



## **Chilly War in the High North under Low Tension: Implications for NATO**

Can DEMİR\*

### **Abstract**

*Over the past couple of decades, the rapid ice melt in the Arctic has facilitated access to the rich natural resources and shipping routes thereby turning the region once again into a ground for the showcase of an intensified global competition. As NATO's two principal competitors, Russia and China have effectively recognized the security and economic implications of an incrementally ice-free High North and have been pursuing long-term policies to enhance their positions in the region. Russia's defense posture and China's increasing economic involvement in the region pose a great threat to NATO's northern flank as well as the overall security environment in the north. The intensified rivalry in the High North has great implications for NATO and the alliance is going through times when it needs to be more vigilant than ever. Through an analytical approach, this study provides an insight into the dynamics and background of the High North offshoot of the global rivalry between NATO and its competitors and puts forward implications for NATO.*

**Keywords:** *The Arctic, the High North, NATO in the High North, Russia in the High North, China in the High North.*

## **Yüksek Kuzey'de Düşük Gerilimli Ayaz Savaş: NATO'ya Yönelik Sonuçlar**

### **Öz**

*Yaklaşık son yirmi yıllık süreçte, Arktika bölgesinde buzulların hızlı bir şekilde erimesi, zengin doğal kaynaklara ve deniz yollarına erişimi kolaylaştırmış ve bölgeyi kızışan küresel rekabetin kendini gösterdiği bir alan haline getirmiştir. NATO'nun iki büyük rakibi olan Rusya ve Çin, gittikçe buzdan arınan Yüksek Kuzey'in ekonomik ve güvenlik yansımalarını etkili bir şekilde etüt etmekte ve bölgedeki konumlarını geliştirmek için uzun soluklu politikalar sürdürmektedir. Rusya'nın savunma duruşu ve Çin'in artan ekonomik varlığı, ittifakın kuzey kanadına ve genel olarak kuzeydeki*

\* Master's Degree in International Relations, chezcandemir@gmail.com, c1demir@kkk.tsk.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-8338-2897.

*güvenlik ortamına tehdit teşkil etmektedir. Yüksek Kuzey’de şiddeti artan rekabet, NATO için önemli sonuçlar doğurmaktadır ve ittifak, daha önce olmadığı kadar müteyakkız olması gereken bir süreçten geçmektedir. Bu çalışma, analitik bir yaklaşımla, NATO ve rakipleri arasında Yüksek Kuzey’de cereyan eden küresel rekabetin dinamiklerine ve arka planına bakış sunmakta ve NATO için sonuçlar ortaya koymaktadır.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Arktika, Yüksek Kuzey, Arktika’da NATO, Arktika’da Rusya, Arktika’da Çin.*

### **Introduction**

The world has monitored a huge and eye-watering ice loss due to the global warming since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The rise in temperature causing exponential ice melt at an alarming rate is a big environmental concern as it is certain to have consequences for the whole planet. However, the same ice melt has been reshaping the geography of the ice-covered regions of the earth in a way that has produced political concerns bolder than environmental ones for the international community. The vast amount of melting in the Arctic region has specifically brought the rich natural resources to the forefront and the region has been coveted by the Arctic and non-Arctic States in terms of its ample gas, oil, mineral and marine resources.

The competition in the Arctic region, or the High North in other words, was dormant during the two decades following the end of the Cold War as the notion of “Arctic Exceptionalism” characterized by the absence of superpower rivalries was upfront. Increasingly accessible natural resources and newly-emerging shipping routes unblocked by ice melt in the region have recently sparked new competitions as well as new dimensions to the already-existing competitions. In this sense, the High North has recently been an area of a contest between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its competitors Russia and China.

Driven by the political urge to diversify their energy resources and have dominance in the global supply routes, Russia and China have recognized the implications of the rapid ice melt in the High North in the security and economic domains and adopted assertive policies to consolidate their positions in the whole region. Though NATO has been urged to adapt itself to meet the requirements of a more demanding strategic environment with continuously aggressive Russia and the

rise of China, it is regarded to lag significantly behind these two competitors in the High North. For the Alliance, the region is not just an area of the global contest with Russia and China but an area of collective defense and deterrence against the aggression of the former and the future potential threats from the latter as well.

Due to its strategic importance, the High North was at higher echelons on the global security agenda during the Cold War. Its prominence was reduced to a great extent with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, due to both the escalation of geopolitical competition and the climate change in the region, the Arctic has once again been of profound prominence to the security of NATO.

Though there seems to be a tendency among the countries in the region to address challenges and territorial disputes by resorting to diplomatic means, a regional offshoot of the global competition between NATO and its adversaries and potential spill-over of tension between NATO countries and Russia as well as increasing engagement of the Beijing administration in the region have turned the Arctic into an arena of vigorous strategic rivalry.

The High North has been and will continue to be an arena of political and military contest which is not likely to turn into an armed clash in the near future. In the title of this study, the said power struggle in the region is addressed as a “chilly war” for analogy as the term “cold war” is eschewed since it refers to a period of retrospective rivalry between the West World and the then USSR.

This study encompasses data and views from a number of scientific references. The references examined for this study mainly focus on the incremental geopolitical importance of the Arctic region along with the competition of superpowers as well as the regional powers. Concerning the power competition in the region, most references highlight the stance and the role of the USA against Russia and China which have also been consolidating their positions in the region as the other parties of the competition. However, the Russian build-up of hard power and the growing Chinese influence in the region constitute long-term threats and challenges against NATO and partner countries other than the USA as well. With this rationale upfront, this study focuses on the position of NATO as a whole in the power competition with the global competitors.

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The study provides comprehensive answers to the following analytical research questions:

- How important is the Arctic region in geopolitical terms for the global and regional powers?

- What is the extent of the hard power of Russia in the region and how does it pose a threat to NATO?

- What is the extent of Chinese influence in the region and how does it pose a risk to the security of NATO countries in the long term?

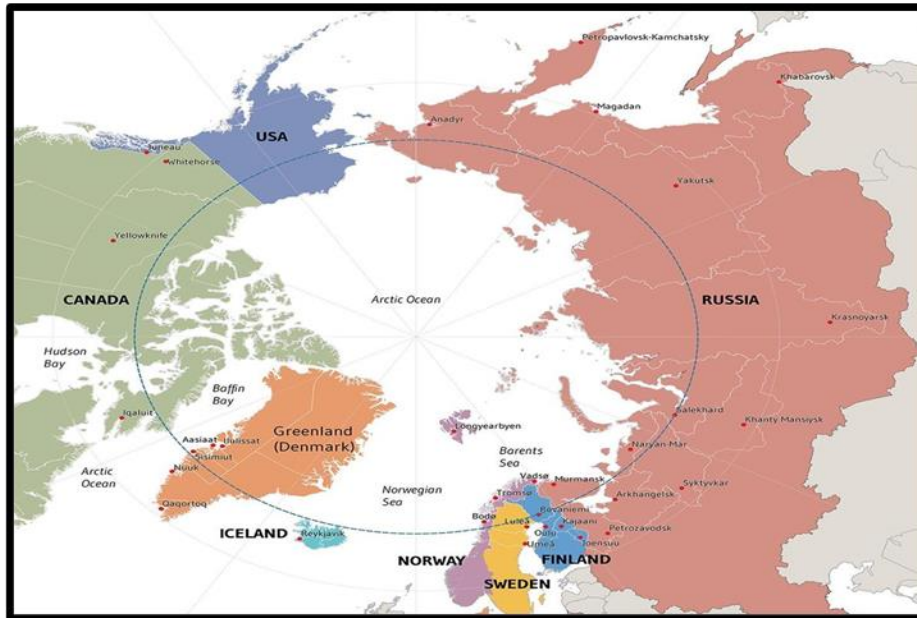
- How does NATO assess the threats from Russia and China? What policies does NATO pursue in view of the threat assessment? What more may need to be done on the side of NATO to counter these threats in the following term?

Shedding light on the geopolitics of the Arctic region and the background of the global competition between NATO and its adversaries in general first, the study goes on to discuss the strategies and policies of China and Russia as NATO's competitors concerning the High North. NATO's strategic approach to the region follows and a set of implications for NATO are put forward as in lieu of conclusion.

## **1. The Geopolitics of the High North**

The Arctic is the region encompassing the Arctic Ocean and the North Pole covered with ice in the Arctic Circle which is an area of sea and land of roughly thirty million km<sup>2</sup>, three times the size of Europe and one and a half times the size of Russia.

Though the region is defined in different ways in line with its climate and flora, the Arctic circle involves territories of the USA, Canada, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden and Finland in terms of political boundaries while only the first five of these are littoral states around the Arctic Ocean (Yıldız and Çelik, 2019: 62-63) as shown on Figure 1.



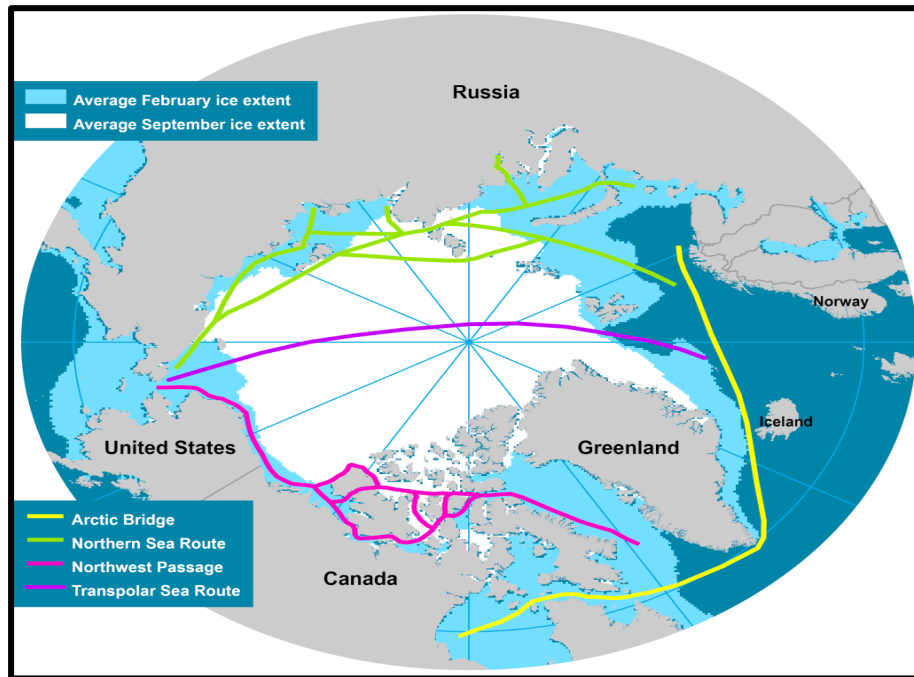
**Figure 1.** Administrative Areas of the Arctic (Arctic Centre, 2021).

The region is estimated to contain nearly 90 billion barrels of undiscovered oil, 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids and 480 billion m<sup>3</sup> of undiscovered gas, constituting 16, 26 and 30 percent of the world's relevant undiscovered resources respectively (Urban, 2015). In other words, natural resources in the region can meet the oil and natural gas needs of a country like Türkiye for three hundred and one thousand years respectively (Kazakoğlu, 2014).

The rapid ice melt in recent years in the Arctic has rendered natural resources more accessible. From the 1970s to 2010s, the number of days during which the Arctic Ocean was covered with ice decreased by ten to twenty days on average while the thickness of the ice covering the ocean decreased by sixty-five percent. Compared to the average size of ice-covered areas between the years 1981 and 2010, ice coverage on the ocean was over forty percent less in 2020 (Limon, 2020: 238-239).

The ice in the Arctic region melts at an alarming rate. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the sea ice level has decreased by roughly thirteen percent per decade and during the past few years, an exponential amount of ice melted due to an

unprecedented rise of temperature in the region (Gürcan, 2019: 23-24). The ice melt in the Arctic has also rendered shipping routes more convenient for navigation. There are four shipping routes in the Arctic as depicted on Figure 2<sup>1</sup>.



**Figure 2.** Shipping Routes Passing through the Arctic (Rodrigue, 2021).

The Northern Sea Route (NSR) lies along the coast of Russia. This route has the biggest commercial potential and is most likely to be free of ice first. The distance of a maritime journey between Western Europe and East Asia is close to 13,000 km through this route, while it is 21,000 through the Suez Canal thereby shortening the duration of the travel by ten to fifteen days<sup>2</sup>. The Northwest Passage (NWP) crosses the Arctic Coast off the coast of Canada. A journey between East Asia and Western Europe through the Panama Canal is 24,000 km while it is close to 14,000 through

<sup>1</sup> Ice extent on the map reflects average numbers between 1981 and 2010. The average ice extent is known to have receded since 2010.

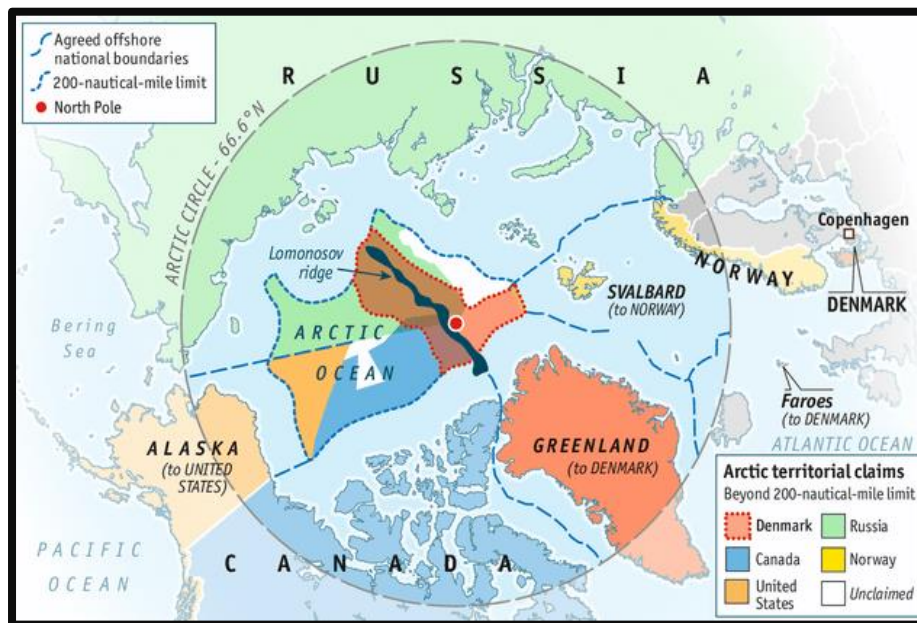
<sup>2</sup> Russian Administration has been boasting about the Northern Sea Route as a better alternative to Suez Canal for a long time. In March 2021, the Suez Canal was blocked by a stranded container ship for days causing an exponential amount of economic loss. Moscow seized on the shutdown of the Suez Canal as an opportunity to reassert its claims (Kundu, 2021).

this passage in the Arctic. The use of the Transpolar Sea Route (TSR) depends on ice-free conditions and it is likely to be used for commercial purposes in the near future. Though the Arctic Bridge is not a trans-Arctic route, it connects the hinterlands of North American Midwest and Northwest Europe through the Arctic (The Geography of Transport Systems, 2021).

These shipping routes are not convenient throughout the year due to varying ice coverage. February-March is the period when ice coverage peaks and July-September is when the least amount of ice coverage exists. In two to three decades, the shipping routes are expected to be 80-100 percent accessible; many sailing distances between far away locations will be shorter as many days of sailing and an exponential amount of energy will be saved (Humpert and Raspotnik, 2012: 288-291).

Exponential amounts of energy in the Arctic and shipping routes passing through the region are parts of global security domains of the regional and global powers led by the USA, Russia and China. The Arctic region, therefore, is one of the most important parts of their global agendas (Akpınar, 2017: 94-95).

The Arctic Council, which was founded by all eight Arctic states in 1996, as an intergovernmental forum concerned with sustainable development and environmental protection (Dal, 2020: 38), the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) are the institutional structures and documentations which are concerned with the region; however, no organization that regulates security issues and boosts political cooperation exists in the Arctic region (Genç, 2020: 37). Figure 3 shows Arctic countries' national boundaries, 200-mile zones and territorial claims beyond these zones in accordance with their interpretations of the international law.



**Figure 3.** Boundaries and Territorial Claims in the Arctic (The Economist, 2014).

The Arctic was one of the principal playgrounds of the rivalry between NATO and the USSR during the Cold War. Following a couple of decades of rapprochement, the region with its exponential amount of energy sources and strategic shipping routes more accessible than ever has lately retained its importance as the showcase of a new episode of rivalry between NATO and Russia (Yıldız and Çelik, 2019: 65-66) as well as China.

## 2. The Global Competition from NATO Outlook

Undergoing a big change in the outlook in the wake of the Cold War and the following global challenges, NATO released its latest strategic concept in 2010. In the concept which is now regarded as outdated, it was clearly stated that the Euro-Atlantic area was at peace and there was only a low threat of a conventional attack against NATO countries. In addition, subtle statements were employed to highlight the other threats challenging NATO (NATO, 2010: 10-13). However, much has changed since the latest strategic concept of the alliance was released. NATO's



current threat perception and outlook to the near future have been analyzed in a number of policy papers.<sup>3</sup>

At the current juncture, the international security environment is a multipolar-aggressive system encompassing different types of low-intensity warfare without the presence of major conflicts which can, in other words, be described as a kind of peacetime war (Credi, Marrone and Menotti, 2020: 2). Among a wide array of actors and dynamics, Russia and China obviously pose the greatest risks and threats to the Alliance.

In the wake of the Cold War, the alliance built a successful partnership based on cooperation and dialogue with Russia. However, Moscow's aggression against Georgia and Ukraine together with its large-scale military build-up and assertive activities primarily reaching out to the Black Sea and the Baltic, Eastern Mediterranean and the High North have led to a severe deterioration in the relationship thereby negatively impacting the security environment in the Euro-Atlantic area. The Russian military has continuously been conducting military operations intended to be intimidating in the vicinity of NATO countries. It has also increased its reach and enhanced capabilities for threatening the freedom of navigation and airspace in northern and eastern parts of the Euro-Atlantic area. The Kremlin has violated some of its international commitments and succeeded in developing an array of capabilities to threaten the securities of individual NATO countries as well as the cohesion and stability within the Alliance on the whole. Demonstrating its willingness and ability to use hard power, Moscow has been seeking ways to exploit fissures within the Alliance. Russia has also used chemical agents on the territories of the alliance leading to civilian casualties. Since the illegal and illegitimate annexation of the Crimea Peninsula in 2014, NATO has maintained a unified stance against Russian aggression politically by displaying its solidarity in response to Russian actions of aggression such as nerve agent attack in Salisbury and violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty as well as militarily by enhancing its deterrence posture along its eastern flank. Since 2016, NATO has pursued a dual-track policy of enhanced deterrence and willingness to continue dialogue with Moscow in the NATO-Russia Council for a view exchange on

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<sup>3</sup> *The primary policy paper analyzing NATO's new outlook is the one worked out by a reflection group appointed by NATO Secretary General and released after the endorsement of the latter (Reflection Group, 2020).*

Ukrainian Crisis and kept the military channels of communication open with a view to avoiding misunderstandings and reducing risks. Perversely, Russia has continued aggressive actions and assertive policies through a hybrid campaign to weaken the faith of the western communities in democratic principles and institutions as well as to enlarge its sphere of influence. With its uncompromising attitude being the principal obstacle to dialogue, Russia is the main military threat to NATO in the outlook of the alliance to 2030. The Kremlin is sure to confront the alliance through a fait accompli action or sustained pressure to paralyze the cohesion and mobilization in a crisis (Reflection Group, 2020: 25-26).

With its gradual transition to complete authoritarianism and expansionist agenda, the global scale of Chinese power poses great risks for democratic and open societies. However, Beijing is also inevitably a great economic competitor and trade partner for the majority of the countries in NATO. Therefore, China is to be regarded as a systemic competitor both posing a political threat and presenting economic opportunities to the alliance. Though no Russia-scale immediate threat to the Euro-Atlantic area from the Chinese military exists, China has expanded its military reach into Africa, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Arctic. Strengthening its military ties with Moscow as part of the wider concept of Sino-Russian cooperation, Beijing has developed conventional and nuclear weapon systems with ranges reaching out to faraway territories. The Chinese great economic initiatives namely Belt and Road, Cyber Silk Road and Polar Silk Road have evolved rapidly. These and the acquisition of infrastructure by Chinese state-owned or private companies inside and in the vicinity of the alliance territory are sure to have consequences for interoperability and communications. A number of countries in the alliance have ascribed cyber attacks, technology theft and disinformation to China-based actors. The ambition of the Beijing administration to become the biggest indisputable technological superpower in the world in the following decades has implications for the rules-based international order and security of the alliance. Moreover, China is ready to exploit the differences among the countries in the alliance and coerce them into swerving from the common principles of the alliance (Reflection Group, 2020: 27-28).

The ongoing deep-seated competition between NATO and the Sino-Russian front has had geographic centers of gravity with the eastern flank of the alliance upfront all along. However, the High North gaining more geopolitical importance

over the past few years proves to be a soft spot for the outbreak or escalation of a potential crisis that is likely to emanate from the current competition.

### **3. Pragmatic and Prudent China in the Arctic**

Unlike states in the Arctic, China has no territorial share and sovereignty to have access to resources in the Arctic. However, the region is of note for the economic interests of the country. Self-defining itself as a “near-Arctic state” and “Arctic stakeholder”, China has an observer status in the Arctic Council and tries to build a foothold in the region by pursuing policies towards the loopholes in terms of legal and institutional constraints. The growing role of China and its interest in the region are legitimized by claims centered around the contributions of the country to the region through scientific research and governance. Until recently, Chinese claims concerning the region were limited to environmental and scientific issues; however, with a view to taking advantage of the historic opportunity of easier access to relatively ice-free shipping routes, Beijing has been asserting its rights and interests in the region in a more vociferous way over the past decade (Grieger, 2018: 1-2).

Following a long period of involvement in the region which was confined to scientific research and limited commercial activities only, China’s involvement in the region grew more concrete and pragmatic after gaining observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013. The same year, a Chinese commercial ship passed through a route in the region for the first time, which was followed by the passage of five ships of the Chinese Navy across the coast of Alaska two years later and that of five other commercial ships through the Northern Sea Route in 2016. In 2017, a Chinese nuclear-powered ice-breaker passed through the Transpolar Sea Route (Çevik and Durukan, 2020: 256).

China has assumed a leading role in addressing global climate change issues and made aggressive investments in clean energy and alternative energy sources as it is also concerned with its energy security and economic sustainability to support its population growing at a high rate. China resorts to the Arctic to provide solutions to its domestic issues including energy security and food production as the region warming faster than the global average provides a perfect venue to extract and transport seafood and energy resources. Accounting for almost a quarter of global energy consumption, the Beijing administration and Chinese companies have

invested in energy resource extraction activities in the region in close cooperation with Russian enterprises (Bowman and Xu, 2020: 4-6).

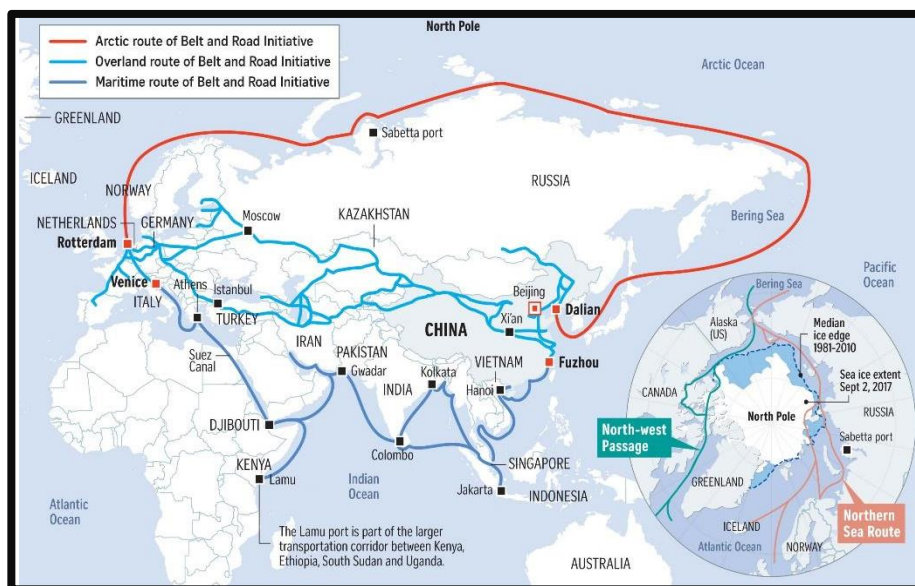
In 2018, China released its first policy paper on the Arctic. One of the key takeaways from the paper is its intention to safeguard its interests in the high seas of the Arctic. Although Arctic territories are shared among the Arctic states and the states have territorial claims beyond their boundaries, none of the states has sovereignty over the high seas in the region which is still the terra nullius area. Thus, China's freedoms and rights are justified in those high seas covering an area which is nearly the size of the Mediterranean Sea (Lim, 2018: 7-8).

The Arctic region is also one major projection of the extension of China's Belt and Road Initiative<sup>4</sup> in the high north as depicted in Figure 4. Though there are concerns over the efficiency of the initiative and much remains to be seen, China's huge commercial and energy-based projects with countries in the region led by Russia are considered under this initiative (Çıtak, 2020: 5462-5463).

While China has active and constructive economic relations with Russia, Iceland and Norway to a certain extent; the USA, Canada and Denmark administrations have been more cautious against Chinese economic involvement in the Arctic. The Beijing administration in return has concerns over any potential diplomatic tension with the countries in the region and a new type of Cold War between the USA and Russia in the region which are sure to derail its economic gains in the long term (Kartal and Dağıstan, 2020: 261-265).

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<sup>4</sup> *Built on the Chinese historic Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative is a global initiative. However, the initiative puts the focus on countries in Asia, MENA and Eastern Europe with the emerging markets in those areas. Currently more than seventy countries take part in the initiative which accounts for one third of the GDP of the world and two thirds of the global population (BRI, 2021).*



**Figure 4.** Polar Extension to China's Belt and Road Initiative  
(The Straits Times, 2018).

China does not seem to have any aggressive ambition and military strategy towards the Arctic region at the current juncture as it eschews any policy that may elicit negative reaction from the countries in the region some of which view Chinese involvement in the region with a jaundiced eye. The involvement of the Beijing administration in the region is sure to follow an incremental pattern in the near future. With reference to the notion that every energy source and potential brings along the question of energy security, China may need to revise its long-term military strategy concerning the region in the face of the rising military build-up in the region by the other parties which may hamper Chinese economic sustainability.

#### 4. Russia in the High North: Hard Power under Low Tension

Holding almost one-quarter of all energy reserves on earth, Russia is the fourth biggest international actor in energy production after OPEC countries, China and USA. The country holds almost one-fifth of all coal reserves on earth. Moscow comes in first in natural gas export, second in oil export and third in coal export in the world (Ateş, 2017: 82). A considerable portion of the energy potential comes from its share in the Arctic.

The High North is vital for Russia as its territories in the Arctic holding only one percent of its population account for one-tenth of its GDP and one-fifth of its exports. Moscow's strategy for the Arctic region was set out in 2008 and remains almost unchanged<sup>5</sup> up to date. Russia is mostly interested in reasserting its status and prestige as a superpower in the region through international cooperation. However, the Kremlin also has a defensive military posture to counter potential threats to its sovereignty and economic interests in the Arctic Zone of Russia Federation (AZRF) (Laruelle, 2020: 5-7).

In the wake of the Cold War, the High North was not perceived by Moscow as a region of potential military confrontation with the West. Thus, huge Soviet-era military infrastructures were dismantled, Russian armaments and troops deployed in the High North as well as regular military activities in the region were reduced drastically. However, as the natural resources in the Arctic became more accessible and the international rivalry became more visible, Russia as an Arctic state turned to be the most active party of the rivalry. Military modernization activities rampant in the neighboring countries in the region as well as the intensification of the activities of international organizations led by NATO and EU and non-Arctic countries led by China have prompted Moscow to change its security perception.

After the Ukrainian crisis, the West abruptly stopped their military cooperation and even imposed political and economic sanctions on Russia. The tension had a spill-over effect and Moscow had to resort to military precautions in the Arctic. The Kremlin accelerated the military modernization projects and increased its military activities in the High North (Sergunin and Konyshev, 2016: 32-33).

Russian threat assessment concerning the region is shaped in line with its adversaries' projections and outlook. Four out of five countries encircling the Arctic Ocean are NATO countries and have common policies towards the Arctic region in line with the expectations of keeping the region secure through military means (Khafizullina, 2019: 53). This keeps the Kremlin administration threat-conscious and vigilant against any potential aggression by NATO states from its perception.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2013, Russian national strategy for the Arctic through 2020 was released and this has now been succeeded by national security strategy document for the Arctic through 2035. The new strategy stresses the need to improve the living conditions and international cooperation as well as the protection of the region against potential aggressors (Kluge and Paul, 2020: 1-2).

To this end, Moscow highlighted the threat from what it called the antagonists in a number of military doctrine and strategy papers and established a security system focusing more on early warning, interception and crisis management (Dağıstan, 2020: 119-121).

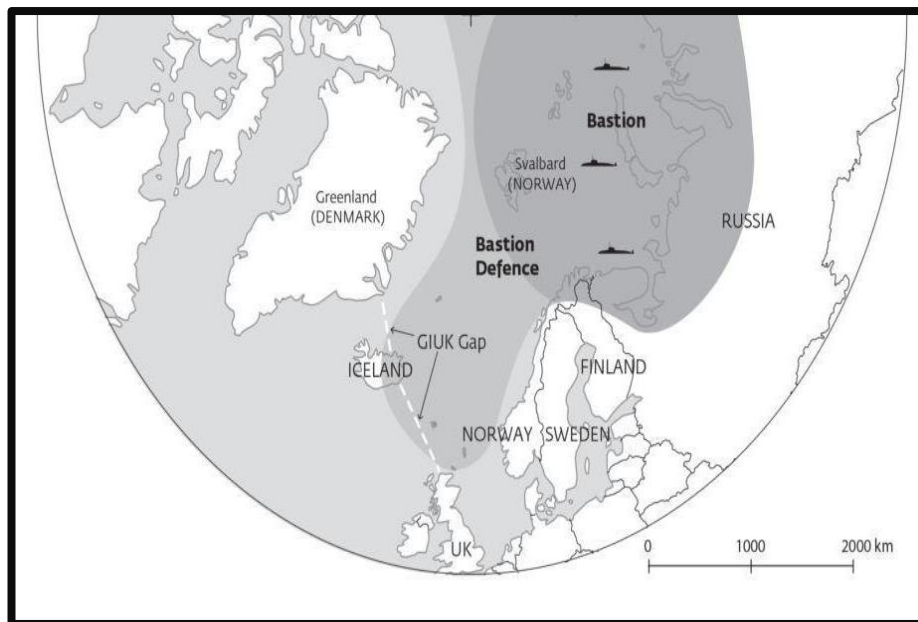
Russian military gives strategic importance to perimeter defence in the Kola Peninsula so as to ensure the survivability of nuclear assets. The Kola Peninsula and its vicinity are considered of strategic importance for the national security of Russia. The extension of the Bastion defence concept, depicted on Figure 5, dating back to the Soviet times as a perimeter defence is designed to grant the Russian military the ability to execute defence in depth. The Bastion defence encompasses a wider region extending from the Kola Peninsula towards the Norwegian Sea, the Barents Sea and further to the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap. The defence concept has been operationalized through the utilization of high-tech and long-range weapon systems facilitating anti-access area denial (A2/AD) against the antagonists (Boulègue, 2019: 6-8).

The main instrument of the Russian military in the Arctic is the Northern Fleet which is tasked with securing the second-strike ballistic missile submarine forces and its territories in the Arctic as well as asserting super-power status, supporting resource and territorial claims, infrastructure and economic interests by countering and deterring the military buildup of NATO and its partners which Moscow considers as threats to its regional interests. The Northern Fleet's capabilities were enhanced to phase NATO forces out of the Arctic. Its capabilities are modernized with naval surface combatants with more capabilities, four new brigade-level combat teams, a motorized-infantry brigade, artillery and missile units, improved air defense systems and anti-ship cruise missiles. Additionally, work is in progress to facilitate logistical support for military assets and the fifty-icebreaker fleet.

In 2014, an Arctic Joint Strategic Command was created with a view to providing protection to military bases and installations along the Northern Sea Route. As part of the new organization, an Arctic brigade was created.

Despite its force modernization initiative, the Russian military does not appear to be seeking naval superiority in the region at first look. Most capabilities are not designed for offensive but rather for perimeter defense and border protection.

The growing scale and number of infrastructures are to be used for civilian missions such as SAR activities or protection of energy investments. In fact, most Russian military capabilities and activities in the High North have offensive potential and pose a threat. Naval and air forces have intimidated NATO on the eastern and northern flanks of the alliance with provocative actions and maneuvers. Air, naval and submarine patrols near territories of Denmark and Norway have increased and snap military drills have been conducted in the region. Even aggressive tactics were employed to harass U.S. air and naval operations off the coast of Alaska.



**Figure 5.** Geographical Display of Russian Bastion Defence Concept (FIIA, 2019).

The primary focus of Russia from an operational perspective is defending its territory and seas around the Kola Peninsula and anti-access for NATO/U.S. forces to the region. Implementation of an extended in-depth defense necessitates deployments through the GIUK gap, which is sure to pose a great threat to the sea lines of communication of NATO and its carrier battle groups. Russian intentions are certain to change if NATO deploys more advanced missile defense or anti-submarine warfare weapons in the vicinity of the region. If Moscow has bolder threat perceptions, it will shift from its strategy which looks more defense-oriented to a



more offense-oriented posture with greater force-projection capabilities (Rumer, Sokolsky and Stronski, 2021: 9-10).

The Russian military is known to place an emphasis on tactical needs in case of a potential military operation in the Arctic. The military has been developing new technologies to adjust operations to the environment in the High North. The Russian Military has developed UAVs that can operate in extreme weather and projects are underway to develop larger UAVs that are to be used for resupplying the remotest bases in the High North. Armoured Personnel Carriers which can operate on ice and snow have also been developed. In addition, the Russian military has started laying deep-sea fiber-optic communication cables on the Arctic seabed between key points. Due to the physically inhospitable environment, the Russian military plans to develop space-based assets, underwater drone technology, smaller satellites and conventional smart weapons to lessen the number of troops on the ground in a couple of decades.

In terms of combat readiness, most units in the Russian military in the land, air and maritime domains are known to be trained to operate under harsh weather conditions. Since 2015, the Russian military has conducted military drills and large-scale exercises to test the combat readiness of the Arctic forces on border defence and military logistics in the depth of theatre of operations. The Vostok2018 exercise in 2018 provided a venue for the Russian Northern Fleet to conduct large-scale operations in the Arctic (Boulègue, 2019: 21-23). During the Tsentr2019 exercise, Arctic troops' battle capabilities were tested in separate operations (Staalesen, 2019). The surfacing of three nuclear submarines holding a number of Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM) was part of the exercise and a number of other weapon systems also played their roles (Naval News Staff, 2021).

Russian strategic weapon systems regarded as game-changers in a more militarized environment such as Poseidon and Tsirkon<sup>6</sup> are envisioned to be tested on a number of occasions in the High North. These strategic weapon systems are intended for the retention of the upper hand in the High North (Walsh, 2021).

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<sup>6</sup> *Tsirkon is an anti-ship hypersonic cruise missile which can strike a military target nearly 1.000 km away both on the ground and underwater. Poseidon is a more deadly nuclear weapon which can deliver nuclear torpedos up to 10.000 km away. The latter, once detonated underwater, can create unprecedented tsunamis which can destroy cities along the U.S. coasts (Woolf, 2020: 24-26).*

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## 5. NATO's Sight on the High North

In the wake of the Cold War and the end of the historical rivalry with the USSR, NATO undertook a significant adaptation and pursued open door policy to states throughout the world so as to manage the security of the globe better. Following the 9/11 attacks, NATO adapted to the new strategic environment with threats from terrorist groups capable of causing devastation to the global security and subsequent to the onset of Russian aggression beginning with an offensive against Georgia and continuing with the illegal invasion of Crimea in 2014, the alliance once again adapted to the new environment by improving its deterrence and defence posture significantly (Reflection Group, 2020: 25-26). Over the past years, China has grown up to be a superpower posing challenges to democratic and open societies with its authoritarianism and territorial expansion ambitions. Though Beijing is an economic partner with many countries in the alliance, it continues to expand its military reach into the close vicinity of the alliance, deepen defence ties with Russia and undermine the rules-based international order with such acts as cyber offense and technology theft. Therefore, NATO perceives China as an antagonist and competitor (Reflection Group, 2020: 27-28). All in all, Russia and China have lately been two competitors for NATO and the Alliance has been seeking ways to counter the threats from these two competitors in all domains.

The High North or the Arctic region is one of the primary areas of threats directly from Russia and indirectly from China. Five Arctic states, namely the USA, Canada, Norway, Denmark and Iceland are NATO member states while Sweden and Finland have Enhanced Opportunities Partners status with close cooperation with the alliance on defence of their territories (Wieslander, 2019). This all boils down to the fact that all the countries in the Arctic Circle apart from Russia are NATO or partner countries and points to the fact that NATO has great interests in defending its territories in the region against potential risks emanating from Russian aggression.

NATO perceives its northern flank as a strategically important region where a growing competition with Russia exists although there are few internal drivers of potential conflict. The High North is expected to host a “horizontal escalation” rather than a “vertical escalation”, which is to say that the likelihood of a crisis emerging in other regions and moving rapidly to the High North is much higher than that of a crisis emerging in the region itself and evolving into an armed conflict.

The environment of mutual mistrust between NATO and its competitors in the High North emanates from the previous conflicts in the other regions. Deterioration in relations with Moscow following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 along with the forcible intervention in Eastern territories of Ukraine as well as the downing of an airliner in the country reshaped the threat assessment of the alliance. Incidents such as the nerve agent attack in 2018 in Salisbury in the UK, ongoing provocations in the eastern flank of the alliance including the Baltic region and the allegations of Russian interference in the national elections of countries led by the USA and France also solidified the state of vigilance against the threat from Russia. In addition, the ongoing rise of China and Beijing's aspirations to be a great power casting a shadow over the global powers of leading NATO countries in other parts of the world have also added to the threat assessment. The threats from the main competitors of the alliance are drivers for potential confrontations in different parts of the world which are sure to have spill-over effects for the High North (Black et al., 2020: 7-11).

Recent Russian military reforms have facilitated its ability to conduct multiple-domain joint operations. The reforms include operationalizing joint strategic commands such as the Northern Fleet in 2014 for the defense of Russia's territories in the Arctic. In addition to enhanced command and control network and generation of units with high readiness capabilities, the Russian military has personnel with real-world experience from armed clashes in Ukraine and Syria as well as the ability to move units in land and air domains from one region to another rapidly as demonstrated during the latest exercises. Additionally, as part of its A2/AD strategy, cruise and ballistic missile systems, integrated air defence systems (IADS), other long-range fires, naval mines and other weapons possessed by the Russian military pose a great risk to NATO forces and bases even from great distances.

Moscow has great ambitions to deny NATO forces the use of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the high seas. To this end, Russia has been investing heavily in sub-surface and surface capabilities for the maritime denial including long-range anti-ship missiles. The Russian military is also capable of challenging NATO in the domains of space, cyber and electronic warfare. In peace and crisis, Russia can disrupt satellite and communication systems in the High North and can utilize non-kinetic tools of other types to gain an advantage (Black et al., 2020: 12).

China, in general, poses a threat to NATO through the activities of technology theft, espionage, cyber operations as well as its increasing influence over global supply chains for enabling technologies and key materials of defence production and critical infrastructure in Europe. In the High North specifically, China is not regarded as posing an imminent threat to NATO. However, Beijing promotes itself as a near-Arctic state heavily investing in nuclear-powered icebreakers and envisages future utilization of shipping routes to the continent of Europe opened up by the melting ice. Beijing has also invested in Russian commercial interests and infrastructure in the High North. Incremental investments by Beijing in Greenland have also raised concerns for the USA and Denmark (Black et al., 2020: 16).

Upon the re-emergence of global power competition among NATO and its adversaries, these threat assessments have prompted NATO decision-makers to focus more and more on concrete deterrence against potential aggression by Russia against the countries in the alliance including the allied territories in the High North. As a result of this, the territories in the immediate area of the High North have lately been receiving much more attention in NATO operations and exercise planning.

In 2018, during the October-November period, the NATO Trident Juncture-18 Exercise was conducted in Norway and the adjacent waters in the Norwegian Sea and the Baltic. Finland and Sweden as well as armed forces of all 29 NATO-member countries participated in the exercise which was regarded as the largest exercise of NATO to that time since the end of the Cold War. The exercise featured strong elements in the Arctic and an American Navy Aircraft Carrier was deployed above the Arctic Circle for the first time since the end of the Cold War.

In September 2020, Joint Force Command Norfolk (JFCNF) under NATO Command Structure reached its initial operational capability<sup>7</sup> as the first command of the alliance dedicated to the Atlantic in a couple of decades. Colocated with the 2nd Fleet of U.S. Navy, JFCNF is tasked with providing the Allied forces with command arrangements, conducting exercises, maintaining situational awareness and working out operational plans concerning an array of geographic areas, from the

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<sup>7</sup> *Joint Force Command Norfolk has been trained in one of NATO's most outstanding exercises ever in 2021. NATO Steadfast Defender-21 exercise has bolstered the defense and deterrence posture of the alliance (JWC, 2021).*

east coasts of the U.S. territories across the GIUK gap and into the Arctic region (O'Rourke et al., 2021: 26-27).

Allied countries are known to have held major exercises in the High North in 2020. Norway hosted Exercise Cold Response-20 in March. The USA and eight other allied or partner nations participated in the exercise which was designed to improve military cooperation and capabilities in the challenging environment of the Arctic with extreme cold weather and rugged terrain (Marines, 2020).

In September, a U.S. Destroyer held naval exercises with British and Norwegian frigates 115 miles off Russia's coastline in the Arctic. The navy drills led by the UK Navy took place in international waters but within 200 nautical miles of the Exclusive Economic Zone that Moscow claims. The small navy task force operated off the coasts of the Fisherman peninsula of Russia which is geographically part of the Kola peninsula where the Russian Northern Fleet and main submarine bases are located (McLeary, 2020). The exercise was the first American Navy exercise in the region since the 1990s (Garamone, 2020). Following these, in 2022, Norway will host the biggest exercise in the High North since the Cold War. About forty thousand soldiers will participate in Exercise Cold Response 2022 in which the air force and navy will be the main players in the war game (Nilsen, 2021).

In addition, NATO has accelerated aligning its military deterrence activities concerning the High North heavily with the national military activities of its member states around the Arctic circle. As one of NATO's single-service commands, Maritime Command (MARCOM) has established a new arrangement of operational coordination with the Danish Joint Arctic Command (JACO) in Greenland so as to enhance the situational awareness in the maritime domain in the vicinity of the High North (MARCOM PAO, 2020). Activities of military cooperation between NATO commands and the armed forces of individual member states in the Arctic are sure to follow an incremental pattern in the following term.

Though the alliance has undergone a number of increased deterrence activities against potential threats from the direction of the High North, no full-extent cohesion of intention concerning policies towards the region exists within the alliance. For instance, Canada, as an Arctic country, does not advocate a strong alliance role in the High North. In the near future, the members of the alliance in Eastern and Southern Europe might regard an increased focus on the High North as

a transfer of NATO's focus and resources away from the security challenges in other areas. For a greater role of the alliance in the High North, decision-makers need to facilitate environments for the skeptical members of the alliance to be convinced that the security in the northern flank of the alliance is for the benefit of all regions of the alliance (Auerswald, 2020). To this end, NATO policymakers have considered establishing platforms to settle disagreements on the role of the Alliance in the Arctic since 2017 (Danoy and Maddox, 2020: 78).

### **In Lieu of Conclusion**

The rapid climate change over the past couple of decades has turned the High North into one of the most contested areas in the world. Thanks to its rich hydrocarbon reserves and newly-emerging shipping routes which are more accessible, the Arctic region has lately been coveted by global superpowers in an unprecedented way.

Most references highlight the position of the USA in the region as the party at the forefront of the West world. However, the High North is of note for a number of other states of the western world which are NATO and partner countries as well. Russia and China are among the global superpowers that have set their sights on the High North and their ambitions in this regard are of great concern for NATO. As a non-Arctic state, Chinese ambitions are currently centered around economic gains, and for China, every potential economic gain brings up the question of security through military measures. The Beijing administration has invested exponentially in its defense and increased the scale of its military reach to faraway regions. While direct Chinese military involvement in the High North is very unlikely in the near term, NATO is likely to continue its all-domain situational awareness against potential Chinese military involvement and defense cooperation with Russia in the High North.

Compared to those of China, Russian ambitions in the region have more aspects related to defense and security. Following a period of rapprochement in the wake of the Cold War, the patterns of aggression in Russian foreign policy over the past decade have fueled NATO's past competitions with Moscow. Just like in the eastern flank of the alliance, Russia has undergone a huge military build-up in the north. Though the High North is an area of low tension despite Russian military demonstrations, it is regarded as the region with the highest likelihood of hosting

military confrontations caused by the spill-over effects of potential conflicts in any other region.

Russian defense infrastructure, strategic weapon systems and A2/AD bubble along the northern flank of the alliance are of critical concern for NATO. Since individual allies both in and out of the Arctic region have different views concerning NATO's involvement in the High North, no overarching concept for the High North exists within the Alliance. However, since individual allies in the High North are exposed to an imminent threat from Russia, any military confrontation is sure to trigger the Article-5 requirement. Hence, it is imperative that NATO develop a comprehensive strategy concerning the Arctic with environmental, political and military components but focusing more on deterrence against its competitors and defending alliance territories.

NATO first needs to settle the differences within the alliance concerning the extent of its role in the region. Besides, the alliance needs to achieve full-extent all-domain situational awareness and vigilance by increasing efforts of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and enhancing information sharing in the High North. For the interoperability and military competency in the region, NATO decision-makers need to work on the feasibility of establishing new military entities in NATO Command Structure including both maritime and land domain components with effective command and control relations as well as in NATO Force Structure especially against the threat from the Kola peninsula. NATO is likely to increase its military exercises in the region and encourage member states in the Arctic to increase investment in military capabilities that balance the adversary and facilitate military operations in harsh environments.

However, through a more prudent approach, NATO needs to eschew policies and actions that are likely to increase the tension in the region. To this end, the alliance needs to establish dialogue on a separate platform to promote transparency about allied actions in the region. If not on a separate platform, NATO needs to address issues concerning the High North in already-existing platforms.

Russia is known to react less to the military activities of individual states in the Arctic than those under the wider umbrella of NATO. With a view to avoiding antagonist reactions from the adversary, military activities may be notified as the

activities of individual states rather than NATO as a whole. This is also a point of consideration for the decision-makers within the alliance.

### Genişletilmiş Özet

Yaklaşık yirmi yıllık süreçte, Arktika bölgesinde buzulların hızlı bir şekilde erimesi, zengin doğal kaynaklara ve deniz yollarına erişimi kolaylaştırmış ve bölgeyi kızışan küresel rekabetin kendini gösterdiği bir alan haline getirmiştir. NATO'nun iki büyük rakibi olan Rusya ve Çin, gittikçe buzdan arınan Yüksek Kuzey'in ekonomik ve güvenlik yansımalarını etkili bir şekilde etüt etmiş ve bölgedeki konumlarını geliştirmek için uzun soluklu politikalarını sürdürmüştür. Rusya'nın savunma duruşu ve Çin'in artan ekonomik varlığı, ittifakın kuzey kanadına ve genel olarak kuzeydeki güvenlik ortamına tehdit teşkil etmektedir. Yüksek Kuzey'de şiddeti artan rekabet, NATO için önemli sonuçlar doğurmakta ve ittifak, daha önce olmadığı kadar müteyakkız olması gereken bir süreçten geçmektedir. Bu çalışma, analitik bir yaklaşımla, NATO ve rakipleri arasında Yüksek Kuzey'de cereyan eden küresel rekabetin dinamiklerine ve arka planına bakış sunmuş ve NATO için sonuçlar ortaya koymuştur.

Çalışmanın giriş kısmında, dünya genelindeki küresel ısınma nedeniyle son yıllarda özellikle, Yüksek Kuzey olarak da tanımlanan Arktika Bölgesindeki buzulların erimesinin, bölgenin zengin doğal kaynaklarına erişimi kolaylaştırdığı ve deniz güzergahlarının kullanılabilirliğini artırdığı; bu durumun süper güçler arasında bölgeye yönelik rekabeti kızıştırdığı ve özellikle NATO ile iki büyük rakibi olan Rusya ve Çin arasında, çalışmanın başlığında özgün biçimde “ayaz savaş” olarak tasvir edilen büyüyen bir rekabetin cereyan ettiği belirtilmiştir.

Çalışmanın başlangıcında, Yüksek Kuzey'in jeopolitik özelliklerine yer verilmiştir. Burada, bölgedeki hidrokarbon kaynakların zenginliği ve deniz güzergahlarının özellikleri incelenmiştir. Müteakip kısımda, NATO bakış açısından küresel rekabetin dinamikleri incelenmiştir. Burada, ittifakın iki büyük rakibi olan Rusya ve Çin'e yönelik genel tehdit değerlendirmeleri açıklanmıştır. Özellikle, Rusya'nın son on yıldır sergilediği agresif dış politika ve Çin'in askerî boyutları da bulunan ekonomik yükselişinin ittifaka yönelttiği potansiyel tehditler ele alınmıştır.

Ardından, Çin'in Yüksek Kuzey'e yönelik politikaları incelenmiştir. Arktika ülkesi olmamasına rağmen, kendisini “Arktika'ya Yakın Ülke” olarak nitelendiren Pekin yönetiminin, bölgede büyük bir ekonomik varlık sergilediği, bölgede Çin



askerî varlığının henüz söz konusu olmadığı, ancak enerji güvenliği mülahazalarıyla yakın gelecekte böyle bir hususun söz konusu olabileceği, NATO'nun diğer coğrafyalarda olduğu gibi Yüksek Kuzey'e yönelik de Çin kaynaklı asimetrik tehditlere karşı teyakkuz içinde olması gerektiği vurgulanmıştır.

Sonrasında, Rusya'nın Arktika bölgesine yönelik politikaları ve özellikle bölgedeki askerî varlığı ele alınmıştır. Rusya'nın Arktika bölgesi içinde kalan topraklarının ülkeye önemli ekonomik kazanımlar sunduğu belirtilerek; Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde askerî önemini yitiren Arktika bölgesinin, son on yılda Kremlin'in askerî politikalarının odak noktalarından biri haline geldiği, Rusya'nın bölgede çok önemli bir askerî varlık yarattığı, Rus Silahlı Kuvvetlerinin, bölgeye yönelik yeni birlikler oluşturduğu, stratejik ve operatif önemi haiz silahları bölgede konuşlandığı ve sayısız askerî faaliyet ve tatbikat icra ettiği vurgulanmıştır.

Son olarak, NATO'nun Yüksek Kuzey'e bakışı ele alınmıştır. Bu bölümde, ittifakın genel tehdit değerlendirmesine binaen, bölgeye yönelik Rusya ve Çin'e karşı tehdit değerlendirmeleri incelenmiştir. Çin'in bölgedeki artan ekonomik varlığı ve Rusya'nın büyük askerî varlığının ittifakın kuzey kanadı için büyük tehdit oluşturduğu vurgulanmıştır. Yüksek Kuzey'in NATO ile rakipleri arasındaki askerî bir çatışmanın başlangıç bölgesi olmayacağı değerlendirilmekte birlikte, ittifak ile rakipleri arasında farklı coğrafyalarda başlayacak olan olası bir silahlı çatışmanın sıçraması en muhtemel olan bölge olduğu argümanı ortaya koyulmuştur. Bu bölümde ayrıca, NATO'nun bölgeye yönelik askerî yapılanma çalışmaları, tatbikatlar ve Arktika ülkeleri ile ikili işbirliği hususları ele alınmıştır. Bölüm içinde son olarak, NATO içinde üye ülkeler arasında Yüksek Kuzey'e yönelik politikalar konusunda görüş ayrılıklarının bulunduğu ve bu ayrılıkların uygun ortamlarda çözüme kavuşturulması gerekliliği dile getirilmiştir.

Çalışmanın “sonuç yerine” kısmında ise, hızlı iklim değişikliğinin Yüksek Kuzey'deki sonuçları ve politik yansımaları üzerinde durulmuştur. Çin'in Yüksek Kuzey'deki büyük ekonomik varlığı ve Rusya'nın askerî varlığının NATO'nun kuzey kanadı için büyük bir tehdit yarattığı hususu yinelenmiştir. Özellikle, Rusya'nın savunma altyapısı, stratejik silah sistemleri ve savunma konseptinin ittifak için kaygı uyandırıcı seviyede olduğu, Arktika bölgesindeki NATO üyesi ülkelerin Rusya ile olası bir askerî angajmanının, ittifak anlaşmasının 5'inci maddesini tetikleyeceği ve ittifakın Rusya ile geniş kapsamlı bir silahlı angajmana

girmek zorunda kalabileceğinden hareketle, bölgeye yönelik kapsamlı bir strateji geliştirilmesi gerektiği vurgulanmıştır. İttifakın, Yüksek Kuzey'e yönelik askerî komuta ve kuvvet yapısına yeni yapılar kazandırması, askerî faaliyetleri ve işbirliği faaliyetlerini artırması ve bölgedeki üye ülkelerin askerî yatırımları artırmaya teşvik etmesi gerektiği vurgulanmış; bununla birlikte, hiçbir şekilde Rusya ile krizin tırmandırılmaması, şeffaflık ilkesinden uzaklaşılması ve farklı platformlarda Rusya ile diyalogun sürdürülmesi ile mümkün mertebede bölgedeki askerî varlıkların ittifak şemsiyesi altında değil, üye ülkelerin münferit askerî faaliyetleri olarak lanse edilmesinin ittifakın faydasına olacağına altı çizilmiştir.

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