The Arctic has long been considered as an area of low military tension with a potential for sub-regional cooperation, especially in jointly developing energy resources in the High North. Receding polar ice, as a result of climate change, has created even more opportunities in this respect. It also encourages more intensive use of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which is gradually opening up for navigation for ever bigger parts of the year. However, the Arctic region is no longer exempt from broader geopolitical tensions. Recognising these changes, some individual EU Member States (the UK, Netherlands, Germany) have recently published white papers or other policy documents on Arctic security and the Finnish EU Presidency is pushing for better coordination and possibly a renewed EU Arctic strategy. Although the risk of a military conflict originating in the Arctic could still be considered relatively low, this would not exclude military spillover effects from conflicts elsewhere or misunderstandings concerning incidents at sea or in the air, with the potential for escalation. In this context, this paper looks into options for conflict prevention and regional security cooperation in the Arctic, which the EU and Russia could jointly undertake in a number of different, multilateral frameworks.

A geopolitical risk assessment

A geopolitical confrontation in a scramble for Arctic resources seems unlikely in the short term. Legal and partially overlapping claims by Arctic states, especially on the extension of Exclusive Economic Zones, are still under review by the UN Commission on the Law of the Seas and practical issues concerning deep water offshore exploration basically remain unresolved, as long as the dual-use technology needed for such exploration and exploitation remain subject to Western sanctions. Different legal issues on the interpretation of the rights and obligations of coastal states and the rights of free passage and navigation are still manageable, especially as long as NSR-shipping remains limited. The fact that Russia still seems to be acting here as a status quo power and respecting international law, could pave the way for the rebuilding of some trust, not only in furthering dialogue, but also in finding compromise solutions, even when legal positions differ. A good example of this would be the recent settlement of the case of the Greenpeace ship “Arctic Sunrise” between the Netherlands and the Russian Federation.¹

Meanwhile, a certain “militarisation” of the Arctic region has taken place with several powers, including Russia, either rebuilding military facilities or developing broader Arctic military capabilities and extending their operational capabilities for border control. Military

exercises within the region could also lead to increased threat perceptions on both sides and to miscommunication, misunderstandings and incidents, either at sea or in the air. Overall, the Russian military build-up in the High North could still be considered as being mainly defensive, in view of the serious degradation of military assets in the 1990s and the strategic importance of protecting Russia’s Nuclear Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) of the Northern Fleet, as implied in its “Bastion Strategy”. Furthermore, climate change leaves bigger parts of Russia’s northern coastline exposed and in need of not only military protection, but also better capabilities for border control, as other actors (fishermen, poachers, smugglers, environmental activists, migrants) are gaining opportunities to reach coastal areas that are no longer protected by the polar ice.

At the same time, Russian build-up of military resources, and especially Anti-air/Area Denial assets, could pose a challenge for NATO’s Sea Lines of Communication and reinforcement operations in times of crisis. Svalbard, Iceland and the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap have regained strategic importance, which they had lost after the Cold War ended. A special point of attention would also be the growing role of China in developing its Polar Silk Road, which is still mainly of an economic nature, but could have broader security consequences as well, depending on how China’s partnership with Russia develops. Therefore, the biggest challenges at the moment seem to be:

- The prevention of an escalation or spillover of military conflicts elsewhere (the Baltic or Black Sea areas) to the Arctic by identifying platforms for military-military contacts and for broader dialogue and cooperation on hard security-related issues, including Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs);
- Identification of possible areas for non-military security cooperation, including search and rescue and possible ecological crises, while keeping options open for broader cooperation in the future.

Military-to-military dialogue and CSBMs: limited role for the EU

Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, military-to-military contacts between Russia and Western partners have been diminished and other forms of security dialogue (NATO-Russia Council or within OSCE) have been stalling, including on possible (regional) confidence and security building measures. The mandate of the intergovernmental Arctic Council, which brings together Arctic and near-Arctic states and partners, does explicitly not extend to military security affairs. However, such a platform could be found in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR). This Forum has been meeting since 2011, but Russia has no longer been invited since 2014. Re-inviting Russia and prioritising dialogue on issues like broader military transparency, prevention of incidents and managing local conflicts could be useful steps in rebuilding trust and eventually adopting some military code of conduct for the High North, as recently proposed by M. Boulégue. However, it seems that Russia would still prefer meetings of Chiefs of Defence Staff instead of re-engaging in the ASFR.

In principle, Arctic security could also be discussed in the NATO-Russia Council, but not all Arctic states are NATO members (especially Sweden and Finland) and NATO member Denmark is hesitant to bring NATO more actively into the Arctic region, as the position of Greenland remains a sensitive issue. In as far as the EU discusses such issues, this is mostly done in close cooperation with NATO and non-EU member states, like Norway (and also the post-Brexit UK in future). Selective engagement between the EU and Russia at present does not extend to Arctic hard security issues and most recent discussion papers, both by the Commission’s European Political Strategy Centre and the College of Europe on strengthening EU engagement in the Arctic are hesitant in this respect. The latter even suggests that “expressing security concerns may fan the flames”.

The OSCE could also be a platform, as all Arctic states are also OSCE participating states, but there does not seem to be much support among the participating states at present to move in that direction. However, considering the OSCE’s comprehensive security mandate, this could be a logical platform for interrelated hard and soft security issues in a sub-regional context. B. Schaller has suggested that specific CSBMs for the Arctic region could start to be developed, beginning with a systematic information exchange and verification of military capabilities of Arctic states deployed in the region. Whether the OSCE could play this more inclusive role could be further investigated, including in the context of the OSCE’s Structured Dialogue. However, it should be noted that the EU, as such, plays only a limited role inside the OSCE, apart from the EU Member States in their capacity of OSCE participating states.

Broader security issues in the Arctic as an option for EU-Russia cooperation

At the recent Arctic Forum in St Petersburg, President Putin underlined Russia’s willingness for cooperation with other partners in the Arctic. As joint exploitation of energy resources in the Arctic remains closed for Western energy companies, due to the present export restrictions on dual-use technologies and on the financing of such projects under EU and US sanctions, such options for cooperation will have to be found in other areas. In this context, some soft security issues, like emergency response, search and rescue and cooperation on the protection of the fragile Arctic environment, could be a more realistic subject of bilateral and/or multilateral cooperation, including between the EU and Russia. Both the Arctic Council and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, which will both be chaired by Russia in the coming years, could be used as platforms for such dialogue and cooperation, including on integrated marine management. And the OSCE, including the Economic and Environmental Dimension (EED), could also be better used to foster interaction between all Arctic states and near-Arctic states (except for China). The main issue here could well be convincing the US that such a multilateral approach could serve its interests in the Arctic better than any unilateral “America First”-approach, as recently outlined by Secretary of State Pompeo.

As the EU’s role within the OSCE is limited, the EU should also renew its efforts to acquire observer status within the Arctic Council, which is presently blocked by Russia. Although the EU, as such, already participates in all working groups, having formal observer status could give it more opportunities, including for dialogue and cooperation in the Arctic with Russia, especially when its integrated Arctic policy, adopted in 2016, would be renewed and strengthened under the new Commission.

Conclusion

As discussions on a more integrated and renewed EU Arctic Strategy under the new Commission have already started, EU and Russia could attempt to move forward simultaneously in developing a more intensive dialogue and closer cooperation on non-military security issues, including dealing with the broader consequences of climate change in the Arctic. The most appropriate forum for such cooperation would still be the Arctic Council, but Russia would then have to accept the EU acquiring formal observer status.

Another option that would help Russia and EU Member States to cooperate more broadly on Arctic security issues would be to raise such issues within the OSCE, either within the Structured Dialogue to discuss regional CSBMs and/or in the framework of the Economic and Environmental Dimension of the OSCE. How to tackle these more sensitive issues (which are simultaneously dealt with in NATO) in a coordinated manner, including within the EU, will remain challenging, also in connection to the existence of different and divergent threat perceptions in individual EU member states.

Tony van der Togt participated in the 10th EUREN meeting on “The EU, Russia and the future of European security” on 4–5 July 2019 in The Hague. This paper is based on his presentation. Its content is the sole responsibility of the author and does not represent the position of individual EUREN members or EUREN as a group.

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