



## An Evolution in Arctic Collective Defense

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### **Abstract**

Evolution is inevitable – whether it be technology, economic development, weapons systems, geopolitics, or international agreements. It is increasingly clear that the Arctic region is facing an accelerated evolutionary trend that is dramatically impacting the security environment.

Unprecedented climate change has converged with Russian belligerence and strategic competition to shatter the previous ‘High North, Low Tension’ adage.

It is time to reassess our collective defense frameworks in the region. We must not rely upon relics of a Cold War security architecture, but rather take an innovative approach that will enable peace, stability, and prosperity in a demanding future security environment. While the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is transforming to the realities of the current geopolitical situation – strengthened with the accession of Sweden and Finland – we must further assess defensive frameworks. The Arctic is a unique region that demands expertise in order to survive – let alone to fight and win. No longer a region focused predominantly on flight paths of ballistic missiles and strategic bombers or submarines lurking below the ice, NATO must reexamine its approach to the High North through more clearly defined command and control. This paper will examine innovative approaches to solving this challenge – to include enhancing current structures and establishing a new Joint Force Command – by building upon the legacy of successful organizations of the past but carefully designed to succeed in the security environment of the future. To execute an effective layered defense, in the face of an increasingly belligerent Russia and Sino-Russian cooperation, NATO should consider establishing a new Joint Forces Command dedicated to the security of the Northern Flank.



*“PRC and Russian activities in the Arctic – including their growing cooperation – the enlargement of NATO, and the increasing effects of climate change herald a new, more dynamic Arctic security environment.” US Department of Defense Arctic Strategy 2024.*

*Keywords: NATO, NORAD, Arctic, defense*

### **The Threat Has Changed**

There is no question – the North is changing. Warming trends affect the region at a rate of as much as four times the rest of the global, dramatically affecting sea ice melt, coastal erosion, permafrost thaw, and myriad other geophysical and hydrographical characteristics of the region. But the change doesn't end there. Russia's invasion of Ukraine froze dialogue and cooperation within the Arctic Council, little of which has subsequently thawed. Further, the demonstrated belligerence prompted the unthinkable – Finland and Sweden became Allies under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Arctic now consists of seven NATO Allies and Russia, the latter increasingly turning to China to provide much-needed economic and technological investment to continue development of northern resources.

The Arctic is emerging as a new frontier in strategic competition – particularly worrisome given the potential implications of a growing Sino-Russian partnership. Indeed, the strategic environment of the North is being shaped by climate trends converging with strategic competition, with increasing concerns for economic, environmental, and human security. New technology – such as hypersonic missiles – combines with evolving grey zone tactics to create a time sensitive threat environment that spans the traditional military domains.

While the region has always been filled with complexities and a challenging operational environment, the increasingly global focus on the North demands that we reexamine the regional security architecture in order to better deter – while also offering swift response to crisis or conflict by upholding the commitment to collective defense.

### **Understanding the Old to Enhance the New**

Conflict in the Arctic dates back centuries and one can look to the coastal forts of the region to develop a historical sense of the need to deter and defend. During the outset of the Cold

War, technological trends merged with political ideology to necessitate new perspectives on securing the northern approaches. In North America, the United States and Canada cooperatively envisioned the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) to tackle security challenges. Yet NORAD is a bi-lateral agreement, rather than a component of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance. In order to better evaluate the layered defense in depth protecting the Northern Flank, it is imperative to examine the strengths – and weaknesses – of NORAD, as well as NATO's Joint Force Command framework. Doing so will reveal opportunities to harness proven relationships and capabilities with an innovative approach to resolve persistent command and control (C2) and capability gaps.

### **NORAD: An Evolving System**

NORAD and North American defense have a history of evolving to meet new threats. Arguably the most successful and recognizable homeland defense institution, NORAD was established in 1958<sup>i</sup>. As Russia advanced their long-range bombing capabilities, the United States and Canada recognized the need for a bi-national approach for the defense of North America.

The primary threat to North America at the outset of the NORAD Agreement was formations of Russian bombers carrying nuclear gravity bombs. The United States and Canada worked quickly to establish a system of sensors and air defense bases to detect and respond to manned airborne threats. Over the next couple of decades, Russia fielded an array of ICBMs and sea-launched missiles, against which the NORAD air domain sensors and traditional fighter interceptors would be ineffective. This shift to ballistic missiles forced NORAD to adjust, incorporating new space warning radars, create command centers with greater survivability, and in turn reduce fighter forces and alert bases. NORAD reflected its agility again in response to the

September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, working to protect the homeland from all threats – inward or outward – through the 2002 establishment of US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) under a single, dual-hatted commander<sup>ii</sup>.

The U.S. Unified Command Plan (UCP) <sup>iii</sup>designates the Arctic region as a key focus area for USNORTHCOM. Yet although significant portions of Canada and Alaska reside in the Arctic, the NORAD agreement does not specifically call out the Arctic as a focus area<sup>iv</sup>. The NORAD Agreement does, however, state “cooperation is conducted within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty” and “(the agreement) will need to continue to adapt to future shared security interests.”

Forward deployment and ‘defense in depth’ is more important now than ever. While the ballistic missile threat has not diminished, the fielding of Chinese and Russian long-range hypersonic weapons presents a new and challenging threat to North America and makes cooperative Russian and Chinese bombers a much more credible threat<sup>v</sup>. Indeed, while NORAD and USNORTHCOM have been effective in the past, the future demands greater Arctic domain awareness, capabilities, and coordination across the North.

### **The World’s Most Powerful Alliance**

Recently celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, NATO has proven to be an enduring alliance, focused on promoting “stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area. They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defense and for the preservation of peace and security.”<sup>vi</sup> The preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty has endured the test of time, guiding the Alliance as it welcomed its 32<sup>nd</sup> Ally this year. The has Allies have proven versatile in adapting to the challenges of the evolving strategic environment – but must continue to adapt as NATO’s center of gravity shifts northward.

The establishment of Allied Joint Force Command – Norfolk in 2018 sought to respond to the evolving threats emerging from adversaries and enhanced capabilities. The newest of three Joint Force Commands, JFC-Norfolk provides an operational level command and control (C2) capability and is particularly focused on defending the strategic lines of communications across all domains between Europe and North America.

Yet the renewed Russian – and emerging Chinese – focus on the Arctic demands re-thinking of the Cold War problem set. Whereas NORAD prioritizes bi-lateral deterrence and defense, NATO must provide collective defense for the entirety of the Alliance – doing so through the contributions of Allies. Determining the most effective command and control – and avoiding any capability gaps – is a poignant challenge for any defense structure. But perhaps an even more critical one in the North, where the strategic environment has evolved dramatically since the days of the Cold War.

### **Strengthening our Collective Defense**

Should a crisis unfold in Europe targeting NATO Allies, the United States would need to act quickly to project power from North America to Europe. It would be to Russia's advantage in that case to strike the United States, both kinetically and non-kinetically, to frustrate the flow of military power to aid our European allies. Advanced Russian hypersonic weapons have ranges beyond 1,500km<sup>vii</sup> and can be launched at targets from well outside of NORAD's existing sensor coverage, giving NORAD forces very little time to respond.

Allied forces in the Nordics could, in theory, eliminate adversarial bombers or missiles before long-range weapons are launched. The critical question is how can those cooperative forces share their data and coordinate the use of force across vast distances? A fragmentary approach would be unreliable at best.

Now that seven of the eight Arctic nations are NATO Allies, we suddenly have a unique opportunity to enact a NATO solution to secure the Alliance's Northern Flank. It must first be noted that the positive effects of the NORAD Agreement on the collective defense of North America cannot be overstated. NORAD has long been the gold standard for multinational defense cooperation and it has conducted its mission faithfully for over six and a half decades. NORAD's accomplishments should be celebrated. But, there is a demonstrated need to adapt security architectures to the future.

This paper will explore the creation of a new Joint Force Command that specifically focuses on deterrence and defense in the High North, in order to eliminate C2 gaps, enable more efficient movement of air defense assets, improves communications and domain awareness, and strengthens interoperability and interchangeability of Allies tasked with defending the region. It will present two options for the creation of this new command, each with advantages and disadvantages that should be considered as NATO seeks to address the security challenges inherent in the North.

### **JFC-Stavanger Option**

The NATO Joint Warfare Centre was established in Stavanger, Norway in 2003, under Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT), and is a multi-national organization represented currently by seventeen nations contributing to the overall warfighting readiness of the Alliance<sup>viii</sup>. Stavanger could be well-suited for tasking as a new Joint Force Command for several reasons.

- While transforming a training command to an operational one is not an easy or rapid process, the basic infrastructure, capabilities, and potential to succeed as a JFC are inherently present in Stavanger.



- With a location just south of the Arctic, Stavanger is well-suited to hand-off C2 from other JFCs to focus on the highly specialized Arctic fight.
- Stavanger has the basic NATO infrastructure required for swiftly assuming command and control of forces and would be able to act as a bridge between the other JFCs for the northern fight
- The location draws upon centuries of operational experience in the region on how to fight – and win in the challenging northern environment.

Aligning Stavanger as a JFC would require political maneuvering within NATO and substantial investment to fully modernize facilities. Yet it presents an appealing solution to the C2 gap when looking at the responsibilities of JFC-Norfolk and JFC-Brunssum.

#### **JFC-North to Colorado**

Much like the primary mission of JFC Norfolk, which is to defend sea lines of communication from North America to Europe in time of crisis, the primary mission of JFC-North would be to defend all domains of the non-Russian Arctic region in order to guarantee uninterrupted force projection of the assumed preponderance of forces for NATO defense, from North America in time of crisis. Simply defending the Nordics would not be the primary mission.

Colorado Springs, Colorado presents an ideal location for the new JFC for several reasons.

- First, the Arctic Region is already a key focus area for the USNORTHCOM Commander.
- Colorado is a very long distance from the primary threats of China and Russia, giving the Commander the most time possible for decision-making in the event of an attack.

- Finally, NORAD/USNORTHCOM Headquarters is already purpose built and connected to world-wide systems for broad area C3. Housing the JFC in an already established globally-capable command headquarters would eliminate the need for significant monetary investment to build a new command center.

Given the evolving threat to North America, the expansion of NATO to include all non-Russian Arctic countries, and the growing obsolescence of the antiquated NORAD Agreement establishing a new NATO JFC North in Colorado Springs would require the following steps:

1. Dissolve the NORAD Agreement and its associated bi-national command structure.
2. Replace the NORAD Agreement with a procedural, non-command, bi-national base access and overflight agreement.
3. Hand all-domain defense of the Continental U.S. (CONUS) to USNORTHCOM.
4. Hand all-domain defense of Canada to Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC).
5. In the place of the NORAD HQ, establish the new JFC, appointing the Commander of USNORTHCOM as the dual-hatted Commander of JFC North. Deputy Command would rotate through the NATO countries that co-man the JFC.
6. NATO countries who are represented in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable would co-man JFC North.

### **Conclusion**

Given consideration of fiscal realities and budget planning cycles, now is the time to reexamine our way of thinking. While this paper highlights options to build on the current successful command structures, it does so offer the following for consideration:

- The most likely military threat against NATO nations in the Arctic is from Russian and Chinese cruise missiles fired from bombers operated in the Arctic Region.
- The United States and Canada, due to lack of basing infrastructure, have limited options to deploy defensive assets forward into the high North.
- NATO member nations have the ability to collectively provide all-domain layered defense of the non-Russian Arctic but lack the region-specific joint command structure to close the C3 gaps that limit joint operations effectiveness.
- The NORAD Agreement is unable to close those C3 gaps on its own.

A new NATO JFC for the defense of the Arctic is the best solution to command and coordinate joint all-domain Arctic security operations.

The existing NATO and NORAD command structures have provided a tremendous foundation from which to prepare for the strategic challenges of the future. While the proposals in this paper are incumbent upon nations allocating appropriate fiscal resources and strengthening capabilities, NATO offers the best approach for collective defense frameworks in the North. A new JFC-Stavanger could draw upon numerous synergies with existing command structures and be ready to engage in the fight relatively quickly, but a new JFC-North in Colorado Springs, Colorado could serve to both replace the NORAD Agreement and strengthen the defense architecture of the North.

There is no doubt that we are at a unique intersection where warming trends, strategic competition, and security concerns are converging in the North. The accession of Sweden and Finland combines with advances in technology and capabilities to present both dilemmas and potential solutions in how to best provide collective defense to the broader Alliance. The strength

of thirty-two nations in the world's most powerful Alliance can be utilized to develop innovative approaches to the northern problem set. While the solutions of the past were vital in the Cold War, today's world is a dramatically different one that demands greater innovation and capability. The establishment of a new, effectively layered defense would be a critical step in improving regional security and stability by forming both a credible deterrence and a robust defense of NATO's Northern Flank.

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