



## “High North, Low Tension”

### *A Primer on Multilateral Arctic Institutions and the Case for Expanded Military Governance and Security Capabilities*

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Commonly referred to as the region of “high north, low tensions,” the Arctic is undergoing changes in a dynamic landscape of territorial claims, increased maritime activities, and commercial and tourist vessels, all while more territory becomes accessible as climate change thaws the region. These changes highlight the need to establish sound security governance mechanisms to avoid potential military conflicts and territorial disputes, especially those caused by miscalculations.

Currently, informal forums and institutions serve as the basis for cooperative dialogue and decision-making. With a multitude of organizations overseeing Arctic governance and coordination efforts, A7 and A8 states—the United States, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and A8 with Russia—potential lapses in military governance and information silos could emerge, creating confusion in the region for both observers and operators alike.

There is debate amongst researchers and practitioners as to the potential advantages and disadvantages of broadening the remit of these forums to cover military governance and security issues. This article briefly explores the advantages and disadvantages of the addition or expansion of military coordination and governance for each of the following international organizations:

- The Arctic Council
- The Arctic Defense Ministers Forum (ACDF)
- The Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF)
- The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR)

Factors such as coordination, diplomatic relations with Russia, and current mandates of the organizations were all taken into consideration. At the end of this primer, four general points to consider are presented.

#### **“High North, Low Tensions” and Challenges to the Arctic Status Quo**

The Arctic will encounter numerous challenges and threats in the coming decades, with some already raising concerns. The region is expected to be fully open to public and commercial enterprises by 2030.<sup>1</sup> The level of military activity in the Arctic, particularly in



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Europe’s far north, has been escalating amid rising global tensions between NATO members and Russia. U.S. policy regards the Arctic as a “battlefield for great power competition” in which the interests of Russia and China as a “near Arctic state” are at play.<sup>2</sup>

Given the changing geopolitical dynamics and the current de facto operating order in the Arctic, the necessity for security governance is at the forefront in a region where the risk of miscalculation is high.<sup>3</sup> China’s growing development and interest in the Arctic, as well as uncertainty about the geopolitical future of Greenland’s investments by Chinese companies, also create uncertainty.<sup>4</sup>

Contention in land claims as well over Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) will increase in coming years as A8 states continue to file claims extending their EEZs, overlapping with other states’ territory. In cases of overlapping claims, countries must resolve delimitation disputes, with the United Nations’ Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) which is tasked with assessing the validity of claims without political influence. Numerous A8 states have asked for an extension of their EEZs over contested areas with no decisions. Disputes include the Northwest Passage (disputed since 1969), Beaufort Sea (disputed since 2004), and Lomonosov Ridge (disputed since 2014) with several other disputes not yet taken to CLCS.<sup>5</sup>

### ***A Mosaic of Military and Security Cooperation Institutions***

Currently, a mosaic of institutions serves as the foundation for cooperative dialogue and decision-making in the Arctic across a range of domains and among diverse stakeholder groups. These organizations and frameworks for Arctic governance generally fall into three different categories:

1. Arctic-specific institutions, which include state-led organizations, forums, and contact points like the Arctic Council, the Arctic Coast Guards Forum (ACGF), the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR), and the Arctic Chiefs of Defense (ACDF).
2. Formal global institutions, such as the United Nations (via UNCLOS), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), NATO, and international maritime operating norms.
3. A wide range of formal and informal cooperation exists in the Arctic, including regional forums, bilateral talks among Arctic nations, various agreements, academic and economic conferences, as well as multinational exercises involving both civilian and military participation.

For this policy brief relating to military governance, the focus will be on the first category of Arctic governance. This primer will first discuss the Arctic Council, considering opinions on the inclusion of military discussions within its framework and opinions of those who believe the Arctic Council ought to remain focused on its diplomatic role, without incorporating such military discussions.

### ***Arctic Council***

The Arctic Council was established in 1996 based on the Ottawa Declaration and is the main intergovernmental forum for solving Arctic issues with a focus on environmental protection and sustainable use of the Arctic.<sup>6</sup> While the Arctic Council’s mandate explicitly excludes military security issues, some researchers believe the Arctic Council’s

multilateral commitment to military governance could have potential benefits. On the one hand, incorporating military discussions into the Arctic Council agenda could increase transparency and build trust among member states, especially given the growing strategic importance of the region and the increasing military buildup of A8 states.<sup>7</sup> A dialogue at the Arctic Council could perhaps reduce misunderstandings and reduce the risk of escalation while promoting coordination to address future security challenges in the Arctic, such as search and rescue operations, environmental protection, and maritime domain awareness.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, some researchers believe that the inclusion of military matters within the Arctic Council’s mandate could provide a platform for confidence-building measures and risk-reduction mechanisms among member states.<sup>9</sup> This could include developing guidelines for Arctic military activities, improving communication channels, and increasing transparency through information sharing and monitoring activities to reduce the potential for miscalculation or escalation.

The predominant view of practitioners is that including military issues in the Arctic Council’s deliberations could be seen as violating the forum’s inherent stated principles and could undermine its mandated focus.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the inclusion of military issues could exacerbate existing tensions and mistrust among certain member states, especially given the ongoing geopolitical tensions between Russia and the A7 members of the Arctic Council.<sup>11</sup> There are also concerns that the militarization of the Arctic Council could escalate regional tensions and contribute to a future security dilemma, where nations increase their military capabilities in response to perceived threats from others.<sup>12</sup> This could potentially lead to an arms race and heighten the risk of conflicts, undermining the Arctic Council’s goal of promoting peace and stability in the Arctic.

Researchers argue that existing forums, such as the Arctic Chiefs of Defense Forum (ACDF) and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) are better suited to address military governance and security matters in the Arctic.<sup>13</sup> These platforms, which are specifically designed for military-to-military dialogue, they believe may be more appropriate venues for discussing military and security issues without compromising the Arctic Council’s mandate for non-military collaboration.

### ***Arctic Chiefs of Defense Forum (ACDF)***

The Arctic Chiefs of Defense Forum (ACDF) was established in 2012 following the Arctic Chiefs of Defense Staff Conference with The Declaration on Security Cooperation. ACDF hosts meetings and forums with key allied military leaders, the most recent of which was held in August 2022.<sup>14</sup> The ACDF includes the A7 and their relevant commanders for the Arctic, Russia is not a member state.

One of the primary advantages—and conversely later, a disadvantage by some—of the ACDF is its ability to coordinate and discuss military approach and governance among only the A7.<sup>15</sup> This targeted dialogue among allies allows for an opportunity to increase transparency and intelligence sharing on shared issues. The ACDF also allows for joint military training exercises, search and rescue operations training, and other allied military preparedness activities in the region. Furthermore, proponents of the ACDF say its informal nature and exclusion of non-military stakeholders allows for more open and constructive discussions of military issues without the additional input that may arise in

broader multilateral groupings with more diplomatic and non-governmental input, such as the Arctic Council or other forms.<sup>16</sup>

Alternatively, some researchers view the ACDF's limited scope and lack of binding commitments as a drawback, as they believe it has limited influence on broader policy decisions or the enforcement of agreed-upon measures related to Arctic security.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, some view the exclusion in a decision-making forum of non-military stakeholders including indigenous communities, environmental organizations, and other Arctic Council observers can lead to a narrow, and exclusionary view of Arctic security issues.<sup>18</sup>

Some experts believe that the Arctic Chiefs of Defense Forum is a forum that would benefit from expanded military governance capabilities in the Arctic. In their view, the ACDF expanding the influence and regularity of meetings of the ACDF can help reduce the risk of miscalculation and misunderstanding among Arctic states.<sup>19</sup> Proponents of expanding the governance capabilities of the ACDF advocate for an increased number of confidence-building measures, as well as the establishment of guidelines for military activities, communication channels, and transparency mechanisms, and to generally promote stability in the region.<sup>20</sup> As the Arctic becomes more accessible and strategically important, the ACDF could provide a dedicated platform to address emerging security challenges, such as maritime security, search and rescue operations, and potential territorial disputes.<sup>21</sup>

Others believe that expanding the role of the ACDF in military governance could have negative consequences for Arctic security and governance coordination. Overlapping mandates with other existing forums could lead to diplomatic contention or frustration, potentially reducing their effectiveness.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, discussions within the ACDF on sensitive military issues could exacerbate existing geopolitical tensions between Arctic states, particularly between Russia and the West, and could hinder cooperation and dialogue through other Arctic dialogue platforms.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the ACDF's increased focus on military governance may be seen as promoting the militarization of the Arctic, which would raise concerns among non-military stakeholders such as indigenous communities and environmental organizations.<sup>24</sup> As an informal forum, some researchers also believe that the ACDF lacks the legal framework or enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with any agreed-upon measures or guidelines related to military governance and cooperation in the Arctic, limiting its effectiveness if it were to expand its role.<sup>25</sup>

### **Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF)**

The Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) was established in 2015 as a platform for Arctic countries to cooperate on maritime security and environmental protection in the region, through their respective Coast Guards. The ACGF plays a role in facilitating joint exercises, information sharing, and coordination of operations to ensure effective response capabilities in the Arctic's “challenging marine environment.”<sup>26</sup> The ACGF's Statement of Cooperation brings member countries together to address issues such as search and rescue operations and oil spill response drills in the Arctic.<sup>27</sup> While the ACGF's primary focus is in areas including search and rescue operations, environmental response, and maritime awareness, experts have identified potential advantages and disadvantages of the ACGF's expanded participation in Arctic military activities beyond the Coast Guard.

In some researcher’s views, if the ACGF expands its role in military governance beyond the Coast Guard, it could build on the success the ACGF has had with the Coast Guard coordination and improve interoperability among Arctic nations’ broader security forces.<sup>28</sup> ACGF’s coordination thus far in maritime operations and domain awareness can provide valuable insights into the development of policies for responsible military activities in the Arctic environment.<sup>29</sup>

However, expanding the ACGF’s remit to cover general military governance outside of the Coast Guards may be difficult. The ACGF’s expansion could be perceived as overlapping or conflicting with the responsibilities of other existing forums such as the Arctic Defense Chiefs Forum (ACDF) or the Arctic Council, potentially leading to redundancy over focus or contention with overstepping.<sup>30</sup> Discussions of sensitive military issues within the ACGF could also exacerbate existing tensions among the A8 and post additional questions about Russian participation in security discussions.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the ACGF’s informal nature and lack of enforcement mechanisms may limit its ability to advance specific policy changes or ensure compliance with agreed measures related to Arctic military governance.<sup>32</sup>

### **Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR)**

The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) brings together senior military leaders from the A8, including Russia, to discuss common security challenges and opportunities in the region. Established in 2011, ASFR provides a platform for open dialogue and information exchange on a wide range of Arctic security issues, including maritime security, environmental protection, and potential territorial disputes. In 2014, Russia suspended its participation as a result of sanctions and suspension of mil-to-mil contact.<sup>33</sup>

The ASFR aims to create a forum to promote transparency and discuss security measures among the participating nations.<sup>34</sup> The ASFR serves as a forum for Arctic nations to exchange best practices, explore opportunities for cooperation, and coordinate efforts to address emerging security challenges in the region.<sup>35</sup> However, as an informal and non-binding forum, the ASFR may be limited in its ability to advance specific policy changes or implement agreed measures related to Arctic security policy.<sup>36</sup>

Some experts believe a greater role for the ASFR in military leadership discussions could foster greater cooperation and interoperability among Arctic nations’ security forces. Such enhanced cooperation could improve the region’s collective ability to respond to potential security threats such as military activities, territorial disputes, or environmental emergencies.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the broad and diverse ASFR security discussions could provide a valuable roundtable for developing guidance or measures for responsible military leadership in the Arctic. The question of Russian involvement raises considerations for proponents of expanding the ASFR’s role in military governance. This encompasses both the concerns of potential escalation vis-à-vis Russia and the arguments favoring Russia’s inclusion as a key player in Arctic security.

Other challenges discussed by those who are against the ASFR’s expansion believe again that its expansion may be perceived as overlapping or conflicting with the responsibilities of other existing forums such as the Arctic Defense Chiefs Conference or the Arctic Council, potentially leading to redundancy or confusion.<sup>38</sup> Second, discussions of sensitive military issues within the ASFR may exacerbate existing geopolitical tenseness among certain Arctic



states and may hinder cooperation and dialogue, again the question of Russian participation arises.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the ASFR’s informal nature and lack of enforcement mechanisms may limit its ability to forward specific policy changes or ensure compliance with agreed measures related to Arctic military governance.<sup>40</sup>

#### **4 Policy Recommendations Moving Forward**

##### **1. *Maintain the Arctic Council’s Scope on non-military issues:***

The Arctic Council has to retain its non-military focus to maintain its future and current effectiveness in response to multilateral non-military issues. It is critical the Arctic Council does not discuss military issues as it can continue to play a vital role in establishing mutual collaboration and debate among the states and indigenous populations on shared concerns such as environmental protection, sustainable development, or scientific research. The Arctic Council’s inclusion of Russia as a member-state allows the council to remain a potential diplomatic forum if there is to be a re-engagement of Russia on Arctic issues in the future.

##### **2. *Strengthen the role of the Arctic Defense Ministers Forum (ACDF) as the primary platform for military governance:***

Enhancing the ACDF as the principal mechanism for military governance is a potential way forward for multilateral military governance and engagement in the Arctic. The ACDF could be a vehicle that ensures efficient mil-to-mil dialogues and cooperation among the Arctic nations and helps to minimize the chances of misunderstandings, miscalculations, and to coordinate potential responses to disputes or gray-zone activities.

If the ACDF is empowered with increased authority and resources, the joint capabilities of Arctic nations would increase too, ultimately contributing to more effective countermeasures against security challenges, including search and rescue missions or preparedness training events. Furthermore, by entrusting the ACDF with the key role in military governance, it enables Arctic states to safeguard their sovereignty and maintain regional stability while avoiding any pitfalls that arise from the military issues taking a political dimension within the wider framework provided by the Arctic Council. Increasing the military governance and coordination potentials of the ACDF could happen immediately, with no concern for intelligence sharing or Russian input as they are not a member of the ACDF. However, the question remains regarding Russia’s potential reaction to a theoretical expansion of the ACDF. Nevertheless, an immediate enlargement of the ACDF could facilitate readiness and preparedness training, with an acknowledgment of the potential necessity of Russian involvement in a military forum in the future.

##### **3. *Enhance Coordination and Information Sharing between existing forums when relevant:***

Information sharing and coordination gaps between Arctic forums need to be reduced to avoid siloing. The geography of the Arctic is such that it is also home to a myriad of intergovernmental and multilateral institutions, each having its own clearly defined purpose and concern domain. To this end, ensuring that there is coordination among these forums becomes a critical measure that can help avoid any form of duplication,

streamline decision-making processes, as well as ensure that limited resources are used efficiently. Furthermore, encouraging more active collaboration between already operational forums facilitates actors leveraging complementary capabilities, skills, and resources on cross-cutting issues such as climate change, environmental protection, or sustainable development.

#### ***4. Include non-military stakeholders:***

Including non-military stakeholders in discussions on Arctic security and governance is essential for promoting a comprehensive and inclusive approach that addresses the diverse needs and perspectives of all Arctic stakeholders. The Arctic region has indigenous communities whose attachment to the land is deep-rooted with cultural values for its sustainable development as well as preservation. Environmental organizations also contribute to promoting conservation measures and awareness of how human activities negatively impact the Arctic environment. Additionally, non-military stakeholders' participation in Arctic governance processes will improve transparency, accountability, and legitimacy, leading to building trust between all participants. As such, Arctic states should endeavor to include non-military stakeholders as part of broader discussions on issues regarding Arctic security and governance to foster an all-inclusive approach drawing from regional social-cultural, and environmental complexities.

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