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The Bastion Endures — But Its Ground Shield Has Been Spent

The underlying concept is familiar. Submarines carrying Russia's sea-based nuclear deterrent operate within the defended waters of the Barents Sea — a bastion of approximately one million square kilometres, roughly twice the area of France — shielded by layered air, surface and subsurface forces. Coastal troops and naval infantry provide a territorial screen, while land forces on the Kola Peninsula were designed to secure the approaches from the south and west.

The past tense is deliberate. The landward component of Russia's Arctic defensive system — the 80th Separate Arctic Motor Rifle Brigade at Alakurtti and the 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade in the Pechenga-Sputnik area — has been effectively destroyed as a specialist force by the war in Ukraine. Both brigades were committed to the invasion from its opening weeks. By 2024, the 80th had suffered approximately 80% casualties and is now manned largely by convicts serving reduced sentences in exchange for front-line service. The 200th was described as effectively destroyed as a coherent formation by the end of 2022; its reconstitution at Pechenga was carried out with Northern Fleet sailors reportedly issued Second World War-era helmets and body armour without plates. Together they formed what was once the terrestrial shield of Russia's Arctic bastion. They no longer fulfil that role. Recovery of specialist Arctic ground capability is assessed as unlikely before the mid-to-late 2030s at the earliest. The full analysis is in the supporting paper Russia's Northern Military District: Losses, Attrition and the Path to Recovery.

The Northern Fleet's principal amphibious formation, the 61st Naval Infantry Brigade, has been continuously committed to operations in Ukraine — its drone operators were confirmed in the Pokrovsk direction as recently as December 2025. The brigade that was designed to underpin coastal defence in the High North is currently fighting in eastern Ukraine. Russia's Arctic ground posture has not merely been weakened. Its specialist cadre has been spent, and the Kola Peninsula's landward defences rest for now on infrastructure, missile systems and the nuclear deterrent itself rather than on the elite conventional ground forces that once provided their outer shield.

The Northern Sea Route: Commercial Prize and Military Corridor

The Arctic is not becoming an ice-free ocean, but it is an increasingly accessible one. The navigable season along the Northern Sea Route has extended to approximately four to four and a half months in most recent years, running from late June to mid-November. Sea ice minima over the past five years have fluctuated between 4.2 and 4.9 million square kilometres — far below late twentieth century norms but no longer declining in a straight line. The operational calendar is lengthening.

Commercial traffic along the route has grown accordingly. Cargo volumes reached a record high in 2024, and President Putin has set a target of 80 million tonnes annually by 2025 — a figure that reflects Moscow's strategic as well as commercial ambitions for the route. Russia regards the Northern Sea Route as falling substantially within its national jurisdiction and has built both the regulatory infrastructure and the military presence to enforce that interpretation. A fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers — four Project 22220 vessels now in service with further

hulls building — provides year-round escort capability. The Federal Security Service maintains a parallel network of Border Service and coastguard infrastructure along the route, contributing to maritime domain awareness, administrative control and enforcement in peacetime and crisis alike.

The route lies within waters where Russia maintains dense sensor coverage and where Northern Fleet forces monitor all maritime and submarine activity. In operational terms, a predominantly Russian-controlled military environment persists along most of its length. Winter transit by non-Russian submarines would be highly constrained without Russian agreement — a strategic reality that neither commercial optimism nor legal argument currently alters.

China and the Competition for Access

China's engagement with the Northern Sea Route has moved well beyond scientific interest. Having declared itself a "near-Arctic state," Beijing commissioned its third polar icebreaker, Jidi, in 2024. A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership concluded with Russia the same year explicitly references Arctic cooperation, and joint Russian-Chinese naval exercises in Arctic-adjacent waters took place in 2023. Chinese investment in port infrastructure in the Russian Far East — directly relevant to NSR transit — continues to expand. Beijing's long-term objective is regularised access to a route that shortens the distance between Chinese ports and European markets by approximately 40% compared with the Suez Canal passage. The strategic implications of that ambition — and the tension between Chinese access interests and Russian control ambitions — are addressed in the ICE10 supporting paper on EU Arctic policies and other nations' Arctic strategies.

The Northwest Passage through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago offers a second polar corridor, increasingly accessible in late summer, but infrastructure remains sparse and the United States and Canada's presence, though persistent, remains low-visibility compared with Russia's posture on the Eurasian littoral.

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The High North is best understood not as a new frontier but as a reconnected one. The same geographic realities that shaped Cold War strategy — distance, climate, chokepoints and the

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Nordic defence cooperation, structured through NORDEFCO and now embedded in NATO's Regional Plan North-West, has shifted from parallel national postures to genuine operational integration at a pace that has surprised even its architects. A joint Nordic defence concept was signed in September 2024. A Combined Air Operations Centre is being established at Bodø. Norway, Denmark and Finland have all adopted the F-35A as their sole combat aircraft — the practical foundation of a Nordic air force that will increasingly operate as a single entity.

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Data curated by Robin Ashby with AI assistance (ChatGPT5.2 and Claude.ai

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