

Linking security debates in the Arctic and North Atlantic: Hybrid activity at sea and the case of Svalbard

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1. INTRODUCTION

‘Geography is changing – even though we cannot change geography’ (Gahr Støre 2012). Speaking at an event highlighting the resource potential and related geopolitics of the Arctic to a room full of oil and gas executives in 2012, then-Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre wanted to underscore the dramatic changes taking place in the North and Norway’s related role. At the time, Arctic oil and gas prospects looked hopeful and relations in the region with Russia and China were still relatively amicable. The changing geography the Norwegian foreign minister was referring to was, of course, due to effects of climate change.

Certain regions are experiencing change more rapidly than others. Regional change involving states can be climatic or environmental (i.e. desertification in the Sahel), economic (i.e. trade agreement concerning market access in North America – the USMCA), or political (i.e. the security concerns derived from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022). These dynamics overlap and can reinforce each other. Descriptions of regional development and interaction as static or monodirectional naturally fails to capture such change.

No place is this more apparent than in the Arctic. The Russian decision to place the Arctic on their political agenda in the early 2000s marked a watershed moment in Arctic-political interest. A Russian expedition’s use of a submersible on 2 August 2007 to plant a Russian flag on the Arctic seabed beneath the North Pole was a pinnacle of this interest (BBC News 2007). This action generated considerable media coverage, much of which was relatively alarmist in nature. In response, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, emphasised that Russia was not acting illegally or unilaterally; its actions were ‘in strict compliance with international law’ (Novosti 2007).

Since then, *all* eight Arctic states (those with territory above the Arctic Circle at 66.34 degrees latitude) – Canada, Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, USA – have held several high-level gatherings both separately and in the context of the regional cooperative science-oriented forum, the Arctic Council. These meetings emphasised the importance of international law, governance and cooperation amongst Arctic states and peoples. Some scholars have even deemed The Arctic an ‘exceptional’ region: as the ultimate example of the virtues of region-building and transcending a state-security oriented approach to international affairs (Exner-Pirot and Murray 2017; Devyatkin 2023).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment in relations between the West and Russia, including in the Arctic, as cooperation was halted and further sanctions on Russia were put in place. Most of the ideas about an Arctic exceptionalism and a shared community with Russia were disbanded (Østhagen 2023a). Still, politicians in Arctic countries emphasise that the Arctic is a region characterised by cooperation, hoping that despite the invasion of Ukraine, low-level forms of collaboration with Russia can still be possible in the future. The Arctic Council continued to function with Russian participation, albeit low-level. At the same time, Russian politicians and military leaders actively seek the partnership of non-Arctic actors, China first and foremost, in order to counter that all other seven Arctic states are NATO members (after Finland and Sweden joined in 2023 and 2024 respectively).

The Arctic region comprises an ocean – the Arctic Ocean – surrounded by land. The Arctic is also, per definition, an extension of the North Atlantic. In an Arctic context, this entails the centrality of ocean-based issues, as well as conceiving functional and material linkages across ocean-space. With more than two-thirds of the region comprising maritime space, one cannot

disentangle the ocean from the wider Arctic focus, which in turn also relates it to the North Atlantic.

One issue that in particular has attracted attention is the European Arctic maritime space, is the fear of intended and unintended escalation at sea. Beyond, perhaps, the impact and influence of climate change, this is the most apparent linkage between the Arctic and the wider North Atlantic security domain. Increased fears of Russian vessel activity, or, indeed, vessels with unclear state-associations, stretches from the northern coast of Norway, down to the various North Atlantic and European states. This report will examine the issue of hybrid activity at sea, with particular reference to the European Arctic and Norway, and even the archipelago of Svalbard as a case study, and then finish by drawing some linkages to the wider North Atlantic security environment.

2. BACKGROUND: THE ARCTIC 'REGION'

Figure 1. Map of the Arctic. [Source](#)



Figure 2. Map of the Arctic area in a wider context. [Source](#)



Figure 3. The exclusive maritime economic zones in the Arctic (made by Malte Humpert, The Arctic Institute)



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Figures 1 and 2 set the geographical parameters for this report to achieve clarity. The focus is on the eight countries above the Arctic Circle and the political dynamics amongst and between them and countries and actors located outside the region. Still, what the term ‘Arctic’ represents, and the common and/or political usage of the term itself is not always consistent but the result of a social construction through debate, actions and language.¹

When it comes to maritime spatial zones (Figure 3), a deep dive into the delimitation agreements and remaining disputes is crucial to understand the fundamentals of Arctic geopolitics and the background of political security dynamics. Of the eight Arctic states, seven are parties to UNCLOS. Although not a party, the USA generally regards UNCLOS as being reflective of customary international law and thus binding to all states (Roach and Smith 2012).

¹ For more on this, see Keskitalo (2004, 2007)

All the Arctic coastal states, including Iceland, have advanced broad maritime claims in keeping with both international law and their own national interests (Churchill 2001). These maritime claims include 12-nm territorial seas (except in respect of Greenland, where a 3-nm territorial sea is claimed). Canada, Norway, Russia and the USA also claim contiguous zone rights out to 24 nm, although Norway's claim here does not apply to Jan Mayen Island or Svalbard. In addition, all the Arctic coastal states claim EEZs out to 200 nm (see Figure 3), although Norway has only provisionally implemented this around Svalbard through a non-discriminatory Fisheries Protection Zone based on the Act on Norway's Economic Zone (Norwegian Ministry of Trade Industry and Fisheries 1976).

Whether the Arctic is a region or not, depends on whom you ask. A natural scientist studying changes to sea ice texture or the movements of the beluga whales, would draw a line zigzagging across the top of the globe, defining the Arctic region according to climatic criteria. If you ask a political scientist, on the other hand, the answer to whether the Arctic can constitute a 'region' would depend on whether they study Arctic political developments like the Arctic Council (then the answer tends to be 'yes') or traditional security questions like NATO-Russia relations (then the answer tends to be 'no', although that might be changing).

If, however, you ask a foreign minister from one of the eight Arctic states they would tend to define the Arctic as one region in order to achieve certain political goals. These goals have, at least up until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, revolved around regional cooperation, expanding governance mechanisms, and portraying the Arctic as an 'exceptional' part of the world in terms of state interaction. This is also in line with what was outlined in the introduction of this book, namely the need to study both how ocean regions impact global politics, and how global politics manifest in ocean regions.

The Arctic emerged as a 'region' in the early 1990s, linked to several efforts mainly focusing on dealing with local or regional issues linked to the climate or the Arctic population, alongside a desire to integrate Russia in various cooperative mechanisms after the fall of the USSR. Moreover, efforts to promote regional cooperation and the primacy of the Law of the Sea (and the Arctic states sovereign rights therein) came about as a response to increased global interest in the Arctic and erroneous claims of an impending resource race or legal vacuum. The organisation of the Arctic as a 'region' is partly due to these efforts, although there are naturally also other lenses that can be used to explore Arctic region-building, not least the interests, issues and concerns of the four million people living in the Arctic, where a large share of them are Indigenous peoples.

The political developments in the Arctic amongst the eight Arctic states in the period 2005-2014 attempted to transcend the constraints of geography and construct a 'region' in a part of the world that comprises almost four percent of the globe and is relatively inaccessible. State leaders in everywhere from Russia to the USA, China and India, have attempted to politically define the Arctic as a 'region' that they either belong to or have strong connections with. Emphasising everything *but* state security (or traditional military security) concerns, the Arctic 'region' emerged as a constructed object at the turn of the millennium and is now accepted not only as the geographic space above the Arctic Circle, but also as a political entity where states engage and interact both in adversarial and cooperative ways.

It is thus clear that Arctic states as well as non-state actors made use of different conceptions in order to establish the Arctic as a region. These include the perceived and portrayed 'need' to jointly manage the climatic changing occurring in the Arctic space; the increased

interdependence on certain functional tasks between states in the North; the political discourse surrounding the Arctic especially linked to the importance of the Arctic Council; and, attempts at setting up circumpolar ‘soft law’ mechanisms linked to everything from Central Arctic Ocean management to science cooperation.

However, those interested in assembling an Arctic (ocean) region have also encountered some hurdles. Primarily, two loom large in Arctic affairs: the sheer size of the regional space in question which leads to practical challenges pursuing functional or operational cooperation; and the role of Russia.

Albeit the smallest of the world’s five oceans,² the Arctic Ocean (at 14 million km²) is almost six times larger than the Mediterranean Sea (at 2.5 million km²), five times larger than the Caribbean Sea (at 2.754 million km²), and four times larger than the South China Sea (at 3.5 million km²). Although ‘regions’ are inherently a politically constructed notion, they do also refer to specific geographic spaces where states interact, and activity occurs. In the period from 20005-2022 while Arctic states and other actors touted Arctic regional cooperation and collaborative solutions to ‘Arctic’ problems, Arctic states were also increasing northern defence spending and engaging in increasingly – especially after 2014 – military exercises in the North. However, this latter development did not take place in a pan-Arctic or circumpolar context; rather it is confined to, and linked with, security dynamics in the various Arctic sub-regions that are extensions of their immediate vicinity: the North Atlantic and the North Pacific.

Moreover, with the tension between Russia – the largest Arctic stakeholder in terms of territory, ocean space and population – and the other seven Arctic states becoming increasingly evident from 2014 onwards, we can question the depth of some of these collaborative efforts and even the region-building. With an ocean region so dominated by one actor, at least in terms of geography, it is apparent that from 2014 the notions of Arctic exceptionalism and the region being sheltered from security concerns starts to unravel. Focus also somewhat shifted away from circumpolar expressions of regionalism.

With Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent responses from the other Arctic states, including Finland and Sweden joining NATO, Arctic-wide cooperation with Russia on any level has become almost impossible and security concerns now dominate much of the Arctic focus, both in Arctic states and amongst the global community. Moreover, Russia has deliberately turned away from emphasising Arctic cooperation and engagement with the other Arctic states and is rather seeking third-party involvement from for example China (in military and political matters) and India (in scientific and economic matters).

Still, Arctic Council work including Russian actors on a working group / technical level was resumed after 2022 and is still ongoing. There are still no major disputes or drivers for *regional* tension in the Arctic, or in the various sub-regions of the Arctic (the European Arctic and the North Pacific Arctic) where security interactions compound. That, in turn, means that if relations between Russia and the other states improve at some future point, region-building efforts and a re-emphasis on low-level politics or positive-sum cooperation might again emerge.

² Historically, there are four named oceans: the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, and Arctic. However, most countries - including the United States - now recognize the Southern (Antarctic) as the fifth ocean. The Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian are the most commonly known (NOAA 2024).

3. FRAMEWORK: HYBRID ACTIVITY AT SEA

States are increasingly utilising hybrid threats that combines a range of different tools and strategies, often blending conventional military methods with non-traditional tactics such as cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, economic pressure, and irregular warfare. Hybrid threats are difficult to counter because they operate across multiple domains; they enable power projection while circumventing the threshold of full-scale conflict, effectively blurring the traditional boundaries between war and peace by employing multiple modes of engagement simultaneously (Schmid 2021).

Hybrid activity is not affiliated solely with contemporary Russian military strategy focused on land-based activity or targets. From a relatively limited starting point, hybrid operations at sea are increasingly becoming a special area of consideration. The sea is, of course, a different domain to the land. Humans cannot – at least, not yet – fully occupy the maritime domain, and domain awareness is bound to be limited. However, as Osgood (1976, 10–12) noted, the ocean has always held a crucial role for military power projection, but that it is non-military utilization of the ocean that has led to its primacy in national and international affairs.

Two strands of scholarly work have sought to analyse such hybrid activity at sea. The first has focused on operational challenges in specific domains, or from a practical or practitioners' perspective: how navies should respond to hybrid threats (see, for example, Lohela & Schatz, 2019; Stavridis, 2016). The second strand of scholarly work springs out of the Law of the Sea legal circles, and examines how hybrid activity at sea can be defined, managed and dealt with under the larger framework of the international framework established by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS; see Kraska & Pedrozo, 2013, pp. 860–865; Lott, 2022).

Many examples of hybrid activity concern China, which has employed tactics closely resembling the characteristics of hybrid operations in the South and East China Seas (Chakravorty 2019; Hosoda 2023). To ensure geopolitical gain, Beijing has employed a maritime militia known as *haishangmingbing* (海上民兵). Framed as civilian fishers, its main objective is to support conventional operations performed by the People's Liberation Army Navy (Chakravorty, 2019; Heazle, 2021). Using fishing vessels supported by the Chinese Coast Guard, China engages in operations designed to 'win without fighting' (Grossman and Ma 2020). Their assertiveness appears designed to achieve sovereignty objectives and revise international behavioural norms through acts of latent coercion, eroding the existing regional order through hybrid tactics in the realm of grey zone or hybrid activities (Hoffman 2018).

From this, one can establish some criteria for evaluating activity along these degrees, tailoring general assumptions from the hybrid literature to the maritime domain:

- To avoid the impression of outright military aggression, the use of private vessels (like fishing trawlers or research vessels) may be a preferred type of holistic military response, which still aims to achieve national and international political objectives (Hicks and Metrick 2018), while maintaining plausible deniability – a crucial point in and of itself.
- An actor uses the risk of escalation itself as a tool for coercive leverage, although the specific campaign remains below the threshold of a military response (Morris et al. 2019). At sea, this entails showcasing military capacity, often regarding the coast guard–navy nexus (Østhagen 2020), which in itself may entail uncertainty. In this way, military intimidation and political leverage create a deterrent threat.
- A feature of hybrid activity in general, and specifically at sea, is the use of extensive

legal and political justifications for actions to create further uncertainty about their legality (Morris et al. 2019). In practice, hybrid operations manoeuvre on the threshold of armed conflicts by creating a legal ‘grey zone’ in which states can exploit the gaps or leeway in the legal environment to justify their actions. In this grey area, ‘lawfare’ can be used as an instrument of hybrid warfare (Dunlap, 2008).

It is the totality of these three dimensions that constitute a possible case of hybrid activity at sea (Figure 4). In and of themselves, each dimension is not sufficient to warrant being termed a hybrid operation. Actions and events in one dimension might constitute a threat, as perceived by another actor. A hybrid operation, however, is different: it requires coordinated action in several (at least two) of the dimensions outlined here. Warfare must be seen as something more holistic and orchestrated than mere limited or continuous operations. Although it need not include all three dimensions outlined, it generally will. Moreover, UNCLOS does not explicitly address hybrid threats in their contemporary form given that these threats primarily have evolved after UNCLOS was adopted in 1982. Thus, legal scholarship has scantily examined how existing regulations can be employed to manage hybrid threats at sea. Many UNCLOS-provisions are also inherently ambiguous.

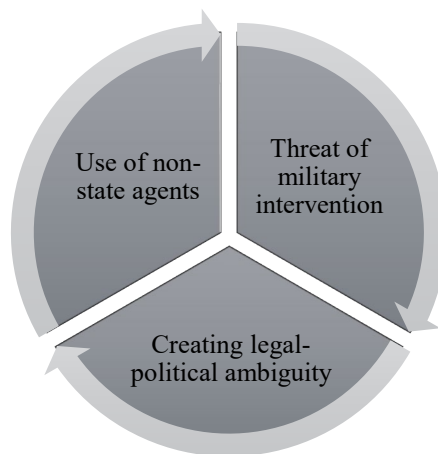
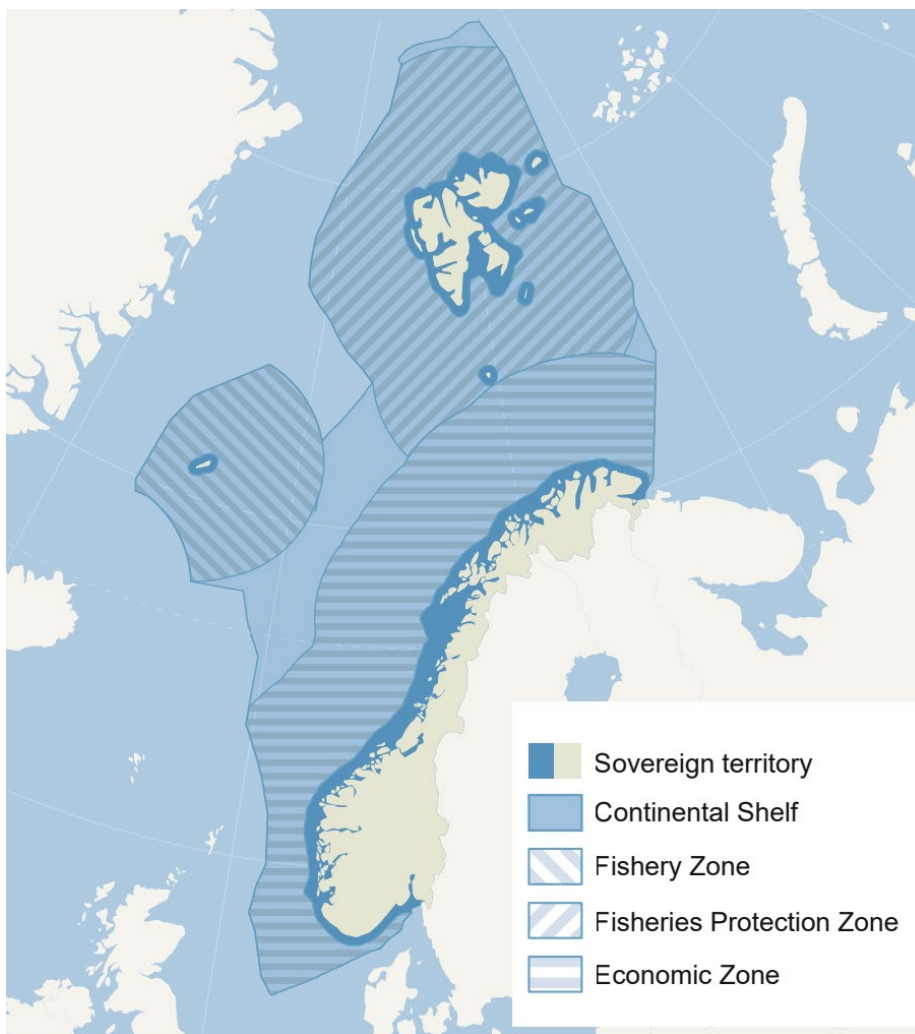


Figure 4
Three dimensions of hybrid activity at sea

4. CASE: SVALBARD'S MARITIME ZONES

In the Arctic, one location that has received considerable attention following the increased interest in Arctic issues since the early 2000s, is the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard. Located approximately 650 kilometres north of the Norwegian mainland and just 1,000 kilometres from the North Pole, Norway's most northern territory has political and economic aspects suited for analysis of the links between geography and power politics. The presence of Russian nationals residing in separate Russian communities on what is Norwegian territory, as well as the proximity of Svalbard to military activity and fortifications – primarily the Russian Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula – make the archipelago particularly relevant in Norway–Russia relations, and NATO–Russia relations writ large.

Figure 5: *Map of Norway and its maritime zones*³



³ From Norwegian Defence Commission 202. English short version:
https://files.nettsteder.regjeringen.no/wpuploads01/sites/495/2023/06/forsvarskommisjonen_kortversjon-1.7_singel.pdf

Moreover, while Norway is the sovereign of Svalbard as per Article 1 of the Svalbard Treaty from 1920, several states have maintained a sense of entitlement linked to the archipelago – ranging from the presence of research stations to a focus on historic activity through fisheries, exploration and coal mining.⁴ All these issues revert back to the special provisions in the Svalbard Treaty which, in essence, had two primary functions: settle the question of sovereignty over Svalbard by awarding it to Norway, and ensure that nationals of other states could still enjoy certain economic privileges on the archipelago.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Svalbard received a surge in attention from both Norwegian and international media, as a focal point for interest in Arctic security concerns. The Norwegian public broadcaster NRK highlighted the archipelago's particularities and conflict potential (Fredriksen et al. 2022; Finnset, Berg, and Rostad 2022; Wormdal 2022; Pettersen et al. 2023), while international broadcasters like the *BBC* (BBC News 2023), *The Guardian* (Bryant 2023), *Le Parisien* (Brugeron 2022), *USA Today* (USA Today 2023), *Deutsche Welle* (Nahmen 2023), and *Al Jazeera* (Al Jazeera 2022) issued lengthy features about Svalbard.

The origin of Svalbard's unique political situation can be traced back to its role as a locus for commerce and trade in the Arctic, centuries ago. Initially named *Spitsbergen* by the first verified discovery of the archipelago by the Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz in 1596, the archipelago was renamed Svalbard by Norway in 1925. Today Spitsbergen is the name of the largest island. The name 'Svalbard' originates from 'Svalbarði fundinn', mentioned in the Icelandic annals from 1194, and means 'the cold coast found' – possibly referring to Viking-era observations of the islands (Arlov 2003, 50–51).

Prior to World War I, various governance models were discussed, culminating in three international Spitsbergen conferences in 1910, 1912 and 1914 (Arlov 2003, 285). Then, during the peace conference in Paris 1919–1920, the matter of Svalbard was revisited and finally settled with the Treaty of February 1920 (here called the Svalbard Treaty, to avoid confusion, although the Treaty does not have any official name). The Treaty affirmed Norway's increasing demands for sovereignty over the archipelago (Svalbard Treaty 1920).

A key objective of the Treaty was, after assigning Norway 'full and absolute sovereignty' (Art. 1) (Svalbard Treaty 1920), to secure the economic interests of nationals from other states (Ulfstein 1995). This was done by including provisions that nationals of all parties to the Treaty 'shall enjoy equally the rights of fishing and hunting' (Art. 2) and 'shall have equal liberty of access and entry' (Art. 3) in certain defined areas of activity. Norway may not treat other nationals less favourably than its own citizens, and taxes levied in the Treaty area can be used solely for local purposes (Art. 8). Moreover, the islands cannot be used for 'warlike purposes', and Norway committed 'not to create nor to allow the establishment of any naval base in the territories specified in Article 1 and not to construct any fortification in the said territories' (Art. 9).⁵

⁴ See for example the reactions to Norway's new research coordination (Moe 2020) or Russia's assertions of entitlement and historic relations (J. H. Jørgensen 2010; Østhagen, Jørgensen, and Moe 2020; Todorov 2020a, 2020b; A.-K. Jørgensen and Moe 2023; Obukhova 2024).

⁵ For an in-depth examination of the Svalbard Treaty, see (Ulfstein 1995; Jensen 2020; Arlov 2003, chap. 11)

In January 2024, the total population of Svalbard, spread across seven locations, was 2993 (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2024, 11).⁶ The largest settlement Longyearbyen has a population of 2600, where 36 percent are not Norwegian citizens, coming from more than 50 countries (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2022, 7, 41). Ny-Ålesund has a population 44 scientists, whereas the population in Barentsburg has been steadily declining and is 354 as of 2024. Pyramiden – abandoned in 1998 – is an open-air museum with a population of 12 (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2024, 10), although the Russian state owned company Trust Arktikugol have, in 2023, launched ambitious plans to revive the former settlement with tourism and research activities (Edvardsen 2023b, 2023a).

A geopolitical dimension of Svalbard exists at sea. This dimension derives from an ongoing disagreement over the geographical scope of the Treaty. This, in turn, affects the status of the extended maritime zones around the archipelago, since the Treaty itself refers only to ‘territorial waters’ (Svalbard Treaty 1920), initially 4 and today 12 nautical miles from the baseline.⁷

In the post-WWII period, coastal states started to implement more extended ‘resource zones’ in order to manage far-from-shore fisheries (Østhagen 2021). Simultaneously, states extended their sovereign rights over adjacent continental shelves, codified with the Geneva Convention on the Continental Shelf in 1958 (UN 1958). By the 1970s, it had become clear through negotiations concerning a legal framework for the oceans – finalised with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1982 (United Nations 1982) – that coastal states would be entitled to implement a 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that entailed sovereign rights to resources both on the shelf and in the water column.

Concerning Svalbard specifically, the question in dispute is whether this 200-nautical-mile zone and the continental shelf around the islands are covered by the provisions in the 1920 Treaty. The concept of extended maritime zones was not in place at the time the Treaty was signed, and therefore is not mentioned in the Treaty. Norway states that the maritime space is not covered by the Treaty’s provisions, and that the intention of the Treaty was never to extend beyond the territorial sea. Since Norway is the sovereign of Svalbard, per Law of the Sea the maritime space around Svalbard constitutes an area where Norway has exclusive sovereign rights not limited by the provisions in the Svalbard Treaty (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2022b, 16; see also Churchill and Ulfstein 2010; Anderson 2009).⁸

Others have argued that the Treaty must be interpreted dynamically, and that although Norway has jurisdiction in this maritime space, jurisdiction must be based on the same principles as activity on land per the Treaty (Molenaar 2012). To avoid an escalation of the issue Norway

⁶ It is often said that there are more polar bears on Svalbard than humans, but the number of polar bears is probably much lower (Polar Bear Science 2018; Staalesen 2021).

⁷ For an interesting discussion on the difference between territorial waters and extended zones, and what the intentions behind the Treaty from 1920 were, see Rolf Einar Fife (Fife 2021).

⁸ The Norwegian position is stated in its Svalbard white papers: ‘It is clear from the wording of certain provisions in the Treaty that they apply both to land territory and to territorial waters. At the time the Treaty entered into force, Norway had territorial sea extending to four nautical miles. Norway’s territorial sea was extended in 2004 to 12 nautical miles from the baseline. After that, the Treaty provisions applicable in territorial waters also became applicable in the area between four and 12 nautical miles. The special rules stipulated in the Treaty do not apply on the continental shelf or in zones that were created in accordance with provisions in the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea governing exclusive economic zones. This follows from the wording of the Treaty and is underpinned by the Treaty’s prehistory and by its development and system.’ (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2016, 20)

established a Fisheries Protection Zone (FPZ) in 1977, where access to fisheries was based on historical activity in area in the decade prior to 1977 (Anderson 2009; Tiller and Nyman 2017). With the establishment of the co-management regime between Norway and Russia concerning transboundary fish stocks in the Barents Sea, the issue of quota distribution in the FPZ became less acute (Hønneland 2014), and it has historically been fishers from Iceland and Spain that have mounted the largest challenge to the FPZ itself (Østhagen and Raspotnik 2019; Skram 2017).

In recent years, however, the EU represented by the European Commission has been the most active proponent of the view that Norway must adhere to the Svalbard Treaty's non-discrimination provisions concerning activities at sea. This issue was raised on the political agenda in Brussels through a dispute between Norway and the EU over the right to fish for snow crabs around 2015 (Østhagen and Raspotnik 2018; Raspotnik and Østhagen 2019). It received further attention with a dispute over cod quotas in 2020–2021 that came about as a result of Brexit (Moe and Jensen 2020; Moens and Galindo 2021). The EU even went so far as to award itself licences to catch snow crabs, breaking with both its own position that Norway still has jurisdiction to manage economic activity in the area, and with coastal state rights under the Law of the Sea (Moe and Jensen 2020). That case ended up in the Supreme Court of Norway, where the ruling confirmed the Norwegian position on the issue (Supreme Court of Norway 2023).

Russia has taken a different approach, arguing that Norway did not have the right to establish the FPZ unilaterally, and that Russia should have been consulted about any such regime. Subsequently, the position – albeit rather under-specified by Russian officials – seems to be that the area is international waters, where only flag states have jurisdiction over vessels (A.-K. Jørgensen and Østhagen 2020a; J. H. Jørgensen 2010). The shelf, on the other hand, Russia has argued, is covered by Treaty provisions (Østhagen, Jørgensen, and Moe 2020; Todorov 2020a), albeit restricted by the so-called Svalbard box (i.e. the coordinates set out in the Treaty that creates a box that includes both the land area of Svalbard and parts of the maritime domain surrounding it).⁹ For all practical purposes, the fisheries co-management regime between Norway and Russia that was established in the 1970s makes the question of the Treaty's applicability to the maritime zone less relevant for fisheries relations between the two states, as the whole Barents Sea (including the Norwegian EEZ, the Russian EEZ, and the FPZ) is seen as one zonal area for fisheries (Hønneland 2012; Hønneland and Jørgensen 2015). Shelf-matters, however, are a different story, and Russia has protested against the possible opening of the shelf for oil and gas activity by the Norwegian government (Bolongaro 2017; Tamnes 2020; Churchill and Ulfstein 2020). At the same time, Russia has shown an interest in keeping this dispute from escalating, due to what is generally thought to be viewed in Moscow as a beneficial current set-up (Todorov 2020a; Østhagen, Jørgensen, and Moe 2020; Tiller and Nyman 2015; Tiller 2009).

There are two aspects of this geopolitical dispute that may intensify further. The first is the issue of access to resources, and possible attempts by vessels from various states to claim their rights, as seen with the EU in the snow-crab case (Østhagen and Raspotnik 2018; Tiller and Nyman 2017). The fact that snow crabs are defined by all relevant parties as sedentary species also

⁹ However, by entering the 2010-delimitation agreement with Norway (Norwegian Government 2010), which sets a multi-purpose (zone *and* shelf) maritime boundary all the way from the Norwegian–Russian border on land and up towards the North Pole, it seems that Russia recognises that Svalbard indeed generates a maritime zone (Henriksen and Ulfstein 2011; Moe, Fjærtøft, and Øverland 2011), and is not to be considered as international waters.

means that how they are managed sets a precedence for other shelf resources such as hydrocarbons and seabed minerals. The attention to oil and gas development on the shelf around Svalbard has somewhat subsided since the heyday of Norwegian Arctic oil and gas interest around 2007-2010, although that might change in the future.

Seabed minerals, however, have become more relevant in recent years. In 2020, the Norwegian government initiated a process for allowing mining operations on the Norwegian continental shelf. About a third of the area in question as the opening process was approved in 2024 overlaps with the continental shelf and the Fisheries Protection Zone around Svalbard. As highlighted, while there is broad agreement that Norway has sovereignty over Svalbard and thus can decide whether to permit commercial mining activities on the seabed in this area, there is the dispute as to whether the Svalbard Treaty's provisions apply for Norwegian exercise of authority. In turn, if mineral activity on the shelf is indeed licensed and initiated, it is likely that Norwegian interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty and rights to the resources on the continental shelf around Svalbard are further challenged (Hvinden and Østhagen 2024). Moreover, Russian fisheries in the FPZ might resist that activity and spur Moscow into diplomatic action for fear of negative environmental impact from the mineral industry. It is also likely that Norway will face increased pressure and criticism from other states, and especially from the EU, because seabed mining is believed to have major, yet unknown, environmental consequences.¹⁰

It should, however, be highlighted that in the unlikely case that the Norwegian government yields in the question of whether the Svalbard Treaty applies to the maritime zones around Svalbard – either by an unfavourable ICJ case or by extensive diplomatic pressure – the Treaty's article 8 on limited taxation would apply to any shelf activity.¹¹ Norway would thus have limited economic incentives to allow for such activities, and would probably decide to not open up for it in the first place.

Finally, some have speculated whether the role of China – with the world's largest fishing fleet – and potential Chinese claims to equal access to fishing rights could come into play concerning fisheries in the Arctic (Hoel 2023; Jonassen 2023). Liu speculates that Svalbard and the surrounding FPZ could become a focal point for this interest, although China is also wary of causing a rift with Norway over the issue, as China seeks cooperative relations with Norway and portrays itself as a benign actor in Arctic affairs (Liu 2021). In China's Arctic Policy from 2018, the Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Treaty is referred to six times to underscore China's Arctic rights, interest, and history, stating that 'China maintains that all activities to explore and utilize the Arctic should abide by treaties such as the UNCLOS and the Spitsbergen Treaty as well as general international law...' (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2018).

The second aspect concerning the dispute at sea that might be a cause for concern is a possible escalation of incidents in the FPZ between Russian vessels and the Norwegian Coast Guard that could get caught up in wider security concerns (Østhagen 2018). Russian fishers are – per the administrative fisheries cooperation – allowed to fish in the FPZ, but the Norwegian Coast Guard is responsible for fisheries inspections and possible fines and/or arrests. However, the Russian state makes a point of not recognising Norwegian jurisdiction to inspect and arrest in these waters (A.-K. Jørgensen and Østhagen 2020a). This has led to tense situations where Russia has threatened with the use of military force to 'protect' the rights of its fishers

¹⁰ For an article outlining these possibly challenges, see (Hvinden and Østhagen 2024).

¹¹ Which states 'Taxes, dues and duties levied shall be devoted exclusively to the said territories and shall not exceed what is required for the object in view.' (Svalbard Treaty 1920)

(Østhagen 2018).¹² The tighter the wider security relations between Norway and Russia, the greater are fears that such small-scale incidents at sea involving the Norwegian authorities and Russian actors could escalate out of proportion (Østhagen 2023b).

Although escalation when interacting with fishing vessels is the primary reason for this concern (A.-K. Jørgensen and Østhagen 2020a), questions are increasingly being asked about the activities of Russian vessels in Norwegian waters (Kibar, Prestmo, and Kenny 2021b). For example, in January 2022, one of the two subsea cables crucial for information technology on Svalbard was found to be cut after Russian fishing vessels had been operating in the area (Gulldahl and Eriksen 2024). The Norwegian authorities have not been able to specify a perpetrator, although some – including Norway’s public broadcaster – have speculated about a linkage to Russian intelligence collection and hybrid operations in the Norwegian Arctic (Fredriksen et al. 2022; Østhagen 2023b). With the sabotage of the North Stream gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea in September 2022, this issue acquired new urgency in the Norwegian security and defence debate (Olsen et al. 2022).

Making Svalbard’s waters particularly sensitive is Russia’s refusal to acknowledge the FPZ as an area where Norway has jurisdiction. Asserting that Norway has no right to inspect and arrest Russian vessels could give Russia an excuse to claim that Norway is exceeding its jurisdiction if any inspection and subsequent arrest of a vessel should escalate out of control. In turn, Russia could respond by threatening to use military force, as was apparent already in the early 2000s when Russian fishing vessels were arrested in the FPZ by the Norwegian Coast Guard (Østhagen 2020, 52–53). It should, however, be noted that on a day-to-day basis, the Norwegian Coast Guard regularly inspects Russian fishing vessels without any incidents or escalation as Russia de-facto accepts Norwegian jurisdiction, even if the captains of the vessels refuse to sign the inspection document afterwards (Østhagen 2018).

Complicating the matter for Norway is the fact that both fishing vessels and research vessels from Russia have access rights to Norwegian waters that are difficult to curtail. That fishers with a quota may fish in all of the Barents Sea constitutes a core pillar of the successful co-management scheme of fisheries cooperation between Norway and Russia (Hønneland and Jørgensen 2015; Hønneland 2014; Stokke 2022; A.-K. Jørgensen 2022). Norwegian politicians have remained wary of disrupting this regime, even after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Oma Vyvial 2023). The access of research vessels to the Norwegian EEZ, the FPZ, and the shelf rests on UN Convention on the Law of the Sea Article 246 (United Nations 1982), where ‘the coastal State should normally grant its consent’ except in a few specific circumstances (Woker et al. 2020, 2). Thus, the burden of proof concerning Russian vessels conducting illegal activities in Norwegian waters, including in the FPZ, lies with the Norwegian authorities – which is diplomatically and administratively strenuous.

¹² Most notably the *Elektron* incident in 2005, and the Gorbatsjov/Pokramovitsj incident the same year (Lepperød 2005; Tjønn 2005). For an analysis of the former case, see (Inderberg 2007; Bruusgaard 2006; Åtland and Bruusgaard 2009; Tiller 2010; Fermann and Inderberg 2015; Østhagen 2018).

5. ANALYSIS: ARCTIC HYBRID OPERATIONS

As seen in campaigns in Eastern Europe (especially Ukraine), hybrid operations and warfare have become one of Moscow's preferred operational tactics (Dayspring 2015; Council of Foreign Relations 2022). This includes the use of irregular instruments in favour of, or in combination with, conventional means of power. Based on the three characteristics as shown in Figure 4 – the incorporation of non-state actors, the combined use of military and non-military tools to create coercive leverage, and the use of judicial ambiguity – the suggested use of primarily Russian fishing vessels for strategic purposes can be placed within the concept of hybrid activities.

A distinction can be made between a hybrid threat concerning the possibility of a military escalation, and threats regarding jurisdiction, where the purpose may be to maintain a geostrategic position and create 'strategic uncertainty'. The fear and uncertainty created by the confrontations in the FPZ and periodic statements of hostile intent emanating from Russia's government and media make the discussion of hybrid means relevant. Hybrid *threat* perceptions are evident in descriptions in the Norwegian media, by scholars and even government officials. And Russian officials seem intent on ensuring that this is an active threat, by continuing to ensure Russian fishers do not sign inspection papers, by regularly criticising Norway for establishing the FPZ, and occasionally showcasing military force in the same domain.

However, this does not necessarily mean ongoing 'hybrid operations'. The definition of hybrid *operations* includes the synchronous application of hybrid means. Thus, the application of one single hybrid instrument does not invoke the use of the term hybrid operation unless other hybrid means are employed simultaneously or against the same target over a longer or shorter timeframe. The effects of Russia's known actions in the FPZ can hardly be considered independently when viewed through the lens of hybrid concepts. In terms of hybrid *operations*, the picture is less clear. There are indications that Russia has engaged in, and perhaps continues to engage in, both specific and limited operations in some areas, and continuous operations in others. Possible examples range from the cutting of the Svalbard fibre cable (Fredriksen et al. 2022; Guldahl and Eriksen 2024), to suspect movement patterns of Russian research vessels (Kibar, Prestmo, and Kenny 2021a; Olsen et al. 2022), and radio equipment onboard Russian trawlers (NRK 2022).

The problem is that direct evidence for these activities is hard to come by, and the Norwegian authorities have not confirmed outright *operations*, nor accused Russia – as for example was done after a cyber-attack on the Norwegian Parliament in 2020 (Johansen 2020). This is, in turn, perhaps the point of such hybrid operations. Given the amount of evidence and the obvious activity along all three dimensions described above – apparently scaled up by Russia since 2014 – hybrid operations have probably been taking place at various intervals.

Although the term hybrid warfare may be applied to the orchestrated multidimensionality of Russian techniques designed to achieve national and international strategic objectives, however, it may not be suitable for describing what is currently happening in the FPZ. Furthermore, we should distinguish between low-level disputes (such as the issues between Russian trawlers and Norwegian authorities) and 'high-level' disputes that threaten the state itself as well as the regional or global order.

While the Russian trawlers' violation of Norwegian jurisdiction has sometimes challenged Norwegian sovereign rights in the FPZ, none of these incidents have spiralled out of control.

Mutual interest in preserving aspects of the bilateral cooperation in the FPZ may be a reason for this. As noted by Moe and Jensen (2020), Soviet and later Russian policies regarding Svalbard have been relatively stable in the post-war period, marked by the search to achieve a special status on the islands as well as in the FPZ. Although the rhetoric and intensity have varied, Russia recognises Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard and has refrained from undermining Norwegian jurisdiction to such an extent that the Treaty would be challenged (Moe and Jensen 2020).

Referring to the example of the Chinese fishing militia, the attempt to link fishers to the country's strategic and political motives has some important shortcomings. The fishing militia narrative considers fishers as passive agents under full control of the authorities. This does not hold up under scrutiny here, however, as it during the *Elektron* incident and in the ensuing discussion of FPZ issues, where we can note a distinction between a dialogue-oriented central power and a conflict-oriented regional actor in Murmansk (A.-K. Jørgensen and Østhagen 2020b).

Moreover, although fluctuating at times, continuous dialogue has led to resolution of disagreements between the Norwegian Coast Guard and Russian fishing vessels without resort to military solutions. Demonstrating the cooperative sector gains in periods of geopolitical tension has been the Russo–Norwegian coast guard cooperation on fisheries – the sole bilateral military connection that remained untouched in Norway's sanctions against Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. As the only other state with communities on Svalbard, and with significant interests in various economic activity ranging from coal mining to tourism and fisheries, Russia has arguably been served with maintaining the status quo (Todorov 2020a; Østhagen, Jørgensen, and Moe 2020). The current situation on Svalbard favours Russian economic interests, as well as the broader desire to ensure that regional relations in the Barents Sea remain politically stable.

Together with Russia's known economic interests in the area and the institutionalized annual negotiations on fishing quotas, this indicates that, in practice, Moscow accepts Norwegian jurisdiction and exercise of control in the FPZ. Despite some opacity, the Russian stance on the FPZ has remained consistent. Russia's objections to Norwegian inspections and the refusal to recognise Norwegian authority in the FPZ is therefore not a surprise to Norwegian policymakers. Most experts have concluded that such factors are unlikely to undermine the Svalbard regime at large, or threaten the Treaty itself (Østhagen, Jørgensen, and Moe 2020; Todorov 2020a; Hønneland and Jørgensen 2015). These conclusions have not changed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, although security relations in the North have become more tense.

Thus, although Russia regularly reiterates its disapproval of specific Norwegian policies, it seems relatively satisfied with the current status quo in the FPZ, as reflected in its national security and financial interests in the region. Moreover, opening what Todorov (2020a) refers to as 'Pandora's box' in the form of multilateral discussions on the geographical application of the Treaty might entail significant risks of losing what Russia has already achieved in terms of fisheries management. By officially challenging – yet maintaining – the existing balance in matters related to the legal regime of the zone, the status quo could provide a certain level of stability – although it might also serve as a springboard from which to engage in conflict in the future *should* the need arise.

Moreover, the continuous flow of statements from Russia regarding Svalbard more generally also seem to support an underlying policy of maintaining a form of strategic uncertainty

concerning the challenges to Norwegian rules and regulations on Svalbard, and the legal position concerning the maritime zones around it. It seems that, although Moscow prefers to continue to pressure Norwegian authorities on Svalbard issues, it is not interested in instigating further regional instability and tension – unless the security situation should deteriorate further. In other words, *how* Norway and its allies manage potential mishaps, misunderstandings and miscalculations, alongside potential provocations, also matters in avoiding conflict escalation in this part of the world. This is undoubtedly also what spurred the Norwegian government to further emphasise the need for national control over the archipelago in its latest iteration of its Svalbard white paper from May 2024.¹³

As a North Atlantic and Arctic Ocean coastal State, and with maritime territory eight times larger than its land area, Norway's maritime domain is considered exposed to hybrid threats for several reasons: *First*, Norway's proximity to Russia, a major geopolitical player, increases its vulnerability to hybrid threats. *Second*, Norwegian waters are key to global shipping lanes and energy supplies. Hybrid threats may target infrastructure, such as offshore oil rigs or transportation networks, to create instability or exert pressure on Norway. *Third*, Norway relies heavily on digital infrastructure to manage its energy, communications, and defence systems. Hybrid threats often include cyberattacks that can target this infrastructure, potentially crippling key services like energy grids or navigation systems. *Fourth*, as a member of NATO, Norwegian waters could be targeted as part of a broader strategy to destabilize or challenge NATO's cohesion, as hybrid threats can target both military and civilian sectors. *Fifth*, climate change has led to greater access to the Arctic region, which is rich in resources. Around 80 percent of Norway's maritime space is above the Arctic Circle. This makes Norwegian waters – including the Fisheries Protection Zone (FPZ) around Svalbard – vulnerable, as foreign actors might employ hybrid tactics to assert control or influence over these resources. Threats could include economic pressure, illegal fishing, or even using environmental issues to create geopolitical leverage.

Thus, in the context of Norwegian waters, hybrid threat actors may exploit various scenarios to their advantage: the cutting of undersea cables presents a security issue, as it requires clarification on Norway's rights and obligations to safeguard submarine cables; determining when a mock attack or potential collision or interference transitions into an *armed attack* under international law is crucial, as it dictates the appropriate measures Norway may justifiably take in response; the establishment of military exercise zones by foreign entities can impede fishing and other coastal activities, potentially breaching international law; in the contested maritime areas around Svalbard, over-exploitation by foreign vessels of resources would necessitate an examination of measures Norway can legally and politically pursue to counteract such activities; naval operations bring to the fore Norway's rights to impose conditions on foreign warships' passage and naval exercises. Any such activities raise questions about whether they constitute an unlawful use of force against Norway or infringe upon the principle of 'peaceful use of the sea.'

Reports suggest that Russia may be engaging in hybrid operations within Norway's waters already (Juul Stensrud and Østhagen 2024), with examples ranging from the disruption to one

¹³ It states, for example: "Strong national interests have always been linked to the management of Svalbard. This is also reflected in this report, while at the same time measures are proposed that further strengthen the degree of national control over the activity on the archipelago (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2024, p. 7; authors' translation). The original text reads: «Det har alltid vært knyttet sterke nasjonale interesser til forvaltningen av Svalbard. Dette reflekteres også i denne meldingen, samtidig som det foreslås grep som ytterligere styrker graden av nasjonal kontroll med aktiviteten på øygruppen.»

of the two fibre optic cables connecting Svalbard and mainland Norway (Fredriksen et al. 2022; Guldahl and Eriksen 2024), the suspicious movement patterns of research vessels (Kibar, Prestmo, and Kenny 2021b; Olsen et al. 2022), and the presence of questionable radio equipment onboard trawlers (NRK 2022). The Norwegian government has increasingly expressed concern regarding such activities and the lack of measures to regulate foreign operations. For instance, there is no explicit prohibition in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) against a foreign State conducting military exercises or similar activities within a coastal State's 200-mile zone. And over the past decade, there has indeed been a notable increase in snap military exercises in Norway's waters—often in the vicinity of active fishing grounds in the Barents Sea (Åtland, Nilsen, and Pedersen 2024). Such exercises may not only pose safety hazards but may also serve as deliberate acts of disruption by Russia.

Similarly, while fishing or research vessels are not inherently threats, their potential for dual-use can make them components of a hybrid threat strategy: vessels holding fishing quotas under the Norway-Russia fisheries co-management regime in the Barents Sea (A.-K. Jørgensen 2022), might be strategically used by foreign State agencies; research vessels – which under Article 246 of UNCLOS 'normally' should be granted consent by Norway to conduct research activities in Norway's maritime zones (Jensen 2014) – can be repurposed for intelligence-gathering purposes. The emerging Russian 'shadow fleet' adds to these concerns. This fleet operates without proper registration to evade sanctions and legal oversight. Thus, they allow for covert economic, military, or political actions without the visible or direct involvement of a State, which is a hallmark of hybrid warfare.

Maritime hybrid warfare is an urgently important area of both practice and research in Norway. Incidents such as the sabotage of Baltic Sea pipelines and fibre-optic cable disruptions in the Baltic and Barents Seas have raised alarms. However, the growing complexity of maritime hybrid threats requires to enhance its understanding across multiple areas to effectively detect, counter, and mitigate such threats.

6. CONCLUSION: LINKING THE NORTH ATLANTIC TO THE ARCTIC

Taking a step back and looking at the wider security environment in the Arctic and its linkages to the North Atlantic, we can see that Moscow's rhetoric towards Western encroachment in these maritime domains has become more outspoken along with Russia's increased military presence. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has further exacerbated the increasingly tense security situation in the Arctic, especially the European Arctic (the High North). Although a Russian-initiated military encounter remains unlikely due to the likelihood of such belligerent actions escalating into a kinetic war that Russia could not win, Moscow could employ a range of conventional and unconventional tactics short of formalized state-level aggression. The goal is presumably to maintain some form of plausible deniability, while causing disruption, stress and uncertainty.

Indeed, as showcased here, although the incidents we have highlighted in the case study concern – to some extent – Norwegian jurisdiction, they do not concern only the management of fisheries. By contradicting national jurisdiction, the vessels are also involved in the larger context of legal ambiguity and Russia's geopolitical interests in the region. Contesting aspects of legal frameworks through hybrid means may also create a dual opportunity for Russia. First, these actions continue to uphold access to vital marine resources. Second, Russia's *de facto* presence could prevent full recognition of Norway's sovereign rights in the zone around Svalbard, which Russia – at least rhetorically – has highlighted as relevant in a possible NATO–Russia conflict in the North (A.-K. Jørgensen and Østhagen 2020b). Viewed from a broader geopolitical perspective, Russia can challenge norms of conduct and contest in the regional and global structures of alliances to achieve its greater political objectives without crossing economic and political thresholds or engaging in a kinetic war.

The Russian war in Ukraine that began in 2022 further underscores this relevance of conceiving how Russia *might* use a fishing or research vessel as a pretext for military escalation, albeit still under the threshold of outright warfare. The unstable security situation calls for consideration of possible intended escalation by Russia in order to achieve larger strategic goals such as testing national response capacities, NATO cohesion, or focusing NATO-attention away from crisis-scenarios elsewhere.

Beyond the specific interests of Russia concerning Svalbard as highlighted above, it is also essential to recognise Russian military activity and posturing in the North Atlantic writ large as part of its bastion defence concept of ensuring the relevance of its nuclear capacities located on, or emanating from, the Kola Peninsula. Thus, military activity and strategic uncertainty in these waters are also ways of signalling to NATO (or the United States) – often thought to be the primary goal for Russian strategic military activity in the North Atlantic and Arctic (Wilhelmsen and Gjerde 2018).

However, ambitious economic and development projects require transnational collaboration and, perhaps more importantly, a stable security environment. Judging from Russia's official strategies and the uncertain political landscape characterized by renewed strategic competition, it is in this grey zone, between multilateral collaboration and competition, that Russia may engage in campaigns of simultaneously applied conventional and unconventional means (Devyatkin 2023; Pedersen and Steinveg 2024).

The framework provided here also helps further specific measures to specific hybrid challenges.

Dealing with the first dimension – non-state actors – requires enhancing maritime domain awareness through integrated surveillance, reconnaissance, and intelligence-sharing. This involves coordination among naval forces, intelligence agencies, and international partners. The second dimension – threat of military force – is countered at sea through presence. Coast guard capabilities might provide the ultimate guarantee for stability and sovereignty enforcement, with its often multi-purpose, multi-hatted role (Østhagen 2020).

However, managing challenges that derive from the third dimension – legal-political ambiguity – is a different task. That requires international cooperation and the development of norms and rules through various Law of the Sea-processes to address unconventional challenges (Lott 2022). Collaborative efforts among maritime nations can help to establish a collective response to hybrid threats, and/or further strengthen and specify specific provisions under the Law of the Sea-framework.

Moreover, it is highlighted here the importance of taking a closer look at the maritime domain itself. As legal scholars have done with analysis of how the Law of the Sea can grapple with hybrid or non-traditional threats (Kraska and Pedrozo 2013; Lott 2022), so must security-oriented scholars examine the political, legal and physical changes underway in the maritime domain and how these impact hybrid activity and interrelated analysis. One can also note how the preoccupation of states and state leaders with marine resources and the general strategic value of extended maritime space, together with technological developments that enable greater control over the maritime domain (coast guard vessels, satellites, drones, subsea installations, etc.) will not render disputes over the same space any less relevant.

What this means is that we need to recognise and study how hybrid activity in the maritime domain can be utilized in order to achieve domain-specific goals – such as upholding sovereign rights or underscoring a legal position. This activity does not necessarily have to be placed in the larger context of conflict escalation and possible ‘warfare’. But distinguishing and delineating various goals and purposes should be a highly relevant task for analysts and academics going forward.

In turn, it is apparent that the Arctic and North Atlantic are intricately linked via geopolitical, security, and maritime considerations. A significant connection arises from the geopolitical landscape characterised by competition and cooperation among Arctic states and the evolving security dynamics. The complex geopolitical interplay involves the Arctic’s vast natural resources, strategic military importance, and the increasing interest from non-Arctic states like China. This nexus is exemplified by the Svalbard Archipelago, a case study of geopolitical tension as well as the need for functional cooperation between Norway and Russia, influenced by historical aspects and contemporary international relations.

The Arctic Ocean acts as an extension of the North Atlantic, linking ocean-based issues across regions. The maritime space is crucial due to its extensive coverage of the Arctic region, intertwining regional concerns such as security, climate change, and resource management. As the Arctic is part of the North Atlantic, issues such as hybrid threats – utilising a mix of conventional and unconventional tactics, including cyber-attacks, disinformation, and economic pressure – pose significant security challenges. Hybrid threats blur traditional peace-war boundaries, making them difficult to address, as seen in increased Russian military activity and ambiguous maritime operations.

The Arctic’s security environment will continue to evolve, particularly with the interplay of

hybrid threats. These threats, which may include ambiguous military exercises and the use of civilian vessels for covert operations, represent a strategic challenge to Arctic states like Norway. The potential for armed escalation remains low, but Russia's actions, such as increased vessel movements and infrastructure disruptions, escalate regional security concerns. Norway's proximity to Russia and reliance on maritime domains intensify its exposure to these hybrid threats. Norway is not only an Arctic state, but a North Atlantic one, linking its security challenges to those of its southern maritime neighbours – the UK, Belgium, Netherlands and France – and its western 'neighbours' across the Atlantic – Iceland, Greenland, Canada and the USA – which in turn impacts the wider security considerations of the North Atlantic region.

Climate change impacts, such as ice melting, continue to open new avenues for economic activities like shipping and resource extraction. However, these activities necessitate careful environmental considerations, particularly as ecosystems face disruption. The potential for resource exploitation, such as seabed mineral extraction around Svalbard, may reignite geopolitical disputes, emphasizing the importance of international cooperation and robust legal frameworks.

Enhancing norms and legal frameworks to address hybrid threats and ensuring maritime security will remain focal points for Arctic states, underpinning stability and cooperation across the North Atlantic. Russia's strategic interests, particularly in maintaining access to marine resources and asserting regional influence, persist amidst rising tension with NATO member states. This balancing act between military posturing and multilateral dialogue defines the North Atlantic's future trajectory. The increasing military activity, coupled with economic projects, underscores the need for a balanced approach to ensure stability and prevent conflict escalation in this sensitive geopolitical theatre.

In conclusion, the interconnectedness of the Arctic and North Atlantic is underscored by complex geopolitical interactions, security challenges, and economic opportunities. Future trajectories will likely involve a delicate balance between leveraging economic potential and maintaining regional stability, coupled with continued efforts in multilateral governance and legal frameworks to address the evolving threats in the region, as well as awareness of these issues and linkages across North Atlantic states.

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