

Nordic nations hope US fixation on Greenland pushes Nato to get tough

Countries urge alliance to bolster Arctic security after years of Russian military build-up in region

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Looking at one of his favourite maps — showing the world from the perspective of the Arctic — Tore Sandvik points to Russia's Kola Peninsula, home to one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals, inside the Arctic Circle just across the border from northern Norway.

The shortest flight path of a projectile launched from Kola towards US cities on both coasts, Norway's defence minister explains, is over the Arctic, close to the North Pole and Greenland.

"An intercontinental ballistic missile comes down with a speed of 7km per second, it takes 18 minutes from launch until it reaches a major US city," Sandvik said. "This is homeland defence. That's why we're putting this on the table for President [Donald] Trump and when we meet allies. This is homeland defence [for the US], for London, for Paris, for Berlin, for all of the alliance."

Trump has put an aggressive and, at times, uncomfortable focus on Greenland in the past year with his forceful pursuit of the Danish Arctic island.

But in agreeing a "framework" of a deal on the world's largest island with Nato secretary-general Mark Rutte last week, the US president has shifted the focus in the alliance to Arctic security — a subject Nordic countries have been pushing for decades.

"Nato must increase its engagement in the Arctic," said Mette Frederiksen, Denmark's prime minister. "Defence and security in the Arctic is a matter for the entire alliance."

For the five Nordic countries — all Arctic states — that represents a chance to get the geopolitical discussion back to where they want it: the Russian threat.

Nearly all Arctic states, Russia included, cut back on their military presence after the end of the cold war, closing bases. The US shut several in Greenland and Iceland. But Russia started the military and economic revitalisation of the Arctic much earlier than western powers, led by President Vladimir Putin in the 2000s.

Russia controls about half the Arctic's landmass and waters, giving it by far the largest footprint of the eight countries with a presence in the region, which includes the US and Canada as well as the five Nordics. Today Moscow has more than 40 military facilities along the Arctic coast, including bases, airfields, radar stations and ports.

The Arctic plays a critical role in Moscow's nuclear doctrine. It is home to Russia's Northern Fleet, based in Severomorsk on the Kola Peninsula, which operates six of the country's 12 nuclear-armed submarines, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

"The Northern Fleet and, in particular, its submarines, is a pillar of Russia's strategic deterrence. Because of its importance, the fleet is still being modernised," said Ondrej Ditrych, at the European Union Institute for Security Studies.

Russia also maintains a high level of readiness at its nuclear testing site on Novaya Zemlya, an Arctic archipelago where last October it tested its nuclear-powered Burevestnik cruise missile. It is also promoting the use of the Northern Sea Route, which runs over the top of Russia and offers the prospect of shorter shipping times between China and Europe, although traffic numbers are



Arctic security has risen to the top of the agenda

● Russian military base



Sources: Norwegian defence ministry; Norwegian Polar Institute; FT research

Northern exposure: a soldier patrols the Russian military base on Kotelnoy Island, beyond the Arctic Circle. Moscow has more than 40 military facilities along its Arctic coast

Maxime Popov/AFP/Getty Images

below target. The Nordic neighbours to Russia have watched developments with growing concern, urging Nato to become more involved, with relatively little success in part because of opposition from the likes of the US.

"We know that the Russians are having more activity in the north. The security situation is also that when the polar ice is melting, China is rising as a regional hegemon but with global interests. They have self-proclaimed themselves as a near-Arctic nation," Sandvik said. A senior official from another Nor-

dic country said: "The concentration of military resources in our neighbourhood is rather huge."

Nato's most senior military officer, Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, told the FT in October that the Arctic was "of great interest" to the alliance, which was committed to keeping it open for free navigation and nascent business opportunities, such as mining and oil and gas exploration.

Several Nato members have intensified training in Arctic conditions in Norway, Finland and Greenland, including

the US, UK and France. In March, about 25,000 soldiers from across the alliance — including 4,000 from the US — will take part in the Cold Response exercise in northern Norway, to practise air, sea and land warfare in harsh winter conditions.

As well as trying to refocus US attention on the threat from Russia, the Nordics hope renewed attention on Arctic security will allow them to show their usefulness to Washington.

There are two crucial sections of sea where Nato and Russia would jostle for control in any conflict in the Arctic: the better-known GIUK gap between Greenland, Iceland and the UK; and the so-called Bear Gap between the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard and its mainland, ending close to the Kola Peninsula.

Sandvik said Norway used P8 reconnaissance planes as well as satellites, long-range drones, submarines and frigates to monitor the Bear Gap and elsewhere.

"This is the way Nato thinks about defending this area in the time of a hot crisis. But, most of all, we're doing this to avoid escalation and to deter Russia."

A senior Nordic official added that the US depended on this intelligence: "It's definitely a two-way street. We have good situational awareness about what Russia is doing on their side of the border. The US can also use our airspace to monitor Russia."

Much of the interest in the Arctic is in monitoring what could be coming through the air or underwater, rather than preparing for action on land. "Greenland is impossible to 'invade'. You could take Nuuk. But 95 per cent of it is snow and ice, and you can't take that," said a Danish official.

Trump seems to be eyeing Greenland for his proposed Golden Dome missile defence system, which would use sensors, satellites and interceptors to stop various projectiles reaching the US.

The US runs the main military facility on the Arctic island, the Pituffik space base in the far north-west, used for early-warning radar systems.

Many in the Nordics worry, however, that there is an inexorable logic to the militarisation of the Arctic, hitherto one of the few regions of the world able to be classified as "low tension". They stress that the region is home to millions of people, many of them indigenous, as in Greenland.

"My concern is that security is dominating the Arctic agenda and we forget that there are other issues that are just as important, such as climate change, infrastructure, the rights of indigenous people," said a senior Nordic official. "There's not a lot to gain from the militarisation of the Arctic because it's such a difficult area for activity."

For now, there is also recognition that Russia's war in Ukraine has slowed its military build-up in the Arctic.

"The actual force presence in Arctic military sites has gone down as some of the Arctic brigades were deployed to Ukraine and sustained heavy losses," said Ditrych.

But there is also a recognition that both Russia and China are willing to play a long game in a region where melting ice can change the military and economic calculus over decades. "It's a race in strategic competition in the Arctic," said Sandvik.

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