

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reacting to a geopolitical setback: NATO expansion in Sweden and Finland through the lens of Russian geopolitical culture

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The accession of Sweden and Finland to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is typically seen as a serious geopolitical setback for Russia, the opposite of its goals to limit the alliance's spread eastwards. In contrast to Moscow's stances on Ukraine and Georgia, however, its reaction to NATO's Nordic expansion is more ambiguous. This article uses the framework of critical geopolitics to analyse several layers of Russia's discursive reaction: practical, formal, and popular. This study finds that much of the popular geopolitics continues pre-2022 trends, presenting a securitised and nationalistic construction of NATO as a threatening 'Other'. On the other hand, more moderate and pragmatic assessments in formal geopolitics balance against bellicosity and highlight the agency of the Nordic states, suggesting Russia may return to peaceful cooperation. In practical geopolitics, there is a gap between discourse and practice. Alongside more negative official discourse on NATO Nordic expansion, there was also reduced Russian military activity and an avoidance of provocative steps. These two faces – realism and pragmatism as opposed to securitised and nationalistic threat deterrence – reflect the structure of Russian geopolitical culture when it is applied to the North and Nordic NATO expansion.

Keywords: critical geopolitics; NATO; othering; Russia; security studies

Introduction

In the West, it is conventional to view the accession of Sweden and Finland into North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as an unexpected geopolitical setback for Russia – the opposite of what Putin wanted to achieve with his 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine. NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg made this point most forcefully in October 2023:

*Before the invasion of Ukraine last year, President Putin issued an ultimatum to NATO. He wanted us to close NATO's door to new member states. And that we should remove all our forces from NATO countries in the east of the alliance. He wanted less NATO. Now he gets more NATO. More forces in the east, and more members. This is yet another confirmation that the invasion of Ukraine is a strategic defeat for Russia.*¹

¹https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_219722.htm.

Stoltenberg's comments were seized upon in Russian state media as evidence that the West rejected diplomacy in 2021 and aggressively pursued NATO expansion with the aim of destroying the Russian state. Suffice to say, Russian geopolitical culture produces rather different discourses on NATO expansion on its North-Western border. These responses have evolved against a backdrop of unprecedentedly high tensions between NATO and Russia. In the 2024 NATO Summit, it was declared Ukraine was on an 'irreversible path' to membership. Later in the same year, Kyiv finally received the green light to use ATACAMs (Army Tactical Missile Systems) to hit targets inside Russian territory. Moscow responded with tactical nuclear drills and the use of a new weapon – the Oreshnik, an intermediate-range ballistic missile capable of reaching a speed of Mach 10.

Yet, despite aggressive political signalling and threats about escalation, the new northern NATO–Russia border space has not been a site of serious military tension. In contrast to the 2015–2021 phase of 'coercive signalling'², since 2022 Russia has reduced its military deployments and activities in the North.³ In contrast to its military activity, Russia's discursive reaction has been more ambiguous. This article examines the various levels of Russian geopolitical discourse – practical, formal, and popular – on NATO's Nordic expansion. This provides a snapshot into the fluid operation of geopolitical culture in response to a geopolitical setback in a time of war-driven securitisation and radicalisation.

Contrary to conventional portrayals of Russian geopolitical culture as unified under a Putinist neo-imperial vision, this study reveals heterogenous and contradictory elements. On Nordic NATO expansion, Russia's geopolitical culture is found to operate in a Janus-faced fashion. One face is aggressive and demeans the 'irrational' decisions of Sweden and Finland and threatens harsh responses to any future NATO force deployments in the North. Such rhetoric reflects the securitised, nationalistic, and paranoid part of Russian geopolitical culture that has been particularly visible since 2014.

The other face is more moderate and realist and views the North and the Arctic as a space of peaceful cooperation. This reflects Russia's role as a status quo player in the North that avoids 'NATO provocations' and patiently waits for its Nordic neighbours to 'come to their senses'. This more conciliatory side of Russian geopolitical culture, also visible in its public diplomacy with the Global South, recognises the agency of Helsinki and Stockholm to determine their own version of NATO membership and, one day, to normalise their economic and security relationship with Russia.

The findings underline that the degree of geopolitical consensus within the Russia should not be overplayed; the country should not be presented as a singular monolithic entity. Rather than pre-programmed or rigidly ideological, Russian geopolitical culture is reactive and fluid, the product of how 'elites, and ordinary citizens, constitute the identity and positionality of their state in a world of geopolitical forces'.⁴ With Donald Trump's second term underway in 2025, Russian geopolitical culture is likely to retain this Janus-faced nature, as the country attempts to achieve détente with America while securing its objectives in Ukraine and deterring European states from further action against Russia.

Before analysing the various layers of geopolitical discourse on northern NATO expansion, I first outline how critical geopolitics is used as a framework and outline the materials and methods used in the study. Then, I provide an interpretation of worsening NATO–Russia relations between the annexation of Crimea (2014) and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022) and apply this to the situation in the North in this period.

²Charap, Samuel, et al. (2022). *Understanding Russian coercive signaling*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA198-9.html.

³Åtland, Kristian, Thomas Nilsen, and Torbjørn Pedersen, 'Bolstering the Bastion: The Changing Pattern of Russia's Military Exercises in the High North', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 7:1 (2024), pp. 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.280>.

⁴Savic, Bojan, 'Where is Serbia? Traditions of Spatial Identity and State Positioning in Serbian Geopolitical Culture', *Geopolitics*, 19:3 (2014), pp. 684–718. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.915808>.

Critical geopolitics: practical, formal and popular

In the context of this article, ‘critical geopolitics’⁵ is understood as ‘geopolitical storylines’ that ‘construct the meaning of events in international affairs in ways that prejudice policy options and solutions.’⁶ Critical geopolitics should be distinguished from classical geopolitics, which is related to a ‘statist, Eurocentric, balance-of-power conception of world politics’ in which rivalry over territory and resources is presented as natural.⁷ Critical geopolitics pushes back both on the argument that states are rational actors and that states are the subject of international relations.⁸ Instead, subjects are constantly in the process of being formed or altered in line with discourses about changing perceptions. Thus, the attention of critical geopolitics is on ‘how power structures (like states and markets) have produced places, territories, landscapes, environments, and social agents.’⁹

In utilising the critical geopolitics approach, I follow the approach of Ó Tuathail and Agnew to analyse geopolitical discourses in ‘formal’, ‘practical’, and ‘popular’ forms.¹⁰ ‘Formal’ geopolitics is examined in the ‘dry’ and ‘academic’ outputs produced by ‘intellectuals of statecraft’, who examine the strategic and tactical implications of NATO’s Nordic expansion for Russia. In contrast, ‘popular’ geopolitics is the most accessible and emotional discursive level, usually consisting of simple narratives of ‘who is to blame’ and ‘what is to be done’, replete with ‘us–them’ dichotomies. ‘Practical’ geopolitics represents the formulations made by officials on what states can and should do in real terms.

Taken together, the various levels of geopolitical discourse both draw from and contribute to an existing ‘geopolitical culture’ that, even in Russia’s authoritarian context, is fluid, ‘contested and contradictory’.¹¹ Geopolitical culture is a synthesis of a range of features: ‘how states see the world, how they spatialise it and strategise about the fundamental tasks of the state: security, modernisation, the self-preservation of identity’.¹² Geopolitical cultures ‘formulate answers to three fundamental questions facing all territorial states: who are we, how do we survive, and how do we prosper?’¹³ Studying the three levels of discourse – formal, practical, and popular – sheds light on the nexus of internal power structures and existing practices of ‘framing international events within domestic politics’.¹⁴

In Putin’s Russia, the ‘normalising power of geopolitical discourse’ has been central to way the regime legitimises itself and positions the country on the international stage.¹⁵ The shape that Russian geopolitical culture takes must be understood with reference to the political regime type, power networks, and the media environment of Putin’s Russia.

⁵Kuus, Merje, ‘Critical Geopolitics’, in Robert A. Denemark, and Renée Marlin-Bennett (eds.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia* (1st ed., Vol. 2) (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁶Gerard Toal, ‘Russia’s Kosovo: A Critical Geopolitics of the August 2008 War over South Ossetia’, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 49:6 (2008), pp. 670–705.

⁷Kuus 2010: 2.

⁸Kuus, Merje, and John Agnew, ‘Theorizing the State Geographically: Sovereignty, Subjectivity, Territoriality’, in K. Cox, J. Robinson, and M. Low (eds.), *The Handbook of Political Geography* (Sage, 2008), pp. 117–32.

⁹Toal, Gerard, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 8–10.

¹⁰Tuathail, Gearóid Ó., and John Agnew, ‘Geopolitics and discourse: Practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy’, *Political Geography*, 11:2 (1992), pp. 190–204.

¹¹Paul B. Richardson, ‘Geopolitical cultures, pragmatic patriotism, and Russia’s disputed islands’, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 59:1 (2018), pp. 7–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2017.1421474>.

¹²Toal 2017:10.

¹³Ibid: 39.

¹⁴Toal, Gerard, ‘Oceans Rise Empires Fall’, in *Oceans Rise Empires Fall* (Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 92–93.

¹⁵Suslov, Mikhail, *Geopolitical Imagination: Ideology and Utopia in Post-Soviet Russia* (A. Umland, Ed.; 1st ed.) (Ibidem Verlag, 2020).

Russian geopolitical culture under Putin

In domestic terms, Russian political culture has been shaped by three key factors: (1) the political regime type and how power networks compete for influence; (2) the evolution of foreign policy debates; and (3) the nature of the informational space. In the decade leading to its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the red thread running through Russian geopolitical culture was the goal of regime survival (framed as Russia's survival as a state), the struggle with perceived internal and external enemies, as well as the preservation and projection of Russian power.¹⁶ For over a decade, the regime has called on elites and society to rally to the defence of national security and secure the existence of Russia as a 'civilisation state'.¹⁷

This geopolitical imaginary¹⁸ has developed to legitimate a political regime often coded as personalist.¹⁹ According to this interpretation, power is distributed downwards in a patrimonial presidential pyramid;²⁰ Putin balances between power networks to maintain a functioning 'power vertical'. Mark Galeotti has described this system as an 'adocracy' where various political actors and power networks compete to create and implement specific policies and projects that fit with the general line articulated by the Kremlin.²¹ In contrast, those who openly oppose or attack the Kremlin's general line without gaining permission to be 'legal opposition' are subjected to varying degrees of state prosecution and repression. This ranges from 'ghettoisation' and marginalisation to harassment, legal prosecution, outright imprisonment, and the liquidation of organisations, including nominally apolitical civil society actors.²² The way Russia is run as a personalist autocracy has important implications for how geopolitical discourse is produced along the practical, formal, and popular levels.

One important impact is on the nature of political debate and how actors attempt to influence foreign policy. The President yields overwhelming decision-making power in foreign policy. Only a vetted few, such as MiD spokesperson Maria Zakharova or Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov, will elaborate on foreign policy stances in public. An additional group of hawks is also vocal but does not represent the official stance of the President. Examples include prominent Security Council leaders such as Dmitri Medvedev and Nikolay Patrushev, as well as Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic. Moderate or 'dovish' statements on NATO or Ukraine in the Russian political establishment are extremely scarce. The President plays the role of 'moderate' in contrast to the 'hawks', such as with the 2015 decision to force separatists to sign the Minsk II agreement.

When it comes to 'formal geopolitics', Russia's 'intellectuals of statecraft' avoid open criticism of government policy and look to raise their profile among policy-making audiences and among policy implementers such as the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs. Russia has very few privately funded think-tanks with missions independent of the government. There is significant self-censorship; experts police themselves rather follow the oversight of a Soviet-style party-state apparatus. As the audience for the outputs of formal geopolitics is very small and niche, they are not a cause for concern to those policing the political speech. This means moderate and hawkish positions can be advanced, albeit in careful ways given the wartime restrictions on speech in Russia.

¹⁶Toal 2017: 290.

¹⁷Blackburn, Matthew, 'The morphology of Putinism: the arrangement of political concepts into a coherent ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2024), pp. 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2024.2431864>.

¹⁸Suslov 2020.

¹⁹Frye, Timothy, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (Princeton University Press, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691216980>.

²⁰Hale, Henry E, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²¹See: Galeotti, Mark, *We Need to Talk about Putin: Why the West Gets him Wrong*, (London: Ebury Publishing, 2013); Ledeneva, Alena V, *Can Russia Modernise?: Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

²²<https://re-russia.net/en/review/435/> <https://ovd.info/en/information-human-rights-situation-russia-osces-moscow-mechanism>.

Nonetheless, among the three schools of IR thinking in Russia, it is clear the ‘liberal’ one has lost influence, in contrast to the statist-realist and civilisationalist-traditionalist camps.²³

Domestic political features have also impacted Russia’s information space and how ‘popular geopolitics’ is produced. In Putin’s third term, state media was reorganised under Dmitry Kiselev, resulting in a model of ‘agitainment (...) an intensive and prolonged, centrally sanctioned communication of ideologised political messages, delivered in accordance with an entertainment logic’.²⁴ This tabloid coverage of international affairs is replete with ‘conspiracy theories and nationalist heroics’, which are woven into simplified stories about good and evil.²⁵ Although a relatively free space for anti-regime dissent remains in social media, particularly on Telegram, televised state outputs remain the most consumed media content in Russia.²⁶ While state media adheres to the general line of the government, there is some editorial autonomy on what topics to cover as competing shows battle for ratings and revenue.

To summarise, the practical, formal, and popular dimensions interact in Russian geopolitical culture in ways that reflect the political regime type, power networks, and media environment. As will be seen below, formal and popular geopolitics are largely divorced from each other. While the former translate geopolitics to an elite audience in the strategic realist Kissinger-style of ‘statecraft beyond ideology’²⁷, the latter amplifies Kremlin talking points with an affective, nationalistic, and conspiratorial style to agitate and entertain a mass audience.

Materials and methods

To examine practical geopolitics, I collected relevant texts from the Presidential Administration (Kremlin.ru) and the Foreign Ministry (mid.ru), as well as the reporting of *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, which extensively quotes officials. To study formal geopolitics and the ‘intellectuals of statecraft’, I collected articles, essays, and expert commentary of the Russian Council of Foreign Affairs, RUSSTRAT (the Institute for International Political and Economic Strategies), the Valdai Discussion Club, Russia in Global Politics, and International Affairs (the journal of the Foreign Ministry of Russia). To access ‘popular geopolitics’, I took a sample of media outputs from Russia Today (in Russian), *Krasnaya Zvezda*, and the flagship state media programme ‘News of the Week with Dmitry Kiselev’. While *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* mainly reflects official stances, *Russia Today* offers more idiosyncratic commentaries that critique Western policies in various tones and styles. *Krasnaya Zvezda*, closely affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defence, reports far more on military topics and the comments of security state officials.

All these sources were searched with the primary terms of Finland, Sweden, and NATO over February 2022 to June 2024. I coded these materials on NVivo to identify the thematic markers of geopolitical discourse across the data. This produced additional key words and allowed me to code all of the collected text. Finally, I manually searched all episodes of ‘News of the Week’ to find reports that related to Finland and Sweden.

Before examining the findings of the materials analysed in this study, it is important to interpret worsening NATO–Russia relations between 2014 and 2022. It is, after all, not possible to understand how Russian geopolitical culture has reacted to accession of Sweden and Finland without understanding the deterioration of NATO–Russia relations that preceded it.

²³Tsygankov, Andrei P., and Pavel A. Tsygankov, ‘National ideology and IR theory: Three incarnations of the ‘Russian idea’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 16:4 (2010), pp. 663–686. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066109356840>.

²⁴Vera Tolz & Yuri Teper, ‘Broadcasting agitainment: a new media strategy of Putin’s third presidency’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 34:4 (2018), pp. 213–227, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1459023>.

²⁵Toal 2017: 49–51.

²⁶<https://www.levada.ru/en/2024/06/07/the-role-of-television-and-the-internet-as-the-main-sources-of-news-and-the-top-most-popular-russian-journalists/>.

²⁷Toal 2024: 37.

The deterioration of Russia–NATO relations

A large part of geopolitical culture is developing a coherent sense of ‘self’ as a state and nation. As indicated above, Russia’s geopolitical culture has evolved due to domestic factors such as political regime type and the nature of its information space. This, however, is only part of the picture. No geopolitical culture operates in a vacuum; they evolve while interacting with other geopolitical cultures. For Russia under Putin the interaction with the West is of primary importance. Russia and NATO became ‘locked in a negative spiral of identification’ where each side views the other as a threat, a dynamic that has become an ‘an “autonomous” driver of conflict’.²⁸ What is clearly observable between Russia and NATO is a ‘tit-for-tat’ dynamic²⁹ of mutual securitisation³⁰ and uncooperative reciprocal behaviour that has reduced cooperation and increased hostility.

2014 is generally seen as the critical turning point. Russia’s annexation of Crimea and support for Donbass separatists in 2014 was generally viewed as aggressive and illegitimate in the West, leading to changes in NATO discourses and doctrines, including new troop deployments and military exercises. Moscow equally viewed the West’s support for the Maidan Revolution – which they dubbed an illegal and unconstitutional seizure of power – as an expansionist and provocative Western ploy to swing the balance of power against Russia. While the conflict in Ukraine was partially frozen with the Minsk Agreements, the root causes of the NATO–Russian standoff were not resolved. Three elements drive the NATO–Russia tension, which in some ways now resembles a state of undeclared war: (1) an unresolved geopolitical conflict between status quo and revisionist actors; (2) incompatible ongoing ‘grand strategies’ whose internal contradictions increase the risk of conflict; and (3) the mirroring of securitised Othering discourses that presented the other side as driven by unfair and unlimited aims.

Firstly, 2014 reflected an ongoing geopolitical power struggle between status quo (NATO) and revisionist (Russia) actors. NATO and European Union (EU) expansion is broadly taken to be legitimate and normal in the West; an open-door policy for NATO is part of the post-Cold War status quo. Under Putin, Russia has redefined this as expansionist and threatening. In the seminal 2007 Munich speech, Putin declared America was not a cooperative or consensual status quo power but a domineering and aggressive one hellbent on global hegemony. In 2008, Moscow used hard power in its conflict with Georgia to set the limits of Western expansion and challenge a status quo it saw as threatening to its security. This was repeated in more radical form in 2014 when Moscow reacted to what it categorised as Western ‘hybrid war’ methods of ‘colour revolution’ by annexing Crimea and supporting separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

Meanwhile, NATO’s official assessment of Russia resembles the classic status quo approach, identified by Busan, of diagnosing the ‘immoral and aggressive’ revisionist as ‘the problem’.³¹ With the annexation of Crimea, a consensus was rapidly formed in the West that Putin was an imperialist who had sought to reconquer territory lost in 1991 and earlier. NATO discourse sidestepped all of Russia’s claims of security interests to place the whole blame for the Ukraine crisis on aggressive Russian revisionism and irredentism.

Secondly, the events of 2014 also underlined the incompatibility between Russia and NATO grand strategies. Russia was on a quest for recognition as a great power and wanted its zones of interest to be respected. In contrast, NATO was publicly committed to an open-door policy and an ideology of liberal internationalism that rejected great power *realpolitik*. This alone put the two on a path of collision.

²⁸Wilhelmsen, Julie, ‘Spiraling toward a New Cold War in the North? The effect of mutual and multifaceted securitization’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:3 (2021). p. 2.

²⁹Imedashvili, Nino, and David S. Siroky, ‘Tit-for-Tat.’ Understanding Russia – NATO Interactions in Eastern Europe’, *Caucasus Survey*, 11:2–3 (2023), pp. 163–189, p. 166.

³⁰Hagmann, Jonas (In-) security and the production of international relations: *The politics of securitization in Europe* (Routledge, 2015).

³¹Busan 1991: 300–1.

In addition, each side's grand strategy contained internal tensions that increased the risk of conflict. Russia's ambitious plans to gain a new status in the world order sat alongside an acute sense of vulnerability and insecurity.³² Such concerns are rooted in geography and history: Russia's sheer size and the impossibility of defending its vast land and sea borders simultaneously have been demonstrated in previous invasions of the country. In addition, the collapse of the Soviet political and territorial order in 1991 left traumatic memories and an obsession about avoiding a future repeat.³³ Russia's perceived inferiority to the West in other domains – military, technological, economic, and soft power – also contribute to the deep sense of insecurity. This sense of vulnerability meant Russia would be sensitive to losing a geopolitical power struggle in what it saw as its 'own backyard'. Russia had an incentive to demonstrate it was not weak – even though relatively speaking it was – and use hard power to set limits on NATO expansion.

A tension at the heart of NATO's own strategy also increased the risk of conflict. In the decades following the Cold War, NATO pursued expansion eastwards combined with a reduction in defence spending. As Russia was not officially described as a threat at this time, it appeared a peace dividend could be enjoyed while NATO expanded eastwards. Not merely a defensive alliance, NATO was now touted in the post-Cold War era as an effective means of spreading democracy and Western values.³⁴ Incorporating new members was relatively cheap and easy, as it did not come with concrete defence spending commitments. The downsizing of European militaries continued apace, with military spending as share of GDP halving in most cases.

When NATO expansion reached the Baltic States the contradiction of this approach became manifest. These new members were geographically exposed and contributed little to the alliance's hard power. NATO wargames indicated they could not be defended from a Russian attack. This was not a problem if relations with Russia did not deteriorate. But the announced intention to expand NATO to Ukraine and Georgia in 2008 clearly antagonised Russia. While the open-door policy of expansion gave NATO new purpose, it also has led to an overextended and underfunded alliance with uncertain boundaries on its Eastern flank and increased danger of conflict with Russia.³⁵ This outcome was at odds with the declared aim of using NATO expansion to increase the West's security and deliver stability and peace to Europe. In summary, NATO antagonised Russia while simultaneously expanding but also weakening its basic military capacities. As of 2023, US defence as a % of GDP was at its lowest point since 1953.³⁶ European NATO spending and force deployment are much less than in the Cold War and arguably below the level required for basic deterrence.

The third element was the emergence of new identity discourses that intensified securitisation. Between 2012 and 2014, Russia underwent a 'conservative turn' in which the regime called for national unity against 'colour revolutions', support for 'traditional values'³⁷ and protecting Russia as a 'civilisation state'.³⁸ Russia's Military Doctrine was revised in 2014 to highlight the 'danger' of NATO expansion and its plans to create 'internal military risks' for Russia in the form of 'colour revolutions'.³⁹ Strategic documents were rewritten in these years to respond to the threat of 'hybrid war', a concept elaborated by Valerii Gerasimov, head of the Russian General Staff. Reflecting on

³² Staun, Jørgen, 'Russia's Arctic policy: Upcoming change?', *Polar Record*, 59 (2023).

³³ Toal 2017: 46–47.

³⁴ <https://warontherocks.com/2016/06/natos-open-door-leads-to-an-identity-crisis/>.

³⁵ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2022-01-17/time-nato-close-its-door>.

³⁶ <https://www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Photos/igphoto/2002099941/>.

³⁷ Regina Smyth & Irina Soboleva, 'Looking beyond the economy: Pussy Riot and the Kremlin's voting coalition', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30:4 (2014), pp. 257–275, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2013.865940>; Linde, Fabian, 'The civilizational turn in Russian political discourse: From Pan-Europeanism to civilizational distinctiveness', *The Russian Review*, 75:4 (2016), pp. 604–625.

³⁸ Blackburn, Matthew, 'Mainstream Russian Nationalism and the "State-Civilization" Identity: Perspectives "from below"', *Nationalities Papers*, 49(1), (2021), pp. 89–107. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.8>.

³⁹ Sakwa, Richard, *Russian politics and society* (5, [rev. and updated] ed.). (Routledge, 2021).

the decline of conventional interstate wars in the 21st century, Gerasimov argued the West used diverse methods to contain, extend and weaken Russia.⁴⁰

The core of Gerasimov's conspiratorial vision is that NATO uses indirect, gradual and covert approaches to decisively swing the balance of power in its favour and to Russia's detriment. This way of seeing the Western threat was incorporated into Russia's 2021 National Security Strategy.⁴¹ According to this vision, most Western hybrid war efforts are directed in post-Soviet states and inside Russia itself. Moscow does not generally view Sweden and Finland as central actors in this hybrid war, unlike the UK, Poland or the Baltic States, which are viewed as leading a 'Russophobic' bloc inside the EU and NATO.

Gerasimov's thesis was not only incorporated into Russia's strategic documents after the 2014 Ukraine crisis. After Russia's actions in 2014, NATO also adopted the term 'hybrid war' not merely to describe Russia's 'operational approach to warfare' but to characterise its grand strategy⁴² and entire foreign policy.⁴³ Interestingly, Gerasimov's interpretation of Western strategy was understood in NATO circles as 'the blueprint for the Kremlin's attempts to destabilise its neighbours and Western democracies.'⁴⁴ This flipped all of Russia's accusations upside down and claimed Moscow was the using hybrid war methods to subvert the West.

In addition, NATO reinvented itself in 2014 not merely as an alliance of progressive democracies but the defender of the 'rule-based order' with a new emphasis on fostering democratic 'resilience' against 'hybrid threats' within the alliance and beyond.⁴⁵ All of this amounted to a fundamental redrawing of NATO's global mission under a Manichean grand narrative that identified Russia as the main enemy. As Gerard Toal succinctly put it, this was the 'rhetoric of a civilising mission, not a security alliance.'⁴⁶ Over 2014–2022, NATO listed Russia's 'hybrid threats', ranging from cyber, informational or military forms.⁴⁷ This was the justification for raising defence expenditure of all NATO members to 2% of GDP in the Warsaw Summit of 2016 and deploying four battalions on permanent rotation in Poland and the Baltic States.⁴⁸

Taken together, these three levels explain the deterioration of the NATO–Russia relationship by 2022. Discourses on security, space, and identity merged to solidify Russian and Western geopolitical cultures, which interacted and fed off one another. Ultimately, it is Russia that has resorted to the use of hard power. Moscow viewed NATO as determined to expand, leading to the loss of Russia's strategic buffer zones and increased risk of internal de-stabilisation.⁴⁹ In Moscow's view, inaction would lead to Russia being cut off economically, culturally, and diplomatically from neighbouring countries, defeating its 'Greater Eurasia' strategy and leading to marginalisation, impoverishment, and isolation. Such an interpretation incentivised Russia to take assertive action to reduce these threats and set limits on NATO's ambitions during a 'window of opportunity' in Ukraine when Moscow calculated the alliance was unprepared to resist Russia in hard power terms.

⁴⁰The relevant part of the doctrine describes 'a complex mixture of military force with political, economic, information and other non-military means, implemented with the extensive use of the protest potential of the population and special operation forces' (Doctrine 2014).

⁴¹cited in Herd 2023: 491.

⁴²Fabian, S., 'The Russian hybrid warfare strategy – neither Russian nor strategy', *Defense & Security Analysis*, 35:3 (2019), pp. 308–325.

⁴³Renz, Bettina, 'Russia and 'hybrid warfare'', *Contemporary Politics*, 22:3 (2016), pp. 283–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201316>.

⁴⁴(Sakwa 2021: 584).

⁴⁵Beaumont, Paul David, Julie Wilhelmsen, and Kristian Lundby Gjerde, 'Reimagining NATO after Crimea: Defender of the rule-based order and truth?', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 45:3 (2024), pp. 396–425.

⁴⁶Toal 2017: 299.

⁴⁷Stoltenberg, Jens, 'Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Plenary session at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Bucharest', (2017) https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_147635.htm, accessed 1 September 2025.

⁴⁸Tsygankov, Andrei P, 'The sources of Russia's fear of NATO', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 51:2 (2018), pp. 101–111 (p. 107).

⁴⁹Andrew Doris & Thomas Graham, 'What Putin fights for', *Survival*, 64:4 (2022), pp. 75–88 (p. 82).

In other words, the launch of the Special Military Operation in 2022 partially followed the logic of preventative war.⁵⁰

Here, it is crucial to note that Russia's assertiveness and belligerence is not visible in all regions. Ukraine and Belarus occupy a special place of strategic and cultural vulnerability. Second comes the other post-Soviet states from Moldova to Uzbekistan, in which Moscow strives to retain its influence. Russia believes it can enforce its own Post-Soviet Monroe Doctrine, where neighbouring states are neutral de-militarised buffer zones in which rivals – the United States, Europe, China, Turkey and Iran – are prevented from gaining primacy.

What Russia calls its 'Near Abroad' can be understood as a particular 'geopolitical field' that is post-colonial in essence but, as Gerard Toal has argued, not straightforwardly a 'space of decolonisation'. Toal examined the tensions between four players: the former empire (Russia); the former colonies (Ukraine, Georgia, etc.); concentration of 'populations loyal the former imperial metropole', and the presence of a 'normative great power centre' – the West.⁵¹ These tensions rendered the post-Soviet space pregnant with the potential for separatism, civil conflict, proxy wars, and nationalism, all exacerbated by a zero-sum geopolitical competition for influence and power between Russia and the West.

The specifics of the post-Soviet space as a geopolitical field explain why Russia believes its vital national security interests are at stake in countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova.⁵² Russia does not view Sweden and Finland in this way. The Nordic countries not only have a deeper cultural and historical connection to the West; they are also all secure democracies and members of the EU. They are far stronger and more established states that are less susceptible to external interference and destabilisation. Military neutrality – as well as relatively positive economic, cultural, and diplomatic relations – meant Russia has pursued a different approach to relations with Sweden and Finland.

Simply put, Finland and Sweden were not sites of serious competition between Russia and the West in ambiguous post-Cold War conditions. Russia had far less influence to loose, less capacity to intervene, and no serious crisis point occurred to draw it into the affairs of Sweden and Finland, as it did in Ukraine or Georgia. Returning to the Stoltenberg quote at the start of this article, it is unrealistic to ever expect Russia to view Nordic NATO expansion in the same way as in Georgia and Ukraine. This point is important to keep in mind when summarising security developments between Russia and its Nordic neighbours in the North before 2022.

The Nordic trend towards NATO cooperation and Russia's logic of retaliation

Between 2014 and 2022, Sweden and Finland increased military cooperation with a variety of NATO member states and increasingly discussed joining the alliance. Through training exercises and agreements on force deployments and weapons, both countries were moving from neutrality to *de facto* NATO member status. In response, Russian voiced concerns about NATO deployments and training exercises around its Kaliningrad enclave and warned against efforts to bring Sweden and Finland into the alliance. Russian actions in this period have been described as 'coercive signalling'⁵³: Russia conducted its own large military exercise (Belarus-Zapad 2017) and flew military planes into NATO airspace in several provocative incidents (see Map 1) in what it claimed was a reaction to similar moves by NATO countries.⁵⁴ Lavikainen has described this as following 'logic of

⁵⁰ Geoffrey Roberts, "Now or Never": 'The Immediate Origins of Putin's Preventative War on Ukraine', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 22:2 (2022), pp. 3–27, <https://jmss.org/article/view/76584/56335> Barry R. Posen; Putin's Preventive War: The 2022 Invasion of Ukraine. *International Security*, 49:3 (2025), pp. 7–49. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00501.

⁵¹ Toal 2017: 34.

⁵² (Imedashvili & Siroky 2023).

⁵³ Charap, S., et al. (2022).

⁵⁴ (Tsygankov 2018: 108).

retaliation' where Russia reacts aggressively to even slight increases in NATO forces.⁵⁵ Others have interpreted the Russian actions as intimidation to deter closer military collaboration with NATO that ultimately failed; the Nordic states responded with more not less NATO related activity.⁵⁶

While these military and security tensions simmered, Russia prioritised its broader geo-economic agenda for the Arctic. The North is a region of key importance to Russia's 'Greater Eurasia' strategy. The Northern Trade Route is intended to boost the 'Great Eurasian Partnership' and the Arctic's raw materials are to be extracted to secure Russia as an energy superpower.⁵⁷ While Russia is revisionist in the Post-Soviet Space, it is a status quo power in the Arctic and High North that seeks cooperation and peaceful development rather than conflict.⁵⁸ Its primary security concerns are potential rather than imminent, such as the possible future deployment of NATO nuclear submarines or anti-BMD systems that could undermine Russia's nuclear deterrent.⁵⁹ In addition, climate change may result in the thawing of the Arctic, making it more amenable to military activity that could challenge Moscow's control over the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF).⁶⁰ Notwithstanding such concerns, Moscow has prioritised the socio-economic development of the AZRF, a task complicated by Western sanctions and fall in investment after 2014.⁶¹

In the period of 2014–2022, despite the tension in the North, Russia could have taken some reassurance from NATO's relative weakness in the Baltic Sea. Western experts cast doubt on NATO's abilities to defend the Baltic States in the event of a war with Russia:

There is no strategic depth, and the [Baltic] states are only connected to Europe by the 65-kilometer-wide Suwalki Gap. The entire area is covered by Russian Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. It would be suicide to try to fight a war with the Kremlin on this territory. (Coyle 2018 cited 377: Menon & Ruger 2020)⁶²

The likelihood of a rapid Russian advance in the Baltic Sea certainly threatened NATO's credibility, and Russia's A2/AD dominance nullified many NATO airpower advantages.⁶³ It can be surmised the Kremlin was aware of these asymmetries in the Baltic. Russia was also aware that NATO sought to address this weakness by some day adding Sweden and Finland to the alliance. Finland would give strategic depth and access to the Åland Islands. Sweden would put NATO forces in Gotland and help undermine Russia's A2AD capacities. As Russia preferred to have neutral Finland and Sweden as a strategic buffer zone, these countries increasing cooperation with NATO caused alarm, which coercive signalling aimed to deter.

By 2020, Russian experts noted Sweden and Finland were drifting away from neutrality and into the NATO orbit, predicting their membership would become a real possibility in the coming years.⁶⁴ A 2021 article entitled 'The Formula of North European Security: More NATO, less EU and

⁵⁵ Lavikainen, Jyri, 'Russia's redefined view on strategic stability: a security dilemma in northern Europe?', *FIIA Briefing Paper*, April 2021 (308) (2021), p. 7.

⁵⁶ Åtland, Kristian, Thomas Nilsen, and Torbjørn Pedersen, 'Military muscle-flexing as interstate communication: Russian NOTAM warnings off the coast of Norway, 2015–2021', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 5:1 (2022), pp. 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.133>.

⁵⁷ Kefeli, Igor F., and Anastasia V. Nikolaenko, 'Russia's Arctic Strategy in the Greater Eurasian Partnership', *Evrasijskaâ Integraciâ: Ekonomika, Pravo, Politika*, 15:4 (2022), pp. 109–121.

⁵⁸ Staun, Jørgen, 'Russia's strategy in the Arctic: cooperation, not confrontation', *Polar Record*, 53:3 (2017), pp. 314–332.

⁵⁹ (Zysk, 2015, p. 80) cited in Staun 2017.

⁶⁰ <https://www.theartcicstitute.org/russias-arctic-military-posture-context-war-against-ukraine/>.

⁶¹ Konyshchev, Valery, Alexander Sergunin, and Sergei Subbotin, 'Russia's Arctic strategies in the context of the Ukrainian crisis', *Polar Journal*, 7:1 (2017), pp. 104–124.

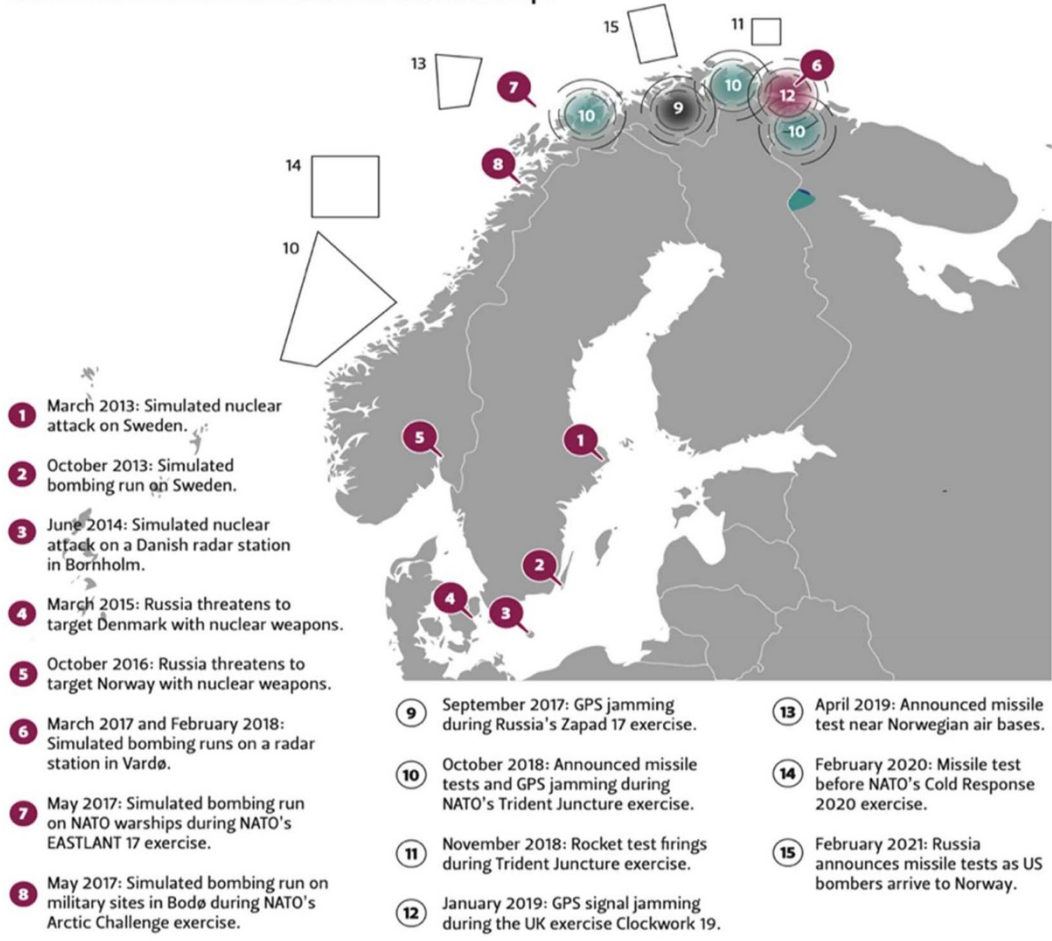
⁶² Menon, Rajan, and William Ruger, 'NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: A net assessment', *International Politics (Hague, Netherlands)*, 57:3 (2020), pp. 371–400.

⁶³ Kemp, Herb PhD, 'Strategic security in Northern Europe: The implications of Russian anti-access/area denial strategies in developing complex threat environments', *Journal of Strategic Security*, 14:1 (2020), pp. 78–91.

⁶⁴ Smirnov A.M. The prospects of NATO membership for Sweden and Finland [Perspektivy vstupleniya Shvetsii i Finlyandii v NATO] // Geopolitics and Patriotic Education [Geopolitika i patrioticheskoye vospitaniye]. 2017. o 27. S. 57 – 63. 9

more pressure', penned by one of Russia's leading Nordic states experts V. K. Voronov, described Finland and Sweden as increasingly *de facto* NATO members. If the conflict in Ukraine flared up again, Voronov predicted Finland and Sweden would very quickly apply to join NATO.⁶⁵

Russia's selected deterrence actions in Northern Europe



Map 1. Russia's selected deterrence actions in Northern Europe.⁶⁶

Thus, between 2014 and 2022 the North became a space of Russia–NATO tension, albeit not involving the explosive post-colonial dynamics of the post-Soviet space, which Russia views as a zero-sum high-stake contest with the West. On the other hand, formal geopolitical analysis inside Russia warned the North could see future NATO expansion if Russia escalated in Ukraine. Yet, despite launching a full-scale invasion that was likely to massively impact the orientation of Sweden and Finland, 'practical' and 'popular' geopolitics in Russia displayed surprise, confoundment, and indignation at these logically predictable developments.

⁶⁵https://www.imemo.ru/index.php?page_id=1248&file=https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/magazines/meimo/01_2021/10-VORONOV.pdf.

⁶⁶Reproduced with permission from Lavikainen 2021: 7.

Official statements: setting the parameters of practical and popular geopolitics

Official discourse on the plans of Sweden and Finland to join NATO contained three main nodes: (1) statements on the security implications, ranging from downplaying the threat to predicting new danger; (2) rhetoric on the ‘irrationality’ of the decision to join NATO when this only benefits US interests; (3) interpretations of Nordic NATO expansion as part of a kneejerk Russophobic sentiment sweeping the West.

The implications for Russian security were first considered by President Putin on 16 May 2022:

Russia has no problems with these states [as] there is no immediate threat for us in the expansion [of NATO] to these countries But the spread of military infrastructure on this territory will undoubtedly cause a reaction from us in response. We will decide that response based on the threat that is created there.

The ‘wait-and-see’ position of the Presidential Administration was surely also based on the uncertainty as to when exactly these countries would join NATO, given that Hungary and Turkey were delaying the procedure. Officials repeatedly stated across 2022 that Finland and Sweden do not represent the same kind of threat as Ukraine joining NATO.

In ‘practical’ geopolitical terms, Russia did not need to do anything about the situation. As Presidential Spokesman Dmitry Peskov put it, ‘we do not have territorial conflicts with Finland or Sweden, in contrast Ukraine becoming a member means Russia has a territorial conflict with a state participating in the alliance.’⁶⁷ Dmitry Medvedev, speaking in his capacity as deputy head of the Security Council, announced ‘Ukraine in NATO is much more dangerous (...) Crimea is part of Russia and any attack on it is a declaration of war on our country (...) a third world war is a total catastrophe.’⁶⁸ In contrast, the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO has far less impact, with Senator Andrey Klimov adding they could not worry a ‘military great power’ like Russia.⁶⁹

Accordingly, for most of 2022 and the first months of 2023, official statements were limited to vague promises of ‘military-technical’ measures in response to the expansion. Across 2023, however, this official stance shifted, as NATO membership became a reality, and the focus shifted to deterring any NATO military deployments in the new members. The Kremlin hoped this message would be heard if not in NATO HQ, then at least in neighbouring Finland, to which most of the messaging was addressed.

Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu announced that military threats to Russia on the North-Western direction could now rise sharply: ‘The deployment of NATO military contingents and equipment is likely, which are capable of destroying critically important targets deep inside Russia on the North-West direction.’⁷⁰ After Finnish entry to NATO was completed in April 2023 MiD spokeswoman Maria Zakharova announced ‘we see any approach of American military infrastructure to our boundaries (...) as a clear confirmation of Washington’s officially declared aim to inflict a “strategic defeat” on our country.’⁷¹ President Putin’s Address to the Federal Assembly was a signal of increased escalatory rhetoric towards NATO in 2024:

We need to seriously strengthen military forces on the Western strategic direction to neutralise threats that have emerged from yet another expansion of NATO to the east, absorbing Sweden and Finland. The West has provoked conflict in Ukraine, the Middle East, and other regions and continues to lie. Now they claim there is no doubt that Russia is preparing to attack Europe. It

⁶⁷ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5355106>.

⁶⁸ <https://rg.ru/2022/06/28/medvedev-shveciia-i-finliandiia-v-nato-ne-stol-opasny-dlia-rf-kak-ukraina.html>.

⁶⁹ <https://rg.ru/2022/06/28/v-sovfe-de-ne-uvideli-znachimogo-vreda-dlia-rf-ot-vstupleniia-shvecii-i-finliandii-v-nato.html>.

⁷⁰ <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/42782>.

⁷¹ https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/video/brifingi/1866793/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab20004612a15e81a692c3f8314383c04ad704b33a51f249ea3fa78b72006a35cacd90081a8ffaba14300014c65da6c832733e6d819d5a73873eccb36e29761cdb3fb8ee384387dade13c3ba86742d6caa1ab8ad295942428c60cd.

*is just – we all know – total nonsense. And at the same time, they pick out targets to hit in our territory and select the most effective weapons to use. But we remember the fate of those who sent their armies on the territory of our country. Today the consequences for possible invaders would be far more tragic. They must understand that we have weapons – and they know this! – that can destroy targets on their territory.*⁷²

In March 2024, the significant announcement was the recreation of the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts, which Sergei Lavrov said was a reaction to Sweden and Finland joining NATO: ‘we will put extra weapons sufficient to meet the threats that may appear there on the territory of Sweden and Finland.’⁷³ One month later, the Foreign Ministry repeated that Russia’s ‘military-technical measures’ would be contingent on the level of ‘NATO military infrastructure that is deployed on Finnish territory.’⁷⁴ This latter comment was a response to the signing of a new defence agreement between USA and Finland. A year later in April 2024, Maria Zakharova responded aggressively to the recently completed NATO Nordic Response exercise:

*These exercises and the rhetoric around them are elements of a hybrid war unleashed by the Collective West on our country. With these measures they are trying to put pressure on the Russian Federation, drag our country into an arms race, stretch our military potential, to force Russia to give up the goals of the Special Military Operation. This will not succeed. We have enough strength and resources to provide security to Russia and defend her interests in all directions.*⁷⁵

The second major node in official discourse interprets the ‘irrational’ decision of Sweden and Finland to join NATO and claims the main beneficiary is the USA. Russia’s Foreign Ministry led the way in presenting NATO expansion as aggressive and not in the interests of Finland and Sweden. The argument here is that Sweden and Finland had lost strategic autonomy in giving up neutrality, which was presented as an optimal solution for both countries. As MiD spokeswoman Maria Zakharova put it, both countries became ‘mindless reproducers of their new NATO masters.’⁷⁶ Lavrov claimed the Americans called the shots on how to use Finland and Sweden to ‘contain Russia.’⁷⁷ In taking this decision, Sweden and Finland ‘irreversibly lose their sovereignty’ and become just another of the NATO members that ‘cannot decide anything by themselves.’⁷⁸ Furthermore, it was claimed there was no rational reason to join NATO at this time, a point elaborated on by Deputy head of the Federation Council Konstantin Kosachev:

*There was no threat from Russia. There was no genocide of Russians happening there, there was no plan to take by force any Russian territory, there were no nuclear weapons or other topics that caused a security problem for Russia. So why did Helsinki take this strategic threat on to itself? Only one reason: to hurt Russia. The approval of this thoughtless policy happened in the context of a clear stirring up of anti-Russian feeling*⁷⁹

Russian Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matvienko made similar comments, suggesting the two countries only joined NATO due to the pressure of the ‘collective West’, as she could see no

⁷²<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73585>.

⁷³<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6551476#:~:text=«У%20нас%20уже%20приняты%20организационные,%2C—%20сказал%20глава%20МИД%20ПФ.>

⁷⁴<https://www.interfax.ru/russia/894366>.

⁷⁵https://mid.ru/cn/foreign_policy/news/1946792/?lang=ru.

⁷⁶<https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/41082>.

⁷⁷<https://tass.ru/politika/15618293>.

⁷⁸https://mid.ru/es/foreign_policy/news/1866793/?lang=ru.

⁷⁹<https://rg.ru/2023/04/04/vice-spiker-konstantin-kosachev-poiasnim-pochemu-vkliuchenie-finlandii-v-nato-eto-ee-pirrova-pobeda.html>.

objective reason for them applying as ‘nothing was threatening Finland or Sweden.’⁸⁰ In a commentary in *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, prominent expert Fyodor Lukyanov explained the decision to end neutrality as a psychological and ‘moral-ethical’ knee-jerk desire to be ‘on the right side of history’ rather than sober analysis of hard security needs.⁸¹ A joke posted by Dmitri Medvedev made the rounds on major media outlets:

*Pekka, why is our country joining NATO?
Because the Russians are threatening us.
And why are they threatening us?
Because Matti, we are joining NATO.*⁸²

In explaining the main beneficiary, officials unsurprisingly pointed to NATO and the USA. The entry of Finland and Sweden was seen as a way of raising the morale of the alliance, MiD deputy minister Aleksandr Grushenko claimed:

*NATO is the kind of organisation that cannot live without an enemy (...) the most important thing is to create the image of the opponent while moving the organisation to the borders of this potential opponent. Now they are announcing in Asia a new zone of interests which moves its defence alliance to the borders of China.*⁸³

Secretary of Russia’s Security Council Nikolay Patrushev echoed these points, claiming ‘NATO is not a defensive but clearly aggressive offense-minded military bloc – joining it means automatically transferring a significant part of one’s sovereignty to Washington.’⁸⁴ Swallowing up the sovereignty of other nations, America is presented as gaining power. Nordic NATO expansion would assist US plans to push Russia out of certain zones in the Arctic.⁸⁵ America was aiming to create a system of military bases in Finland and improve its power projection in the North.⁸⁶ Finland would be squeezed to spend more money on military spending to assist this US ambition.⁸⁷

Commentaries on RT and *Rossiskaya Gazeta* contributed to practical geopolitical discourse by underlining the point that, as a result of joining NATO, Sweden and Finland had put themselves in the crosshairs of Russia’s nuclear strikes in the event of war⁸⁸, all while reducing – not increasing – the security of their countries.⁸⁹ It was repeatedly argued that both countries had irrationally discarded the strategic autonomy that neutrality offered them and become ‘de-sovereignised’ through entry to NATO.⁹⁰ These discourses present Russia as a pragmatic rational actor and the West as intoxicated by emotion and ideology. The West’s ideology is presented as a misguided and obnoxious liberal internationalism; the emotion is one of kneejerk Russophobia as the latest manifestation of Western ‘cancel culture’. European states are presented as falling under the spell of this ideological-emotional spell, playing the role of vassal to the American hegemon, largely to the detriment of their own economic interests and national security. As will be seen below, ‘popular geopolitics’ reinforces this othering of NATO and the West for a mass audience.

⁸⁰ <https://rg.ru/2022/05/19/matvienko-reshenie-shvecii-i-finliandii-o-vstuplenii-v-nato-priniato-pod-davleniem-zapada.html>.

⁸¹ <https://rg.ru/2023/04/04/boleev-neaktualnyj-nejtralitet.html>.

⁸² <https://rg.ru/2023/08/14/medvedev-opisal-situaciiu-so-vstupleniem-finliandii-v-nato-anekdotom.html>.

⁸³ <https://ria.ru/20221114/nato-1831257911.html>.

⁸⁴ <https://rg.ru/2022/05/24/patrushev-helsinki-i-stokholm-primut-v-nato-potomu-chto-tak-reshil-vashington.html>.

⁸⁵ <https://rg.ru/2023/05/29/aleksej-leonkov-ssha-i-strany-evropy-otrabatyvaiut-sposoby-vydavlivaniia-rossii-iz-arktiki.html>.

⁸⁶ <https://tvzvezda.ru/video/news/2023431815-3cfE1.html>.

⁸⁷ <https://tvzvezda.ru/video/news/2023926120-q5HWw.html>.

⁸⁸ <https://rg.ru/2023/04/04/voennyi-ekspert-leonkov-teper-rossijskie-iadernye-rakety-budut-naceleny-na-finskie-goroda.html>.

⁸⁹ <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/1003632-mirzayan-finyandiya-shveciya-nato>.

⁹⁰ <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/1004698-nato-finyandiya-shveciya-turciya>.

Here, it is important to note an important gap between spikes in bellicose official statements and the actual military activities of Russia in the North. Research has shown a reduction in Russian NOTAMs (warning notices to aircraft) away from the Norwegian Sea towards the Barents Sea. This has been interpreted as a shift away from the coercive signalling of 2015–2022 towards a less ambitious and more defensive pattern around Russia's 'Bastion'.⁹¹ As Russian measures of coercive signalling only resulted in increased NATO activity in 2015–2022, this may explain the change of approach in 2022–2024. However, this can also be explained by Russia's overstretch in Ukraine as military deployments in the Kola Peninsula were reduced by to one-fifth of February 2022 levels.⁹²

Official Russian discourse, supported by prominent media commentators, does not acknowledge Russia's decreased military activity or discuss Nordic NATO expansion as a geopolitical setback for Russia. In contrast, formal geopolitics, which is consumed by vastly smaller numbers of people, does acknowledge these points and unpack both the nature of the setback for Russia and the kind of challenges it is producing.

Formal geopolitics: responses to NATO's new advantages in the north

A small number of academic articles and short-form analysis have been published so far on NATO's Nordic expansion. One such article, written by P. A. Smirnov, a specialist on America, has explicitly listed how Nordic NATO expansion is a strategic setback for Russia.⁹³ Smirnov predicted new tensions will emerge in the Arctic, as Sweden and Finland offer NATO new possibilities in the monitoring of Russian military activity and the projection of power. With Russia expelled from the Baltic Council in 2022 and suspended from the Arctic Council, Smirnov argued there was less chance of cooperation and problem-solving, and greater chance of escalation and threat.

Russian think tankers have also interpreted how the expansion fits into NATO's strategic goals. This presents the expansion into Scandinavia as transforming neutral countries into a NATO 'outpost of pressure on Russia'.⁹⁴ Thus, the addition of Sweden and Finland bolsters NATO through the 'creation of unified zone of defence from the Arctic to the Black Sea and Mediterranean'.⁹⁵ NATO expansion in the North is understood in realist terms as a means of containing, excluding, stretching, and pressuring Russia by adding another chain of interlinked countries with integrated militaries along NATO's eastern flank.⁹⁶ Thus, a new unified northern region links Sweden and Finland firstly with Norway and Denmark, and secondly Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. New strategic, tactical and logistical possibilities accrue for NATO within this unified space. A second NATO chain is Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece which is formed to block Russia from the Mediterranean. Between the first and second chain is the linker section: Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Moldova – which is still a work in progress for NATO as the last two countries have yet to join the alliance.⁹⁷ In the context of this broader picture, several analysts used NATO's Nordic expansion in realist terms to retrospectively justify Russia's actions in 2014; intervening in Ukraine forestalled NATO plans to expand into Ukraine and close the Black Sea region to Russia.

⁹¹ Åtland, Kristian, Thomas Nilsen, and Torbjørn Pedersen, (2024).

⁹² Nilsen, Thomas, 'Land forces at Kola reduced to one-fifth, Norwegian Intelligence says', *Barents Observer*. (13 February 2023), Retrieved from <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/02/four-fifths-kola-land-forces-wiped-out>.

⁹³ Smirnov P. Ye. The Accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO: The Geopolitical Consequences for Russia's positioning in the Baltic region [Vstupleniye Finlyandii i Shvetsii v NATO: geopoliticheskiye posledstviya dlya pozitsionirovaniya Rossii v Baltiyskom regione] // The Baltic Region [Baltiyskiy region] 2023. T. 15, № 4. S. 42–61.

⁹⁴ <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/2733>.

⁹⁵ <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/shvecziya-finlyandiya-nato/>.

⁹⁶ https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/v-polku-nato-pribylo-cto-shvetsiya-mozhet-predlozhit-alyansu/?sphrase_id=145053784.

⁹⁷ <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/39390>.

'Formal' geopolitical analysis outlines the benefits Finland and Sweden bring to NATO, including points often avoided in official statements and state media coverage. One advantage is the addition of two states with high capacities, existing military abilities, and relatively strong economies. This ensures the two new members will act as NATO 'donor' states, in contrast to many of the previous new 'recipient' members.⁹⁸ These Russian assessments largely match those of a 2024 RAND Corporation that listed NATO's gains from the accession of Sweden and Finland. According to the RAND report, with these new 'frontline NATO states', NATO can achieve more 'ambitious cooperation' and more integrated defence and deterrence capabilities, while also being able to 'hold key Russian bases and forces in the Kola Peninsula (part of Russia's so-called "Bastion") at risk' as well as 'other hubs such as the city of St. Petersburg using precision long-range fires, if in the event of war'.⁹⁹

While Russian analysts recognise NATO's threatening new possibilities, they also underline this will take significant time and resources to realise.¹⁰⁰ Raising military spending and weapons production, construction of airbases and fortifications, as well as training, conscription and recruitment, are all processes requiring fund-raising, coordination and joint implementation. This is also the view of Western analysts who see serious challenges in remedying the 'massive neglect of defence in previous years'.¹⁰¹ Thus, in the current period, NATO deployments do not threaten Russia's 'Bastion Defence' in the North. The Nordic NATO states are under the cover of article 5 and a nuclear umbrella. There is relative calm in the North. Nonetheless the lack of a recognised security architecture for the region does leave the door open to future misunderstandings and miscalculations.¹⁰²

A final factor in formal geopolitics is interpretations on how Sweden and Finland will behave as new NATO members.¹⁰³ Such analysis is far less inclined to present NATO as a centralised and unified actor than official discourse, which sees the military alliance as run for US interests. Several think-tank outputs have asked what model Finland and Sweden will follow as NATO members. One option is to take the Baltic States and Poland model, which will render the Nordic states 'anti-Russia' bulwarks fully committed to closing and containing Russia. This will increase the security competition in the North. The other option is the development of a unique 'Nordic model' that involves more cooperation and diplomacy with Moscow.¹⁰⁴ Mainstream analysts recommend that Russia avoids any actions that would stoke tensions in the north to allow future diplomatic contacts and a renewal of cooperation with the Nordic states in the future.¹⁰⁵ A similar approach in the Arctic would ensure the region experiences limited securitisation and military competition. It can be argued Norway, Finland and Sweden should look to restore the balance between deterring and

⁹⁸ <https://tvrzvezda.ru/news/2023451717-EbLfY.html?ysclid=lxado3gdeq55280317>.

⁹⁹ <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA3236-1.html>.

¹⁰⁰ <https://russtrat.ru/analytics/19-maya-2022-0010-10320>.

¹⁰¹ Friis, Karsten, and Rolf Tamnes, 'The defence of northern Europe: new opportunities, significant challenges', *International Affairs* (London), 100:2 (2024), p. 8, pp. 13–824/p. 818.

¹⁰² Boulègue, Mathieu, 'Up North: Confronting Arctic Insecurity Implications for the United States and NATO, CEPA Report', (5 December 2024) <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/up-north-confronting-arctic-insecurity-implications-for-the-united-states-and-nato/>.

¹⁰³ Andrey Kortunov, 'Две модели НАТО [Two models of NATO]' (18 May 2022), <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/dve-modeli-nato/>.

¹⁰⁴ Andrey Kortunov, 'Полноценная «Арктическая война» – не самая главная угроза международной безопасности сегодня [A full-fledged "Arctic war" is not the main threat to international security today]' (9 February 2023), https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/polnotsennaya-arkticheskaya-voyna-ne-samaya-glavnaya-ugroza-mezhdunarodnoy-bezopasnosti-segodnya/?sphrase_id=98886776.

¹⁰⁵ Sergey Andreev, 'Пути разошлись [The paths diverged]', RIAC, (7 April 2023), <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/puti-razoshlis-kak-shvetsiya-i-finlyandiya-v-nato-vstupali/>.

reassuring Russia, as one part of a new European security arrangement under construction in the second Trump presidency.¹⁰⁶

Thus, in contrast to the more propagandistic and bellicose tone of ‘popular geopolitics’, many experts emphasise Nordic agency and want to leave door open to future cooperation.

Popular geopolitics: constructing the enemy

Three main themes emerge in reading a range of popular geopolitics media, all of which are present in official discourse: (1) the irrationality of the decision of Sweden and Finland to join NATO; (2) the aggressive nature of the US-led alliance and need to stand firm against it; and (3) the role of organic and created Russophobia in changing the orientation of Finland and Sweden, as well as previous historical examples of this process. This section focuses on *News of the Week (Vesti Nedeli)*, one of the most watched weekly TV news shows in Russia. The show is an excellent site to observe how popular geopolitics are exhibited in fifteen-minute ‘agitainment’ reports for mass consumption.

In May 2022, the first major report on *Vesti Nedeli*, entitled ‘The northerners want to make things hotter’, came in reaction to Finland and Sweden applying to join NATO. It began with a dubbed Euronews report on how Swedish ‘preppers’ educated the population on what to do in the event of a Russian attack.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile Finland was shown to be building air raid bunkers. The report juxtaposed this with archive footage recalling the warm relations between Finland and the USSR, in its close trade, tourism and industrial-technological ties. This was followed by a clip of Putin from the archives visiting Helsinki in 2016 where he warned Finland, albeit in a relatively light tone, of the dangers of joining NATO:

Imagine if Finland joined NATO. This would mean Finnish military forces would lose their independence and sovereignty in the fullest sense of these words. They would become part of the NATO military infrastructure which would immediately be on the borders of the Russian Federation. We without question value Finland's neutral status. To paraphrase what one of my Finnish friends said: 'NATO would happy to fight Russia to the last Finnish soldier'. Do you need this? We don't!

Putin concluded his words with a smile and friendly demeanour. This was then juxtaposed against an unsmiling image of the Finnish president, who had recently called Putin to inform him of his country's plan to join NATO. This was presented as breaking the ‘northern balance’ that had held peace in the region since 1945. The clear implication was that Finland's abandonment of this secure arrangement was a serious mistake.

This report set the context for Kiselev's monologue, performed with a picture of a strategic nuclear missile launch in the background. Why would these countries end an optimal balance of power arrangement and jump into NATO? Rather than answering, Kiselev focused on Russia's ‘rudely’ ignored December 2021 proposal for a ‘fair and equal’ NATO–Russia deal. In a typical rhetorical turn, Kiselev said the official reason for NATO's expansion is ‘fear. But in fact, they only become more frightening [to Russia]’. In reaction to NATO deployments in the new countries: ‘Russia will have no choice but to address the disbalance caused ... this is not to scare anyone, it is just a reaction to NATO expansion in our direction ... these countries are now our legal targets when they were not before.’¹⁰⁸ This narration is an excellent example of how realist language is endowed with an emotional and nationalistic coating to inform the public of a new geopolitical development.

¹⁰⁶Matthew Blackburn, Julie Wilhelmsen, ‘Trump II: A new trajectory in Russia relations for NATO Nordic states, NUPI Policy Brief (1/2025)’, (2025), <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/trump-ii-a-new-trajectory-in-russia-relations-for-nato-nordic-states>.

¹⁰⁷<https://vesti7.ru/video/2411117/episode/15-05-2022/>.

¹⁰⁸<https://vesti7.ru/video/2411106/episode/15-05-2022/>.

From the Spring of 2023, media attention clearly shifted to Finland. This reflects the country's 1400 km border with Russia and the speed with which bilateral relations worsened. One of the official cues that seems to have led to increased attention on Finland was a visit to Russian Karelia by Nikolay Patrushev on 31 July 2023, who declared:

*The policy of the Finnish leadership, encouraged by their overseers in Washington, destroys the neighbourly Russian–Finnish relations established after the defeat of Fascist Germany. Once again, a confrontational approach is taken with our country.*¹⁰⁹

Patrushev directly linked the current 'anti-Russian' course of Finland to its historical experience of waging war on the side of Nazi Germany against the USSR 'with particular cruelty (...) barbarically killing over seven thousand prisoners of war and torturing in concentration camps up to eight thousand peaceful citizens'.¹¹⁰ Patrushev claimed the Finns to this day seek to regain control over Karelia and actively encourage separatism.

One RT commentary linked Finnish 'Russophobia' to the rise of right-wing nationalist parties since the mid-1990s such as the 'True Finns'.¹¹¹ The references to Russophobia are combined with stories highlighting Helsinki's new hostility to its neighbour in the second half of 2023. This includes the confiscation of the assets of Russian citizens,¹¹² the gradual closure of the Finnish border with Russia (denying a favoured point of entry to the EU for Russian visa holders),¹¹³ and compliance with sanctions leading to economic downturn in border regions.¹¹⁴ All in all, Helsinki was shown to be in radical solidarity with Ukraine and, thus, experiencing a bout of radical anti-Russian nationalist feeling. In May 2024, an open-air exhibition was opened by the Military-Historical Society entitled 'Episodes of Finnish Russophobia'.¹¹⁵ The exhibition summarised the new line on Finland and its deeper historical roots of enmity to Russia. Particular attention went to Helsinki's decision to join Hitler's Anti-Soviet coalition and its dreams of a 'Greater Finland'. The key claim made in the exhibition is that this dream of territorial expansion is alive again in contemporary Finland. Following the path of the Baltic States, it is claimed that Finland is entering the mainstream of 'European neo-Nazism'.

Kiselev picked up these themes in a November 2023 report entitled 'The Finnish Wall', by which time the country had joined NATO and was building fences on its border with Russia. Once again nostalgic images of USSR–Finland relations were rolled out, juxtaposed with contemporary images of the closed border between the countries, empty gas stations, and duty-free stores. While Finland was building an expensive fence and bunker system along the border, the Russian region of Karelia was presented as doing well with domestic tourism and new industrial growth stabilising the local economy. Kiselev explained why Finland was behaving in this way was by returning to 20th history.¹¹⁶

Kiselev's narration attacks the 'myth' that Finland joined the Nazi invasion of the USSR only to regain territory lost in the Winter War. The 'real reason' was a plan to create 'an ethnically pure Greater Finland'; a vision outlined in a book published in Finland and exposed in a feature length documentary on Russian state television called 'The Ghost of a Greater Finland' (see picture 1).¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ <https://tass.ru/politika/1841302>.

¹¹⁰ <https://rg.ru/2023/07/31/nikolaj-patrushev-helsinki-soznatelno-idut-na-konfrontaciiu-s-moskvoj.html>.

¹¹¹ <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/1182079-aksyonov-rossiya-finlyandiya-nacionalizm>.

¹¹² <https://rg.ru/2023/11/20/diplomat-beliaev-moskva-otvetit-na-liubye-antirossijskie-dejstviia-finliandii.html>.

¹¹³ <https://rg.ru/2023/12/15/reg-szfo/finliandiia-zakryvaet-granicu-v-moment-pikovogo-sprosa-na-poezdki.html>.

¹¹⁴ <https://rg.ru/2024/05/11/mid-rf-v-finliandii-iz-za-rusofobii-ostanavlivaitsia-promyshlennye-predpriatiia.html>.

¹¹⁵ <https://rg.ru/2024/05/30/reg-cfo/eto-nachalos-ne-vchera-v-moskve-otkryli-vystavku-ob-istokah-finskoj-rusofobii.html>.

¹¹⁶ <https://vesti7.ru/video/2709234/episode/05-11-2023/>.

¹¹⁷ <https://vesti7.ru/video/2709157/episode/05-11-2023/>.



Picture 1. Graphics from 'News of the Week' 5 November 2023.

The rest of the report played up Finland's leadership in close ties with Hitler and claims Finland's genocide of Soviet prisoners, where over 7000 were killed in camps across Karelia, went unpunished in the deal signed with the USSR that converted Finland into an ally against Germany. This reporting indicates how popular geopolitics is developed using historical memory, constructing threats in the present based on the traumatic violent past.

The final relevant report came in January 2024, in response to Finland closing all the crossing points on the border with Russia. The report emphasised the economic pain this inflicts on Finland while the property of Russian citizens is also seized, actions presented as 'illegal' according to previous agreements and international law. The explanation for these actions is found to be 'Russophobia', visible in the renaming of streets and threats to remove Finnish citizenship for those with Russian passports. It is claimed those married to Russians lose their jobs and face discrimination. It was reported that no candidate in the Finnish Presidential Elections will pursue any dialogue with Russia.

Once again references are made to Finnish 'atrocities' in World War II. Finland's 'crimes' in the past are tied to those of the present. The report mentions the leader of the True Finns party tweeting that 'killing Russian soldiers is a good thing, and Ukrainians should be helped to kill them'. He is also shown to have signed rockets and bombs going to Ukraine with the slogan 'For the Freedom of Finland'.¹¹⁸ The report then immediately cuts to a scene of children in a Russian-language school in Eastern Finland that the Finnish authorities plan to close. Kiselev's monologue opened with an image of a wintertime closed road border into Finland under the title 'In NATO's Finland'. The report ends by quoting an unnamed Finnish politician who, in a social media post, called for any Russians without legal right to be in the country to be shot.

Thus, news reporting is constructing Finland as a bad neighbour and an emergent threat to Russia. This is presented as a repetition of previous historical trends, where rival great powers turn Russia's neighbours against them. These discourses on Russophobia require more research. It can be argued this conspiratorial and nationalistic vision of history, applied to the present, forms an increasingly large part of Russian geopolitical culture. This involves the instrumentalisation of historical memory to create a narrative of perfidious and devious Western states supporting anti-Russian nationalist movements in Central and Eastern Europe to achieve the encirclement and isolation of Russia from Europe. Such views are increasingly mainstream in wartime Russia and may now be incorporated into new programmes of patriotic and military education.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ <https://vesti7.ru/video/2747675/episode/21-01-2024/>.

¹¹⁹ https://russiapost.info/politics/dna_of_russia.

Conclusion

This review of Russia's reaction to NATO's Nordic expansion has underlined how the discourses of formal, practical, and popular geopolitics interact within a fluid geopolitical culture. The realist, strategic, and pragmatic arguments of 'formal geopolitics' contrast with the securitised, bellicose, and nationalistic 'popular geopolitics'. Official statements, including pronouncements on 'practical geopolitics', show the spectrum of acceptable discussion. This article has underlined how realist calculations of balance of power or assessments of threat are often, ultimately, expressed through the prism of identity.¹²⁰ The construction of the 'self' is not done on a blank canvas but is constrained by temporally and spatially bound discourses.

This study shows that the North as a space in Russian geopolitical culture is constructed quite differently than its so-called Near Abroad. Although a more thorough quantitative analysis is needed to substantiate this, Nordic NATO members are less often construed as a threat in the nationalistic, securitised, and bellicose language of Russian popular geopolitics than post-Soviet states such as Ukraine and Moldova. The tough language of Russian Foreign Ministry officials is not matched by the actual military activity of the Russian Federation. From February 2022 to the end of 2024, there was a reduction in land forces deployment and in the geographical scope of Russian NOTAMs. In practical geopolitics Russian officials claim they take only defensive measures and show restraint against NATO escalation and provocation. NATO's expansion is presented as a potential rather than an actual threat. Russia's more moderate signalling to the Nordic NATO states can be easily missed in the context of 2024's grandstanding escalatory rhetoric between Russia and the West.

With a new Trump administration seemingly seeking détente with Russia, it now seems less likely such brinksmanship and security competition will spill over into the Northern theatre. Nonetheless, understanding Russian reactions in terms of geopolitical culture is important, given both NATO commitments to expand the Alliance further as well as rapidly integrate Finland and Sweden into the alliance as 'frontline' members. Much depends on the actions of the actors involved. Nordic NATO states have a window to decide their form that their NATO membership will take; they need not follow the model of Poland and the Baltic States.¹²¹ Moscow does not treat NATO expansion into Sweden and Finland as an existential threat but does appear to view the deployment of new NATO military infrastructure in these terms.

We are still in the initial phase of NATO integration of Sweden and Finland. After refusing to do so over 75 years as a NATO member, Norway finally granted the US military full access to 12 Norwegian bases.¹²² Sweden and Finland have made very similar deals. Influential voices in US defence circles advocate a large expansion of US and NATO military presence in the North to increase deterrence and stretch Russia's limited resources. The threat of encirclement and overstretch by an expansive NATO preoccupies a significant part of Russian geopolitical culture. Security competition and the lack of a stable and agreed upon set of operating principles may yet spark a spiralling security dilemma in the North that could produce very dangerous scenarios.

In addition, negative mutual perceptions may encourage Russia-NATO security competition into the North.¹²³ All levels of Russian geopolitical discourse analysed in this article avoid open acknowledgement that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine hugely damaged Russia's image in the Nordic countries and is the direct cause of their NATO accession. The fact that a military operation, designed to improve Russia's security, reduced it by encouraging Sweden and Finland to join NATO, creates uncomfortable dissonance. Both official statements and the outputs of

¹²⁰ Neumann, Iver B, 'Security, ethnicity, nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 24:2 (2018), pp. 348–368.

¹²¹ Blackburn, M., Wilhelmsen, J. 2025.

¹²² <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/new-agreement-gives-us-access-four-new-military-areas-north>.

¹²³ Wilhelmsen, Julie, and Anni Roth Hjermmann, 'Russian certainty of NATO hostility: Repercussions in the Arctic', *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 13 (2022), pp. 114–142.

popular geopolitics seek to reduce this dissonance by blaming the expansion on the arch imperialist meddler America and their hapless and feckless stooges in Sweden and Finland. It is also claimed that sustained Russophobic sentiment, fostered from without and growing organically within, is a major factor in worsening relations. It is unclear whether this geopolitical imaginary, reproduced so frequently in popular and practical geopolitics, may be an autonomous factor that influences Russian foreign policy actions towards European states in the coming years.

Further research is needed that could examine ‘formal geopolitics’ more deeply, for example involving elite interviews and analysis of high-profile roundtables and conferences, as well as the specific work of experts tasked with Russia’s policy in the North. ‘Popular geopolitics’ could be studied with a more comprehensive TV media sample as well as a review of geopolitical discourses on social media, a medium that has gained prominence since 2014.¹²⁴ It is hoped this study underlines the need for empirical investigation into geopolitical discourses on multiple levels. A better understanding of Russian geopolitical culture will certainly be needed for those preparing to reengage with Moscow in the current period of turbulence and uncertainty.

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¹²⁴Suslov, Mikhail D, ‘Crimea Is Ours!’ Russian popular geopolitics in the new media age, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 55:6 (2014), pp. 588–609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2015.1038574>.