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**Summary  
analysis**

**Russia and Eurasia  
Programme**

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# Exploring military security issues in the Arctic

Insights from the expert  
community

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## Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine is having knock-on effects on Arctic cooperation and regional security – as seen, for instance, in the March 2022 decision by the members of the 'Arctic 7'<sup>1</sup> to pause their participation in the Arctic Council.<sup>2</sup> Given that Russia is set to chair the Arctic Council until the spring of 2023, the other coastal Arctic states must reassess security and military issues in the region and explore alternative channels for coordination.

This document summarizes the most salient points from the author's current research in this space. The author's analysis is supplemented by the results of a confidential online survey conducted by Chatham House in April and May 2022 with the aim of gathering insights from the expert community on the topic of military security issues in the Arctic.<sup>3</sup>

The survey was sent to policymakers from Western countries as well as to military and civilian experts and key stakeholders working on Arctic affairs. Responses were submitted anonymously. The survey provides a snapshot of expert opinion at a given point in time, and its findings should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

## The impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on Arctic governance

According to the results of the survey, the impacts from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represent the greatest threat to circumpolar governance and security since the Cold War. Interstate tension or conflicts arising in non-polar regions could spill into the Arctic: indeed, circumpolar geopolitical dynamics have already shifted, so that there is now in effect a division between a Russian Arctic and what could be termed a 'Nordic–North American Arctic' (namely including territories of the aforementioned Arctic 7).

### *The future of circumpolar governance*

Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine has already had dire effects on circumpolar Arctic governance and cooperation. Notably, the conflict has eroded trust – among Arctic states and non-Arctic partners alike – concerning the Kremlin's intentions and has led to increased insecurity. Survey participants believe there is also a higher likelihood of inadvertent

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<sup>1</sup> Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the US.

<sup>2</sup> US Department of State (2022), 'Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', 3 March 2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

<sup>3</sup> The survey was compiled by the author and conducted via SurveyMonkey. It included a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The survey received 29 responses. All responses were anonymized and are not connected to any personally identifiable information.

escalation, including ‘horizontal’ escalation to and from the Baltic Sea area, due to miscalculation and tactical errors.

Collaboration with Russia on essential matters for Arctic stability has become more difficult. These areas include search and rescue operations, fisheries management and scientific cooperation. Collective efforts to understand and mitigate the impact of climate change in the Arctic will also suffer from Russia’s absence – especially given limited access to climate data relating to the Russian Arctic.

There are also risks to rules-based governance in the region – including, notably, questions over the viability of the Arctic Council as a cooperation forum without Russia. Circumpolar governance will be further weakened if individual states – and, more particularly, non-Arctic countries such as China – disengage from the council’s work and more actively promote their perceived national interests (exploitation of circumpolar resources, increased physical presence along waterways, etc.).

There is now a reduced likelihood of states reaching negotiated agreements on fundamental issues related to Arctic cooperation, such as on a military code of conduct. The possibility that the region will become the object of competing governance models cannot be excluded, especially if countries such as Russia, China or India jointly seek to create an alternative format to the Arctic Council. Nevertheless, existing agreements under the Arctic Council are still binding on the participating states.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Engaging Russia***

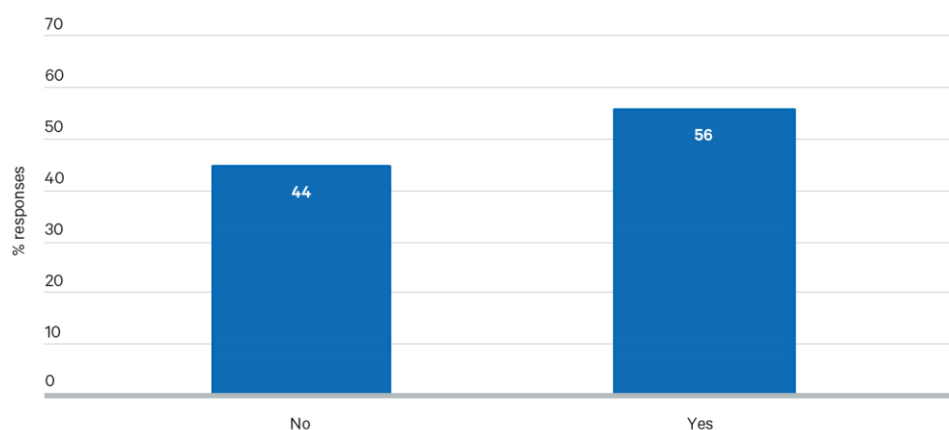
A key question is whether Arctic stakeholders and rights-holders should re-engage Russia, and if so, at what level and how. In the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine, members of the Arctic 7 must be careful when considering future circumpolar cooperation with the current Russian leadership.

The expert and policy community is divided over re-establishing cooperation with Russia at the level of the Arctic Council or an equivalent forum. Survey respondents fear that reaching out to the Kremlin could represent a diplomatic win for Moscow and vindicate its aggressive behaviour. The counterargument is that circumpolar engagement must respond to Arctic-related issues, and not to actions in other parts of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Arctic Council (2022), ‘International Cooperation in the Arctic’, <https://www.arctic-council.org/explore/work/cooperation/>.

Figure 1. Responses to survey question: Should the Arctic Council members re-establish cooperation with Russia? (27 responses)



In the coming years, there may be space for renewed cooperation with Russia in carefully selected and narrow areas of common interest in the civilian sector: for instance, in climate change mitigation and environmental protection, scientific cooperation, search and rescue and safety at sea, issues linked to indigenous populations, nuclear safety, etc.

Indeed, considering the significance of the Arctic for the Kremlin in economic and strategic terms, cooperation in such areas could be a bargaining chip for Western circumpolar states. However, there is neither a guarantee that Moscow will respect its commitments nor any certainty that the Russian leadership can be trusted generally.

## Military security affairs in the Arctic

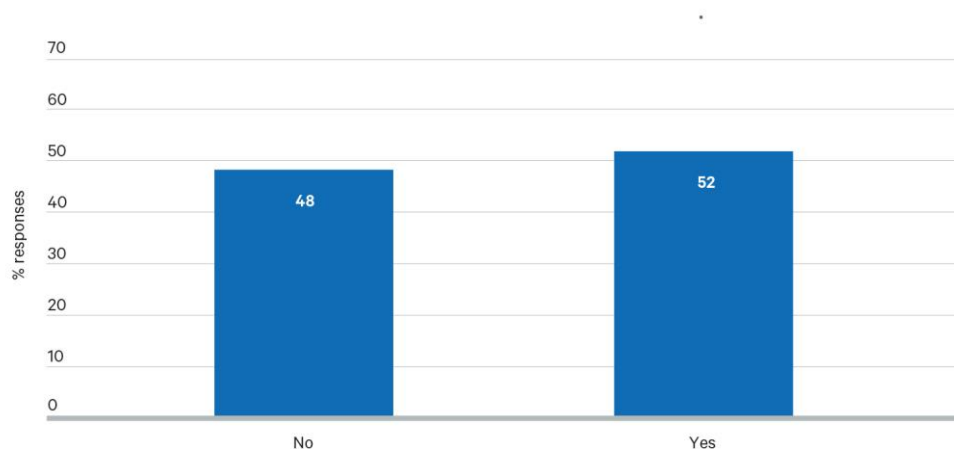
Even though the Kremlin might still be keen to put Arctic military security on the discussion table, Russia's war has further sidelined discussions on the matter and there is limited scope for a return to the *status quo ante*. Russia's position as a credible interlocutor on Arctic affairs was, in any event, already in doubt after 2014 when its participation in the existing discussion format was suspended. Nevertheless, most survey participants agree that the Arctic needs dedicated discussions for military security affairs.

At a minimum, it is essential to shape a common understanding of what constitute 'normal' and non-threatening military operations. A key question relates to the optimum framework and format for discussions: experts agree that military security discussions should not be over-institutionalized, and that talks should remain informal or at the level of working groups.

### ***Military code of conduct for the Arctic***

The expert and policy community is divided about the creation of an Arctic military code of conduct or similar mechanism addressing military ‘rules of the road’ and deconfliction in the region.

Figure 2. Responses to survey question: Do you think the Arctic could benefit from a military code of conduct or a similar mechanism addressing military ‘rules of the road’ and deconfliction in the region? (27 responses)



Creating such a code would help emphasize rules-based behaviour. Ideally, such a document would:

- Apply not only to military assets but to all vessels able to operate in an Arctic environment, particularly fishing and research vessels that could potentially be used for malign operations and/or covert military purposes;
- Include all states able to deploy and sustain military assets in the Arctic, and therefore be open to non-coastal states; and
- Cover equally the maritime, subsea and aerial domains.

Survey responses show that a major counterargument is that there would be little ability to verify and enforce such rules. There is also no guarantee that countries such as Russia or China would abide by a military code of conduct, even if they signed it or participated in negotiating its rules.

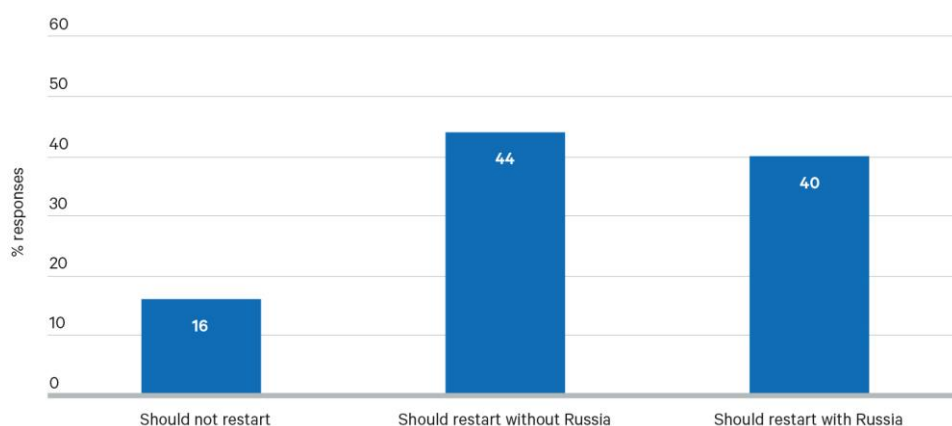
### ***Military security with or without Russia?***

The question of whether Russia should be included in future discussions on military security is a divisive one, according to the survey. Respondents concur that discussions cannot be conducted with Russia – at least for now – because the minimum requirement in terms of confidence and trust does not exist with the current Kremlin leadership. The chances of resuming dialogue constructively also depend on whether Moscow will take

discussions seriously, commit to any proposed agreements and exercise military restraint in the region.

In terms of existing formats, there is little likelihood at this stage that the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff (CHODS) meetings will resume *with* Russian participation. There is space, however, to progress with the Arctic CHODS format, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) and/or the Arctic Coast Guards Forum *without* Russia. This would enable other participants to highlight and expose region-specific multilateral military issues, and more broadly would help to strengthen the security of the Arctic 7.

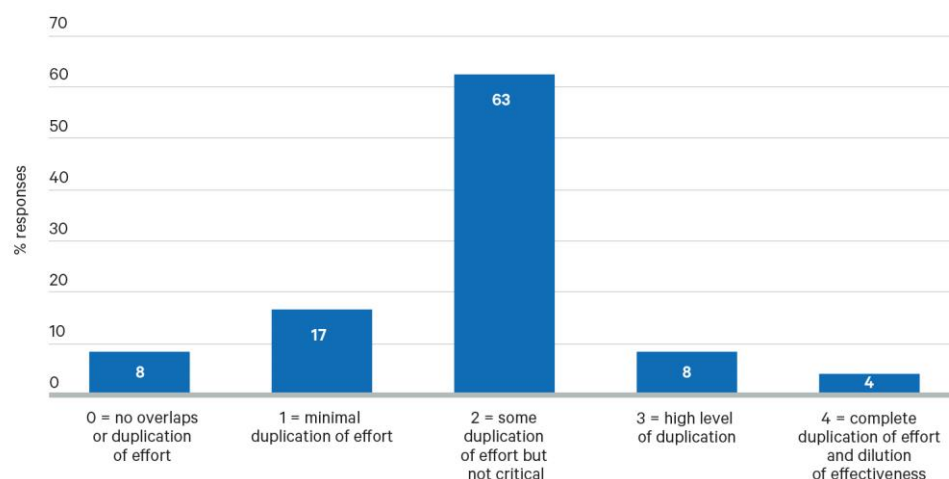
Figure 3. Responses to survey question: Do you think the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff (Arctic CHODS) meetings should restart with or without Russia? (25 responses)



### Overlapping endeavours

Another important aspect of military security discussions is whether existing cooperative endeavours – the ASFR, the Arctic CHODS meetings, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) forum, etc. – create a duplication of effort that dilutes their effectiveness. Respondents agree that these endeavours could benefit from a higher degree of coordination. However, keeping some level of redundancy is also key to varied and comprehensive discussion.

Figure 4. Responses to survey question: Considering the number of defence and security cooperative frameworks in the Arctic (NORDEFCO, the Northern Group, the ASFR, the Arctic CHODS meetings, the Joint Expeditionary Force, etc.), do you think this creates duplication of effort and dilutes effectiveness? (24 responses)



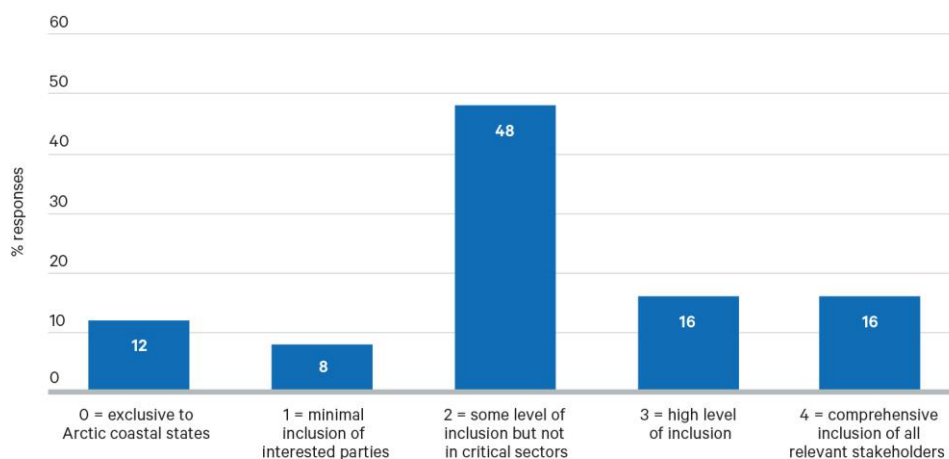
The expansion of NATO to include Finland and Sweden is also raising further questions about overlapping endeavours: for instance, would NORDEFCO be necessary if all Nordic countries joined NATO?



## Diversity and inclusion in Arctic military security affairs

An important but often overlooked aspect of military security discussions in the Arctic relates to the appropriate level of inclusion and the diversity of representation of all interested parties, notably including indigenous rights-holders.

Figure 5. Responses to survey question: What should be the appropriate level of inclusion of Arctic stakeholders and interested parties in military security discussions? (25 responses)



This issue relates to the role of non-Arctic states in regional military security affairs, as well as to how non-circumpolar actors seek to advance their domestic agendas in the region. Since non-Arctic states already have a presence in the region and an impact on the future of Arctic security, their inclusion in military security discussions would be preferable.

It is paramount to ensure that a wider diversity of actors is included in Arctic military security affairs, as they can add genuine value in terms of regional governance and stability. Three key stakeholder groups must be considered in particular: indigenous rights-holders and local communities; NATO; and China.

### ***Indigenous rights-holders and local communities***

Military security discussions must ensure that the safety and security of circumpolar indigenous and local communities are not overshadowed by nation state defence considerations.

Indigenous and local communities are critical rights-holders, not least because they are generally the first to be impacted by mounting insecurity and because they have a unique understanding of local security concerns.

For instance, their skills in reconnaissance, cold-weather survival, search and rescue operations, etc. are unparalleled. Furthermore, in many cases they are first responders to climate disasters or in search and rescue operations.

## **NATO**

A direct consequence of Russia's war in Ukraine is the increased presence of Russian and Western military assets in the Arctic (a development that has become even more relevant in the context of Finland and Sweden joining NATO). The security dilemma between NATO and Russia could expand into circumpolar affairs.

The Kremlin has repeatedly expressed its discontent with the Finnish and Swedish NATO accession initiatives,<sup>5</sup> but Russia will likely limit itself to rhetorical protest and below-the-threshold destabilization efforts.

NATO is intrinsically present in the Arctic. The alliance therefore offers a crucial framework for military cooperation among the Arctic 7. Members of the expert and policy community remain divided, however, as to what the exact role of NATO in Arctic military security affairs should be – and, in particular, *how much* NATO is needed.

One of the problems is that significant NATO involvement in the Arctic would vindicate the Kremlin's threat perception and overtly militarize the region, adding to the risk of escalation. However, the alliance must find innovative ways to be involved in regional military affairs – for instance through a multilateral coalition of northern states within NATO. The alliance's priorities should be to protect the security of its northern members and deter Russia's military build-up in the region.

## **China**

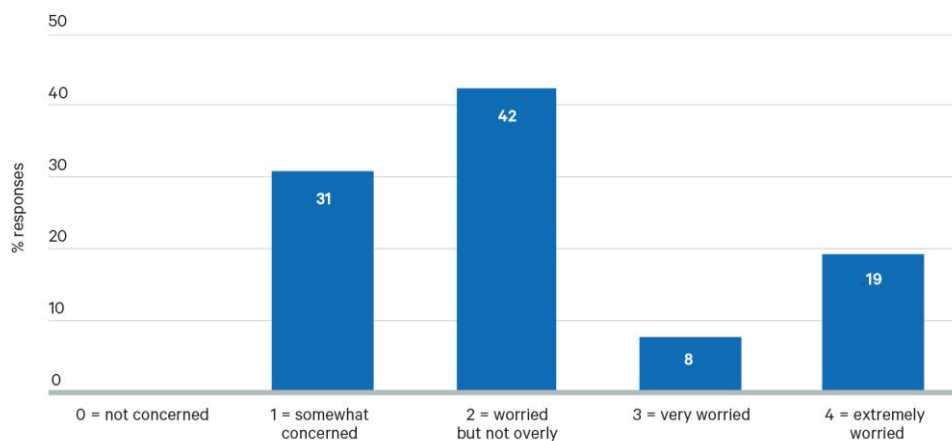
China's growing presence in the region and its expanding interests in Arctic affairs are causes for concern among the expert and policy community. Particular concerns relate to China's lack of commitment to its environmental and human responsibilities in the Arctic. Beijing's increased presence, in cooperation with Russia, in circumpolar activities such as fishing, energy exploration, mining and commercial ventures will require careful monitoring and management by the Arctic 7.

Coastal Arctic states should give careful consideration to Beijing's intended endgame in its regional outreach towards Russia and non-Arctic stakeholders and rights-holders. Coastal states should also carefully monitor and assess Chinese intentions regarding regional governance and norms.

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<sup>5</sup> Faulconbridge, G. (2022), 'Putin sees no threat from NATO expansion, warns against military build-up', Reuters, 17 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-calls-finland-sweden-joining-nato-mistake-with-far-reaching-consequences-2022-05-16/>.

Figure 6. Responses to survey question: Are you concerned about the increased involvement of China in Arctic affairs? (26 responses)



## Summary and policy recommendations

### ***Increase Arctic 7 cooperation***

In the absence of cooperation with Russia, deeper coordination and communication between the members of the Arctic 7 will be key to keeping the Arctic stable and secure. Arctic 7 governments should consider increasing coordination and integration of joint intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (ISR) activities and domain awareness capabilities. Stronger intelligence capabilities will not only give the Arctic 7 a better understanding of Moscow's regional intentions, but will also potentially deter malign Russian activities.

Arctic-specific discussions within NATO are also now necessary, considering Finland and Sweden are joining NATO. One goal of such discussions might be to define the exact role and place of NATO in circumpolar security.

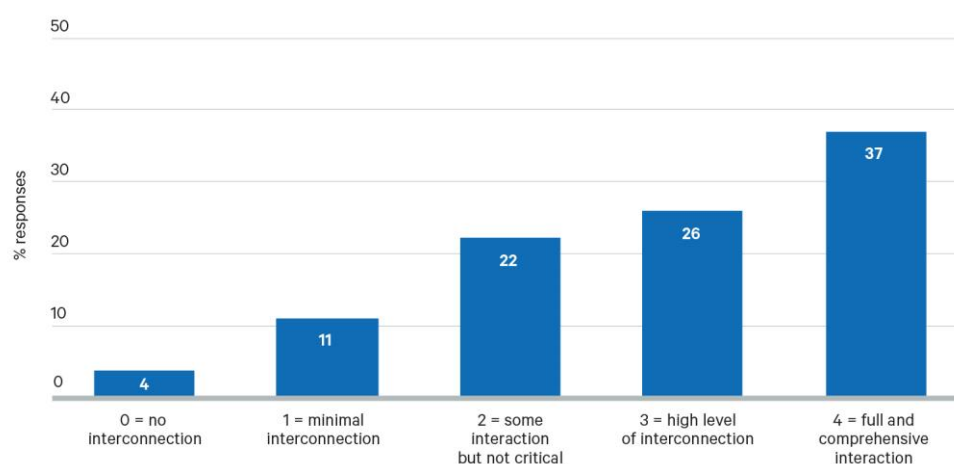
### ***Bridge 'soft' and 'hard' security issues***

The Arctic 7 must consider a wide spectrum of security issues – from human security, safety and constabulary ('soft security') to military affairs ('hard security') – to ensure continued stability in the Arctic. Circumpolar military forces are *de facto* engaged in supporting safety and law enforcement.

The Arctic 7 should systematically discuss where soft and hard security intersect and overlap. Doing so will enable Arctic 7 states to better coordinate management of issues that arise, for instance in the event of an environmental catastrophe or an accident at sea requiring civilian and military responses. Ensuring clear chains of command and procedures are now in place will prevent further tensions in the future.

At the same time, coordination must be accomplished without military security issues dominating the agenda or rendering progress on human security hostage to military developments. For instance, day-to-day human security and safety challenges do not need to be addressed through the prism of military affairs, as this would only increase confusion and dilute the effectiveness of any response.

Figure 7. Responses to survey question: Do you think there should be a connection between military, soft security and safety issues in the Arctic? (27 responses)



### ***Continue building a dedicated military security architecture for the Arctic***

The Arctic needs a dedicated military security architecture. Members of the Arctic 7 must start building such an architecture, coordinating with all relevant stakeholders and rights-holders in an inclusive and diverse way. Key factors to consider are:

- The need for common political will among the Arctic 7 to discuss regional military security affairs;
- The optimum level of inclusion and representation of external actors, such as non-Arctic states and non-state actors (Russia's role and place in this ecosystem remain undetermined);
- The role and place of indigenous rights-holders in military security affairs;
- The exact format and level of institutionalization of dedicated military security discussions (notably those on the question of overlapping endeavours); and
- The exact content of discussions and delineation of priority areas, notably on 'rules of the road' and deconfliction activities to increase transparency and predictability.

Low- to mid-level military-to-military cooperation, as well as diplomatic linkages, would offer a good starting point for efforts to define ‘rules of the road’ for acceptable and responsible military behaviour.

Finally, the Arctic 7 should increase the tempo and scope of joint Arctic training, military exercises and capability development.

### ***Include indigenous peoples and local communities***

Circumpolar indigenous peoples and local communities represent a natural bridge between human/soft security, climate security and military security affairs. It is vital that their inclusion in state and interstate Arctic defence planning be deepened. A good example to follow is that of the Canadian Rangers in terms of supporting institutional diversity.<sup>6</sup>

The starting point, however, remains the commitment to and implementation of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) across the Arctic.

Indigenous peoples and their institutional representatives should have greater visibility and be accorded more of a voice in existing military security discussion formats and cooperative endeavours. Direct indigenous involvement in multilateral security planning and military operations will improve Arctic stability overall and would be in the spirit of Article 30 of UNDRIP regarding effective consultations.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Invest in Arctic-specific technology for improving stability***

The Arctic 7 states should invest more resources and efforts in developing and procuring modern technology aimed at improving circumpolar domain and situational awareness. This is especially relevant to the Canadian Arctic because of the vastness of the territory and its limited digital infrastructure.

The Arctic 7 should jointly explore the following technology areas:

- Maritime domain awareness (surface and sub-surface) and situational awareness capabilities such as radar and remote sensors for search and rescue, environmental protection and mitigation of climate change impacts;
- Unmanned and semi-autonomous systems;
- Dedicated satellite communication and geo-positioning capabilities;
- Internet connectivity and fibre-optic cables; and
- Arctic-specific power generation and power storage technologies.

<sup>6</sup> Lackenbauer, P. W. (2021), *Diversity Statistics, Self-Identification Data, and the Canadian Rangers: Underestimating Indigenous Peoples’ Participation Rates in the Canadian Army*, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, [https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Lackenbauer\\_Rgr-Diversity-Statistics-final.pdf](https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Lackenbauer_Rgr-Diversity-Statistics-final.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations (2007), *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf).

Modernizing and sustaining the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) should also be a priority, in particular as this would help to protect Canadian interests.<sup>8</sup> Another important endeavour should be to strengthen information sharing and coordination of activities between NORAD, the US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and NATO (especially between Nordic Arctic states, the NATO Joint Force Command-Norfolk and the US 2nd Fleet).<sup>9</sup>

## About the author

Mathieu Boulègue is a consulting fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. His research focuses on Russian foreign policy and military affairs, Ukraine, Russia–NATO relations and transatlantic security, Russia–China defence and security relations, as well as military-security issues in the Arctic.

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<sup>8</sup> Charron, A. and Fergusson, J. (2022), 'Defending the Continent: NORAD Modernization and Beyond', Canadian Global Affairs Institute, May 2022, [https://www.cgai.ca/defending\\_the\\_continent\\_norad\\_modernization\\_and\\_beyond](https://www.cgai.ca/defending_the_continent_norad_modernization_and_beyond).

<sup>9</sup> NATO (2021), *Regional Perspectives Report on the Arctic*, Norfolk: Allied Command Transformation, <https://www.act.nato.int/application/files/8516/3236/7596/regional-perspectives-2021-04.pdf>.

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