



Getting the Joint Force and NATO Ready to Defend the Arctic

Major John Behrmann
Marine Corps University

Dr. Lon Strauss
*U.S. Marine Corps
Command and Staff College*

Njord Wegge
Norwegian Defence College University

Introduction¹

As tensions in the Arctic is on the rise, questions related to NATO's ability to defend its northern flank has re-emerged in several European and North American capitals. This *KCIS-Insight* will investigate US Joint Forces' and NATO's developments with respect to their readiness to defend the Arctic, asking specifically: **To what degree are the US Joint Forces along with NATO prepared to operate in, project power to, and defend its area of responsibility on its northern flank?**

In this brief, NATO's northern flank will be defined as the North Atlantic region from the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap and northwards to the North Pole. This area is largely a maritime or coastal region, characterized by little infrastructure, and long distances that makes operations and logistical support challenging. In addition, the region is characterized by freezing temperatures with great variations in daylight during the year, with its unique challenges to military operations both during winter, summer, and in the thawing and often wet spring and fall.

In starting out with a brief assessment of key trends in the security situation in the Arctic that addresses how geopolitical tensions following the war in Ukraine also matter in this northern region, this brief seeks to give an overview of the current situation for the USA and NATO with respect to their readiness to defend their northern flank. The brief concludes by suggesting some policy recommendations to the key strategic, conceptual, and operational challenges relevant to the complex security situation in the North Atlantic region.

Trends in the Security Situation in the Arctic

The Kola Peninsula has long represented a Russian geographic strength for projecting military power into the Arctic and North Atlantic region. Hosting a combination of advanced land, air, and naval assets, the peninsula serves a critical role in Russian defensive strategy by providing a second-strike nuclear capability in the event of conflict. Since it is home to Russia's Northern Fleet and the preponderance of both its strategic, nuclear ballistic missiles,



The Kingston Consortium on
International Security
138 Union Street, Suite 403
Queen's University,
Kingston, Ontario Canada K7L 3N6

kcis@queensu.ca

consortium partners



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as well as the highly advanced, silent multi-purpose and submarines, the Kola Peninsula contains some of the highest concentration of nuclear weapons in the world.² The peninsula is also seen as key terrain from which to propagate a multi layered anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) “bastion defence” intended to protect Russia’s second-strike capability.³

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has significantly heightened concern among NATO allies regarding the likelihood of Russian military aggression in the Arctic. Although the grinding war in Ukraine has had a deleterious effect on the readiness of several of the Russian ground forces normally assigned to the region, the strategic sea capabilities located on the Kola Peninsula have not been similarly diminished. In the face of continued military setbacks in Ukraine and the mounting pressure of international economic isolation, the Arctic has assumed a heightened importance for Russia as a region ensuring a continued deterrence against NATO, regardless of the military fallout in Ukraine.

As the international cooperation in the Arctic is currently at a freezing point between Russia and the West, Russia’s war in Ukraine has none the less served as a catalyst for the impending admission of Sweden and Finland into the NATO alliance. This is an expansion that will serve to strengthen the alliance’s position in the Arctic and more than double NATO’s land border with Russia. Seen from Moscow, this development might present an image of encirclement of the Kola Peninsula, potentially serving as a justification for further Russian provocations. The recently released *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* specifically identifies the expansion of NATO infrastructure and an increased foreign naval presence in the Arctic as threats to Russia’s security, setting the stage for NATO’s northern flank to potentially serve as a flashpoint for conflict in the near term and beyond.⁴

Joint Forces and Allied Operations on NATO’s Northern Flank

Since the Commandant of the US Marine Corps (USMC) released *Force Design 2030 (FD 2030)* in March 2020, the USMC has wrestled with its role as a maritime force and its place in the 21st century joint force.⁵ Marine Corps Commandant General David H. Berger’s guidance is pointing the way towards establishing a reconnaissance-counter-reconnaissance (RXR) force that is agile enough operate dispersed over a large area with an adversary’s weapons engagement zone (WEZ) as a stand-in force (SIF).⁶ This force should be capable of collecting and distributing information on an adversary, ideally having its own organic A2/AD capabilities while massing the effects of combined Joint Force’s long-range fires. Specifically, the USMC envisions having to do all of this in the Indo-Pacific. The hope is that if Marines are a stand-in force with all these capabilities, it will deter an adversary like China from attacking Taiwan, for instance. Additionally, the concepts espoused in FD 2030 are largely predicated on the introduction of Marine forces into a potential conflict zone *before* the onset of hostilities.

Similarly, the US Army’s concept of Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) discusses not only actively competing against an adversary across all domains, but also establishing themselves an inside force within an adversary’s WEZ to deter them from taking aggressive action.⁷ The inside force will use their multi-domain capabilities to maintain a corridor within an adversary’s WEZ for outside forces to stream through. Though this concept is theater agnostic, the likely region of the world where this would be achievable for the US Army is central and eastern Europe.⁸

Both concepts raise questions about how US forces would apply them in a worst-case scenario on NATO’s northern flank. The difficulty with addressing this concern is that such a potential scenario would likely mean a general war with a strategic competitor, namely Russia. In such an event, a direct conflict between

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Russia and NATO could rapidly spread across to all of NATO's flanks. If that were the case, NATO forces would plausibly be stretched thin across eastern and northern Europe, as well as elsewhere around the globe. The US Army would likely be focused upon Eastern Europe. Special operations forces and other elements might make their way into Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The US Navy will want to open up an avenue through the GIUK to gain access to the Norwegian sea and possibly also the Barents Seas.

The crux of the problem is that US forces are neither an inside or stand-in force in Norway or other Scandinavian countries. Thus, those NATO forces under attack or caught within an adversary's active weapons engagement zone will defend and hold out until further aid can arrive. This will require the USMC to have a concept of how to fight *into* an adversary's WEZ. There are very few islands, for instance, in the GIUK gap for Marines to establish themselves without becoming easily targetable.

Although the USMC has significant potential to serve as the joint forces' primary expeditionary force in the event of a rapidly expanding conflict with Russia, core FD 2030 concepts currently lack the framework for properly addressing the above-mentioned problem, let alone substantial forces trained for the very cold and unforgivable arctic environment. FD 2030 is largely concerned with how Marines can fight and survive within the WEZ once hostilities begin, and to do so in a temperate climate. FD2030 does not provide the conceptual framework for how the USMC can potentially gain entry into the daunting A2/AD environment posed by a contemporary Russian bastion defence, nor does it address the very real, unique challenges posed by subzero temperatures in the Arctic region.

This issue is further exacerbated by a lack of doctrine dictating how the larger joint force will employ or integrate the potential local and allied stand-in force/

inside force. The Joint All Domain Operations (JADO) concept envisions the enhanced force-wide situational awareness, decision-making, and targeting that FD 2030 also intended to deliver, but there is currently a lack of doctrinal fidelity in how SIF and RXR partly conducted by locally stationed allied forces, should operate, and integrate. Hence there is a need for a methodology extending FD 2030 and MDO concepts to NATO allies in the Arctic as they would act as a stand-in/inside force should conflict along NATO's northern flank commence or escalate before Marine forces had arrived in theater to fill this role.

Finally, the current readiness of the joint force and NATO in defending the northern flank is simply subjected to gaps related to training and equipment. When examining this issue through the lens of FD 2030, the concept of the theater agnostic force once again does not measure up to the unforgiving demands of Arctic military operations. Certainly, the USMC has made respectable strides in attempting to rapidly adapt its force structure and equipment to align with FD 2030 requirements that also can be used outside temperate environments. For example, the service has moved towards divesting itself of a significant amount of traditional tube artillery while pursuing a greater percentage of rocket artillery capable of delivering the long-range precision fires better suited to enable sea denial in the type of conflict scenario that could erupt in the Arctic. Yet, many of the central acquisition initiatives intended to translate FD 2030 concepts into tangible capabilities, such as the Light Amphibious Warship (LAW), are intended for operations in the more temperate climates and less geographically separated island chains found in the Indo-Pacific.⁹

The Way Forward: Getting the Joint Force and NATO Ready to Defend its Northern Flank

To achieve an enhanced defensive capability along the northern flank, the joint force would benefit

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greatly from closing the gap between the branch-specific stand-in force/inside force concepts and how they can be employed within the context of a joint force, as well as with allied forces. At the same time, the Marine Corps needs to take a hard look at its own evolving FD 2030 progress and develop the conceptual methodology addressing how to gain entry into a dense A2/AD environment should it fail to establish stand-in forces within the WEZ prior to the escalation of a crisis or the rapid onset of conflict. Such an improvement is relevant to the specific problem set of the Russian bastion defence while also enhancing the utility and survivability of the theater-agnostic force concept. It is also imperative that this conceptual development occur within a joint context, given that the prospect of gaining entry into a robust A2/AD environment will almost certainly require the all-domain capabilities of the joint force.

In addition to doctrinal and command and control improvements, the USMC should consider a more aggressive role as the vanguard US expeditionary force on NATO's northern flank. The Marine Corps does not start from scratch for this type of activity. They have significant, if somewhat limited, continued rotational presence in Norway that has been more frequent with expanded exercises during the winter months. This gives the Marines good experience in establishing interoperability with the Norwegian military.¹⁰ In addition, the Marines also have the advantage of having a substantial part of a brigade size heavy equipment pre-positioned in central Norway. At the same time, as well as the Joint Services, they would also benefit greatly from the inclusion of Finland and Sweden into the NATO alliance. Deepening their engagement with these two partners should be a priority since Marines would gain operational experience in the environments of an expanded northern flank.

Re-establishing a continuous rotational Marine Corps presence in these three Arctic nations, tasked to organize, experiment, and conduct FD 2030 mission sets, should be prioritized as it would provide the USMC with an invaluable test-ground to conduct the refinement needed to make these concepts a reality in the Arctic. Alternatively, establishing a robust USMC liaison arrangement should be investigated. Such enhanced presence would provide an optimal venue for the exchange of theater-specific skills and experience from Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish forces, while facilitating the development and integration of local FD 2030 / MDO capabilities. Perhaps most importantly a continuous presence of USMC forces, even if not permanent, that would be integrated with Arctic allies, would constitute an enhanced deterrent to Russian military aggression, and if necessary, serve as a viable stand-in force to counter the effectiveness of a potential activated bastion defence.

Major John Behrmann currently serves as the Director of the Center for Regional and Security Studies at Marine Corps University, Quantico, Virginia, USA. In his current role, Major Behrmann oversees a wide range of language, regional expertise, and cultural awareness educational programming for the United States Marine Corps: <https://www.usmcu.edu/About-MCU/Faculty/Faculty-Directory/Major-John-S-Behrmann/> E-mail john.behrmann@usmcu.edu

Dr. Lon Strauss is an Associate Professor of Military History at the US Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Quantico, Virginia. He has co-authored "The Marine Corps and NATO's Northern Flank" in *The Arctic Review on Law and Politics in 2022 and War: Contemporary Perspectives on Armed Conflicts around the World* with Routledge in 2018. Dr. Strauss is currently co-editing *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Operations* for publication with Routledge in 2023. Profile page: <https://usmcu.academia.edu/LonStrauss> E-mail: lon.strauss@usmcu.edu

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Njord Wegge is a visiting professor and Chair of Arctic Security at Marine Corps University, Quantico, USA. Njord Wegge has a permanent position as professor in political science at the Norwegian Military Academy / Norwegian Defence University College (NDUC). Wegge currently leads a Norwegian MoD funded project focusing on power projection and military operations on NATO's northern flank. Profile page NDUC: <https://www.forsvaret.no/en/research/staff/wegge-njord> E-mail nwegge@mil.no

Endnotes

- 1 Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US Marine Corps, Department of Defense, the US Government or the Norwegian Armed Forces.
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