

Minding the Archipelago: What Svalbard Means to NATO

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Abstract

Although the opportunity, form and level of NATO's High North engagement have long been a matter of debate, the renewed invasion of Ukraine by Russia and its strategic implications at the global level have dragged a reunified NATO into the Arctic as a *fait accompli*. Yet, the Arctic is not one uniform bloc. When pondering its involvement, the Alliance should consider the particulars of each Arctic territory in its area of responsibility. The Svalbard archipelago, under the sovereignty of Norway –the most vocal advocate of NATO's High North increased presence– is one of the Arctic areas falling under NATO's responsibility. Global geopolitical trends, combined with Svalbard's specific points of contention, may exacerbate the risk of conflict affecting the archipelago. This paper argues that NATO should consider the security concerns specific to Svalbard when pondering its High North involvement and highlights two elements that should be factored in the Alliance's strategic and operational thinking over the archipelago. The first relates to the diverging interpretations of Article 9 of the Svalbard Treaty while the second lies in Svalbard's vulnerability to gray-zone tactics due to its particular legal and geographical features. Bearing these particulars in mind, the paper provides key recommendations for NATO to adopt a tailored approach to the archipelago.

Keywords: *Arctic, Russia, Norway, defense, security, Alliance, policy, hybrid, High North, strategy*

1 Introduction

The opportunity, form and level of NATO's High North engagement have long been a matter of debate due to differing security perceptions and concerns that a stronger NATO presence involving non-Arctic states may challenge Arctic stability and peaceful cooperation.¹

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The renewed invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the global strategic implications of this conflict have dragged a reunified NATO into the Arctic as a *fait accompli*. Examples of this ascension include Arctic nations Sweden and Finland seeking NATO membership, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visiting the Canadian Arctic for the first time in August 2022 to underline “the region’s strategic importance for Euro-Atlantic security”,² and the first mention of the High North in NATO’s Strategic Concept in June 2022.³

Yet, the Arctic is not one uniform bloc. When pondering its involvement, NATO should consider the particulars of each Arctic territory in its area of responsibility. The Svalbard archipelago, under the sovereignty of Norway – the most vocal advocate of NATO’s increased presence in the High North – is one of the Arctic areas where West meets East, both geographically and due to the permanent presence of international settlers on its land. Since Norway’s accession to NATO in 1949, and the inclusion of Svalbard in NATO’s defense area in 1951, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which ensures collective defense in case of attack, also applies to the archipelago.

Although Svalbard has generally been an area of peaceful cooperation, its unique geographical and legal features still make it a zone of tension. Russia, in particular, seeks to preserve its key business interests rooted in the archipelago’s natural resources and tourism potential,^{4,5} and along with China, continues to complain about local business regulations. The legal status of the maritime zones surrounding the archipelago is also contested, including by fellow NATO members,⁶ and the dispute is only likely to remain at the forefront of diplomatic discussions with a changing climate altering fish distribution patterns. Of no lesser importance is Svalbard’s significant geostrategic location⁷ at the gateway between the Barents Sea and the North Atlantic, close to the Kola Peninsula, which is home to Russia’s strategic Northern Fleet, and within Russia’s historical concept of “Bastion Defense” area.⁸ This combination of factors has previously led analysts, as well as the Russian Ministry of Defense itself,⁹ to describe Svalbard as a potential “geopolitical flash-point”¹⁰ or “epicenter of tensions”.¹¹ The archipelago has further been presented as “NATO’s Arctic Achille’s Heel” and there have been concerns about a potential seizing of Svalbard by Russian forces.¹²

While this scenario seems the least likely,¹³ at least as long as Russia benefits from a stable environment around Svalbard, some of the norms and customary practices emanating from Norway’s track-record of ensuring peaceful cooperation with its Eastern neighbor have recently deteriorated in the context of the war against Ukraine.¹⁴ Global geopolitical trends, combined with Svalbard’s dormant points of contention, may exacerbate the risk of conflict¹⁵ and highlight the need for NATO to consider the security concerns specific to the archipelago when pondering its High North involvement. By doing so, there are at least two elements that should be factored in the Alliance’s strategic and operational thinking over the archipelago.

The first relates to the diverging interpretations of Article 9 of the Svalbard Treaty, while the second lies in Svalbard's particular vulnerability to gray-zone tactics.

2 Sensitivity over diverging interpretations of Article 9

Article 9 of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, which the Soviet Union ratified in 1935, provides that Norway may not create nor allow the establishment of any naval base nor construct any fortification on Svalbard, and that the archipelago “may never be used for warlike purposes”.¹⁶ Since 1949, Russia, fearing that Svalbard could become a forward base for NATO, has considered the provisions of Article 9 as antagonistic to the application of NATO's Article 5 on the archipelago.^{17,18} Consequently, Oslo introduced a number of reassurance measures to address Moscow's concerns. As such, NATO allies have been prohibited from participating in military exercises east of the 24th meridian.¹⁹

However, with rapidly changing security realities, the wording of Article 9's provisions has increasingly become at best elusive, and at worst outdated. The resulting ambiguity has led to diverging interpretations over the article's current significance,²⁰ in particular as to the leeway for NATO's potential involvement. Moreover, Moscow has repeatedly complained about alleged Norwegian attempts to securitize Svalbard. Recently, this has led to a series of controversial situations between the Russian and Norwegian authorities regarding the scope of Article 9.

In April 2016, Longyearbyen's airport was used as a stopover for Chechen special forces' instructors on their way to an airborne military drill in Russia's Barneo Ice Camp. This use of Svalbard has been analyzed by academics as potentially in breach of Article 9, and of the obligation for foreign military to apply in advance for diplomatic clearance before landing at Svalbard airports.²¹

Conversely, in spring 2017, Russia's Foreign Ministry strongly protested when a delegation from NATO's Parliamentary Assembly (PA) undertook an informational visit to Longyearbyen.²² Despite the mere political nature of the NATO PA, the Ministry called the visit a “provocative policy”, “at odds with the spirit of the Svalbard Treaty”, and an alleged attempt to bring Svalbard “under the wing” of NATO.²³

More recently, in October 2021, the visit of a Norwegian frigate to Longyearbyen sparked protests from the Russian Foreign Ministry, which condemned the use of Svalbard's infrastructure “in the military planning of the defense of Norway, including the reception of reinforcement from NATO allies”.²⁴

3 Legal and geographical vulnerability to gray-zone tactics

Another specificity of Svalbard is its particular vulnerability to gray-zone tactics. The High North in general is one of Russia's favorite playgrounds to test and demonstrate its hybrid capacities, such as GPS jamming and cyberattacks on infrastructure.²⁵ Yet, Svalbard's unique legal and geographical features make it a particularly

inviting target for Russia to test NATO's cohesion or coerce Norway into making concessions,²⁶ particularly in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine.

First, Svalbard's unique legal framework creates vulnerabilities in and of itself, as the Treaty's unclear provisions prohibiting the use of Svalbard for "warlike purposes", combined with the still predominant Western binary perception that nations are either at war or they are not, offers an inviting opportunity for below-the-threshold activities.²⁷ In addition, diverging interpretations of the Treaty may be instrumentalized as a "lawfare" tactic to serve the interests of a rival nation, including through disinformation campaigns targeting public opinion.²⁸ In a recent instance in July 2022, when Norway decided, in line with EU sanctions, to deny the transit via its mainland of the food supplies destined to the Russian settlements in Svalbard, top Russian legislators not only deceitfully claimed that Norway was violating the Svalbard Treaty, but also alleged that such a violation undermined Oslo's sovereignty over the archipelago. According to Russian legislators' debatable interpretation, signatories of the Svalbard Treaty would only recognize Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard on the condition that Norway adhered to the entirety of the treaty's provisions.²⁹ Lastly, by allowing the presence of international settlers, the Treaty enables foreign nations to establish a *de facto* strategic foothold on the archipelago. This has led to misperceptions about Svalbard's legal status, of which the perceived dilution of Norwegian sovereignty³⁰ is a vivid example that may also be leveraged by malign actors.

Second, Svalbard's geographical location makes it vulnerable to gray-zone mischief on different levels. Due to the archipelago's remoteness from mainland Norway, continuous maritime domain awareness is challenging, while the well-functioning of critical subsea infrastructure such as undersea communication cables is all the more crucial. This makes Svalbard's undersea infrastructure extra vulnerable to gray-zone tactics, as evidenced by the January 2022 cutting, attributed to human activity, of an undersea fiber optic cable providing Longyearbyen with internet broadband. In addition, Svalbard's location halfway between mainland Norway and the North Pole gives it a unique position to host a key satellite ground station, connected by the same cable that was severed in January.³¹ Ultimately, Svalbard allows easy access to extreme latitudes for nations with polar aspirations, such as China, whose scientific facilities in Ny-Ålesund have been described as "dual-use" with the capacity to collect data on Arctic-specific operations for military purposes.³²

4 A tailored NATO approach

Bearing these specificities in mind, NATO would benefit from adopting a tailored approach to Svalbard.

This entails factoring in Moscow's sensitivity over Article 9 and the risk that the latter may be used as a pretext for escalation against any miscalibrated NATO involvement. Accordingly, the Alliance should consider self-imposed limitations regarding

the level of its military exercises and capability-development around Svalbard to avoid undermining the fragile geopolitical balance around the archipelago while still deterring Russia and standing ready to respond to a full spectrum of aggressions.

While maintaining a strong amphibious force with projection capacity in mainland Norway is necessary, NATO needs to prepare more proactively for gray-zone tactics. Incorporating these elements into military drills and tabletop exercises, as well as increasing consultation, transparency and information-sharing between allies and with the private sector will be key.³³

Additionally, deterring hybrid threats requires further unifying NATO's northern front by harmonizing diplomatic positions over Svalbard's sovereignty status. This includes working towards resolving the maritime dispute between the EU and Norway to ensure that existing divisions do not become a critical vulnerability.

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NOTES

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