



Russia's threat perceptions in the Barents and Baltic Sea regions

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TAKEAWAYS

- **Russia has increased its security measures in the Barents and Baltic Sea regions in the past decade. However, the focus has mainly been on the Northern Fleet and its nuclear capabilities, a cornerstone of Russian strategic thinking.**
- **Russia's threat perception follows a traditional view of security which focuses on the protection of state security.**
- **Whether Russia will maintain or even increase its military activity in the future depends highly on the country's economic development.**

Throughout the past decades, Russia has increased its security policy measures in the Barents and Baltic Sea regions.¹ The Barents Sea region is usually defined as the area covering the Kola Peninsula and the adjacent waters, the Barents Sea, the Norwegian Sea, and the southern parts of the Arctic Ocean, including Svalbard and Franz Josef Land. The Baltic Sea region comprises the area surrounding the Baltic Sea, such as parts of Russia, Poland, Germany, the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), and three of the Nordic countries (Finland, Denmark and Sweden). Both regions are essential for training, patrol and transit areas for the Russian navy and ground forces. The airspace above these regions also plays a vital role

due to Russia's increasing aerial patrols in 2007.² Since then, there has been an ongoing deployment of new weapon systems with increased range and accuracy in both regions, increasing Russia's power projection capacity and adding tactical flexibility and strategic leverage. By strengthening its military forces in all three branches, Russia has improved both nuclear and conventional capabilities and is now capable of supporting its anti-access area denial zones.

Despite the similarities, Russia has increased its security more in the Barents Sea region than in the Baltic Sea region. In 2007, Russia stepped up its exercises and resumed its long-range bomber patrols in the Barents Sea region.³ In the Baltic Sea region, a similar increase in aerial activity was not observed until 2014.⁴ Similarly, naval activities have also increased in the Barents Sea region compared to the Baltic Sea region. The level and complexity of the Northern Fleet is more advanced than that of the Baltic Fleet in terms of operational preparedness, advanced weaponry and deployment of modern ships and aircrafts.

This difference in priority has been noticeable since the end of the Cold War. The dissolution of the Soviet Union limited Russia's access to the Baltic Sea, reducing its strategic advantage for Russia and adding to the Barents Sea region's relative importance.⁵ The importance of the Barents Sea region has been and still is associated with the region's nuclear capabilities. The Northern Fleet is the largest and most modern part of the Russian navy and has the biggest concentration of nuclear-based submarines. These nuclear weapons constitute a part of the few remaining symbols of Russia's great power status on par with the US. Since the year 2000, Russia's attention to the region has been increasingly associated with the large amount of the region's natural resources. These strategic reserves will secure Russia's economic future and thus its power status. This, too, added to the Barents Sea region's relative importance.

The differences between Russia's approach to the two regions can be understood by examining factors such as geography, economic and military interests, and historical relations with neighbours. However, as this insight

argues, the differences can be explained even better by looking at a broad spectrum of threat perceptions.

Russia's threat perceptions

Official Russian threat perceptions, communicated in security policy documents, range from political and military, socio-economic and demographic, scientific, technological and educational, public health and even cultural developments.⁶ However, Russia's actions show a greater importance attached to traditional security threats, that is, "the ability of a state to protect itself from external threats with the use of military force and violence".⁷ External threats may come from other states or international organisations. When threats occur, Russia has usually legitimised the use of military resources to defend its interests, because it focuses on military capabilities rather than intentions. For example, in April 2021, Russia's military began working systematically to increase combat capabilities and strengthen its defence in Russia's western borders as a response to NATO allies' increased presence.⁸ Hence, as Russia, to a large degree, follows a more traditional view of the security concept, this insight will focus on the same understanding

Examining the traditional threats addressed in Russia's security policy documents, it becomes clear that Russia's threat perception in the Barents Sea region includes, among other things, NATO's desire to deploy military contingents in countries contiguous with the Russian Federation and its allies, as well as in adjacent waters, and the establishment and deployment of the strategic US missile defence system. Other threats highlighted by the documents are unresolved legal issues and the presence of the territorial claims against the Russian Federation, including coastal territories and adjacent water areas; and the growing competition for natural resources combined with declining energy production and dwindling natural resources. These threat perceptions are used to legitimise why Russia increased its security more in the Barents Sea region than the Baltic Sea region.

While a number of security documents have

outlined threats concerning the Barents Sea region, this was not the case for the Baltic Sea region. Does this mean that Russia does not see any threats in the Baltic Sea region? Looking at official declarations and statements by officials and politicians, it is clear that general guidelines found in doctrines and concepts apply to all regions, including the Baltic Sea region. For instance, during a press conference the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov stated that “the escalating NATO military activity in close proximity to Russian borders in the Baltic Sea region is worrying”.⁹

Considering this, Russia's threat perceptions in the Baltic Sea region stem from NATO's military presence and deployment of military contingents in Russia's neighbouring countries. Other threats alluded to in the security policy documents are the establishment and deployment of the strategic US missile defence system and the potential of Finnish and Swedish NATO membership. These threat perceptions explain why Russia increased its security in the Baltic Sea region.

That said, although Russia's threat perceptions are highlighted by the country's security policy documents, taking Russian statements about its threat perceptions as an absolute could lead to a false conclusion. Therefore, one must be aware of what is rhetoric and what is connected to changes on the ground.

Threats in the Barents Sea region

NATO's military activities

One threat that has prompted Russia to increase its security more in the Barents Sea region than in the Baltic Sea region is NATO's military activities, such as the deployment of NATO's military contingents and the US missile defence system near the Russian border. Russia has accused the US and NATO of increasing its military contingent in the states bordering the Russian Federation, as well as in adjacent waters, especially during the Trident Juncture joint exercise in 2018. A force of 350 US soldiers was stationed in Northern Norway until August 2020¹⁰. This deployment has been described as a threat by the Russian embassy in Norway, which stated that these activities

raise “serious concerns”. In a comment posted on Facebook, the Russian embassy points out that this incident makes Norway unpredictable and might increase tension, initiate an arms race, and lead to destabilisation of the situation in Europe.¹¹

Furthermore, Russia has also reacted negatively to NATO member states' development of military defence in the Barents Sea region. For example, Russian authorities often refer to the Globus 3 radar in Vardø and the deployment of US naval vessels equipped with Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence system (BMD).¹² While the Globus 3 can be used to detect, track, and identify Russian activities, naval vessels equipped with Aegis BMD can destroy targets in the air, on the surface and underwater and potentially open access to the Russian coast from international Arctic waters.

NATO's military activities, especially the first-time deployment of US soldiers and the deployment of elements of the US missile defence system, could indicate a growing Western interest in the region. In Russia, the threat is considered severe due to the region's proximity to Russian nuclear capabilities and to the natural resources securing Russia's future international position. The development of a missile defence system in the Barents Sea region has repeatedly been singled out in official statements. In May 2021, the commander of Russia's Northern Fleet, Admiral Alexander Moiseyev, argued that the presence of NATO ships in the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea has reached levels unseen since World War II. According to him, “Such actions are provocative and have a negative impact on regional security”.¹³ Similarly, this view has also been voiced earlier by President Vladimir Putin, who argued that the US nuclear submarines are already concentrated in the Barents Sea. In 2013, he estimated that the missiles from those submarines could reach Moscow in 16–17 minutes; he reduced this estimate to 15–16 minutes in 2014 and further to 15 minutes in 2017.¹⁴

However, Russian sources offer no data on the number, duration or schedules for any concentration of US submarines, nor is there any information on how the Northern Fleet deals with such submarines. It is therefore difficult to assess the extent of the threat.

Similarly, the Globus 3 radar system on its own is not a threat. Russia often draws attention to NATO military activities in the Barents Sea region, portraying them as hostile and provocative, even when they do not infringe on recognised Russian rights. Considering that Russia's military capabilities are generally greater than those of NATO in the Barents Sea region, the perception of threat reflects enduring Russian national security interests. Again, Russia's approach prioritises military capabilities over intentions.

Unresolved legal issues

Unresolved legal issues also explain why Russia increased its security more in the Barents Sea Region than in the Baltic Sea region. One such issue is in the conflicted positions on the legal status of the maritime zones covered by the Svalbard Treaty of 1920. While the Svalbard Treaty granted Norway sovereignty over Svalbard, it also gave Russia and more than 40 other signatories, such as the US, the UK, Denmark, Sweden and France, the right to undertake economic activities in the archipelago.¹⁵ How far that right extends is however a matter of interpretation. Norway's view is that the treaty does not apply to the economic zone around the archipelago, claiming coastal state jurisdiction and exclusive rights to the natural resources of the maritime zones adjacent to the archipelago. The oil-rich continental shelf and abundant fishing stock in the superjacent waters of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) are accordingly not available for exploitation by signatory states. Russia, on the other hand, disagrees and argues that rights to equal access apply on Svalbard and in the territorial waters, and that it consequently enjoys the right to undertake economic activities.¹⁶

Lack of agreement on this issue has led to undesirable incidents between Norway and Russia in the past. For instance, the Norwegian Coast Guard has attempted to seize Russian fishing vessels on several occasions, resulting in reactions from Russia. Some of the most severe incidents that had the potential to escalate beyond the fishing issues took place in 1998, 2001, 2005 and 2011.¹⁷ Such issues cannot be excluded in the future as this threat

could lead to confrontation between Russia and Norway. The issue is a sensitive one for Russia, given that Norway is a member of NATO and the Svalbard archipelago is covered by Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty. On the other hand, Russia has long felt discriminated against on the Svalbard issue, which is regularly raised with Norwegian authorities in bilateral meetings on several levels and is therefore not likely to escalate tensions in itself. Both Russia and Norway have an interest in maintaining peace in the region.

Another legal issue is the coastal states' overlapping claims to extend their continental shelves, submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). Russia claims the outer limits of its Arctic continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles, expanding the region by 1.2 million square kilometres. In effect, Russia claims rights to a continental shelf which may hold 4.9 billion tonnes of oil equivalents. This claim overlaps "substantially" with Denmark's and Canada's claims.¹⁸ Russia sees this as a challenge as there is a possibility that its claims may be rejected, and Russia will stand to lose parts of the Arctic to NATO countries. Thus, in case of a rejection, overlapping claims may trigger a negative development.

On the contrary, as Russia is one of the main beneficiaries of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) regime, both in terms of economic zones and continental shelf, Russia is unlikely to take steps that would undermine the convention. Hence, in case of overlapping claims, bilateral or multilateral negotiations between the parties involved would be expected to be peacefully resolved. Even if a CLCS decision were to upset Russia, this alone would be unlikely to cause war.

Finally, the third legal issue in the Barents Sea region of concern to Russia relates to differing views on which legal framework applies to the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and its passages. Russia defines the NSR as a national transportation route under Russian jurisdiction, giving Russia control over the passages for world trade and commerce through the straits between the Russian archipelagos. This view is based on Article 234 of the UNCLOS, which gives the coastal state authority to develop and administer non-

discriminatory regulations for vessel activity in ice-covered waters.¹⁹ The US, on the other hand, regards the NSR as an international strait which is open for transit passages and thus is subject to international law.²⁰ The lack of consensus has led to a situation where neither side recognises each other's right to control the NSR and its passages. One can only assume that both the US and Russia would want to secure access to the NSR, especially if maritime traffic increases and the seaway becomes more advantageous commercially.

Adding to Russia's sense of threat, the US has not signed the UNCLOS upon which Russia's jurisdiction is based. This means there is a lack of dispute-resolving mechanisms, which may increase the danger of confrontation. Nevertheless, although the US has not signed the UNCLOS, it has recognised it as a codification of customary international law. As such it is unlikely the US will have this unresolved legal issue high on its agenda. If challenges were to happen, it is expected that both the US and Russia would follow the UNCLOS rules as it is in both their interests to prevent military confrontation in the region.

Natural resources

Finally, competition over natural resources in the Barents Sea region is another threat that explains the differences in Russia's security policy. According to US Geological Survey (USGS) estimates from 2008, the Arctic region holds 90 billion barrels of oil, 1.669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids.²¹ Russia holds the greatest share of these resources, both on land and on the shelf itself. According to official Russian sources, up to 80 percent of the country's known gas reserves and 90 percent of its hydrocarbon deposits are located in the Arctic, and 70 percent is located in the Barents and Kara seas.²²

There was a widespread perception in Russia that the expected growth in global demand for energy, together with declining energy production worldwide, could lead to rivalries and competition with international companies and state actors.²³ This argues that Russia, with its enormous share of global natural resources, may in the future

become an object of a large-scale expansion. Such competition could eventually lead to conflict. To illustrate this threat, Russia's National Security Strategy has declared that "international policy will focus on access to energy resources in The Barents Sea and other regions of the Arctic...."²⁴ The document does not rule out the possibility of using military force to resolve these threats. The conviction that competition over natural resources may cause greater tension and pose a threat to Russia has also been voiced by Russian president Vladimir Putin, who claimed that the competition for resources is increasing and some are making attempts to set aside the rules.²⁵

On the other hand, the competition for natural resources should not be exaggerated, since 95 percent of the resources are already located within the national jurisdictions of the Arctic states.²⁶ The probability of a conflict in the Barents Sea region is therefore small. Furthermore, energy market observers regard these resources as likely to become stranded, due to high extraction costs as well as reduced demand in markets.

All in all, considering that Russia's threat perceptions in the Barents Sea region are not about real dangers, it is possible that unsubstantiated claims are partly Russian rhetoric used to justify an increased military presence.

Russia's threat perceptions in the Baltic Sea region

NATO's military activities

The threats found in the security policy documents regarding the Baltic Sea region are all related to NATO activity. Especially important are the deployment of NATO military contingents near the Russian border and the deployment of the US missile defence system. Russia's Defence Minister, Sergey Shoygu, has stated that NATO is constantly increasing the intensity of operational and combat training near Russian borders. According to him, about four battalion tactical groups consisting of 5 000 troops, a core feature of the NATO Readiness Action Plan (RAP), have been assembled in the Baltic countries and Poland.²⁷

This force is a part of a larger NATO Response Force (NRF), which in 2017 grew to 40 000 in the Baltic Sea region.²⁸ This compares to 350 soldiers deployed in the Barents Sea region. Consequently, there is a larger number of NATO's contingents in the Baltic Sea region than in the Barents Sea region.

Another threat for Russia in the Baltic Sea region is the deployment of the missile defence system. Deployed in the Baltic Sea region, these systems will, as in the Barents Sea region, be targeting Russia's strategic nuclear forces and with a first strike could prevent Russian retaliation.²⁹ Russian authorities have repeatedly accused the US and its allies of deploying elements of such missile defence systems close to borders between Russia and NATO member states.³⁰ In a meeting with Russian military leaders in May 2016, Putin discussed NATO's deployment of the US missile defence system, arguing that it is a build-up rather than a defence mechanism.³¹ This view was supported by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, who indicated that Russia has a negative attitude to NATO's activities close to Russian borders. According to him, "there are no threats in the Baltic region that would justify its militarization".³² As such, Russia's increased activities may be a result of Russia being vulnerable in the region due to a higher NATO presence since 2014. Therefore, Russia will be more disposed towards an active defence of its interests.

That said, although NATO's activities in the region have increased, this could reflect Russia's behaviour since 2014. Russia had several encounters with the West that could have sparked a military or political conflict. Documented examples include Russian intercepts and violations of the airspace of Estonia, Finland and Sweden, a suspected Russian submarine incursion into Swedish territorial waters, and the abduction and illegal Russian detention of Estonian security service operative Eston Kohver from Estonian territory.³³ One can argue that both Russia and NATO members are increasing their security in the region and legitimising their activities by mutual accusations. Thus, both parties seem to be stepping into a vicious circle of security dilemma to maintain and strengthen their military capabilities.

Sweden and Finland's potential membership to NATO

Another threat in the Baltic Sea region is the potential NATO membership of Sweden and Finland. Of the nine coastal states to the Baltic Sea, six currently hold NATO membership. Non-members Sweden and Finland maintain close cooperation with the Alliance. Since 2009, Sweden maintains a solidarity declaration with NATO as well as several bilateral agreements with its neighbours, all to the effect that Sweden will not remain passive if an EU Member State or a Nordic country suffers a disaster or an attack.³⁴ Therefore, it is in Russia's interest to prevent any development of closer relations between NATO and Sweden or Finland. Were Sweden and Finland to become NATO members, Russia would be surrounded by NATO in the Baltic Sea region. Russia fears that NATO would gain an important strategic position in the Baltic Sea region, which would affect the status quo in not only the Baltic Sea region but the whole of Northern Europe.

Russia alleges that this potential change represents a broken promise by the West, at the end of the Cold War, not to enlarge NATO beyond the borders of a reunified Germany. On this matter, the Russian foreign policy concept states that it "respects the choice of European states that are not members of any military alliances, these states are making genuine contribution to ensuring stability and security in Europe".³⁵ Although Swedish or Finnish NATO membership would thus be received as a threat to Russia, it is not of great concern considering that neither Sweden nor Finland have sought NATO membership and the governments in both countries have declared their neutrality and opposed NATO membership.

Nevertheless, the issue is highly contested in both countries. In Finland, the leading party has come out openly in favour of membership, but the majority of the political parties remain opposed or hesitant to membership.³⁶ This view is also reflected by public opinion, where the majority of citizens are opposed to membership.³⁷ Similarly, Sweden has been opposed to NATO membership. According to Swedish Foreign Minister Anne Linde, such a decision would be negative for the safety

of Sweden and should be discussed broadly. However, since the end of 2020, a change has taken place. When discussing this issue in the Riksdag (Swedish parliament), the majority of political parties shifted in favour of NATO membership.³⁸ Likewise, public opinion in Sweden is turning more NATO-friendly.³⁹ However, whether Sweden decides to join NATO or not remains to be seen during the next election in 2022.

Russia's threat perceptions in the Baltic Sea region seem to be a more genuine threat than what Russia perceives in the Barents Sea region. Thus, these threat perceptions should be taken into consideration when aiming to developing effective dialogue and cooperation with Russia.

Future prospects

Russia has increased its security measures in both the Barents Sea and Baltic Sea regions over the past decades. However, the Barents Sea region has been prioritised because Russia sees a trend of increasing NATO activities in the Barents Sea region. This is home to Russian nuclear capabilities and natural resources and will secure Russia's economic future and therefore, power status. Furthermore, due to expected changes to the climate, Russia expects an increase in asymmetrical threats coming from non-governmental actors. Asymmetrical threats would be, for instance, terrorism, illegal migration, smuggling of narcotics, and other forms of transnational organised crime.⁴⁰

Hence, it is expected that Russia will continue to prioritise the Barents Sea region,

but the development of one does not exclude the other. Both regions play different roles in Russian strategic thinking and consequently call for different sets of capabilities and types of military activity. Russia's political leadership has already invested quite a lot in both regions, with numerous plans for military development to increase security. Just how many of these plans Russia will be able to carry out remains uncertain. The outcome depends on several factors related to the economy, such as widespread corruption and a lack of efficiency in the defence industry.⁴¹ These challenges make it likely that Russia will have to curtail certain projects in the coming years. For instance, their financial problems have already put pressure on the government to alter the state armament programme for 2016-2025, which had to be postponed for three years.⁴² Thus, the need to prioritise in such an economic environment will be a key factor in the future for increased security measures in the Barents Sea region compared to that of the Baltic Sea region.

Prioritising the Barents Sea region, as this insight illustrates, is of great importance to Russia now and will be in the coming decades. However, threat perceptions on their own cannot explain why Russia has prioritized these regions. Russia faces threats from several shared borders with NATO members. It is the Barents Sea region's strategic, tactical and economic importance, combined with an increase in NATO activity, that explains why Russia has increased its security measures there more than in the Baltic Sea Region.

Sluttnoter

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