



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 rWØThere is debate amongst researchers and practitioners on 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.



Europe’s far north, has been escalating amid rising global tensions between NATO members

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

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 pose 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



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,

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39