

# Interview with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

Following are excerpts from an interview with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg conducted on May 13, 2020, by Paul Taylor, senior fellow at Friends of Europe, for the report “After the Ice - the Arctic and European Security”, published on September 8, 2020.

## **Q: What new threats and challenges do you see emerging in the Arctic?**

A: We used to say that in the High North we have low tensions and what we've seen in last years is increased challenges. We have seen more Russian presence, Russia deploying new capabilities, submarines, reopening old military bases, conducting more exercises, and we have also seen more presence of China in the High North. At the same time, I strongly believe that we should continue to work and strive for avoiding further escalation, further increase in tensions, and therefore NATO always has to find a balance between being firm, being predictable, being present but at the same time to do that in a defensive and measured way and that's exactly what we are aiming at through our presence in the Arctic.

## **Q: What is NATO doing differently in response to these challenges?**

A: ... NATO has over the last years operated the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence, the biggest adaptation of our alliance in decades, since the end of the Cold War. That includes investing in capabilities which are important and can be used in the High North, including for instance more modern naval capabilities, planes but also anti-submarine warfare capabilities... We have exercises like the U.S.-led Ice series, Canada's Nanuk and Norway's Cold Reponse ... where we are testing our capability to operate in the High North. Trident Juncture (in 2018) which was the biggest exercise NATO has conducted for many years ... It not only took place in the High North but also demonstrated our ability to move forces across the North Atlantic. As part of our adaptation, we have also established a new command for the North Atlantic, the Joint Forces Command in Norfolk, Virginia. So we are doing a lot which is increasing our capability to operate, to be present in the High North... Five out of eight Arctic countries are NATO allies - Canada, Denmark, Norway, Iceland and the United States - and two more are close partners - Finland and Sweden... We also have the US and UK for the first time deploying naval ships in the Barents Sea and demonstrating that this is international waters. The Barents Sea is not Russian waters, it's international waters and of course all NATO allies have the right to the freedom of navigation, the right to exercise, overflights.

## **Q: Russian has set some rules for naval vessels sailing the Northern Sea Route further to the east. Are those rules acceptable and how should NATO nations ensure freedom of navigation there?**

A: For the whole High North, the law of the sea applies, also meaning for all the waters in the High North... This of course goes for any sea route that will take place in international waters in the High North. There are well established rules and regulations, freedom of navigation... As long as we all respect the law of the sea, then we have well-defined rules which we all can adhere to...

**Q: People at NATO tell me the Alliance doesn't have an Arctic strategy and that the North Atlantic Council finds it very hard to discuss the Arctic because some nations don't want it on NATO's agenda. Why is that?**

A: That's not the case, because what we have done is strengthened NATO's ability to operate in the High North with significantly more capabilities from land, air sea, on the sea and under the sea, all of that together with more exercises and a new command for the North Atlantic which also covers the Arctic. All of that has put us in a place where we can operate, where we can respond and where we have increased our presence. Since 2014 we have implemented the biggest reinforcement of our lives. I know that Norway has invested in new frigates, new F-35s and new submarines, and all of these capabilities ... are there to enable us to operate even better in the High North. And other allies like the UK, like the US and Denmark are doing exactly the same... NATO is responding to a changing world, but again we always seek to find a balance between predictability, military strength, but without necessarily contributing to increased tensions. I have a strong personal experience of doing exactly that as Norwegian Prime Minister for 10 years. I worked closely with Russia in the High North and we were able to make a lot of progress on issues like the delimitation line in the Barents Sea (maritime border). We agreed huge issues related to energy, search and rescue, and management of big fisheries stocks. That was not despite Norway's membership in NATO, it was because of Norway's membership of NATO, because NATO provided a platform of military strength that enabled us to sit down and have constructive conversations with Russia and agree all these issues...

**Q: Most military-to-military dialogue between the West and Russia has been suspended since Russia's annexation of Crimea, notably at the operational level. Wasn't that a mistake in hindsight?**

A : I'm strongly in favour of military lines of communications... This has not been suspended since 2014... NATO military commanders, both our chairman of the Military Committee and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) have met several times with General Gerassimov, the chief of defence staff in Russia, and I also know that several NATO allies have bilateral arrangements... The US has this INSEA agreement (with Russia) which is a mechanism also to make sure that we prevent incidents at sea including the High North. I know that the joint chief of staff in Norway at Bodo has regular meetings contacts with their Russian counterparts... As far as I know, they still speak every week, at least they did when I was prime minister... They address all issues related to potential incidents, exercises, search and rescue and just to have open lines of communications... We also have the NATO-Russia Council, where we have what we call risk reduction/transparency but are also briefed on military posture, including on exercises... So yes of course we can always look into how we can further strengthen, but the idea that we don't have (military-to-military dialogue) is wrong....

**Q: What hybrid and cyber operations do you see in the High North and how is NATO responding?**

A: Most of the hybrid and cyber incidents and activities we have observed have not been related to one specific geographic area... But what we have seen is more Russian submarine activities in the High North including close to some of the very important infrastructure, the undersea cables. That just highlights the importance of resilience, of protection of critical infrastructure. Many of these cables cross the North Atlantic and some are also crossing the High North.

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**Q: What is it about China's presence or activities in the Arctic that concerns you?**

A: ... China is not an Arctic country but China calls itself a “near-Arctic state” and they have been an observer in the Arctic Council since 2013. They also have launched a Polar Silk Road by adding the Northern Sea Route to their Belt and Road Initiative. Depending on how fast the ice melts, the Northern Sea Route may become quite important as an alternative to going around Africa or through the Suez Canal. We also see that China and Russia are working together in the High North. China is investing in some infrastructure including Arctic LNG facilities and China and Russia formed a joint Arctic research center to study how climate change is affecting the Arctic region and development of the Northern Sea Route.

The mere fact that China is becoming a stronger and stronger naval power - over the last five years, they added 80 ships to their navy, that's the equivalent of the whole UK Royal Navy. And these ships and submarines, many of them can operate in the High North. If you put on top of that also more Chinese icebreakers, then it's a significant capability which of course NATO has to take into account when we do our planning and analysis. Russia is investing heavily in icebreakers and also investing in ships, and China is investing heavily and working with Russia in the High North.

... For the first time in NATO's history, heads of state and government stated when they met in London in December last year that we need to address the rise of China. This is gradually shifting the global balance of power. The rise of China of course presents some opportunities. It has fuelled economic growth, trade. It's fundamentally good if allies trade a lot with China. Opening up the Northern Sea Route has potentially great economic advantages but we need to also see the challenges related to the rise of China and in particular the military rise, the increased Chinese military capabilities. They are now the second largest economy in the world and also the second largest defence budget and this also affects the situation in the Arctic...

**Q: Do you believe the Arctic can remain an area of low tension, insulated from the dynamics of great power competition elsewhere?**

A: ... During the coldest periods of the Cold War, we had some cooperation with the Soviet Union in the North, on energy, fisheries, search and rescue... It's absolutely naive to think you can delink the situation in the High North from the rest of the NATO-Russia relationship, but it has been possible to have lower tensions, more dialogue and a kind of meaningful pragmatic cooperation on some bi-lateral issues, and I think it's good for both Russia and for NATO allies that we try to maintain that... The paradox of the Arctic is that you have this tradition of cooperation, trying to work together, lower tensions, but you also know that under the ice in the Arctic, you have some of the most dangerous weapons in the world... You see many of the new and novel Russian missile systems deployed up there. Most of the nuclear submarine capabilities of Russia are based in Kola and in the High North. We just have to face that the Arctic is a bit different.

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