

# DUAL-USE DILEMMA: MARITIME INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE POLITICIZATION OF MILITARIZATION IN THE ARCTIC

PAPER 1 IN "INFRASTRUCTURE DEFENSE AND DETERRENCE IN THE ARCTIC"

*Dr. Kelsey Frazier, Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies*

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The Arctic maritime domain is increasingly contested as sea ice recedes and access to strategic waterways expands. **This brief examines how maritime infrastructure in the Arctic becomes militarized in narrative or in function, focusing on the frameworks used to assess militarization, recent Russian and Chinese behaviors, and the implications for U.S. defense posture.** Infrastructure investments across the region—ports, refueling hubs, search and rescue (SAR) stations, and communications systems—are often presented as civilian or dual-use. However, the line between civilian and military utility is frequently blurred and politicized, especially by state actors pursuing strategic leverage. This brief offers threshold criteria and recommendations for U.S. commanders and planners seeking to distinguish legitimate civil infrastructure from latent or politicized military use.

## CONTEXT

Infrastructure in the Arctic maritime domain has become a fulcrum for geopolitical narrative and defense posture in the context of strategic competition. **While many Arctic states frame infrastructure investments as enablers of regional development or climate resilience, adversaries often frame those same investments as signals of militarization or strategic intent.** This is particularly pronounced in the characterization of dual-use facilities—civilian ports, runways, and communication hubs capable of supporting military operations.

**Definitional ambiguity lends power to gray zone tactics.** In early 2025, Russia accused Norway of violating the Svalbard Treaty by allowing NATO-linked activities and military infrastructure development on the archipelago.<sup>1</sup> This recent accusation underscores how infrastructure can be politicized in gray zone strategies. Such accusations, while unsubstantiated, have strategic consequences and can influence operational planning, defense investments, and alliance cohesion. There is no universally accepted legal definition of “militarization” of infrastructure. UNCLOS and the Svalbard Treaty provide partial guidance, but neither defines a threshold for when civilian or dual-use infrastructure becomes militarized in practice or perception.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Russia cited upgraded port facilities and broadband communications infrastructure as indicative of NATO militarization. Norway maintains that its activities are within the treaty’s bounds, which prohibit “military fortifications” but do not ban military presence or dual-use infrastructure. The Norwegian Armed Forces do not maintain permanent garrisons on Svalbard, and logistics support is conducted through civilian channels.



In NATO doctrine, military mobility and infrastructure readiness are emphasized, but these are framed as defensive measures.<sup>ii</sup> Russia, by contrast, uses infrastructure narratives to support coercive diplomacy and justify its own force posture in the Northern Sea Route.<sup>iii</sup>

**Narrative weapons lay groundwork for gray zone operations.** This controversy between Russia and Norway on Svalbard illustrates how accusations of militarization can serve as *narrative weapons*. Any foothold such accusations can gain in the public information space can shape international perceptions, undermine alliance credibility, and justify retaliatory actions. Such accusations often precede gray zone operations—surveillance, information warfare, or economic coercion.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. DEFENSE POSTURE

The politicization of infrastructure complicates threat assessment and risk calculation. As adversaries frame civil projects as military threats—or mask military activities as civil—U.S. and allied commanders must adopt flexible, intelligence-driven approaches to posture and partnership. Key implications include:

- **Narrative Preparedness:** Strategic communications must preempt adversarial framing of U.S. and allied infrastructure as offensive or destabilizing.
- **Infrastructure Attribution:** Differentiating between civilian and military purpose requires layered intelligence inputs, including behavioral indicators, not just material presence.
- **Deterrent Positioning:** Forward defense posture must remain credible without feeding adversary narratives. Visibility of deterrence assets must be coupled with transparency and diplomatic signaling.

## THE PROBLEM DEFINED

The U.S. Department of Defense defines dual-use infrastructure as that which supports both civilian and military needs.<sup>iv</sup> This classification is increasingly insufficient in the Arctic, where austere conditions mean nearly all infrastructure has potential military value. **Therefore, the critical question becomes: when does potential military utility translate into strategic intent?**

**Case Study: Russia’s Use of Maritime Infrastructure in the Arctic.** Russia’s Northern Fleet maintains a permanent presence along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), supported by a network of renovated Soviet-era ports, radar installations, and airstrips. These installations serve as critical logistical nodes for both SAR and defense operations. However, the integration of these facilities into the broader Arctic Joint Strategic Command (established in 2014) reveals a deliberate strategy of civil-military fusion.<sup>v</sup>

The Russian Ministry of Defense often presents this infrastructure as necessary for civilian maritime safety, particularly SAR coverage in the NSR. Yet, concurrent exercises involving anti-ship missiles, bomber patrols, and submarine deployments reveal an underlying military utility.<sup>vi</sup> This pattern—presenting civilian-facing infrastructure with military back-end integration—is now a hallmark of Russian Arctic strategy.

**Comparative Example: China’s Maritime Infrastructure Strategy.** China’s behavior in the South China Sea offers a valuable analog to activity in the Arctic. China’s artificial islands, initially presented as research outposts and fishing facilities, evolved into forward-operating bases with radar, missile systems, and runways.<sup>vii</sup> This strategy of narrative decoupling—civil justification followed by military use—mirrors Russia’s framing in the Arctic.

China’s investment in polar research stations and satellite ground stations in Greenland and Svalbard raises parallel concerns.<sup>viii</sup> While not yet militarized, the PLA’s doctrine of “civil-military fusion” and China’s lack of transparency suggest that latent military capability remains a strategic objective.

## CRITERIA TO IDENTIFY INFRASTRUCTURE MILITARIZATION

The following criteria offer a functional method for assessing when maritime infrastructure in the Arctic has crossed the threshold from civilian to militarized:



- **Integration with Command and Control Systems.** If the infrastructure supports or integrates with military C4ISR<sup>2</sup>, its strategic role shifts substantially.
- **Operational Use During Exercises or Contingency Planning.** Recurrent use of ports or airfields during military exercises, particularly those with offensive capabilities, indicates militarized intent.
- **Restrictions on Civilian Use or Transparency.** Limiting public access, classification of facility data, or rapid deployment capacity are signals of latent militarization.
- **Public Narrative and Strategic Communication.** If state media or official doctrine frames the facility as essential to national defense or sovereignty assertion, it moves into the strategic deterrence space.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Failure to act leaves U.S. and allied infrastructure increasingly vulnerable to strategic mischaracterization, coercive diplomacy, and eventual physical denial. **Inaction enables adversaries—primarily Russia and China—to define the narrative, normalize their own dual-use military buildout, and reshape international norms to suit their interests.** Russia gains freedom of maneuver to consolidate control over the Northern Sea Route and frame NATO-aligned ports and maritime nodes as destabilizing. China, though not an Arctic state, leverages inaction to expand its narrative legitimacy and embed civil-military infrastructure under the guise of scientific cooperation and economic development. Other authoritarian actors, observing this permissive environment, may follow suit in other strategically ambiguous regions. In each case, U.S. credibility erodes, and future decision-making is constrained by adversarial framing already in place.

1. **Develop Arctic Infrastructure Classification Guidance.** Establish DOD-wide criteria for assessing and classifying dual-use Arctic maritime infrastructure in terms of potential and active militarization.
2. **Expand Civil-Military Transparency Initiatives.** Promote confidence-building measures with Arctic allies to increase visibility into infrastructure use, reducing the effectiveness of adversarial narratives.
3. **Integrate Narrative Risk into Operational Planning.** Embed strategic communications teams into joint planning groups to anticipate and counter infrastructure-related disinformation campaigns.
4. **Leverage Legal Norms to Undermine Politicized Claims.** Engage multilateral forums (e.g., Arctic Council, IMO) to reaffirm legal interpretations of infrastructure use in the Arctic and expose misuse of international treaties for political ends.

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## ENDNOTES

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