

# Ready for a colder war

No one wants a military stand-off in the Arctic but no one wants to be caught unprepared, writes Judith Matloff

The call had just come in – another Russian bomber plane was spotted off the Norwegian coast. The pilot had only 15 minutes to be airborne to track it, yet he trotted with notable calm towards the hangar. Alerts like this are common in the Arctic.

As the Norwegian pilot climbed into the F16, officers told of similar interceptions. A few days before, NATO spotters saw three Russian fighter aircraft. The previous year they identified 71. ‘Russia feels a need to show off,’ concluded Lieutenant Colonel John Epsen Lien, spokesman of Norway’s joint headquarters.

Military activity is on land and sea, too. Melting ice due to climate change is opening shipping routes and access to seabeds that hold possibly a quarter of the world’s untapped oil and gas. What was once considered a frozen wasteland is suddenly an economic prize. And countries with Arctic real estate are updating their forces to defend sovereign interests just in case. While readiness is not seen as offensive, it could be used that way if hostilities flare.

‘No immediate threat exists,’ said Lieutenant Colonel Lar Sundnes, who commands training for friendly nations at the Asegarden Camp in northern Norway. ‘I think the Russians are conducting exercises as a preparation and to show muscle. But you never know. As we see from history, if you have loads of resources you have the potential for tensions.’

One third of Russia lies in the Arctic, and its rearmament is as much a function of high oil prices as territorial defence. Moscow is buying new weaponry because it can afford to. And NATO sources believe that Russia is modernizing for the same reasons they are. Not for hostile purposes, but to assert a military presence, to ensure sovereignty, to conduct surveillance of areas of interest and as contingency planning.

The build-up began in earnest in 2006, when Norway hosted its first big military exercise with western allies. Operation Cold Response drew 10,000 troops from 11 nations above the Arctic Circle to prepare for combat. This is now a bi-annual event.

The next year, Russia planted its flag on the seabed of the North Pole and began flying four-plane formations of bombers in large numbers over Arctic seas. Since then, Norway, Russia, Finland, Sweden, Canada, the US and Denmark have all announced security policies for the High North, and most are forming forces espe-



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*The USS Connecticut surfaces through the polar ice. Below, a Norwegian soldier guides in a NATO helicopter*

cod stocks to healthy levels. Both recently signed a deal delineating the boundary of oil and gas exploration in the Barents Sea, an indication that those treasures could be shared without tensions.

Yet, a recent briefing at Norway's joint command headquarters outlined what could go wrong. Prominent were outsized Russian ambitions or sovereignty issues in Svalbard, a Norwegian island with a Russian community. Other worries included terrorism, organized crime, dangerous cargoes and illegal fishing, and civilian distress situations. 'Try to imagine rescuing 8,000 people if a cruise boat hits an iceberg,' noted one speaker.

While boundaries remain undefined, Asian nations are looking at shortcuts in commercial shipping that could cut the trip from Shanghai to Europe by a third. China last year sent an icebreaker through the Northern Sea Route along the coast of Russia in what could become a trend. On land, it is seeking financial footholds with important Arctic stakeholders, in the form of financial ties with struggling Iceland and overtures to Greenland's mining industry.

The Arctic Council is the primary forum to promote inter-governmental cooperation in the region. Originally a research body, it has matured from an environmental talk shop to a political force.

The council's founders explicitly excluded security issues from the mandate in order to promote collaboration. It should stay that way, said Magnus Johannesson, an Icelander who was in the process of setting up office as the new secretariat director. 'Security issues are the mandate of the national governments, not us,' he said. Talking about sensitive issues might impede business.

Yet the diminishing polar cap could present transnational security problems that are better solved as a group. Terrorism and piracy cannot be confronted bilaterally, and ignoring such problems, should they arise, could lead to the very bellicose scenarios that the Council dreads. And no one wants fighter planes to fly over the Arctic in earnest.

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cially trained for upper latitudes. Norway went so far as to move its joint command to Bodo, a town north of the Arctic Circle, and it is upgrading its fleet to better cope with extreme cold conditions. Canada is buying powerful icebreakers. The US has been showing off submarines in the Arctic.

The most aggressive display is by Russia, whose leaders have repeatedly declared the Arctic of prime security interest. They predict that the High North will become the country's main resource provider by 2020 and leaders have made various speeches about the need to ready forces. Russia is forming two specialized polar brigades and deploying troops near the border with Norway. The Barents and White Seas are test beds for new weapons and missiles, and submarine activity is on the rise.

The western counter-response hinges on little Norway, the only NATO member that shares a land border with Russia. Norway's polar training grounds in Asegarden

have become the place where western allies go to prepare for severe cold weather.

Norway last year staged the largest maneuver ever in the Arctic of 16,300 troops from 14 nations. The Norwegians write Arctic doctrine for the 28-member alliance and routinely share their expertise in cold-weather combat with NATO allies.

During the latest exercises in April, British Royal Marines were learning to fight on skis and dodge avalanches in the mountains around Harstad, north of Bodo. Russians are not invited to take part, but they sometimes sneak a peek from the roadside.

Ever the peacekeeper, Oslo insists that everyone is more interested in policing and preparing for disasters than waging war. Officials stress that Russian bombers respect the limit of 12 nautical miles when they train off Norway's coast. The two countries work together in search-and-rescue exercises, and their combined crackdown on illegal fishing has restored Arctic

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