



NATO and the Future of Arctic Security

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Summary

The NATO Ankara Summit confirmed that the alliance is making important progress on its approach to Arctic security. Increased defence spending is underpinning the acquisition of new capabilities. This is occurring alongside an enhanced operational presence, and the steady integration of Sweden and Finland. However, measures designed to placate US President Donald Trump over the Greenland question, and the focus on European (but not specifically Arctic) threat assessments and interests, are overly shaping the allied response to the region's security developments. With Arctic security set to undergo far-reaching shifts in the decades ahead – due to climate change, the growing engagement of hostile actors, and emerging defence and dual-use technologies – NATO needs a forward-looking Arctic policy built on shared security interests and geographies. Such a policy should position the alliance to anticipate emerging regional threats and challenges. It should also set out effective responses that can ensure coordinated deterrence and defence in the Arctic as the region undergoes significant political and environmental change.



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NATO's Arctic gameplan

NATO's growing strategic focus on northern Europe was planned to be a defining feature of the July 2026 NATO Summit. More specifically, the security and defence of the Arctic and the High North were identified as a major theme for the second day of the gathering. Against the background of the crisis in the transatlantic alliance – triggered in early 2026 by US President Donald Trump's [comments](#) about seizing Greenland – NATO's Ankara Summit was intended to showcase the alliance's growing commitments to the region's security and defence. The messaging [ahead of](#) and around the summit was designed to convey that the Arctic is moving to the centre of the Alliance's concerns and that European countries are stepping up to take on more responsibility for the defence of the Arctic.

Secretary General Mark Rutte's [core message](#) stressed this new approach: that member states are acting decisively to achieve the defence spending commitments that were agreed last year in The Hague. In Ankara, progress on defence spending was presented as the backdrop for the announcement of new capability commitments focused on the Arctic and the High North, together with increased levels of military activity. Member states have reached new levels of regional engagement, which was presented as confirming the centrality of NATO in the coordination of Arctic and High North security.

While NATO has made important progress in addressing the security threats that the alliance is facing in the Arctic, its approach to the region remains reactive. It is driven

primarily by a response to confrontation with Russia in the European Arctic, and the imperative to sidestep a crisis over Greenland by signalling to President Trump that the alliance is strengthening its regional commitment. In Ankara, NATO was able to demonstrate that it is doing enough to head off an immediate political breakdown with the US over the Arctic. However, the alliance now needs to move beyond its defensive approach to Arctic security. This is the moment to set out a forward-looking agenda that can build deterrence and stability within the context of shifting Arctic security. Such an approach also supports the renewal of the transatlantic relationship by responding collectively to emerging, shared threats at a moment when the future of the alliance is in doubt.

NATO's evolving Arctic commitments

At the Ankara Summit, NATO highlighted five of its interlinked Arctic and High North initiatives and activities: the Arctic Sentry mission as NATO's overarching new approach to Arctic security, including Greenland; a new commitment to the defence of northern Europe in the form of the multinational battlegroup Forward Land Forces (FLF) Finland; measures to enhance domain awareness in the Arctic, and the application of new technologies through Task Force X-Arctic (TFX-Arctic); new air control and coordination capacities; and increased NATO regional presence through exercises.

In February 2026, NATO launched [Arctic Sentry](#), an initiative intended to strengthen deterrence and defence across the region, and, implicitly, to respond to Trump's



concerns that European allies are not stepping up in the region, notably on Greenland. Arctic Sentry is directed by Joint Force Command Norfolk (JFC Norfolk). After autumn 2026, JFC Norfolk will – for the first time – be led by a [British](#) officer. This follows a [reform](#) that also updated the command's geographic boundaries, adding Denmark, Finland, and Sweden (to the existing responsibilities for Iceland, Norway, and the UK). As a framework alliance mission, Arctic Sentry is designed to consolidate existing NATO regional activities across the High North (for example, the Iceland Air Policing mission that has operated since 2006), alongside current and future member state engagements in the region.

FLF Finland's [official launch](#) on 6 June 2026 during a ceremony in Boden, Sweden was a further key development ahead of the NATO Ankara Summit. FLF Finland is a multinational presence designed to deliver enhanced deterrence in northern Europe (Northern Finland and Finnish Lapland) and operational exposure to Arctic conditions. Plans for the presence were announced at the Washington NATO Summit in July 2024 and, later that year, Sweden was confirmed as the framework nation for FLF Finland. At the Ankara Summit, [France](#) committed to deploy a company on rotation as part of NATO FLF, which will also involve contributions from other [non-Arctic alliance members](#) alongside Sweden, Norway, and Finland.

While NATO's new northern land component underlines the changes to alliance engagement brought about by Swedish and Finnish membership, the maritime dimension of the Arctic remains a central challenge. On the same day as the

inauguration of FLF Finland, NATO also launched [TFX-Arctic](#) to improve regional domain awareness and to advance key defence technologies. Led by Allied Command Transformation and under the badge of Arctic Sentry, TFX-Arctic is designed to demonstrate how networked uncrewed systems can deliver persistent multidomain situational awareness across the North Atlantic, the Arctic, and the High North. This initiative reinforces the space capabilities initiative, [NORTHLINK](#). A group of alliance members launched this in 2024 to provide a secure, resilient, and reliable Arctic satellite communications capability.

The recent initiatives in maritime and land warfare in the Arctic and the High North have been accompanied by a strengthening of NATO's ability to conduct air operations. In September 2025, a new [Combined Air Operations Centre](#) (CAOC) opened in Bodø, Norway. The CAOC complements the two existing NATO facilities in Germany and Italy, and is specifically designed to plan, direct, and monitor NATO air operations in the Arctic and the High North.

These alliance initiatives have been backed up with an increased tempo and scale of military exercises focused on the Arctic and the High North. The exercises are designed to turn the NATO initiatives into operational practice. In March, [Cold Response 2026](#) brought together over 32,000 troops from fourteen allied nations to test movement, logistics, and operations in Arctic conditions, as well as the ability of NATO forces to reinforce the European High North and move into Finnish Lapland in the event of a conflict. In May, [Dynamic MongOOSE 2026](#) – NATO's leading annual anti-submarine warfare and



anti-surface warfare exercise – was conducted in the Norwegian and North Seas. Also in May, [Steadfast Deterrence 2026](#) – NATO's deterrence and collective defence exercise – was focused on the Arctic and the High North, while in June, [Ramstein Flag 2026](#) – the alliance's foremost air exercise – operated from the northernmost parts of Norway, across Finland, Sweden, and Denmark to the southern reaches of Spain, with the CAOC in Bodø in the lead.

National operations have supplemented these large multinational exercises. One example is the UK's Operation [Firecrest](#). This involved the deployment of a carrier strike group to the region. It came under NATO command as part of the Arctic Sentry mission, before then leading the Joint Expeditionary Force [Lion Protector](#) exercise in September 2026.

NATO Ankara Summit messaging

At the Ankara Summit, NATO sought to highlight its strengthened activities while announcing new capabilities focused on the region. The political messaging shaping this approach was, in particular, designed to confirm to President Trump that there is tangible progress on the [agreement](#) he reached with Secretary General Rutte on the margins of the Davos meeting in January 2026. This agreement would see NATO step up its Arctic engagement to better support US security interests. This was a key issue going into the Ankara meeting amid deep concern in the alliance about the US president's designs on Greenland. Thus, right at the beginning of the summit, Norway's defence minister [underlined](#) 'We're already

doing the hard work in the Arctic', which is defending the US.

At the summit, Norway announced an initiative to establish a [broad maritime partnership](#) bringing together eleven European countries and Canada to cooperate more closely on security in the North Atlantic, the Arctic, and the Baltic Sea. Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre [noted](#) 'With this initiative, Europe and Canada are making a significant contribution to enhancing security in the North Atlantic and High North. This is a direct response to calls by the US for other countries to assume more responsibility for the security of Allied territory'.

The Norwegian initiative builds on other maritime initiatives focused on the Arctic and the High North. These include the [announcement](#) made by Norway, Germany, and the UK at the June NATO defence ministers meeting of closer cooperation on anti-submarine warfare. Earlier in the year, the UK launched its [Northern Navies Initiative](#) to strengthen coordination among navies across the Arctic, the High North, and the Baltic, which reinforces the [Atlantic Bastion](#) initiative and the [Joint Expeditionary Force](#). While in Ankara, [Iceland](#) joined a maritime pact including Canada, Germany, Denmark, and Norway. This aims to improve the security of shipping traffic in the North Atlantic and Arctic.

The key message for the summit was, however, to highlight the new Arctic-focused capabilities that NATO members are buying with their increased commitment to defence spending. Immediately ahead of the summit, Canada [announced](#) the purchase of twelve



submarines. As part of their mission, these will maintain a sustained Arctic presence. At the summit, Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Norway [announced](#) the joint procurement of five Northrop Grumman MQ-4C Triton drones for maritime surveillance in demanding regions, notably the Arctic and the High North. Meanwhile, Denmark [committed](#) to buying two US-made Poseidon P-8 maritime patrol aircraft for anti-submarine warfare in the Arctic and North Atlantic. The [UK and the Netherlands](#) announced the intention to acquire a combined amphibious capacity of eight ships which will have a strong northern focus.

Alongside commitments to new capabilities, there were announcements in Ankara about new capability coalitions involving northern European NATO members. These notably focused on developing systems for operating in the Arctic and the High North. Thus, Finland and Sweden signed the [Arctic Mobility Statement of Intent](#), a multilateral framework agreement to collaborate on the development and joint procurement of cold-weather, off-road vehicles and tracked transport systems.

At Ankara, NATO [confirmed](#) the posture shift taking place along its northern and eastern flank. This is moving it towards forward deterrence, with the announcement that the Baltic Air Policing mission, initiated in 2004, will be expanded into an air defence mission.

NATO's approach (just) survives contact with Trump

The planned messaging around Arctic security and defence for the Ankara Summit had been designed to answer President

Trump's calls for greater European and Canadian defence commitments to the region, and thereby avoid controversy at the summit. However, the approach immediately ran into trouble. On arrival in Ankara, Trump [stated](#) that Greenland 'should be controlled by the United States, not by Denmark'. This led to Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's response, in which she stated that 'We are ready to defend every inch of NATO, including our own territory'. Several other European leaders rallied around her position.

Despite the threat of the summit spiralling out of control over the Greenland issue, the overall NATO approach of stressing the increased levels of defence spending and the focused message that the alliance is stepping up on the Arctic appear to have mollified President Trump. [Press reports](#) indicate that the US president did not subsequently raise the Greenland issue with heads of government during the summit, suggesting that the alliance got its pitch about right in Ankara. Indeed, NATO's new approach to the Arctic and the capability announcements in Ankara point to novel and substantial regional components.

Drivers of NATO's evolving Arctic policy

Critically, the inclusion of Sweden and Finland is changing NATO's Arctic. The immediate strategic challenge stemming from this shift is to integrate the Baltic region, Finland, Sweden, and Norway with the Barents Sea, the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap, and the Bear Gap. The Ankara Summit confirmed that the alliance is building a new Arctic military architecture across this



security space. It is doing so through Regional Plan Northwest and with JFC Norfolk as the anchor, as well as through the establishment of FLF Finland and Arctic Sentry. European allies and Canada are stepping up their defence spending to resource this plan, and there is growing security policy and defence-industrial integration within the alliance to respond to Russia across this space. Despite the high-level political tensions, operationally the US is [deepening](#) its security cooperation with European partners in this area.

Indeed, the Arctic, Baltic, and North Atlantic are fast emerging as the centre of gravity for European security within the alliance. Its emergence is driven by the Russian threat, the rapid and substantial rise in defence spending of the region's member states, a new level of security policy [cohesion](#), and deepening defence industry cooperation. NATO is the central political-military framework across the region. Nonetheless, there is an increasing density of security and defence relationships formed through bilateral, minilateral, and even larger-scale frameworks such as the JEF, the Nordic-Baltic 8, and NORDEFCO. These operate within and around alliance structures. Canada is [attempting](#) to reposition itself as having a much stronger northern European and Arctic dimension within this constellation of security relationships, including through its procurement of the Global Eye airborne early warning system from [Saab](#) and the new submarine fleet from [TKMS](#), in part as a hedge against uncertainty over its relationship with the US.

Developments leading up to and at the Ankara Summit, therefore, confirm that

alliance members have woken up to the need to make much bigger commitments to the Arctic and the High North. They are now making serious progress. This shift appears to have gone some way to placate President Trump about the seriousness of Europe's commitment to defence spending and Arctic security, even if the Greenland issue remains unresolved and liable to blow up again.

At the same time, there continues to be a tension between the US and the rest of the alliance on the nature of threats in the Arctic and the broader dynamics of Arctic security. Despite the launch of Arctic Sentry, NATO is overwhelmingly focused on the European Arctic and Russia within this space. The US has well-founded concerns over wider threats and changes in Arctic security. Such concerns are at risk of being dismissed by other alliance members who see these as part of a smokescreen for Trump's [political ambitions](#) for Greenland. Speaking at the start of the Ankara Summit, [Norwegian Defence Minister Tore Sandvik](#) argued that the main military threat in the Arctic is not around Greenland but the waters between Norway's Svalbard and the mainland. The danger is from Russian submarines and strategic bombers moving from the Kola Peninsula into the North Atlantic.

With the focus on managing Trump and seeking to avoid a political fissure over Greenland, alongside the traditional definition of Arctic security, NATO has yet to fully take onboard the shifting security and defence dynamics of the Arctic. In particular, the allies have yet to engage seriously with [US assessments](#) on the implications of the opening of the Arctic to new actors in the coming decade. Notably, insufficient



consideration has been given to the emerging ability of China and Russia to project power across the region through capabilities such as new generations of submarines, hypersonic and cruise missiles, and space-based systems. Such developments will reshape security and defence across a geographic arc from the northern Pacific to the European Arctic, while the region takes on a growing importance for air and missile threats that, for the US, [‘increasingly blur the line between regional and homeland defense’](#).

Priorities for a forward-looking NATO in the Arctic

Ankara signalled that NATO is taking steps to face up to Trump’s challenge: to recognize the Arctic as a critical security space and to respond. It is clear, at the same time, that the Arctic is changing fast. As the region becomes more accessible seasonally due to receding ice sheets – Pentagon assessments see the potential for the region to experience practically ice-free summers as early as the [2030s](#) – a variety of military and military-related activity will become feasible. These changes could challenge the ability of the alliance to operate freely and securely in the Arctic.

The future security and defence challenges in the Arctic will, as a result, be different from those of the Cold War. They will involve a far wider geography than just the European Arctic. In anticipation of this change, the US is working to integrate Arctic security into a hemisphere-wide homeland defence plan stretching from the Bering Strait to the Barents Sea.

If NATO is to respond effectively to the emerging situation in the Arctic, it will, therefore, need to demonstrate that it is capable of further adaptation to meet the

new Arctic security and defence agenda. This will require the alliance to make progress in the next few years on the Arctic regional security agenda in four principal areas:

1. Building a shared Arctic threat perception. With Arctic security set to be transformed in the decades ahead, the transatlantic alliance will need to build a common understanding of these changes, and how best to adapt jointly so that it can maintain deterrence and stability in the region. In [concluding remarks](#) to the Ankara Summit, Secretary General Rutte went so far as to acknowledge that Trump ‘has a point’ on the threat from Russia and China in the Arctic. However, NATO’s overall response to Arctic security belies this observation.

Many in the alliance have been lukewarm towards, or even overtly sceptical of, US concerns over the emerging Arctic security agenda, notably China’s broad Arctic ambitions. The priority is the immediate challenge of Russia in the European Arctic. This focus risks failing to match the speed of adaptation in the alliance approach to Arctic security to the pace of regional geopolitical change. It also risks a failure to ensure that the transatlantic alliance corresponds to the shifting security interests of all its members. In the future, the alliance will need to be able to generate the deterrence required for a fast-changing Arctic where geopolitical and security competition will likely have an increasing role across a broad geography and in multiple domains.

NATO allies – with the Arctic states in the lead – should, therefore, initiate a dialogue to better understand the drivers of change across the Arctic, how security will likely develop as the region opens and what the implications of these changes will be for the alliance overall.

2. NATO and the Arctic’s security architecture. The Arctic Council’s role as a



regional forum has weakened since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The council's founding document also prevents it from addressing defence issues. As a result, NATO cannot rely on an effective forum to address the shifting Arctic security agenda. Yet NATO's role in the Arctic is at risk of fragmentation as the Arctic security agenda expands. The US is increasingly approaching and investing in the Arctic from a homeland security perspective – with the [US Northern Command](#) (NORTHCOM) taking the lead – while European allies are focused on the European Arctic.

To date, several Arctic states have been reluctant to move regional defence matters into NATO, reflecting concerns over sovereignty. There are, however, indications that a political shift may be underway. Notably, [Canada](#) has signalled a new willingness to approach Arctic issues through NATO. A core challenge is to identify how NATO can evolve to integrate and coordinate more effectively with North American (the US and Canada) plans for homeland defence in the Arctic. There is a particular need to strengthen command and control processes and situational awareness, to ensure seamless coordination between NATO and the North American Arctic as the region opens.

Greater involvement of European militaries in North American Arctic exercises, for example Canada's [Operation Nanook](#), would help to build better common understandings of the scope of Arctic security challenges, and the interlinkages between sub-regional defence spaces. It will also be important to ensure that there is a forum to link discussions on economic and resource security to collective defence. The alliance needs to forge a comprehensive approach to Arctic security. This is particularly important as transport, commercial, resource extraction (on land, in the ocean, and on the seabed) and research activities expand, and

as critical infrastructure develops across the Arctic. This should also ensure resilient communities and economies across the northern territories of the US, Canada, and Europe as these are vital for security and defence in the Arctic.

It is likely that Arctic security and defence issues will be addressed through several organisations and in informal groupings.

However, NATO should position itself as the central security forum within this network of engagements. It should build on the security dialogue proposed above by using intensified political and military contacts among allies and officials from NATO, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, NORTHCOM, and European Command, as well as consultations on the region with the IP4 (notably Japan and South Korea to reflect the interlinkages between the Pacific and the Atlantic via the Arctic). Such a step would ensure that US, Canadian, and European security interests and approaches across the full scope of Arctic geographies are integrated and coordinated through NATO as the Arctic agenda expands.

3. Invest in new Arctic capabilities and operations. The Ankara Summit was notable for announcements about new Arctic capabilities. As NATO member states reach the NATO spending commitment of 5% of GDP, further investments can be anticipated focused on meeting the challenge of Russia in the European Arctic. The new Arctic security agenda will require a continued focus on new icebreakers, submarines, and naval vessels. However, it also needs greater resources for critical infrastructure devoted to air, maritime, and space surveillance systems to extend situational awareness, real time monitoring (notably of undersea infrastructure), and interdiction (air and missile defence) capabilities as the Arctic opens. This includes the need for drones and autonomous systems operating in the air, on



the surface, and underwater. Attention should also be given to a new civil–military relationship to deliver key capabilities in the best way, as highlighted by recent agreements for the private sector to provide Arctic surveillance in [Greenland](#) and the integration of [Canada's Coast Guard](#) into the Department of National Defence.

Attention must continually return to developing systems and new capabilities necessary to meet the evolving challenges that will develop in the Arctic and to maintain technological advantage. Advancements in this area will maintain credible deterrence, including all-year round capabilities capable of operating in what will remain extreme conditions. Force postures will require regular adjustment to ensure sustained forward presence operations to detect, monitor, and respond to conventional and grey-zone threats emerging in the Arctic – notably in the subsea domain – as security dynamics evolve.

NATO should assist member states so that they anticipate the sorts of Arctic investments that will be required to sustain and adapt deterrence in the future. The alliance should, therefore, prepare a roadmap for Arctic investment priorities based on effective burden sharing and to ensure interoperability. Such a roadmap should also seek to identify how Arctic missions and NATO's regional force posture will need to evolve to deter aggression and maintain regional deterrence as the Arctic changes, in line with the findings of the shared threat assessment exercise.

4. Promote Arctic security as a key pillar in a renewed transatlantic relationship. President Trump's public statements about Greenland have threatened to divide the transatlantic community. Yet, behind some

of his concerns is a broader US assessment about the changing nature of Arctic security. The US is already stepping up its Arctic engagement through [new deployments](#), [additional investment](#), and new capabilities (notably a new generation of icebreakers being built in cooperation with Finland and Canada through the [ICE Pact](#)). While the US has indicated that it is rebalancing its European security commitments in line with burden shifting, the Arctic remains a core US security interest. This interest will only grow as the Arctic opens, and the region's security becomes further intertwined with US homeland security. This extends to the increasing interest in access to the Arctic from Northeast Asia – notably [China](#) but also South Korea and Japan – for maritime transport. As a whole, these developments will raise the strategic importance of the Bering Strait and Alaska.

There is, thus, an opportunity to approach the new Arctic security agenda to reforge a collective transatlantic partnership and as a key element in a [NATO 3.0](#). By committing to securing the northern frontline, NATO can build common interests to encourage Washington to continue to cooperate closely with its allies. Building effective defence and deterrence from the Bering Strait to the Baltic can, after all, only be achieved through close cooperation between the US, Canada, and the European allies. Despite the tensions over Greenland, the US has reaffirmed its commitment to working on Arctic security with NATO allies in a [joint statement](#) in June 2026.

Now is the time for NATO to respond positively to this political signal and to build momentum to collaborate with Washington on developing a joint, forward-looking NATO Arctic Strategy to address collectively the evolving Arctic security agenda.



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