

Chapter 38: Maritime Security in the North Atlantic

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Abstract

The North Atlantic is a theatre for the projection of military power. It is also the designated area of responsibility for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The North Atlantic is distinct but has a symbiotic relationship with the Arctic and Mediterranean. Technological advances - specifically autonomous vehicles and cruise missiles - negatively impact the overall maritime security of the region, being a manifestation of competition between state actors. North Atlantic security is also shaped by the effects of climate change, the increasing influence of China, and a deficit of institutional mechanisms geared toward managing security issues.

Keywords: North Atlantic, NATO, Russia, China, security

Introduction

In June 2016 Vice Admiral James Foggo, Commander of the US 6th Fleet, declared the 'Fourth Battle of the Atlantic' to be underway (Foggo and Fritz 2016). The North Atlantic is once again an arena of strategic competition after a period of transient stability since the end of the Cold War. This chapter explores the key elements of that competition. First, it provides the context for maritime (in)security in the region by defining the geographic parameters of the North Atlantic, and identifying the institutional configurations in place

there. Second, the chapter analyses the interactions between different Atlantic actors. Third, potential future evolutions are assessed. Through the lens of strategic competition, the North Atlantic is characterised as a site for the deployment of advanced military power.

Context of maritime (in)security – institutional configurations and ocean policies

The North Atlantic was a key theatre of maritime military operations in the twentieth century. Significant activity was evident in both the Great War and the Second World War. The Battle of the Atlantic spanned almost the entirety of World War Two, was pivotal to the British war effort and confirmed the essential material connection between the US and Canada on the one hand, and the European allies on the other. The North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 (which gave rise to NATO) was an expression of that trans-Atlantic link – one subsequently reinforced by the exigencies of East-West rivalry (see next section). With the end of the Cold War, the strategic standing of the North Atlantic waned – a process that spanned the 1990s and early 2000s as the historic tensions between NATO and Russia abated. That situation, however, has been in reverse since 2008 (the year of the Russo-Georgia war). And from 2014 (the year of Russia's annexation of Crimea), NATO and individual allies have once again come to regard Russia as a strategic rival (Roberts 2019).

The strategic importance of the North Atlantic is determined by the number of different oceans and seas it connects to: the Arctic, Mediterranean, Baltic, Norwegian, and Caribbean. It is a gateway ocean that is constrained by chokepoints especially on its eastern side (Hamre and Conley 2018). The International Hydrographic Organisation (IHO) (1953) identifies the North Atlantic as the area between the eastern seaboard of the United States across to southern Greenland, and then following a line across to Iceland and the Northern waters of the United Kingdom (UK), stretching down the west coast of the UK, Ireland, Europe, and Africa until it reaches the equator. The CIA World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency 2020) goes further by including the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico, the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Guinea, the North Sea, the Baltic, and the Northern Passage up to the Norwegian island of Svalbard. The North Atlantic Treaty, meanwhile, sets the boundaries for the application of its collective defence provisions (Article V of the treaty) as

essentially the same as the IHO's *Limits of Oceans and Seas*, but specifically identifies the Tropic of Cancer as the southern boundary (NATO 1949). Proceeding from that definition, the focus of this chapter is on the North Atlantic up to the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap, excluding the High North, Arctic, North Sea, and the Baltic (although these northern latitudes are seen as connecting to Atlantic contingencies).

Beyond NATO, there is little international institutional apparatus focused on the North Atlantic, bar occasional bi-lateral fisheries treaties covering specific sections of the ocean. The United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS), signed in 1982, established freedom of navigation rights and established 12 nautical mile territorial boundaries as well as exclusive economic zones (EEZ) 200 nautical miles out from the states in question. Compared to the bordering Arctic Ocean, the North Atlantic is not the site of significant territorial disputes. This state of affairs is due to the geographic separation of interested parties, something that limits contestation to the boundaries of EEZ. A case in point here is the dispute over the Rockall Bank. This rocky outcrop is situated some 162 nautical to the west of Scotland's Outer Hebrides and 263 nautical miles north-west of Ireland. London and Dublin signed a bi-lateral EEZ boundary agreement in November 1988, although Ireland does not recognise the UK's claim to sovereignty over the islet. Both Iceland and Denmark (via the Faroe Islands), however, dispute this delineation (but unlike Ireland neither claims sovereignty to Rockall itself). All four nations have utilised the conflict resolution mechanisms within the UNCLOS, and whilst unresolved to the satisfaction of all parties, the lack of political capital invested in the dispute suggests it is not a source of fundamental disagreement.

Territorial dispute, then, is not a marker of the North Atlantic's security status. That stems rather from the position of the ocean as a site of strategic manoeuvre. As one observer (Nordenman 2019, p.12) has noted, '[a] war in Europe will not be won in the North Atlantic, but it can surely be lost there.'

Interactions between actors

Security competition in the North Atlantic is determined overwhelmingly by the relationship between the NATO allies and Russia. NATO, is however, dispersed and differentiated. The navies of Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands, lacking easy access to the Atlantic, are

concentrated on coastal defence. The navies of Norway and Denmark prioritise the Arctic; those of Greece, Italy and Turkey, look primarily to the Mediterranean. Turkey, along with Romania and Bulgaria, is also oriented toward the Black Sea. Of NATO's Atlantic-facing members, Spain Portugal, Canada and France retain a significant presence in the ocean (this includes Atlantic submarine patrols of French strategic nuclear forces), but two allies are key to NATO's Atlantic position: the US and the UK. That said, because NATO acts as a collective expression of maritime strategy, doctrine and deployment, it is worth regarding it as a distinct actor in its own right. This section thus begins with an overview of the Alliance as such. It then turns to the positions of the US and the UK, and then to NATO's principal rival, Russia.

NATO, since its inception in 1949, has been premised on the indivisibility of security in the Euro-Atlantic Area. 'The North Atlantic Alliance', the 2014 declaration on 'The Transatlantic Bond' notes, 'binds North America and Europe in the defence of [...] common security' (NATO 2014). To deliver that goal, requires political cohesion among a large group of allies (a constant work in progress in NATO) and a planning assumption that a major reinforcement in the European theatre would require a reliable supply route by air and sea across the Atlantic. During the Cold War, NATO plans aimed at countering Soviet aggression through conventional means were premised on Western Europe benefitting from a major injection of forces from North America (Canada figured here, but US forces were clearly crucial). This meant transiting across the North Atlantic, and required sufficient local infrastructure in order to manage the embarkation and de-embarkation of personnel and material. Between 1969 and 1993 annual REFORGER exercises provided forceful demonstration of a collective resolve to furnish this 'transcontinental reinforcement' (Blackwill and Legro 1989: 70). In the post-Cold War period, these contingencies fell out of NATO's planning cycles. They have been revived since 2014 (see below). The Trident Juncture exercises in 2015 and 2018, as well as Defender 2020 are REFORGER's latter-day equivalents (Judson 2019).

The centrality of the North Atlantic to NATO was underlined by the establishment of Allied Command Atlantic in 1952. In June 2003, however, the Command was disbanded – to be replaced by Allied Command Transformation. In parallel, Allied Command Europe was replaced by Allied Command Operations. NATO's two strategic commands thus moved from a geographic to a functional focus something that reflected NATO's post-Cold War

orientation toward crisis management, counter-terrorism and stabilisation (evident in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Libya). Here, the traditional tasks of collective defence assumed a lesser importance. NATO's maritime configuration in the decade or so after 2003 was geared toward support for these more important missions or toward small-scale naval engagements (counter-piracy missions off East Africa and counter-terrorism patrols in the Mediterranean). NATO's Allied Maritime Component Command operated between 2004 and 2010, before being replaced by Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM), based at Northwood near London. MARCOM became the sole maritime component for NATO with the deactivation of Allied Maritime Command Naples in March 2013, and operated under Joint Force Command Brunssum. The operational remit of MARCOM extended to leading the four NATO Standing Maritime Groups; two frigate groups (SNMG1 and SNMG2) and two mine countermeasures groups (SNMCMG1 and SNMCMG2).

The downgrading of trans-Atlantic defence in NATO's organisational hierarchy was felt acutely in Eastern Europe. Jolted by the Russo-Georgia war of 2008, political leaders in the region complained that the US, and NATO more broadly, were neglecting their security interests (Webber, Hallams and Smith 2014, pp.778-79). Things changed decisively in 2014. Russia's annexation of Crimea that year and Moscow's follow-on military campaign in eastern Ukraine occasioned a major strategic rethink in NATO (Sperling and Webber 2017) while also rendering moot key documents agreed in previous years (including the NATO Maritime Strategy of 2011) (NATO 2011). Measures to restore credible deterrence in Europe were taken forward at the Wales and Warsaw Summits of 2014 and 2016 (Moore and Coletta eds. 2017). It was not, however, until the Brussels Summit of June 2018, that NATO formally acknowledged the importance of the North Atlantic in these new circumstances. At that meeting the allies agreed to reinforce NATO's 'maritime posture', 'reinvigorate [its] collective maritime warfighting skills' and 'ensure support to reinforcement by and from the sea' across the Atlantic (NATO 2018). NATO also agreed to establish a new strategic maritime command. Joint Force Command Norfolk (JFC-NF) was duly declared operational in September 2020, with MARCOM maintaining responsibility for day-to-day operations. The purpose of these reforms was clearly spelled out at the time by the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg (cited in NATO 2020a) – to 'ensure [that] crucial routes for reinforcements and supplies from North America to Europe remain secure.'

The American approach to the North Atlantic mirrors NATO's. The US Second Fleet was established in February 1950 tasked with providing security in the North Atlantic. By the mid-2000s altered strategic circumstances meant that Cold War subordinate command groups, such as Striking Fleet Atlantic, began to be disbanded. The Second Fleet itself was formally dissolved in September 2011. Just as NATO no longer viewed the North Atlantic as a strategic theatre of competition, so too the US decided that its maritime security efforts were better directed toward higher-priority programmes. However, acknowledgment at what the Pentagon referred to (cited in Browne 2018) as 'great power competition' in the Atlantic 'prompted by a resurgent Russia' led in August 2018 to the formal re-establishment of the Second Fleet. Significantly, at that point it was established that the commander of the Second Fleet would double up as commander of JFC-NF, so combining the American and NATO commands.

The revival of the Second Fleet should be seen within broader developments in US naval strategy. The *Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* of 2007 was described as America's first ever 'unified maritime strategy', integrating the sea power of the US with the maritime capabilities of its allies (Conway et al 2008, p.7). The 2020 update (United States Department of the Navy 2020, p.) noted similarly that 'allies, partners and alliances such as NATO' support America's 'enduring asymmetric advantage over [its] rivals [...] generat[ing] naval power, and provid[ing] access to valuable strategic maritime positions.' Since the end of the Cold War, the US has been seeking to apply the principles of Alfred Mahan to the modern era. Specifically, the broader notion of maritime security has been placed alongside forward presence, deterrence, sea control, and power projection. That strategy emphasises the importance of cooperative relationships in the development of maritime security. The particular challenge for the US here – something reflective of its position at the centre of a web of international alliances – is to exercise the leadership commensurate with its global interests and military weight while at the same time taking account of the regional interests of its allies. NATO is the transatlantic expression of that challenge (Raap-Hooper 2020).

Of America's NATO allies, the UK has, in the maritime domain, been crucial. However, that importance has diminished as British maritime assets have contracted. The Royal Navy, no longer operates separate geographic commands – the Western and Eastern Fleets were dissolved in 1971. Its operational headquarters are located at Northwood

alongside MARCOM, and the Royal Navy seeks to maintain suitable capability to meet operational requirements as and when crises emerge. UK surface vessels and submarines, for instance provided support for Operation Allied Force in the Balkans 1999 and Operation Unified Protector against Libya in 2011. In addition to the tasks of coastal defence, longer-term deployments are global in reach. Vanguard submarines are the basis of the UK's continuous at sea nuclear deterrent. The Royal Navy as of 2020 was deployed in the Pacific, Indian and Arctic Oceans as well as in the Mediterranean and Black Seas. It also retained a presence in the South Atlantic (including a standing commitment to the Falkland Islands).

These deployments sound impressive but are thinly spread. This is especially the case in the North Atlantic, a situation best illustrated by the lack of maritime patrol aircraft (MPA), used for anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare, search and rescue and intelligence gathering. The retirement by the Royal Air Force of the Nimrod MR2 aircraft in 2011 (and a decision by the Ministry of Defence not to purchase the replacement MRA4) left the UK with 'no current or planned MPA capability' (House of Commons Defence Committee 2012, p.12). The Nimrod had a long operational history. Deployed in the Falklands War, both Gulf Wars as well as to Afghanistan, it was also crucial to patrols over contiguous British waters including the North Atlantic. The replacement Poseidon MRA Mk 1 has had numerous problems and was only declared at Initial Operating Capability in April 2020, with two aircraft deployable and a further seven on order. Air-Vice Marshal A.L. Roberts (rtd.) suggested in June 2018, that 'however, capable the [Poseidon] may be, the number of aircraft planned is undoubtedly inadequate to fulfil even the highest priority tasks likely to be assigned to the force in tension and hostilities' (Roberts cited in Allison 2018). And the issue of capability is not limited to MPA. The Chair of the Defence Select Committee, Dr Julian Lewis MP referred in July 2019 to the 'present pathetic total' of warships available to the Royal Navy (13 frigates and six destroyers) (cited in Bunkall 2019). The problem here is not necessarily resolved by the decision to construct the two Queen Elizabeth II class aircraft carriers. A UK carrier force could, of course, be deployed to the North Atlantic along with allied naval support (perhaps tellingly, Carrier Strike's first operational deployment, scheduled for 2021, was with the US Marine Corps). However, the Carrier Strike Force is designed for global deployment and so is likely as not to be somewhere other than the North Atlantic. The force also requires surface and submarine protection – and even if allies join in, home assets will still be crucial, so drawing upon the Royal Navy's limited resources

(House of Commons Public Accounts Committee 2020). In short, the force posture of the Royal Navy is ill-suited to providing reliable maritime security in the North Atlantic – a far cry from the singular great maritime organisation envisaged by Winston Churchill (1952, p.10) where the US and the UK perceived ‘with increasing aptitude each other’s capabilities and limitations.’

The UK’s faltering posture contrasts markedly to that of Russia. The Russian navy has expanded its capability in the North Atlantic with continued modernisation of the Northern Fleet, in line with the State Armaments Programme 2020 – launched in 2010 and since extended to 2027 (Connolly and Boulègue 2018). Further, ‘The Atlantic Priority Area’ is formally identified in Russia’s 2015 military doctrine (US Naval war College 2015). Distinct from the Arctic, the Atlantic is specified in the document as a key site of rivalry with NATO and, accordingly, grounds for ‘strengthening the naval potential of the Russian Federation [... including] the Northern Fleet.’ The International Seabed Authority, which organises and controls mineral-resources activity as part of UNCLOS, is also identified as an important partner for Russia in pursuit of its strategic interests. Russia’s approach, therefore, is to promote its ability to exploit the natural resources within its EEZ under the auspices of United Nations frameworks, whilst trying to ensure it has the military capability to prevent NATO members from encroaching onto its periphery, as it argues the Alliance has done in Eastern Europe since 1991. These considerations apply most obviously to the Baltic and Barents Seas and the Arctic Ocean. But these maritime territories, of course, abut the Atlantic. Russia’s strategic objective, therefore, is to demonstrate a capability, or perception of capability, sufficient to deny NATO members the ability to operate in the Eastern North Atlantic, so weakening Alliance cohesion and credibility.

In this regard, developments in cruise missile technology and associated launch platforms gives Russia the ability to adopt an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) posture off the Kola peninsula in the Arctic, one with the potential to negate the command and control that NATO, via the US, has in the North Atlantic. Russia has also been increasing its forward operating presence in and around the GIUK Gap. The objective here is to demonstrate an ability to interdict transatlantic resupply efforts. More specifically, Russia has been deploying upgraded *Kilo* class submarines capable of launching upgraded *Kalibr* cruise missiles (of the sort Russia has launched from the Caspian Sea into Syria).

Submarine capabilities are of particular significance. Russia does not have a modern,

or large enough surface fleet to be able to compete with NATO members. Its submarine fleet, however, stands up well to combined NATO assets. The Russian navy in 2020 possessed 62 submarines compared to 68 held by the US navy (and of NATO's Atlantic allies, ten submarines were held by the UK, nine by France, four by Canada, three by Spain and two by Portugal). Two-thirds of Russian submarines are assigned to the Northern Fleet – when on mission, deployed to the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans. While the British and US navy's own fleets have benefitted from modernisation (through the commissioning of Astute and Seawolf-class submarines), Russia has also made equivalent steps (upgrades to the Kilo-class submarine and the deployment of at least one Lada-class vessel). Concerns at Russian submarine advance was the principal reason behind the revival, noted above, of the US Second Fleet (LaGrone 2019). That decision has since been justified by reference to ongoing Russian activity. A Russian undersea naval exercise in 2019 involving approaches to the US eastern seaboard prompted alarm in NATO militaries. The commander of the US 2nd Fleet suggested in February 2020 that the east coast was no longer a 'safe haven' and that the Atlantic was now a 'contested space' (Vice-Admiral Andrew Lewis cited in Mabeus 2020).

Future Evolutions

The main issues that will shape future maritime security in the North Atlantic include defence investment, technological innovation, Chinese encroachment, and climate change. Whilst there is some crossover between these four categories, each is important enough to be analysed in its own right.

Defence investment

Defence budgets are currently more uncertain than at any point since the end of the Cold War owing to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, while governments have absorbed unprecedented drops in economic activity (and huge increases in public borrowing to match), one lesson of the pandemic is that defence, at least for some governments, retains a protected status.

The US maintains the world's largest military and its defence expenditure dwarves every other nation on earth. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research

Institute (2020), in 2019 America's defence budget was nearly three times that of China's and more than eleven times the size of Russia's. The Trump administration's defence budget request for 2021 was largely flat compared to 2020. President-elect Biden had alluded to the need for reductions in defence spending, but as a number of analysts have pointed out, there should be no automatic assumption that spending will fall as a consequence of a change of president or because of the impact of a COVID-19 recession (Cancian 2020). What is likely, however, is an ongoing appraisal of geographic priorities. The US made clear, under President Obama, that a refocusing of American strategic priorities required a 'pivot' to Asia (Cha 2016). President Trump's America First Policy reaffirmed that position, albeit in cruder terms (Anton 2019), and early signs from the Biden administration did not suggest a deviation from the focus on China notwithstanding a parallel intention to restore civility with the NATO allies following the transatlantic tensions of the Trump period (Baer 2020).

The American pivot to Asia – now a process that spans at least three administrations – carries two implications. First, that defence budget constraints will impact more on America's commitment to Europe than to its engagement in the Asia-Pacific, and second that in consequence the European allies need to stump up more for their own defence. The latter, indeed, was the purpose of the defence spending pledge agreed at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales – and, more obviously, of Trump's constant admonitions that the allies were 'delinquent' in their commitment to defence spending targets. The budget trends in Canada and Europe do not suggest that the allies will be able any time soon to compensate for lowered American commitment. Since the election of Donald Trump there has been much talk of European 'strategic autonomy', but this is a narrative directed toward the EU (not NATO) and for missions that do not include maritime presence in the North Atlantic. Some scenarios (Posen 2020) paint a picture of European allies able to defend themselves against Russian destabilisation (the standard scenario being a conflict that envelops the Baltic States), but these do not extend to a maritime conflagration where in the Atlantic NATO would remain critically dependent upon US forces.

Absent the US, NATO's maritime capability deficit is thus stark. Some small comfort might be obtained by a consideration of the UK position. In November 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced an intention to uphold the position of the Royal Navy as Europe's most powerful maritime force (Rayner 2020). Importantly, that announcement contained a commitment to thirteen new frigates – although it was unclear how many of these were

additional to, or replacements for, existing ships. Equally, while Johnson's announcement foresaw an extra £24 billion for defence over a four-year period, exactly how that would be apportioned between services and toward what strategic priorities remained, in large part, dependent upon the outcome of a postponed Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Foreign Policy and Development (deferred in 2020 because of COVID-19). Further, given the global role envisaged for the UK after Brexit, it appeared the number of frigates available for the North Atlantic would remain limited.

Such constraints contrast with Russian position. Its defence expenditure increased in real terms by approximately 30 per cent between 2010 and 2019. That, according to some estimates, still only placed Russia alongside medium sized powers such as the UK and France – and hardly made it a peer competitor of the US. This may not, however, be the whole story. Measuring expenditure in terms of purchasing power parity, inflates the Russian commitment at least three-fold (and by this measure the US outpaces Russia by a factor of just four not eleven as noted above). Such a calculation explains why, according to Kofman and Connolly (2019), 'Russian procurement dwarfs that of most European powers combined' – and why, relatedly, Russia is able to maintain an ocean-going navy that, bar the US, outstrips that of all other NATO allies.

Technological innovation

Here there are three significant game changers: maritime-based missile defence, cruise missiles and maritime autonomous vehicles or drones. On the first, in November 2020, the US navy demonstrated that it could shoot down an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) using a missile intercept from a warship. Although the test took place in the Pacific with North Korea in mind, its wider impact on Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) cannot be overstated. Specifically, the utility of the North Atlantic in providing a component of the NATO missile defence shield, in support of the active layered *Aegis* capable warships, has been significantly enhanced. However, this in turn, incentivizes Russia to place an even greater emphasis on cruise missile technology.

In December 2015 an upgraded *Kilo* class, became the first Russian submarine to fire cruise missiles in anger. Though the target was Raqa in Syria, the potential of the *SS-N-30A Kalibr* cruise missile to impact security in the North Atlantic was clear. Whilst cruise missiles can be deployed from a range of air and land platforms, it is a submarine's ability to remain

undetected close to a target that is particularly appealing (and worrying) to defence planners. Further, Russia is keen to deploy the *Kalibr* across a range of different platforms, in addition to the *Kilo*. Three *Yasen* class SSNs, able to carry up to forty missiles, have entered into service with a further six planned. The *Kalibr-M*, meanwhile, is reportedly in development, with a range up to 4,500km, as part of Russia's 2027 rearmament programme (Tass 2019). Even with its more limited range, the *Kalibr* in service today can be fired from submarines off the Kola peninsula at targets including European ports capable of receiving resupply across the Atlantic. The Northern Fleet, therefore, no longer needs to break through the GIUK Gap into the open sea of the North Atlantic in order to achieve its strategic objectives.

The place of the third technological development of note is set out in a 2016 US Department of Defence report, *Autonomous Undersea Vehicle Requirement for 2025*. This made the case for Autonomous Undersea Vehicles (AUV) or drones being a key part of the Third Offset Strategy – that is, the US response to the development of A2/AD capabilities being developed by potential adversaries (Chief of Naval Operations 2016). Three missions were noted: Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), Seabed Warfare, and Deception. Further, the report suggested that the autonomy of the AUV 'with the minimum [of] human interaction' will increase over time, so furthering an overall aim of expanding AUVs 'into far forward operations' and increasing 'the number of tasks that can be performed.' The North Atlantic, especially is likely to see an increase in the deployment of AUVs to take forward existing missions. ISR, for instance, is not a new task. Anti-submarine sensors integrated into the Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS) was installed as far back as the 1950s. SOSUS has recently been upgraded and now forms part of the US Integrated Undersea Surveillance System (IUSS), which also incorporates the new Deep Reliable Acoustic Path Exploitation System (DRAPES) (Stashwick 2016). The continued development of IUSS is, however, matched by Russian seabed warfare capabilities – described by one US think tank report as 'the most developed [...] in the world' (Metrick and Hicks 2018, p.7). The focus of NATO members' concerns here has been on the potential for Russia to interfere with undersea communication cables (Stavridis 2018). Consequently, the US Navy, according to its Chief of Operations (2016) 'must develop the capability to deny potential adversaries the benefit of seabed systems and simultaneously exploit concealment' executing a 'diverse set of missions from inside an adversary's [A2/AD] envelope'. The US,

therefore, is specifically planning to utilise AUVs around the Kola peninsula inside the Russian defence bastion.

China

Speculation on a Chinese interest in the North Atlantic derives from a number of concerns. First, China has already demonstrated a global maritime ambition. Since the mid 2000s, the Chinese navy has been regularly deployed to the northern Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, and the Central and Western Pacific. Since 2014, it has made regular forays into the South Atlantic (Martinson 2019). While a presence in the North Atlantic has yet to materialise, China's has obtained increasing influence in contiguous areas. This is most evident in the Arctic. China has been an observer in the Arctic Council since 2013, published an Arctic Strategy in 2018 and has major investments in energy projects in Arctic waters (Lino 2020). But it is Chinese activities in Europe that have really caught the eye. China is a key investor in a number of European ports (Kynge et al 2017). Piraeus in Greece, and Trieste in Italy have attracted the most attention, but Chinese companies also have stakes in Antwerp, Barcelona, Felixstowe, Hamburg, Le Havre, Rotterdam, and Zeebrugge. It is easy to exaggerate the strategic significance of these moves. Chinese investment, for instance, often sits alongside significant national control arrangements (as in Trieste) or involvement by major European investors (Ghiretti 2020). Nonetheless, Chinese commercial intrusion into Europe has increased rapidly – and with it has come a degree of political influence (evident in Belt and Road agreements with Italy and Greece, a burgeoning security relationship with Serbia, and the '17 + 1' format that embraces China plus states in Eastern Europe and the Balkans).

These intrusions have certainly worried the EU. The European Commission (cited in Von Der Burchard 2019) has branded China a 'systemic rival' – a country that is 'an economic competitor', a sponsor of 'an alternative model of governance' and with 'ambitions to become a leading global power.' NATO too has woken up to China. The London Declaration of December 2019 (NATO 2019) referred to the 'challenges' posed by 'China's growing influence and international policies.' The 'rise of China' was addressed by NATO Foreign Ministers at their meeting in December 2020 (NATO 2020b). And *NATO 2030* – an expert report commissioned by the NATO Secretary General (Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General 2020) – referred to China as 'a full-spectrum

systemic rival' noting its role in cyber attacks, acquisitions of infrastructure in Europe ('which have a potential bearing upon communications and interoperability') and intellectual property theft ('with implications for defence'). The report went on to note that China had developed 'deepening defence ties with Russia', had made extensive investments in its military (including the pursuit of an ocean-going navy) and had expanded 'its military reach' into the Atlantic as well as the Arctic and Mediterranean. The US Department of Defence (2020) has raised similar issues – noting that China's investment in European port infrastructure should be placed in strategic context – as a means to 'pre-position the necessary logistics support to sustain naval deployments' in distant waters, the Atlantic included.

Climate Change

Climate change is increasingly shaping the security concerns of nations. Since 2007, the UN Security Council has held five open debates (in 2007, 2011, 2018, 2019 and 2020) on the climate-security nexus. A Concept Note prepared by the German Presidency of the Security Council for the July 2020 meeting noted that 'climate-related security risks' in the shape of 'severe weather phenomena', as well as floods, droughts and sea-level rise, were already 'a daily reality for millions of people.' It added that 'the security implications of climate change will rise [...], aggravate[ing] existing vulnerabilities and conflict drivers [and] contribut[ing] to the emergence of new and unprecedented risks' (United Nations Security Council 2020). As an influential report of 2014 (King 2014) had already noted, such risks included greater 'rivalry between states' over natural resources and disputed national boundaries. The latter is already evident in the Arctic where Russian territorial claims have alarmed the US. Two other NATO nations – Denmark and Norway – have their own claims. All these allies, as well as Canada, meanwhile, are wary also of China's increasing interest in the region (Shea 2019). Similar concerns have also been focused further south. A shrinking of the Arctic ice cap – and with it, an opening of the Northwest Passage and Northern Sea Route – has raised the possibility of a future Chinese naval presence in the North Atlantic (Melia et al. 2017). Such worries aside, climate change has other maritime security implications. Desalination caused by polar ice melt can affect the accuracy of navigation, and detection, systems that rely on underwater sound speed, so undermining the reliability of both the IUSS system as well as of AUVs as they enter service (Ainslie, 2010, pp.513-571). This not only increases the

risk of underwater accidents but can lead to false readings so heightening tensions between the NATO countries and Russia.

Summary

This chapter has focused on the military dimensions of security, something that has a clear and enduring importance in the North Atlantic given the ocean's overlap with NATO's area of responsibility and the dynamic of competition with Russia. Although closely linked to maritime security in the Arctic, the North Atlantic has its own specific security dynamics. The sustainment of this ocean as a zone of rivalry has historical echoes – emanating from both the Cold War and the two World Wars of the twentieth century. The new factors that now set it apart are the emergence of China as an interested party in the region and the long-term consequences of climate change. Both these developments are so far largely unmediated. The lack of institutional bodies, other than the United Nations, that can deescalate, or limit, tensions is notable. To make matters worse, NATO-Russia rivalry has contributed to an evident de-institutionalisation of relations. The NATO-Russia Council, which had had some focus on maritime security, has been largely inactive since the 2014 Crimea crisis. NATO currently has no mechanism for security dialogue with China. The North Atlantic thus remains both contested and unregulated as a site of military security.

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