

NATO's Arctic Sentry mission sets stage for militarisation of High North and deepening conflicts between imperialist powers

Jordan Shilton**15 February 2026**

NATO announced Wednesday the launch of Arctic Sentry, a multi-domain military operation that massively increases the risk of conflict in the High North, a vast region stretching from the North American coast and Greenland in the west to the Nordic countries and the Russian border in the east. Aircraft, naval vessels, and troops will operate across the region, ostensibly to “defend” it against “Russian aggression” and Chinese expansionism. In reality, the mission is not only aimed at Russia and China but also serves as the current form through which the North American and European imperialist powers compete for influence in and control over the key strategic region.

Arctic Sentry is the product of the meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and NATO Secretary General Marc Rutte on the sidelines of last month’s World Economic Forum in Davos. At the time, Trump had imposed tariffs on several European countries to bolster his demand that Denmark cede control of Greenland, an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark, to the US. After the meeting, Trump withdrew his tariffs and the media universally reported a “deescalation” of the crisis, despite the absence of any information about what had been agreed.

Now it is clear that what was established was the framework for a massive military build-up that creates the conditions for war in a region where, at least since the end of the Cold War, the great powers have claimed to observe the approach “High North, low tension.” While the nominal target of Arctic Sentry is Russia, with its long Arctic coastline, the mission unfolds under conditions of the breakdown of the post-war transatlantic alliance, with the US and European imperialist powers viewing each other as rivals for control over the Arctic’s potential shipping routes and rich natural resources. This is not changed by the fact, as Rutte put it, that “For the first time now, we will bring everything we do in the Arctic together under one command.”

Arctic Sentry will create a framework within which previously separate military exercises function under a single umbrella. These include the Norwegian-led biennial Cold Response exercise in March, which expanded in 2024 to encompass operations in Finland and Sweden after these two countries joined NATO, and Denmark’s Arctic Endurance, which involves an expansion of air, sea, and ground forces in and around Greenland.

Lion Protector, a British-led mission covering areas from

Iceland to Norway and the Danish Straits, will take place in September 2026 under the auspices of the Joint Expeditionary Force, a UK-led group of NATO members including the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In his speech to the Munich Security Conference Saturday, Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced that the UK would deploy an aircraft carrier group, led by the HMS *Prince of Wales*, to the North Atlantic in the course of the year.

Ongoing surveillance and other operations will also take place under Arctic Sentry. Britain will double its troop deployment in northern Norway from its current level of 1,000 within three years. Denmark has committed to contributing four F-35 fighter jets to the mission, which will be based in Iceland alongside Swedish Saab Gripen fighter jets. Germany will deploy four Eurofighter planes and a refuelling aircraft, although it was not immediately clear where they would be stationed. The US contribution also remains unclear, although Danish Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen stated that Washington had agreed to play a major role. The overall command of the operation will be at NATO’s Norfolk Command, in the US state of Virginia, and NORAD, the bilateral US-Canadian military structure, will also be involved.

Whatever the final composition of the mission turns out to be, the reality that the imperialist powers are competing as rivals and even enemies in the Arctic will remain. The Trump administration’s so-called “Donroe doctrine” is based on the premise that Washington should enjoy unchallenged hegemony over the Americas, from Greenland in the Arctic to the southern tip of Latin America. Trump wants the unhindered right to seize natural resources and infrastructure, dictate policies to governments, and control trade routes. His “America first” agenda aims to create a continental base for war against US imperialism’s main opponents, China, Russia, and the European imperialists.

From the standpoint of the European imperialist powers, their aim is to first maintain a foothold and then expand their presence in the Arctic as its geostrategic and economic importance grows due to the eruption of a new redision of the world among the great powers and climate change. The Arctic, and Greenland in particular, could at least in the mid- to long term become a key source of critical minerals for modern production, helping the European imperialists reduce their reliance on China. Control over territorial waters and seabeds could prove decisive in exploiting

these resources and controlling sea lanes, which explains why Denmark is so determined to hold onto its sovereignty over Greenland. Without it, Copenhagen would have no territorial claim in the Arctic.

The European powers are both in conflict with the United States and among themselves. A striking feature of the military build-up in the High North is the proliferation of bilateral military agreements outside the structures of NATO or other multilateral organisations. The US concluded defence cooperation agreements over recent years with all of the Nordic countries, giving its soldiers unhindered access to military bases and exempting them from prosecution under domestic laws. In December 2025, Britain reached the Lunna House Agreement with Norway to expand the two countries' collaboration on military production and the deployment of troops, while Germany and Norway finalised their own bilateral agreement this weekend in Munich.

The opening of consulates in Greenland by France and Canada over the past two weeks underscores that the race to control the island and the broader Arctic involves many players. Canada fears that US ownership of the island would all but end Ottawa's claim to the Northwest Passage, both ends of which would be in American hands with Alaska and Greenland. France aspires to be an Arctic power by strengthening the European Union's position. As French President Emmanuel Macron put it in his speech to the Munich Security Conference Friday, Europe must become a geopolitical player that defends its own interests. "This also applies when someone makes demands for a part of Europe's territory. We reject that, politely but firmly," he declared, in what was a clear reference to Trump's threat to seize Greenland.

German imperialism views the opening up of the Arctic as a chance to strengthen its military presence and secure new trading routes for its exports. Berlin has signed a bilateral agreement with Iceland to deploy aircraft and ships to the North Atlantic. The Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap is a critical chokepoint that remains one of the few routes for Russia to access the open sea. The German-led Baltic Sentry NATO mission, from which Arctic Sentry took its name, was launched in January 2025 and aims to increase pressure on Russian vessels carrying oil cargoes and other exports through the Baltic Sea.

The European imperialist powers are exploiting Trump's threat to seize Greenland to legitimise a massive rearmament programme for which they are determined to make the working class pay. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz declared in a recent speech to parliament that it is necessary for Germany to "learn the language of great power politics," while his Vice Chancellor, the Social Democrat leader Lars Klingbeil, lauded the European imperialists at a recent party leadership meeting for standing up to Trump. Opening the Munich conference, Merz asserted that Europe must work towards securing its military independence from the US "not tomorrow" but "now."

Speaking during a debate at the conference Saturday, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen questioned whether the NATO target of every member state spending 5 percent of GDP on the military would be enough. Addressing the agreement at last year's NATO summit, which allowed governments to aim for 3.5 percent of GDP for military budgets and a further 1.5 percent for military-

related investments, Frederiksen said, according to Danish public broadcaster DR, "I think that the 3.5 percent is either for now or 2030 at the latest, but it isn't clear that this will be enough in the long term."

Speaking in the same discussion, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius underlined the aggressive military expansion in the High North that will take place within the framework of Arctic Sentry. The mission would allow NATO to react to a variety of situations "in a way which is appropriate," commented Pistorius. NATO requires a "360-degree view" of security threats, he asserted, adding that the target of spending 3.5 percent of GDP on the military "will never be enough." He continued, "We need to be able to deter our adversaries."

Earlier in the day, Pistorius and Norwegian Defence Minister Tore O. Sandvik signed the so-called "Hansa Agreement." It contains plans to cooperate on area surveillance, maritime security, joint operations in the North Atlantic and North Sea and weapons manufacturing. Sandvik told Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, "Germany is one of Norway's most important allies in Europe, and our most important cooperation partner within the EU. Now we are taking this close and strong cooperation a step further."

The investment of vast resources in war will impose an ever-greater burden on the continent's working class. From Greenland, Iceland, and Norway in the north to the imperialist centres of Germany, France, and Britain, workers will bear the brunt of the imperialist scramble for territory, natural resources, and trade routes unless an international anti-war movement led by the working class is built. This movement must combine opposition to imperialist war with the rejection of job cuts and the gutting of social services to fund the ruling class's wars in pursuit of corporate profits. This task demands the adoption of a socialist and internationalist programme to put an end to capitalism, the root cause of imperialist war.



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