Introduction: A Changing Region
The geopolitical landscape of Northern Europe is rapidly changing. Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine hit the region like an earthquake, triggering the most momentous change to Northern European security in decades: the latest round of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement.

And yet, policymakers have not altered their approach to Northern Europe to keep up with the changing times. For example, NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept, the policy document that guides the alliance’s thinking on the major security issues in the transatlantic community, does not meaningfully mention the region. More often than not, policymakers and commentators still fall back on an old mental map that divides the region into its traditional Baltic, Nordic, or Arctic subsections.

Before Sweden and Finland joined NATO, this misapprehension may have been understandable. But the Baltic Sea is now a NATO lake insofar that the alliance can surveil and contest any Russian movement on the water or in the air between the exclave of Kaliningrad and the city of Saint Petersburg. Today, eight of nine Arctic countries are bound together by treaty...
alliance. As a result, NATO needs to craft a comprehensive security approach that considers Northern Europe as a whole, not merely as the sum of its individual parts. Doing so requires a fresh look at the region as it exists in its entirety. As the leader of the alliance, it is up to US policymakers to drive this process forward.

This paper will outline how the post–February 2022 geopolitical situation has changed the security dynamics of the region; lay out the security challenges Northern Europe faces, including in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic; and offer an overview of how the United States and NATO should adapt to the new circumstances.

Threats in Northern Europe
Analysts generally accept that Vladimir Putin declared his break with the West at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. But what triggered Putin’s first act of real aggression was the relocation of a Soviet World War II memorial in Tallinn two months later. In April and May 2007, Russian state-backed hackers crippled dozens of private and public sector websites in Estonia in the first large-scale state-on-state denial of service attack in history.

Putin clearly has a special obsession with symbols and a slanted interpretation of history. The Baltic states loom large in this context, as the Russian president’s yearslong preoccupation with the historical Grand Duchy of Lithuania makes clear. Putin’s irredentism permeates the Russian system. Last May, for example, Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council and Russia’s former president, took to Twitter (now X) to describe “[Russia’s] Baltic provinces” as “temporarily occupied.” Other times, Russian politicians have questioned the Soviet Union’s 1991 decision to acknowledge the Baltic states’ sovereignty, going as far as to initiate a legal review with Russia’s prosecutor general in 2015.

Putin likes to say that “the borders of Russia do not end.” To that point, Russia regularly runs information operations that target Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia. At times, these propaganda offensives cross into the physical realm. In September 2014, days before the NATO summit in Wales, Russian operatives crossed into Estonia and kidnapped Eston Kohvar, an Estonian intelligence official. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has almost certainly embedded its own agents amongst the large numbers of Russians and Belarusians who have fled their home countries for the Baltic states, overwhelming the domestic security services in places like Vilnius. These methods are part and parcel of Russia’s hybrid campaign against the former Soviet states and Russia’s former satellites.

Russia’s conventional military has also been active in Northern Europe. In 2023, jets from NATO’s Baltic Air Policing mission scrambled 155 times in response to Russian aircraft that flew close to Baltic airspace without filing flight plans, using transponders, or communicating with air traffic controllers. This sort of provocative behavior has become the new normal in Northern Europe, dating back years. Russian attack simulations and military exercises, from the Luzhsky Training Range to the Gulf of Finland, have sent Northern European states a belligerent message. Of the last three Zapad military exercises, two prepared the way for actual invasions: the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ominously, the third, Zapad 2017, focused in part on the Baltics.

Russia is in the midst of a military reorganization in response to NATO’s enlargement. This year, Moscow reestablished the Leningrad Military District (LMD), a command centered on Saint Petersburg and devoted exclusively to Northern Europe. As part of this process, the authorities in Moscow disbanded Russia’s Western Military District, which stretched from Belgorod, bordering Ukraine in the south, to Karelia, near the Kola Peninsula in the north. The reestablished LMD will also absorb the four regions of the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic
Map 1: Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea

Source: Authors.
Command. The Baltic Sea Fleet, based out of Baltiysk in the Gdansk Bay and Kronstadt in the Gulf of Finland, and the Northern Fleet, based in Severomorsk on the Kola Peninsula, will reinforce the LMD.

The LMD will also benefit from increased manpower and resources as it takes shape. According to the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, Russia is likely to double the total number of troops along its border with the Baltic states and Finland. This move will be part of Moscow’s larger plan to grow the Russian Armed Forces to 1.5 million personnel by 2026. Moreover, Putin has approved a massive increase in defense spending that is transforming Russia into a war economy. In 2024, Russia will devote 30 percent of its federal budget to the military, an increase of almost 70 percent over 2023 spending levels.

To complicate matters, Putin’s subjugation of Belarus will increase the vulnerability of the Baltic states. Last decade, Russia stationed Iskander ballistic missiles—road-mobile, solid-fueled, nuclear-capable weapons with a range of up to 500 kilometers (roughly 310 miles)—in Kaliningrad. Now, Moscow has reportedly deployed the same system to Belarus and even stationed tactical nuclear weapons there. To further rattle the region, Russia’s Wagner mercenaries set up operations last summer near the Suwałki Corridor, which connects Poland and Lithuania (see map 1).

Russian forces also hold Baltic maritime assets at risk. Russia’s navy can project power throughout the Baltic Sea, allowing it to threaten oil and gas platforms, undersea communications cables, and gas pipelines. Russia’s Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research has gone to great lengths to map the West’s underwater assets, raising concern among NATO officials.

For example, David Cattler, NATO’s top intelligence official, warned last May that “there are heightened concerns that Russia may target undersea cables and other critical infrastructure in an effort to disrupt Western life.” Several such incidents have taken place in recent years. A Chinese-registered but Russian-crewed ship appears to have sabotaged the Balticconnector gas pipeline along with two telecommunications cables last October, and Russia is suspected of having cut the Svalbard Undersea Cable System in 2022 as well. As the Baltic states decouple from Soviet-legacy power grids dominated by Russia and utilize the NordBalt (Sweden) and EstLink (Finland) undersea cables, the prospects for Russian sabotage in the Baltic Sea will increase.

The Russia-Ukraine War’s Impact on Northern Europe

Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 altered the geopolitical landscape in a way not seen since World War II. Northern Europe was no exception. Below are six examples of significant geopolitical change in the region that policymakers need to consider.

- The enlargement of NATO. Control of the Baltic Sea, and by extension Northern Europe, is largely determined by who controls Finland’s Åland Islands, Sweden’s Gotland, and Denmark’s Borham. These islands are strategically located in the Baltic Sea and have been geopolitically important for centuries. With Finland and Sweden in the alliance, all three islands are part of NATO. Additionally, Finland’s accession has added 830 miles to Russia’s border with NATO, and Sweden’s entry means that the Danish Straits—the entry and exit point of the Baltic Sea—are fully under NATO protection.

- Denmark dropping its Common Security and Defence Policy opt-out. For three decades, Denmark has not been required to participate in the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This was part of a larger deal in 1992 that eventually led to Denmark ratifying the Maastricht Treaty. In the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Denmark held a popular referendum in June 2022 on whether it should participate in the EU’s CSDP
initiatives and operations. In the referendum, two-thirds of Danes supported lifting Denmark’s CSDP opt-out.

• The end of post-Brexit anxiety. In the period after the United Kingdom formally left the EU, many in Europe—as well as in Washington—questioned the role Britain would play in European affairs. Britain’s continued leadership on European security issues, particularly London’s leading role in supporting and arming Ukraine since February 2022, has alleviated post-Brexit anxieties about Britain’s commitment to European security.

• Kaliningrad’s (temporary) depletion. The small Russian exclave of Kaliningrad along the Baltic Sea borders NATO members Lithuania and Poland. It serves as the cornerstone of Russia’s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy in the Baltic Sea region. If Moscow controls Kaliningrad during an armed conflict with NATO, Russia can limit the alliance’s ability to act in the Baltics. Russia has reportedly sent some of the forces, weapons systems, and other platforms from Kaliningrad to Ukraine since February 2022. This means that, for now, Russia’s ability to act from Kaliningrad is limited.

• Ukraine’s degradation of Russia’s Baltic Sea Fleet. Russia’s ability to conduct large-scale and complex amphibious landings in the Baltics has been severely degraded due to its invasion of Ukraine. In February 2022, Russia sent three Ropucha-class landing ships from the Baltic Fleet to the Black Sea to support the forthcoming large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since then, a Ukrainian airstrike has destroyed one Ropucha-class ship, and the other two remain stuck in the Black Sea with no prospect of relief so long as Türkiye continues to restrict passage through the Turkish Straits.

• The changes in Europe’s battlespace geography. NATO will now have to examine ground lines of communication (GLOC) contingencies and defense plans for the entire Scandinavian Peninsula—not just for Norway, which had been the case for decades. As for the Baltic states, the Suwalki Corridor will remain NATO’s main GLOC connecting Poland and Lithuania. There are also changes...
in the Baltic air domain. The entries of Sweden and Finland into the alliance double the number of fourth- and fifth-generation fighters operated by NATO's Nordic member states. Therefore, the alliance needs to expand the scope of the Baltic Air Policing mission to include new geographies while adding a new focus on air defense. The maritime domain has changed significantly too. Sweden and Finland add another 95,775 square miles of economic exclusive zones and 2,780 miles of coastline to the alliance.

**The Arctic Dimension**

No examination of security in Northern Europe can be complete without factoring in the Arctic. Of the Arctic states, all but Russia are in NATO. It is natural, then, to expect the alliance to place a strong focus on the region, but this has not always been the case. While occasional training exercises take place in Norway’s Arctic region, including as recently as this month as part of Steadfast Defender, NATO has no common position or policy on its role in the High North. No official NATO document even contained the word “Arctic” until the 2022 Strategic Concept.

While the military threat from Russia in the Arctic remains minor, NATO may very well be unprepared for several contingencies that could arise in the region. Worryingly, NATO does not have issue-specific policy competencies over many Arctic concerns, from search and rescue operations and fisheries to energy and environmental issues. For these challenges, NATO will play a supporting role, and the primary actors will be national- and EU-level law enforcement, border security, and other governmental agencies.

The danger is that the Kremlin sees the Arctic as a low-risk opportunity to promote Russian nationalism. NATO's limited Arctic cooperation allows Russia to flex its muscles without incurring any significant geopolitical risk. With Russian nationalism on the rise in recent years, this approach has been successful for Putin, and may be for some time yet to come.

**Russia’s Conventional Capabilities**

Until Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow had been investing heavily in militarizing its Arctic region. In the past 15 years, Russia has established or reopened more than 20 military installations above the Arctic Circle after closing many in the 1990s. According to the 2023 NATO summit communique, Russia “maintains significant military capabilities in the Arctic.” Indeed, NATO’s Strategic Concept states that “in the High North, [Russia’s] capability to disrupt allied reinforcements and freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic is a strategic challenge to the alliance.”

While Russia has not let the war against Ukraine stop it from investing in its nuclear weapons modernization program and infrastructure projects above the Arctic Circle, the invasion has taken a toll on Russia’s conventional armed forces in the Arctic. A good example of this is the 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade stationed in Pechenga, only miles from Russia’s border with Norway. This unit, specially trained and equipped to fight in Arctic conditions, participated in the initial large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. According to media reports, only 900 of the brigade’s 1,400 troops who entered Ukraine survived.

In addition, the armored vehicles, main battle tanks, and other associated military hardware lost in Ukraine will undoubtedly impact Russia’s conventional military readiness in the Arctic. Even so, Russian officials are keen to learn the military lessons from Ukraine and apply them to the High North.

**Chinese Ambitions in the Arctic**

Russia’s actions in Ukraine have also created new opportunities for China in the Arctic. For now, China’s main motivations in the region are in the realms of economics, diplomacy, and energy. While these issues fall outside NATO’s security remit, the alliance needs to monitor China’s activities closely.
In the simplest terms, China sees the Arctic region as another arena in the world where it can advance its interests and expand its influence. As a non-Arctic country, China is mindful that its standing in international Arctic institutions is limited, but this has not stopped Beijing from increasing its economic presence in the region. Moreover, the Northern Sea Route, which connects northwestern Russia and China via the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Strait, allows Russia and China to trade while bypassing the Suez Canal and Malacca Strait chokepoints.

There is no doubt that China will try to step in to help Russia in the short run, increasing cooperation between Moscow and Beijing in the Arctic. For example, in April, Russia and China signed an agreement to increase coast guard cooperation in the Arctic. China and Russia also have set ambitious goals for energy cooperation as Western partners have left Russia.

On the other hand, the Arctic Council ceased to function when Russia invaded, costing Beijing, which is an observer on the council, one of its most important tools for influence in the High North.

**Recommendations to Improve Security in Northern Europe**

NATO needs to adapt to changing circumstances and update its military contingency plans for Northern Europe. It is in America’s interest to lead this effort while working in close coordination with regional allies. Below are 10 recommendations to improve security in Northern Europe.

- Lead efforts to establish a Northern Europe air defense mission. While the Baltic Air Policing mission has been useful, NATO needs to do more. With Sweden and Finland in the alliance—and with Russia’s increased aggression, including the formation of the LMD—a robust and expanded air defense mission is needed. Air policing limited to the three Baltic states alone is no longer enough.

- Consider a Forward Land Forces (FLF) battlegroup for Finland. NATO announced the deployment of multinational battle groups to Poland and the Baltic states in 2016. This model, previously dubbed enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), aimed to demonstrate NATO’s resolve by deploying multinational battle groups led by the United States, the UK, Germany, and Canada to Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, respectively. Since February 2022, NATO has agreed to increase its troop presence in the Baltics from a battalion-sized force to a brigade “where and when required.” For example, Lithuania has agreed to host a permanent German brigade of about 5,000 troops, which will be combat ready by 2027. The alliance has since expanded the FLF concept to Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. If Helsinki is so inclined, NATO should consider placing an FLF battalion in Finland now that it has joined the alliance.

- Establish a permanent military presence in each of the Baltic states. The deployment of rotational FLF battle groups to the region is a good start, but NATO ought to do more. The threat from Russia will remain for the foreseeable future. NATO needs to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in each of the three Baltic states.

- Factor Kaliningrad into NATO’s Baltic Sea region contingency planning. The US needs to work with its NATO allies to develop a strategy that deals with the Russian A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad in the event of an armed conflict. In particular, this effort requires close cooperation and planning with Poland and Lithuania. NATO cannot carry out any credible defense of Northern Europe without neutralizing the threat from Kaliningrad at the onset of hostilities.

- Increase NATO’s maritime presence in the Baltic Sea. Since 2022 the US has increased its maritime presence in the Baltic Sea, but it can do more. So long as Türkiye’s Montreux Convention restrictions prevent further entry into the Black Sea, the US and its allies should divert maritime
assets that would have normally been deployed to the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea.

- Establish a US Marine Corps rotational force for the Baltic Sea. Until 2018, the US Marine Corps operated a Black Sea Rotational Force that consisted of a special-purpose Marine air-ground task force (SPMAGTF). The US should consider establishing a similar task force for the Baltic Sea. Such a task force would offer more joint military training opportunities for allies in Northern Europe.

- Conduct more large-scale reinforcement exercises between Southern European states and Northern European states. Countries in Western and Southern Europe should be able to deploy forces quickly to Eastern and Northern Europe. The straight-line distance from Portugal to northern Finland is more than 2,500 miles. Transporting forces over this distance quickly is no easy feat. NATO should consider holding regular exercises focused on defending and reinforcing Northern Europe.

- Consider Belarus’s role in regional security. Belarus played an important role in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russian units that invaded from Belarus committed many of the worst atrocities against Ukrainian civilians. In the event of a Russian military intervention against a NATO member, the US should clearly signal that it would not turn a blind eye to any support that Belarus provides to Russia. NATO should develop military plans accordingly, especially regarding Grodno, a strategically important Belarusian city near the Suwałki Corridor.

- Leverage the US-UK special relationship in Northern Europe. The US and UK are more effective actors in transatlantic security when they work together. The US should work with the UK, which has an enhanced security presence in Northern Europe due to its roles in the Joint Expeditionary Force and the Northern Group, to identify areas of deeper defense and security cooperation in Northern Europe.

- Work with allies to develop a NATO Arctic strategy. The alliance should agree to develop a comprehensive Arctic policy to address security challenges in the region. This is particularly important considering the entry of Finland and Sweden into the alliance. NATO allies should factor the Arctic more into their force design as well; for example, they should assess whether the alliance possesses enough ships with ice-strengthened hulls and anti-air and anti-submarine capabilities to counter Russia around the Svalbard archipelago and the east coast of Greenland.

**Conclusion**

Since Peter the Great, Russia has had imperial designs on Northern Europe, and this will not change in the foreseeable future. With Sweden and Finland now in NATO, the alliance needs to act quickly to develop plans that acknowledge the new geopolitical reality of Northern Europe. Russia’s tactical-level setbacks in Ukraine should not inspire strategic complacency from NATO policymakers. In Ukraine, Russia is fighting its first, high-intensity war in over seven decades. After a slow start, it has shown some ability to adapt, and will continue to draw lessons from its experience that it will apply to its thinking for Northern Europe. NATO planners, encouraged by America policymakers, should view the entry of Sweden and Finland into NATO as the starting point, and not the finish line, for bolstering the security of Northern Europe.
Endnotes


4. Dmitry Medvedev (@MedvedevRussiaE), “A certain person calling himself the president of France said that Russia had already lost geopolitically, and was transforming into the other countries’ vassal. . . . As they put it, tel mâlrte, tel valet,” Twitter (now X), May 16, 2023, 3:26 a.m., https://twitter.com/MedvedevRussiaE/status/165837333909686592.


17. The Åland Islands are a group of 6,700 Finnish islands where the primary spoken language is Swedish. They have always been considered some of the most important geostrategic real estate in the Baltic Sea. Since the 1856 Treaty of Paris, which ended the Crimean War, the Åland Islands have been demilitarized and have remained neutral. The 1921 Convention Relating to the Non-fortification and Neutralization of the Åland Islands reaffirmed the demilitarized and neutral nature of the islands and gave Finland the primary responsibility to guarantee this special status. Article 7 of the convention states that “if the neutrality of the zone should be imperiled by a sudden attack either against the Aaland Islands or across them against the Finnish mainland, Finland shall take the necessary measures in the zone to check and repulse the aggressor.” Now that Finland is in NATO, its military and security responsibilities to ensure that the islands remain demilitarized and neutral have become, by extension, NATO’s responsibility. Therefore, in a time of armed conflict, NATO needs to provide Finland any assistance it may require to guarantee the special status of the Åland Islands.


19. Grant Shapps (@grantshapps), “Today, the UK convened the ten nations of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) to strengthen ties between our militaries & ensure we have the cooperation we need to defend Northern Europe. We discussed our support for Ukraine as it fights against tyranny,” Twitter (now


23 Militarily speaking, the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—are isolated from other NATO members. To the south and east of the Baltic states are Russia and Belarus. To the west, Lithuania shares a border with the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Only Lithuania shares a land border with another non-Baltic NATO member—a 65-mile border with Poland, to the southwest between Kaliningrad and Belarus, known as the Suwałki Corridor.


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