

As one expert explained, Russia's emphasis on "conventional capabilities will be . . . sandwiched between more nuclear saber-rattling and sub-threshold or gray-zone measures."¹⁶¹ This shift toward greater emphasis on nuclear capabilities stems from Russian perceptions of vulnerability resulting from the loss of significant military resources in the Ukraine conflict; these perceptions will likely persist so long as postwar reconstitution efforts are ongoing. The same expert suggested that Russian leaders are aware that the redirection of assets from the High North to the battlefield in Ukraine has put Russia in a difficult strategic position, particularly given the enlargement of NATO to reach Russia's doorstep in the region and because it will "take a long time to recapitalize and reconstitute" these resources.¹⁶²

Given that Russia's strategic assets are concentrated in the High North, **this emphasis on nuclear capabilities could translate into the growing military importance of the region** in the post–Russia-Ukraine war period. Although one expert interviewed for this study suggested that Russian investments after the war will "probably not be dramatically different from before the war," in addition to a greater emphasis on strategic assets, we might see Russia pursue further investments in fleet capabilities and bolster its military presence along the Finnish border.¹⁶³ To protect its strategic submarine fleet, Russia might also invest in building up its anti-access/area denial bubble and its buffer zone along the country's northern shores and islands.¹⁶⁴ However, **several factors might limit the extent to which Russia is able to make these investments in the High North.** First,

¹⁶⁰ Michelle Grisé, Mark Cozad, Anna M. Dowd, Mark Hvizda, John Kennedy, Marta Kepe, Clara de Lataillade, Krystyna Marcinek, and David Woodworth, *Russia's Military After Ukraine: Potential Pathways for the Postwar Reconstitution of the Russian Armed Forces*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2713-1, 2024, p. 89.

¹⁶¹ Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

¹⁶² Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

¹⁶³ Expert on Russia, videoconference interview with the authors, November 25, 2024.

¹⁶⁴ Danish defense expert, videoconference interview with the authors, October 28, 2024.

construction projects in the country's Arctic zone are very expensive, so budgetary limitations might come into play. Second, the loss of skilled human capital—particularly the loss of skilled engineers and technical experts—because of brain drain and attrition during the war in Ukraine will limit Russia's ability to undertake technically complex projects and develop new capabilities in the High North.¹⁶⁵ And third, the role of corruption in shaping future Russian investments in the High North should not be underestimated. As one expert explained, strategic decisions in Russia are "shaped by the daily monster of Russian corruption and bureaucracy."¹⁶⁶ Although "there will always be money for [Russia's] nuclear deterrent," the "question is where the rest of the funds go."¹⁶⁷ Increased investment in the High North could offer new opportunities for corruption, but the intricacies and inefficiencies of Russian bureaucracy could translate into slow progress toward realizing Russia's strategic objectives in the region.

The economic potential of the High North could be harnessed to bolster Russian efforts to transition to a peacetime economy after the Russia-Ukraine war ends. The end of active hostilities in Ukraine will mean that Russia faces the challenge of demobilizing not just military personnel but also the Russian economy. The country's defense industrial base has become particularly reliant on government spending during the war, and it will be difficult for Russia to effectively manage the societal risks associated with undoing these dependencies.¹⁶⁸ By encouraging increased economic investment in the High North, Russia might be able to partially mitigate these risks. Moreover, as one expert noted, because Russian oil and gas resources in Siberia will be largely depleted by 2030, Russia will need to find alternative energy resources. The country's Arctic zone has abundant oil and gas resources, providing a suitable alternative.¹⁶⁹

Finally, the High North will serve as an important litmus test for assessing Russian priorities in the years after the end of the war in Ukraine. As the United States and its allies try to discern Russia's territorial ambitions and intent in the postwar period, the way in which Russia approaches the High North will be particularly telling.

As discussed earlier in this report, Russian strategic documents characterize the High North as a priority area for both military and economic reasons, although the conflict in Ukraine has prevented Russia from translating these written words into action. After the war in Ukraine ends, however, **the extent to which Russia makes planned or new investments in the High North could signal whether Russia views the termination of hostilities in Ukraine as permanent.** Russia accelerating its investments in the High North and rebuilding Arctic-capable units in the region would signal that Russia has turned its attention away from Ukraine. This would enable Russia to devote more resources to preparing for a potential conflict with NATO in the High North, even if Russia does not view escalation in the region as an acute risk. If Russia chooses this path, one might expect to see—in addition to renewed investment in Russia's icebreaker fleet—the full reconstitution of Arctic-capable

¹⁶⁵ Expert on Russia, videoconference interview with the authors, November 25, 2024.

¹⁶⁶ Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

¹⁶⁷ Expert on Russia and the Arctic, videoconference interview with the authors, October 25, 2024.

¹⁶⁸ Grisé et al., 2024, p. 130.

¹⁶⁹ Expert on Russia, videoconference interview with the authors, November 25, 2024. As one expert noted, moreover, Russia will not be able to maximize the benefits of using and selling its oil and gas resources in the Arctic region until the war in Ukraine has ended (expert on Russia, interview with the authors, Helsinki, Finland, February 10, 2025).

ground forces in the Leningrad Military District; the qualitative modernization of Russian Air Force capabilities, including the development of bombers and fighters with extended ranges; the procurement of additional Arctic-enabled drones; the modernization of air defenses; and an overhaul of electronic warfare capabilities.

Although geographically distant from the far reaches of the High North, the war in Ukraine has played an important role in shaping the future of Russian strategy in the region. The war has revealed and magnified Russia's vulnerabilities. It has led to the enlargement of NATO, brought the Alliance closer to Russia's doorstep, elongated Russia's border with NATO, and simultaneously confirmed Russian fears and heightened Russian threat perceptions. Climate change, moreover, will ultimately facilitate increased NATO access to and presence in the High North in the coming years and decades, creating an imperative for Russia to shore up its military posture in the region. Taken together, these trends will contribute to an increased likelihood of confrontation and unwanted escalation in the High North.

Abbreviations

AZRF	Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation
CLCS	United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
FONOP	freedom-of-navigation operation
FPZ	Fisheries Protection Zone
GPS	Global Positioning System
HQ	headquarters
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
LNG	liquefied natural gas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSR	Northern Sea Route
PrSM	precision strike missile
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
USCG	U.S. Coast Guard

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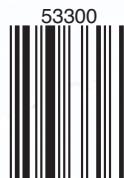
RAND NATIONAL SECURITY RESEARCH DIVISION

In recent decades, the High North has played an increasingly important role in Russian strategic thinking. The region hosts an array of Russian military capabilities, including many of the country's nuclear assets; provides a rich resource base for the Russian economy; and offers a gateway to strategically important sea lines of communication and transit routes that Russia expects will become increasingly contested because of the effects of climate change. Meanwhile, the accession of Finland and Sweden to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—on April 4, 2023, and March 7, 2024, respectively—has more than doubled Russia's land border with the NATO alliance. This has contributed to changes in Russian perceptions of the risk of escalation and military confrontation in the High North, prompting shifts in Russia's stated strategic objectives and military posture in the region.

In light of these changes in the security environment, RAND researchers examined Russian perspectives of the High North and considered the risk of escalation in the region in the coming years. They identified a variety of escalation scenarios involving a conflict between Russia and the West in the High North and conducted virtual workshops with experts on Russian foreign policy and Arctic affairs to analyze these scenarios and identify factors that could escalate or mitigate the situation.

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