

NATO's Arctic War Exercise Unites Climate Change and WWII

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Story Transcript

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Greg Wolpert: It's the Real News Network. I'm Greg Wolpert in Baltimore. The US military is about to send 7,500 combat troops to Norway for exercise Cold Response 2020 where they will join thousands of allied NATO troops in the Finnmark district along the border to Russia to participate in war games that will take place in mid-March.

These maneuvers have been held every other year since 2006, but their increased size and importance are raising credible fears that NATO and the United States are preparing to use the Arctic as a battleground for a possible conflict with Russia. Why have these NATO games in such a Northern latitude been gaining in importance? US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo openly explained the rationale when he visited Finland in May of last year.

Mike Pompeo: The Arctic is at the forefront of opportunity and abundance. It houses 13% of the world's undiscovered oil, 30% of its undiscovered gas, and an abundance of uranium, rare earth minerals, gold, diamonds, and millions of square miles of untapped resources, fisheries galore. And its centerpiece, the Arctic Ocean, is rapidly taking on new strategic significance. Offshore resources, which are helping the respective coastal states are the subject of renewed competition.

Steady reductions in sea ice are opening new passageways and new opportunities for trade. This could potentially slash the time it takes to travel

between Asia and the West by as much as 20 days. Arctic sea lanes could come before the... could come to the 21st century Suez and Panama canals.

Under President Trump, we're fortifying America's security and diplomatic presence in the area. On the security side, partly in response to Russia's destabilizing activities, we are hosting military exercises, strengthening our force presence, rebuilding our icebreaker fleet, expanding Coast Guard funding, and creating a new senior military post for Arctic Affairs inside of our own military.

Greg Wolpert: Pompeo also explained that in addition to the threat that Russia represents, so does China.

Joining me now to discuss the significance of NATO's exercise Cold Response are Michael Klare and [Erik Vold 00:02:20]. Michael is The Nation's defense correspondent and professor emeritus of Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College. His latest book is, *All Hell Breaking Loose: The Pentagon's Perspective on Climate Change*. Erik, who joins us from Oslo, is a Norwegian political analyst and author and is working as a foreign policy advisor to the parliamentary group of the leftist Red Party of Norway.

Thanks, Michael and Erik for joining us today. So let's start with the Arctic, why the Arctic has become of such great interest to the United States? We saw it earlier as Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo already explained it pretty well in that clip. But January, once again, the month of January, beat all climate records as the warmest January in recorded history. Michael, talk about how climate change is driving this scramble for the Arctic.

Michael Klare: Well, at one point you couldn't go there. You couldn't go near there because it was covered with ice. The region was impenetrable. But because of climate change and the rapidly rising temperatures in the Arctic, the ice cap is receding and that's making it possible to drill for oil and natural gas and other resources in the Arctic region. This has led to a scramble to extract those resources by giant energy firms from around the world. So this has made the region much more of importance from a geopolitical perspective.

It's especially true of Russia because Russia highly depends on the sale of oil and natural gas to prop up its economy. Something like 25% of its foreign income comes from the sale of oil and gas and at present most of that oil and natural gas that it sells to Europe and Asia comes from reserves below the Arctic

Circle. But those are running out. So for Russia to continue to rely on oil and gas reserves to power its economy, it has to go above the Arctic Circle.

And so from Moscow's perspective, the development of Arctic resources is absolutely crucial. This is something that President Vladimir Putin has said over and over again and has invested vast resources, economic inputs into developing the new oil and gas fields developed, discovered above the Arctic Circle in Russia's territory.

But as we'll discuss, this creates problems for Russia because it's very hard to deliver those new oil and gas reserves to the rest of the world because of the distance from markets. This has put a new emphasis on trade routes that pass by Northern Norway, which is where this exercise is being held.

Greg Wolpert: All right. Talk to us also about the US interest that is in the resources because you make an interesting point in one of your articles for The Nation where you point out also that even if we aren't right away running out of natural resources in the Middle East, there is an issue that climate change in the Middle East is actually driving also what's happening in the Arctic. Explain that to us.

Michael Klare: Yes, indeed. If you look at the latest scientific literature on what we could expect from climate change in the future, the Middle East region, especially the Persian Gulf, which is where most of oil drilling is occurring at present, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran and so on, those areas are going to become unbearably hot in summer months. You can expect, in decades to come, that summertime temperatures during the day are likely to average above 110 degrees Fahrenheit and very possibly above 120 degrees Fahrenheit. It's almost impossible for humans to survive for very long in those temperatures.

A lot of equipment breaks down under those circumstances. So it's very possible that it'll become impossible to produce oil and gas in that region. That makes production in the Arctic much more attractive as those areas become impossible to operate in the Middle East. So the oil companies, American and British oil companies are increasingly looking towards the Arctic as a future source of production to ensure that they have adequate supplies.

Greg Wolpert: Erik, I want to turn to you now. Now, what has Norway done to facilitate the scramble for Arctic resources? I mean, Norway is usually seen as a

peace loving country, the home of the Nobel Peace Prize after all. To what extent and why is Norway supporting US ambitions there via NATO?

Erik Vold: Well, Norway joined the NATO in 1949 and that was a very controversial decision. And because Norway is a country that is situated on the border with Russia, at that time the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union had just liberated a big chunk of Norwegian territory from Nazi occupation, so there was very little appetite in the Norwegian population to sort of antagonize the Russians by letting the US enter Norwegian territory with heavy military equipment. So we had this self-imposed restrictions on US military presence. For example, not permitting US military bases on Norwegian soil in peace time and not permitting the presence of US nukes on Norwegian territory.

Now, this policy, this very prudent policy that served us very well for about 70 years has been rolled back by this current government, which is more and more inclined to supporting the US and to supporting US militarization off the Arctic that is deemed to be threatening by the Russians. Now I can give you a very illustrative example.

In 2018, the Norwegian government introduced a proposal asking basically asking the parliament for a grant of about 1 billion kroner, about \$1 million for satellite-based broadband connection in the Northern Norway. Now this was presented as a proposal to improve internet connection for business, for fishery, for maritime security, shipping and for the Norwegian defense. This grant was voted favorably, unanimously, by the parliament.

Now a couple of days later, it turned out that this grant was going to be used on something completely different. It turned out that these satellites were going to carry communication equipment for the US military directly connected to US nuclear armed submarines that were using the Arctic territories of Norwegian maritime territory getting close to Russia.

It also turned out that the reason why the Americans wanted to use civilian Norwegian satellites instead of US military satellites was because the US military considered that any satellites carrying communication equipment for nuclear, US nuclear capabilities would become possible targets for attacks from those countries that feel threatened by the presence of US nukes close to their borders. In this case, it would be Russia and China.

So what this goes to show is the way that the US is increasingly using Norwegian territory and Norwegian civilian infrastructure to move nuclear and conventional military, offensive military, capabilities closer and closer to the Russian border. And that the way that this is being done is through, to a large extent, through secrecy and deceptions, sometimes even undermining important principles of the Norwegian democracy.

Greg Wolpert: Michael, I want to get to that point that Erik is raising about increasing US military presence in Norway. We're not just talking about the NATO maneuvers that are happening in early March. So what has the US so far deployed there and what kinds of risks do these deployments represent?

Michael Klare: So step back for a minute. The US, over the past two years, has adopted a new military strategy. For the past 20 years or so, since 2001, since 9/11, the guiding strategy of the United States has been the global War on Terror. And that's led, of course to a focus on Iraq to Afghanistan and other countries where the US has been fighting the various ISIS and Al-Qaeda and so on.

Two years ago, the Department of Defense adopted a new national security strategy, which emphasizes what they call great power competition, meaning the rivalry between the US, Russia and China. And on this space is the US increasingly views Russia and China as its main adversary. In this shift in strategy emphasizes that while the US was focusing on the wars, the what we call the Forever Wars, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and so on, that Russia and China have built up their military capabilities and put NATO and the US at a disadvantage and that therefore, it's essential that the US and NATO build up their capabilities again to deflect and to contain and push back Russian and then Chinese advances.

So now looking at Norway and Scandinavia, the US sees a big Russian build up in the Kola Peninsula. That's the area that adjoins Norway in the far North, a huge buildup of Russian forces there. This is seen as a new or an expanded threat to NATO and to US forces in general because those forces that the Russians have deployed in Kola Peninsula, especially in Murmansk the big naval base there include nuclear forces. So in response, the US has undertaken a drive to beef up its forces in that region and that has included, as [inaudible 00:13:28] said earlier, the positioning of a permanent deployment of American

forces that is, in this case, Marine deployments of several hundred Marines in North Central Norway.

But more importantly, under agreement with the Norwegian government, this is not well known in the United States at all, I don't even know if go regions know about it, the US has established large, large caves, I think in the area to the East of Trondheim in North Central Norway, which hold hundreds, thousands of tanks and artillery pieces and armored personnel carriers, ammunition, all the stocks you need to fight a major war. So there is an anticipation on the US side that we may have to fight a major war with Russia in the far North in the area adjoining the Kola Peninsula.

The exercise that we're about to see, Cold Response 2020, US forces will fly to Norway and then go to those caves and extract all of those tanks that have been pre-positioned in Norway, move to the Northern part of Norway and engage in a mock war with Russia. So there is this, an assumption now in the Pentagon that Northern Norway will be a major battlefield in any war with Russia and in fact could be the starting place for World War III.

Greg Wolpert: Actually, Erik, this is exactly the next issue I want to touch on with you. I mean, just as Michael says, Norway would be in the middle of such a confrontation, whether it's a nuclear or conventional. Now, what's been the reaction within Norway to this militarization?

Erik Vold: That's true. I mean, Norway used to be a kind of a buffer zone between Russia or the USSR and the US. And through those Norwegian policies of limiting US presence in Northern Norway, that position was maintained until pretty recently because the current government has done a lot to tear down those limitations and basically scrap Norway's role as a buffer, as a buffer zone.

So, while reactions are slow [inaudible 00:15:55]. I mean, defense policies, the whole security issue, big power competition, that issue has basically been marginalized since the end of the Cold War. The Norwegian people is slowly realizing the risks that this implies for Norway. I mean, we have enjoyed so many decades of peace and the risk of war has basically not been on the agenda.

But what we are seeing now is that by scrapping that prudent policy of maintaining a certain distance to the US even though being allies, by scrapping that policy, the risk of war is not being, is not reduced. It's increasing. We're seeing basically a security dilemma in which the increased military presence of

the US in Norway makes Russia look at Norway with different eyes. I mean, well, the Russians never feared Norway, a small country of five million inhabitants with whom they've maintained peace for almost a thousand years.

When US nuclear capabilities are connected to Norwegian civilian infrastructure, and when Norwegian territory is used to build up US military presence, then Russian guns are slowly being to more of an extent being pointed towards Norway because what the Russians do fear is that Norwegian territory is being used for aggressive purposes by the US against Russia. And so that increases the risk of Norway being drawn into this big power rivalry between Russia and the US.

It also increases the risks for the Russians. So they're increasing their military spending. And unfortunately, this is also something that might stimulate increase defense spending in the US because to the extent that the US engages in Norway, probably in the case and increasing the risk of a conflict. Maybe the most probable scenario is a conflict arising from a misunderstanding when so much heavy military power is concentrated on such a small area. That's the way it can happen.

So in case of a misunderstanding in which the Russians fear a US attack, they go to, they take some kind of preliminary action to protect their military capabilities in the Kola Peninsula. Then the U S will feel much more obliged to interfere, to intervene in order to maintain their credibility as a security guarantor towards other NATO States. So it also increases the risk of the US being drawn into a conflict unnecessarily based on a misunderstanding. So, what we're going to see is three nations, everyone spending more on defense and getting less security in return from it.

Greg Wolpert: Michael, I was just wondering if you could add to that? I mean this was one of your points in your Nation article as well, that this could be the main area for World War III and why is that? I mean, what is it, why is Russia building up so much? After all, they've got access to the entire, more access to the Arctic than any other country in the world, so why is it such a hotspot?

Michael Klare: Well, this partly is a matter of geography and I hope that you can put a map of this area to highlight this fact. That is to say that although Russia has a number of ports, the port at Murmansk is the only one that offers Russian

submarines open access to the Atlantic Ocean and to the other oceans of the world. They can't on the Atlantic side. They also have ports on the Pacific.

One needs a minute to understand something about nuclear strategy. Russia relies on its nuclear submarines, nuclear missile armed submarines, as its secure deterrent to a US first strike. If the US were to strike first and destroy all Russian missile silos, they count on their submarines submerged as a final deterrent to such a strike because they're supposedly more secure from detection and attack, but they have to get out into the water. Murmansk is therefore essential to them for that reason.

Hence, the United States, as it increasingly sees it, sees the possibility of a nuclear war with Russia sees that area where the submarines would exit from Murmansk to go out into the ocean as a crucial future nuclear war zone. Hence, the US has established with Norway a radar base at the very far North of Norway and Finnmark just 45 miles from the border with Russia and to track Russian submarines. This means in the event of a clash that had a nuclear potential, Northern Norway would be an immediate nuclear target for Russia. So you could see how this area is being caught up in the nuclear planning scenarios of both sides.

It's important to understand in this discussion that as we are shifting to this great power competition that we've been discussing, the US and I think the other great powers are also moving away from the strategy of mutual assured destruction, MAD as it was called, M-A-D, which said that any nuclear war would be so catastrophic that we are not even going to think about a first strike. We're only going to retain a secure second strike and not even think about nuclear war, but that's changing.

The US and Russia and China, it appears, are thinking more and more about the possibility of fighting and winning a nuclear war. I think this is utterly insane and immoral, highly immoral, but that is the case. And so nuclear battlefields are emerging places where nuclear strikes might occur. This area of Northern Norway and Murmansk would be at the very top of the list of possible targets in the event of a nuclear war. I could say more about this, but this is a matter of geography and you have to see Murmansk adjoining Northern Norway as a prime battlefield in any outset of a nuclear war.

Greg Wolpert: Well, I think it's also important to reflect on how these two kind of apocalyptic scenarios, that is of climate change and of nuclear war, are coming together in this particular issue. It's really quite something. But we're going to leave it there for now. We'll certainly continue to follow this as we usually do.

I was speaking to Michael Klare, The Nation's defense correspondent and professor emeritus of Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College and Erik Vold, foreign policy advisor for the parliamentary group of the Red Party of Norway. Thanks again, Michael and Erik for having joined us today.

Michael Klare: Thank you.

Erik Vold: Thank you.

Greg Wolpert: And thank you for joining the Real News Network.

Related Bios

Michael Klare

Michael T. Klare is the Five College Professor of Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. His newest book, *The Race for What's Left: The Global Scramble for the World's Last Resources*, has just recently been published. His other books include: *Rising Powers*, *Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy* and...



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