

FROSTY RELATIONS

—Arctic

Preface

As parts of the Arctic become increasingly ice-free and its role as a valuable commodity is realised, questions of ownership are spurring a bigger military presence in the region. But the 'Arctic Five' insist any competition will be amicable.

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The Arctic melt is uncovering more than just resources and trade routes – it is also opening up a whole new theatre of military operations.

Of all the world's territorial disputes, the ones in the Arctic – and there are plenty – used to matter the least: the only prize at stake was frozen ocean, and most of the time it was too cold for military forces to operate there anyway. National boundaries were left to blur among the floes.

Suddenly those vague Arctic territories matter. The region is increasingly ice-free and the open ocean means rich fishing, undersea mineral and energy resources and new sea lanes. The Arctic, in other words, has become a valuable commodity.

Best placed to assert ownership are the "Arctic Five", littoral Arctic Ocean states with well-established territorial claims and regional bases. "Russia and Norway are the two states most active and deliberate in raising their capacity for operating in the Arctic," says Ernie Regehr, senior fellow in Arctic security at the Simons Foundation – a Canadian think-tank. Canada, Regehr says, made some "dramatic announcements regarding enhanced military capacity in the north", but these have since run up against financial realities, while the US has been too preoccupied

elsewhere to devote much energy to revamping its Arctic presence.

Russia is arguably doing the most: its North Sea Fleet is being restocked and is due to receive a new Mistral-class amphibious assault ship from France; six new \$1.1bn (€816m) icebreakers, which, at 170 metres in length, will be the world's biggest; and later new aircraft carriers. The Norwegians, meanwhile, have procured a new fleet of five Fridtjof Nansen-class frigates, which, together with its six Ula-class submarines, have significantly boosted its naval clout.

Yet it would be misleading to suggest that an Arctic arms race is underway. Bases are being upgraded, ice-breaking fleets expanded and modernised, and Arctic battalions retrained and up-armed. But the sheer remoteness of the Arctic makes conflict almost unthinkable, says Regehr.

"Military preparedness in the Arctic is really only meaningful if it enhances a capacity to contribute effectively to search and rescue, emergency response and support for public safety," he says, citing a "universal insistence" among the Arctic Five that any competition will remain amicable.

New interest in the Arctic threatens to make it a crowded place, however. The Arctic Council – which already includes Finland, Iceland and Sweden in addition to the Five – voted in May to admit several new observer members, including China, India and Japan. Of these, China has taken the keenest interest: in 2012 its sole icebreaker, *Xuelong*, completed the first transarctic voyage by a Chinese vessel and a new \$200m (€150m) icebreaker is due for delivery in 2014, with additional ships planned, as Beijing seeks to open up the High North as a conduit for Chinese trade.

Regehr is optimistic that these new players can be peacefully accommodated. "The risks are not China or India specifically," he says. The concern is that more and more ships will be operating in waters which will remain dangerous even as they become navigable. "Human and commercial activity are in a sharply ascending arch; so too are the risks." — (M)

Five Arctic flashpoints

Territorial disputes

01

The Barents Sea

Cold War rivals Norway and Russia settled their decades-old Barents Sea border dispute in 2010. However, the subsequent discovery of huge oil and gas deposits on Norway's side of the line has left some Russians questioning whether they're getting their full share.

02

The Bering Strait

China plans to start using the Arctic as a key trade route to cut long-distance transit times. But ships must access the region via the Bering Strait – a narrow chokepoint between Russia and Alaska. A blockade of this chokepoint would be an obvious play should conflict arise between China and another power.

03

Greenland

The retreat of the icecap covering Greenland – an autonomous territory that is part of Denmark – is attracting foreign firms keen to exploit the island's resources. But commercial pressures are making it a contentious place to operate, while over-exploitation of its fragile environment could stir up trouble between local Inuit people, foreign business and the Danish government (see page 39).

04

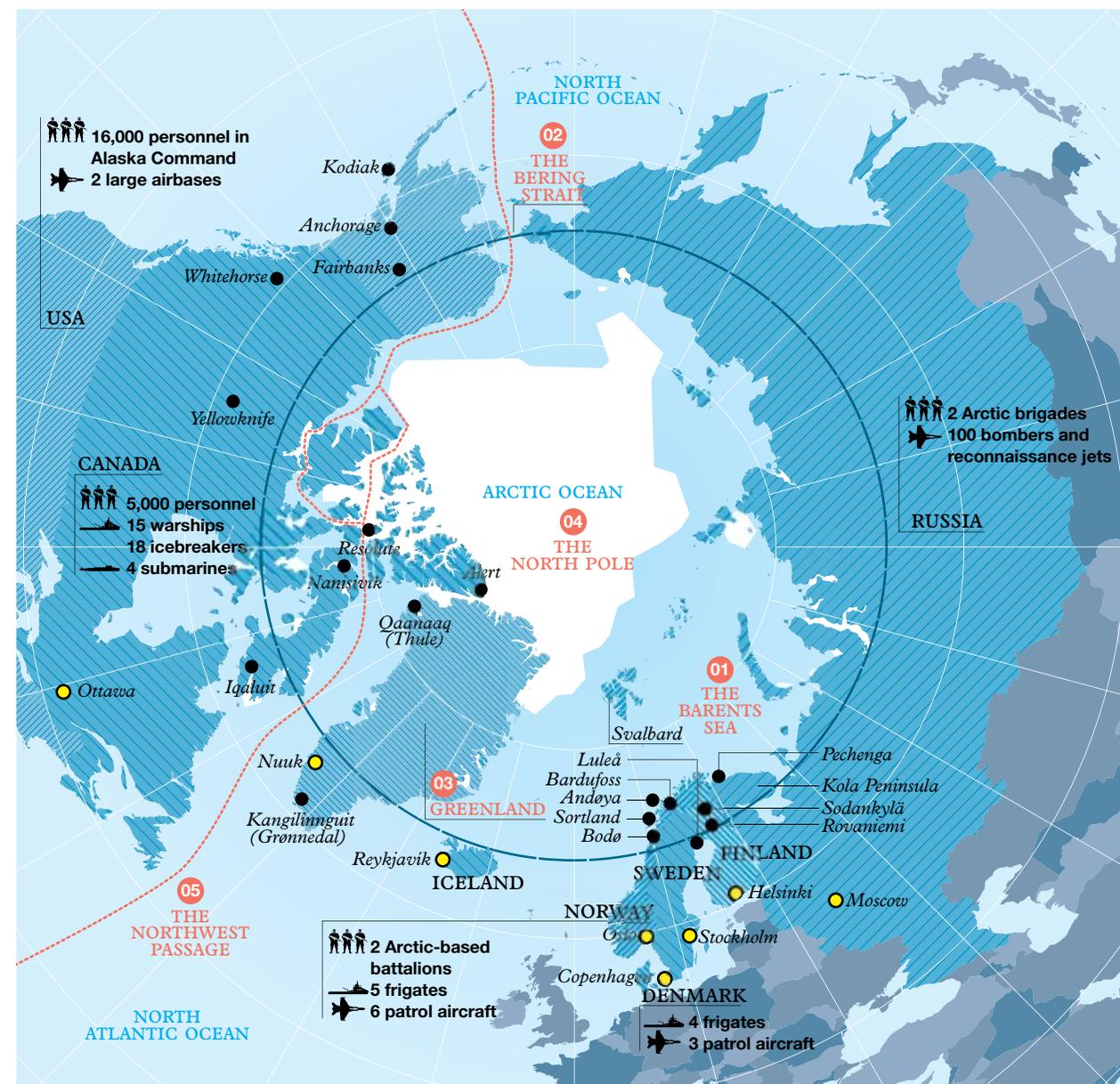
The North Pole

Ever since a Russian submarine planted a national flag on the seabed at the Pole in 2007, ownership of the High North has been a contentious issue. The Pole itself matters much less than the vast hydrocarbon resources thought to lie beneath it. Canada, Denmark, Russia and the US all have overlapping claims based on their conflicting interpretations of the maritime borders.

05

The Northwest Passage

Melting sea ice has opened up the fabled Northwest Passage, which runs along northern Canada and links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. But while Canada claims sovereignty over the route, citing its proximity to the Canadian coast, other Arctic claimants – plus China – say the Passage is in international waters. As more ships ply the route, Canada must choose whether to enforce its claim or bow to pressure.



Capabilities of the Arctic nations

Military operations in place

01
Canada

Several military bases are currently being upgraded on Canada's Arctic coast. A €2.25bn programme for the construction of a new fleet of Arctic offshore patrol ships is underway.

02
Denmark

The Danish military launched an Arctic Command in 2012 as part of its Arctic defence strategy, with a special-ops force that patrols northeast Greenland by sled.

03
Finland

The Finnish army's Jaeger Brigade, based in Sodankylä, specialises in polar warfare. The air force's Lapland Air Command operates from its base at Rovaniemi. Also home to strategically important Santa's village.

04
Iceland

With no military forces of its own, Iceland relies on security provided by its Nato allies. Nato conducts air patrols in Icelandic airspace.

05
Norway

In 2012, the Norwegian army's 2nd Battalion started converting into a new highly mobile Arctic Battalion. The navy's latest frigates and submarines patrol the Arctic. Svalbard, Norway's most northerly territory, is a demilitarised zone.

06
Russia

The army's first Arctic special forces brigade was recently set up in Pechenga in Murmansk Oblast. The navy's Northern Fleet has Russia's only aircraft carrier. Long-range Tupolev Tu-22 bombers patrol the polar region and six nuclear-powered icebreakers are in the pipeline.

07
Sweden

The Swedish military has an Armed Forces Winter Unit, which specialises in Arctic operations, while the air force operates Gripen fighters from its Arctic air base at Luleå.

08
USA

The US military's Alaskan Command operates two major airbases, as well as the US military's premier fighter jet, the F-22 Raptor. Washington is spending €750m on expanding its Alaskan missile defence. Aircraft carrier battle groups exercise annually in Arctic waters, but the US Navy only has one polar research vessel.