



# Russia and China: Reflections and security challenges for the Arctic region

European View

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## Abstract

There is no denying either the importance of the Baltic Sea or the strategic importance of the Kola Peninsula to Russia's military deterrent. It is in Russia's interest to secure the use of these areas for all eventualities. The country's armed forces are expected to increase in size in the coming years, and this will result in both changes to the force structure and the establishment of new forces, especially on the borders of north-west Russia. Alongside this, the inevitable thawing of the Northeast Passage will bring new challenges and actors to the region, impacting the general security situation there. In the current situation, where transatlantic relations are in a state of flux, it is important that the EU and NATO's European member states also prepare for China to become more aggressive in terms of its military capabilities in the northern regions.

## Keywords

Baltic Sea region, High North, Russia, China, Security, Intelligence

## Introduction

Definitions of the Arctic region vary. The Arctic refers to the region surrounding the North Pole, but where its southern border lies depends on who is defining it. In any case, as a region it covers around 5% of the land surface of the Earth (Arctic Centre, University of Lapland 2026). In this article, the Arctic region is defined as the areas of Northern Europe, including the Baltic Sea region; the so-called High North; and the northern parts of Russia.

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Russia's brutal and unjustified invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to the withdrawal of Russian troops from the north-western parts of Russia, with the exception of the Kaliningrad exclave. From a purely military perspective, the situation was excellent for the European states. The threat of aggression against Russia's Nordic and Baltic neighbours using traditional military means quickly became very unlikely.

However, the Arctic region will undoubtedly remain strategically valuable to Russia. The Baltic Sea is undeniably important to Russia's foreign trade, especially for the export of oil and oil-based products. In 2024 almost 40% of Russia's exported raw oil and close to 60% of its oil-based products were shipped from ports in the Gulf of Finland. In the same year, large volumes of fertilisers, chemicals and containers for import/export also sailed through Russia's ports in the Baltic Sea (Solanko 2025). Baltic Sea ports handled 30% of all port traffic related to Russia's foreign trade.

Alongside its Baltic Sea ports, Russia has a strategic interest in securing the Kaliningrad exclave. Despite the measures taken to increase Kaliningrad's energy self-sufficiency, the exclave is militarily isolated. Since Finland and Sweden joined NATO, the Russian navy's freedom of operation in the Baltic Sea has been further restricted. Although it is an oversimplification, the Baltic Sea has, in practice, become an internal sea of NATO. Kaliningrad's lifeline is very thin.

Alongside Kaliningrad and St Petersburg, the strategic importance of the Kola Peninsula to Russia's deterrent is also undeniable. The key elements of the Russian nuclear first-strike capabilities (land, sea and air) are located in the Kola region. For Russia, and especially its Northern Fleet, the Arctic region provides unrestricted access to the Atlantic; therefore, free access to the Arctic Ocean is critical to its nuclear deterrent. Thus, it is clear that this region's importance will continue to be emphasised. Generally speaking, in recent years, Russia has been accelerating the military build-up in its Arctic territory—recommissioning old military bases, strengthening its Northern Fleet and even creating new infrastructure (Dagaev 2026).

## **Russia: in search of lost power**

The Russian leadership announced major changes to its armed forces in December 2022, which include the strengthening of the Russian military presence in the vicinity of Finland (*MTV Uutiset* 2023). This reform indicates the emphasis in Russia's foreign and security policy on its great power aspirations. Russia plans to increase the size of its armed forces in the coming years, which will include changes to the force structure and the establishment of new forces. The heavy build-up of armaments in the north has started—and is actually already visible, as Russia is building the infrastructure for its future military deployment along Finland's eastern border. Based on the information available, the Leningrad Military District, which faces the direction of Finland, will be significantly strengthened in the future. The Kola Army Corps will be transformed into a full army, a completely new army corps will be established in Karelia and several brigades will be transformed into divisions (Finnish Defence Forces 2025, 12).

All of this will increase the number of Russian troops near Finland (i.e. before their transfer to the Ukrainian front) from about 30,000 to about 80,000. However, military strength is unlikely to increase significantly as long as the war in Ukraine continues (Finnish Defence Forces 2025, 12).

The Arctic region has become the stage for a global power struggle. Climate change; the inevitable melting of the Northeast Passage; its wider opening to commercial shipping, but also to military navigation; the importance of the natural resources located there; and concerns about energy security have increased the economic and military value of the region. The region likely holds more than 10% of the world's undiscovered conventional oil resources and some 30% of its undiscovered conventional natural gas resources. In addition to oil and natural gas, the Arctic region possesses significant metal deposits and fisheries (Iglebaek 2008).

Russia was undoubtedly a military power in the Arctic before the outbreak of the war, and it continues to develop the Arctic capabilities of its armed forces. Russia is very jealous of others seeking to enter the region as it considers the Arctic the primary operational area for its armed forces. The military dimension of the region is therefore of high priority, with both its forces deployed and a modernised chain of intelligence and surveillance situated along the entire length of the Northeast Passage, but so too is economic preparedness and infrastructure building in this region, ready for the day when the riches of the northern waters can be better utilised. The significance of the Arctic region for Russia can be summarised in three points: (1) as a strategically important source of natural resources, (2) as a support area for nuclear submarines, and (3) as the core of the country's bastion defence concept.

Russia, currently embroiled in war, is too weak to resist China's attempts to gain power in the Arctic region. As the importance of the Arctic grows, Russia is seeking to use China as a lever to increase its own influence and vice versa. Both China and Russia are especially interested in the undiscovered natural resources and trade routes in the northern seas and the extension of their influence in the Arctic region. An example of this is their cooperation in the Svalbard archipelago. In late summer 2024, a Chinese delegation met with Russian authorities on the islands. The agenda of the meeting was the reopening of an abandoned mining town built by the Soviet Union on Svalbard. Russia is looking to China as a partner for the project. China, in turn, has shown an interest in buying land from Norway (Kantchev 2024).

In any case, since launching its attack on Ukraine, Russia has also strengthened its symbolic presence on Svalbard. Among other things, the Russian armed forces have organised parades on the island. Russia has also violated the Svalbard Treaty—for example, by building churches on the island without permission. The Norwegian authorities also suspect that Russia intentionally cut the undersea communications cables leading to the island in January 2022, prior to the invasion of Ukraine (Kantchev 2024).

## **China: the new Arctic superpower?**

Russia is the biggest security threat to the European Arctic in the short term, but climate change is enabling China to become a strong player in the region too. Now and for the time being, China will remain Russia's strategic partner because Russia currently has no other option. However, I am ready to believe that it is possible that at some point the China–Russia relationship will become strained. It is worth remembering that this relationship has not always been straightforward. It has involved many challenges and disagreements, dating a long way back in history. The fight against a common enemy, the US, and more generally the Western-led world order, has perhaps pushed the memory of these strains somewhat into the background for the time being. Russia's suspicion of China's military presence and long-term competition for influence in the Arctic region could well challenge this partnership.

As a result of global warming, the Northeast Passage is becoming a shorter transit route between Europe and Asia, a strategically important alternative to the Strait of Malacca, and a potential route for Chinese warships and logistics chains. By using this route the Chinese would not necessarily have to deal with, for example, the US navy. China's long-term goal is to control the logistics of the sea routes and build its own bases and ports in the Arctic. This has not gone unnoticed in the US, which is also preparing to have a physical presence in Arctic waters with the procurement of 11 icebreakers from Finland. The US intention is to return to the Arctic not as a spectator, but as a player (Salisbury 2025). It remains to be seen what kind of game will develop for dominance in the Arctic region.

Although China is not officially an Arctic country, it is seeking to position itself as a 'near-Arctic power' and is striving to increase its influence in the region. Over the years it has become at least a moderate player in the Arctic. Its government has repeatedly stated that its activities in the region form part of its efforts to increase its global influence. Today, the Arctic region is seen as the main space for the expansion of China's national interests in the future. However, this expansion of Arctic operations should not, according to China's leadership, be rushed, but rather should serve the country's grand strategic goals. Excessive military force could well backfire and thus damage its broader interests. The strategy should therefore apply economic, military and political means in parallel with its energy-related, legal and scientific dimensions (Kopra et al. 2023, 7–8).

With China emphasising 'softer' approaches to the Arctic region, at least in economic terms, its efforts have remained fairly modest. Studies on Chinese investments in Greenland, for example, show that none of the potential mining projects involving Chinese participation there has yet been realised. The reasons for this include low profitability, Danish export restrictions, technical problems and lack of infrastructure, as well as political pressure from the US and Denmark (Dagaev 2026). Although China emphasises the non-military nature of its Arctic policy, the US has long been concerned about China's presence in Greenland. For the time being, at least, China does not have the

capacity or technology to maintain a military presence so far away and in such challenging climatic conditions (Dagaev 2026).

However, China is already preparing its merchant fleet and navy to face the conditions of Arctic waters. The Chinese navy is investing in capabilities that will benefit Arctic operations. These include icebreakers, submarines designed for Arctic conditions and polar satellite systems (for surveillance/early warning, navigation and weather data). In addition, the merchant fleet is being strengthened to support logistics that are considered strategic. China has trained crews for Arctic waters and participated in research expeditions that, in practice, serve as reconnaissance and naval exercises. Behind all of this is the creation of the ability to exploit the natural resources offered by the region on a larger scale and to secure these and other national interests in this region (Swanström 2025). Despite the apparent alliance between Russia and China, in the long term it may nevertheless be that it does not really fit with Russia's self-image as a great power that China, with a barrage of merchant ships and naval forces, could come into areas it considers its own, or at least to which it thinks it has a pre-emptive right.

## **Russia: the kingdom of darkness and the eternal troublemaker**

War is being waged in Europe. It is being fought with the kinetic effects of military action, economic and informational influence, by diplomatic means, and in the traditional cloak-and-dagger world. Official Russia has stated that it is at war with the West. The West's response has been somewhat more cautious. In any case, Russia considers itself to be in a systemic conflict with the West, and it seeks to influence, in particular, the unity of NATO and the EU, as well as the commitment of the US to European defence arrangements. This has become much easier recently, as transatlantic unity is once again being tested in an unusually severe manner. Russia therefore poses a military threat to NATO's security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. From Russia's perspective, ensuring its own security requires securing military hegemony in the surrounding area and keeping its neighbours in a vulnerable position. For this reason, the expansion of the war in Ukraine and the possibility of a large-scale attack elsewhere in Europe cannot be completely ruled out. I would even argue that war is already being waged at all levels and in all operational environments. Broad-based influencing is already a reality. In simple terms, this means hostile activity outside the scope of traditional warfare, using all state capabilities and instruments to influence the social and political decision-making of the target state. The aim is to destabilise the target country's society using non-military means by influencing its critical functions, objects and people. This affects everyone.

Strange things have indeed been happening in our region and its vicinity. Gas pipelines and communications cables have been cut on the seabed in the Baltic Sea and in the Gulf of Finland; GPS jamming is causing problems, particularly for civil aviation; airspace violations are becoming increasingly brazen; unidentified drones are halting air traffic; link networks are crashing; denial-of-service attacks are being carried out on the websites of authorities, banks and large companies; spies are being caught; and so on.

Russia promotes its goals not only through military force, but also through various other means. Its toolbox includes the means to destroy military and/or critical infrastructure targets if necessary, not to mention the carrying out of contract killings (Finnish Defence Forces 2025, 10).

All five Nordic countries and the three Baltic states now belong to the same defence alliance. All also have bilateral, binding defence cooperation agreements with the US and, in addition, are part of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, which was set up specifically to address potential challenges in this area. For these reasons, among others, it is somewhat difficult to imagine Russia challenging the states in this region with kinetic military force, but it is by no means out of the question. It remains a valid threat that requires continual preparedness, the strengthening of our military capabilities and the continuous improvement of crisis resilience in our civil societies as a whole.

It has been estimated that once the war in Ukraine is over, Russia will be able to rebuild its armed forces to such an extent that it will be able to threaten others in 5–10 years. However, EU and NATO member states are currently investing historically large amounts of money in defence equipment and other defence-related activities, including the increase of societal resilience.

Russia's economic decline continues to deepen with each month of war. Depending on whether the international community continues to impose sanctions on Russia after the war and as dependence on Russian energy decreases, the 5–10-year projection for rearmament may be extended. Nevertheless, the threat posed by Russia to its neighbours remains real.

Russia's dealings with other countries are based on lies, blackmail, threats and empty promises. Russia is perpetrating these malicious and evil deeds at present, despite the war, and will continue to do so after it has ended. According to Finnish defence intelligence, Russian intelligence activities in Finland have increased (Finnish Defence Forces 2025). All three intelligence organisations of the Russian Federation are active in Finland—the Foreign Intelligence Service; the Federal Security Service, whose role in foreign espionage is limited; and Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU, which is known for its ruthless methods. It is estimated that even a year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, up to a third of the diplomats at the Russian embassy in Helsinki were actually working in intelligence (*YLE News* 2023). I assume that a similar situation prevails in the other Nordic countries and in the Baltic states.

The task of intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover has traditionally been to gather information on economic, political, scientific and technological developments in the target country. This also includes recruiting human sources. At least in Finland, the GRU also operates in digital networks: malware has been traced back to GRU operations.

The role of the GRU is interesting in this new global situation. It has already been proven that it was involved in explosions at ammunition depots in Czechia and Bulgaria and in the poisoning of its own citizens in the UK. The GRU is therefore capable of taking very drastic measures if necessary. The agency has combat units which are involved in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and many of Russia's military special forces are under its command.

Russian military intelligence has sought to update its methods to better reflect the changed operating environment. Today's methods are more diverse and more improvisational than previously. This can be seen, for example, in its increasing use of proxies and intermediaries and in its utilisation of more direct information-gathering techniques. Russia is making efforts to recruit personal sources through digital networks, and especially through pro-Russian social media forums (Finnish Defence Forces 2025, 16).

Thus, it appears that Russia is waging war in the cyber and disinformation realms, as well as in the more traditional cloak-and-dagger espionage environment. It goes without saying that its intelligence operations in digital networks remain significant. In addition, the GRU has the ability to carry out sabotage and damage attacks. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that Russia has the readiness, if necessary, to increase the intensity of its operations and to start targeting military objectives or critical infrastructure, as well as the security of supply (Finnish Defence Forces 2025, 16).

## **A dragon or a soft panda after all?**

A direct military threat to the Arctic region from China is currently less likely than one from Russia. However, China's goal is to systematically increase its influence in this region. With a population of 1.4 billion, China, as the world's second largest economy and with the world's largest armed forces in terms of numbers of soldiers and naval vessels, has begun moving towards the resource-rich and rapidly melting Arctic region. A rapidly growing superpower, China considers it essential to be present in all strategic areas, and the Arctic region is a new and emerging strategic area. The state's ability to direct resources to grand strategic initiatives is remarkable.

Whereas Russia mainly uses violence and other malicious means to achieve its goals, China seeks to achieve its own through soft power. It is using science and research to infiltrate the Nordic countries under the guise of academic cooperation. China's scientific activities in the Arctic region can also be seen as a legitimate smokescreen for military activities (Kopra et al. 2023, 49). Chinese activities in the Arctic are largely concentrated in communications, transport and infrastructure, all sectors with large potential for military and intelligence applications. This underscores the perception that China is using economic and scientific fronts to advance its strategic ambitions. It cannot be entirely ruled out that this could also have undesirable effects on current Chinese–Russian relations (Manson and Stuyvenberg 2025). Universities and research institutes serve as interfaces for the acquisition of scientific knowledge and intelligence. In these scientific projects, the Chinese are particularly

interested in dual-use technology, which can be utilised, for example, in surveillance/early-warning systems, satellite positioning, autonomous systems, and underwater sensing and mapping.

From the perspective of intelligence gathering, China could use its scientific research in the Arctic to increase its understanding of the polar operating environment and to collect observation and measurement data that could also have intelligence value. Such activities could include, for example, monitoring the signal traffic of other actors, attempting to obtain information on strategically important sea areas (including areas that could support submarine operations), and collecting communications and signal intelligence. China's scientific data collection activities in the Arctic region could significantly improve its ability to collect and utilise intelligence-relevant information from various sources, such as satellites, aircraft and submarines. In addition, the use of scientific data may support the development of military situational awareness, which is important for China's strategic objectives in the Arctic region (Pezard et al. 2025, 17–24).

Naturally, in order to further its academic research and direct corporate espionage, China is also investing in the Arctic region. It has invested in the mining industry in at least Greenland, Iceland and Norway; in energy and liquefied natural gas projects in Russia; and more generally in ports and maritime infrastructure, as well as in telecommunications cables and data centres.

When considering China's willingness to invest, it is important to remember that this has often been accompanied by so-called debt-trap diplomacy, particularly in Africa and Asia. This is less likely in the wealthy Nordic countries, but still possible. China finances projects and initiatives with loan terms that allow it to exert political leverage if the debts cannot be repaid (Kunden 2023).

The Chinese model combines the interests of the state, businesses and the academic sector in a way that enables systematic information gathering abroad. The Nordic countries have been, at least in the past, very fertile ground for Chinese (and others') attempts to infiltrate scientific communities and thereby gain a foothold in the economy. On the one hand, we are quite open to international cooperation, but on the other, background checks on foreigners, especially those participating in long-term research projects, have perhaps been insufficient in some respects.

Cooperation is a worthy goal in itself, but it should be remembered that Chinese students, researchers and companies have a legal obligation to report to the state security authorities (US Department of Homeland Security 2020, 6). While we focus on countering the threat posed by Russia and its malicious actions against us to the best of our ability, it is important to remember that the panda is a bear too.

How, then, could Chinese expansionism in the Arctic region be stopped?

## Strength in cooperation

China's Arctic strategy is long-term, comprehensive and wide-ranging. It combines economic investment policy, research and soft power with hard measures such as corporate espionage, intelligence gathering and, in particular, the development of maritime capabilities. At least for the time being, it is clear that China's cooperation with Russia supports its own Arctic goals.

Individually, the Nordic and Baltic countries are too small and powerless to counter China in the region. However, together, and possibly by utilising EU and NATO mechanisms, they could begin to have the size and economic power needed to oppose China's efforts. The challenge, however, is finding a way to build a common and realistic Arctic strategy that will protect the region's security structures while maintaining an open but controlled model of cooperation.

The key players in building cross-border and interdisciplinary cooperation in the Nordic region are, of course, universities and higher education institutions, the business community, political decision-makers, and the intelligence and security authorities. There are many ways to counter at least some of China's efforts. One way could be to increase risk management in research cooperation by widely introducing mandatory security clearances and raising awareness among universities and colleges of the threats that Chinese students, and research colleagues in particular, may pose. Similarly, security checks play a key role in preventing corporate espionage in the business world. The role of the intelligence and security authorities is key in this regard. However, protecting critical infrastructure may play an even more significant role in countermeasures and may be more challenging, requiring seamless cooperation between the various parties mentioned above.

Specific means of protection against Chinese influence could also include investment screening and the possibility of restricting risky investments, providing alternative infrastructure financing for small Arctic operators, utilising EU-level financing models that reduce dependence on China, and, as a China-specific issue, protecting decision-making from economic pressure. We must not forget the impact that publicity has on combating hostile activities, as evidenced by the statements in the media made by the US and the UK intelligence communities about Russia's intentions before the actual invasion of Ukraine. I believe these greatly disrupted the plans of the Kremlin's dark forces. In my opinion, the same logic of openness also applies to Chinese attempts to exert influence.

The Arctic region faces challenges and direct threats, mainly from two countries: Russia and China. The threats are very different in nature. Russia's range of options is quite limited: threats, violence and malice. China's toolbox is considerably more diverse in this respect. Both countries are motivated by a desire to increase their influence and build their own spheres of interest, and both have been purposefully developing new capabilities to meet these objectives. The EU and NATO are lagging behind in this respect.

As the Northeast Passage continues its inevitable melting, the Arctic region is becoming at least as important as the Indo-Pacific in terms of global politics and security issues.

The beginning of 2026 has been challenging, to say the least.

Transatlantic unity has been challenged and is being tested. In any case, it is clear that even without this, Europe must do more. The focus of US security policy has been on the Indo-Pacific region for years, albeit this seems to have taken some by surprise recently. Where the focus goes, so do the resources. The melting of the Northeast Passage will soon lead to the Chinese navy patrolling European waters, perhaps together with the Russian navy.

Europe, the EU and European NATO countries, perhaps together with Canada, should prepare for this, and the time to do so is now. Power always requires a counterforce, and Europe must prepare to be that counterforce.

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**Juha Vauhkonen** is a Rear Admiral (ret.) of the Finnish Navy with a distinguished career in national defence and international military cooperation. He served as director of Finnish defence intelligence and as Finland's military representative to both NATO and the EU. His senior command appointments include chief of navy command and commanding officer of the Nyland Brigade. Internationally, he commanded Finnish troops in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, served as deputy force commander of the EU Nordic Battlegroup, and was appointed defence attaché to Germany, Czechia and Slovakia. He is currently a member of the Advisory Council of OPEWI—Europe's War Institute.