



Interjection

The Arctic. Between Conflict and Cooperation

New Perspectives on the Far North

Risks and Options for Germany's Arctic Policy

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Germany's Arctic policy to date has largely consisted of declarations of intent concerning environmental protection and multilateralism. This has to change: after all, Russia is taking an increasingly confrontational stance in the Arctic too, where it is pursuing a military build-up. At the same time, China is likewise adopting a more ambitious approach in the region. For this reason, security must play a greater role in Germany's deliberations on the Far North in future.

Polar bears, the Northern Lights and an endless expanse of white are what most people associate with the Arctic. Politically, the northernmost region of the world has not attracted much interest from Germany to date. Through the Arctic Council, the Arctic states have tried to keep geopolitical tensions away from the region since 1996, seeking to settle differing interests between the states in a peaceful manner instead.

During the Cold War, the Arctic did have a key role to play in military terms, as the shortest flight distance for strategic intercontinental missiles and bombers between the Soviet Union and North America passes over the North Pole. The Soviet Union also hid submarines with second-strike nuclear capability under the Arctic ice. Huge radars were used as an early warning system for approaching missiles and bombers. When Mikhail Gorbachev advocated turning the Arctic into a "zone of peace" during a trip to the Kola Peninsula in 1987 in connection with his reform efforts, this raised hopes, and it was from this idea that the Arctic Council emerged in 1996.

That body is an intergovernmental forum that brings together the eight Arctic states – Denmark (with Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Canada, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States (with Alaska) – along with several observer states, including Germany, observer organisations and six organisations representing indigenous peoples. Joint working groups have so far addressed issues such as environmental protection, sustainable development and disaster

management in the Arctic. In line with the idea of "Arctic exceptionalism", not least with the aim of securing cooperation with Russia too, the issue of security has deliberately been left to one side. This has also been reflected in the EU's Arctic policy up until now.

In addition, regional stability is based on a network of agreements that regulate shipping and resource management. The most important of these is the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which determines the rights of use and control of the Arctic Ocean and adjacent waters and has so far averted many disputes in this region. New problems are now emerging in connection with shipping lanes such as the Northwest Passage through the Canadian archipelago and the Northern Sea Route along the Russian coast, where melting ice is increasingly freeing up access over the summer. The partial opening of these routes has led to players such as China increasing their presence in the region in recent years and making investments there on a continuous basis. Most recently, the US Coast Guard repeatedly detected Chinese and Russian warships operating together in the US exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around Alaska.¹

Still economically insignificant and rarely used, the Northern Sea Route shortens the journey for merchant ships between Europe and Asia, potentially reducing fuel costs by about 20 per cent. Yet the total costs, including bureaucracy, are significantly higher than those incurred using the

Suez Canal route, for example. The Arctic clause in UNCLOS that is actually designed to promote environmental protection and security is being invoked by Russia and Canada to extend their sovereign rights to waters that are only intermittently covered by ice. However, the Arctic clause in Article 234 UNCLOS only allows for “non-discriminatory laws and regulations for the prevention, reduction and control of marine pollution from vessels in ice-covered areas within the limits of the exclusive economic zone”.

New insights into the continental plates could lead to previously agreed territorial boundaries being called into question again.

Yet Russia passed a law in March 2019 requiring foreign governments to give 45 days’ notice before sailing the Northeast Passage.² This restricts the freedom of navigation and is in line with Russia’s approach of reserving the route primarily for its own use. The United States, the EU and China classify waters outside the twelve-mile zone that are not covered by ice as international waters. Back in 1988, Canada and the United States signed an Arctic Cooperation Agreement in which they agreed that US ships would only sail in waters claimed by Canada after registering with the Canadian Coast Guard.³ Clear rules apply to straits and ice-free international waters: enforcement of these rules is important for international shipping and therefore for Germany too. The United States repeatedly conducts “freedom of navigation” operations in unlawfully claimed waters such as the South China Sea to challenge excessive maritime claims. For German ships to be able to move freely in international waters too, it may become necessary for Germany to insist on this right in the future.

Russia has been surveying the Lomonosov Ridge in the Arctic Ocean for decades. In 2001,



Russia declared an area of 1.2 million square kilometres, which includes the Lomonosov Ridge and the North Pole, as an extended continental shelf. However, an extended continental shelf may not extend further than 350 nautical miles from the coastal state baseline and may not extend more than 100 nautical miles beyond the 2,500-metre water depth line. To claim a 2,000-kilometre submarine ridge as a continental shelf and to include the 4,300-metre-deep North Pole makes



Moscow's most important asset in the Arctic: Russia's Northern Fleet plays a crucial role, not least in ensuring its second-strike nuclear capability. Photo: © Lev Fedoseyev, TASS, dpa, picture alliance.

a mockery of the concept of a continental shelf.⁴ In such cases, the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf can only make a recommendation as a basis for arriving at a political agreement. New insights into the continental plates and islands revealed by the melting of the ice caps could also lead to previously agreed territorial boundaries being called into question again. In the

Ilulissat Declaration of May 2008, the polar states committed to abide by the principles of UNCLOS in resolving overlapping claims in the region. Due to China's violations of maritime law in the South China Sea and Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, however, reliance on international agreements is unlikely to be sufficient to prevent conflicts over opposing interests in the future.

The End of Arctic Exceptionalism and Russia's Military Efforts

The period of largely peaceful coexistence since the end of the Cold War is now over. Governments of the Western world were roused to action by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine that started in February 2022, preceded by ultimatums being issued to the United States and NATO. Hopes that even relations with authoritarian states such as Russia and China could be based on rules and settled exclusively by means of diplomacy were disappointed, with Russia failing to be deterred by threats of sanctions. March 2022 saw the termination of cooperation with Russia, which chaired the Arctic Council. Cooperative research in the Arctic was discontinued; as a result, the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation can now no longer be used for joint research. In June 2022, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Canada, Norway and the United States nevertheless decided to resume project work without Russia.

Russia's main objective in the Arctic is to ensure second-strike nuclear capability.

There were numerous indications that President Vladimir Putin was serious about his superpower ambitions and his quest for imperial expansion. Ever since 2014, Russia has taken a more confrontational stance in the Arctic and has massively expanded its military capabilities there. The region remains poorly developed in terms of infrastructure, Russia's financial resources are limited and the population decline is worsening.⁵ Nonetheless, the actions taken by the Russian regime in Ukraine show that its superpower ambitions and imperial expansion are more important to it than the welfare of the population – in particular that of national minorities.

Russia has three primary objectives in the Arctic: the most important of these is to ensure that the

Russian submarine fleet on the Kola Peninsula has second-strike nuclear capability. The second objective is to gain access to the North Atlantic and European Arctic waters. The third is to provide military cover for the pursuit of Russian economic interests and investment projects, not least to secure commercial use of the Arctic route between Asia and Europe, which will be free of ice in the future.⁶

Moscow's most important tool in this regard is the Northern Fleet. It also has newly established combat units with a total of 6,000 troops and modern air defence systems on the northern coasts, not to mention transport, reconnaissance, communication and command systems. Several of the systems developed especially for the Arctic have already been spotted and destroyed in Ukraine.⁷ Russia is building nuclear-powered icebreakers, also enabling the military to access remote regions. Old military bases and airports have been reactivated and modernised, such as those on the island of Novaya Zemlya and the New Siberian Islands. In 2007, a submarine expedition placed a Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole – as a symbol of Russian sovereignty claims.

Climate Change and the Economic Importance of the Region

The sea ice extent of the Arctic has roughly halved in the last four decades as a result of climate change. Once inaccessible raw material deposits can now be exploited more easily, and new economic sectors can be established in the Arctic. Modern technologies even enable more efficient extraction of raw materials from under the ice.⁸ The relevant economic sectors in the Arctic are energy, non-energy land resources, shipping, fisheries, tourism, agriculture and livestock. It can be assumed that there are still many undiscovered raw materials under the ice that might attract interest.

Russia is particularly dependent on revenue from the raw materials sector: this sector offers particular advantages in a kleptocracy dominated by oligarchs – benefits that are exploited





Showing the flag in the Far North: Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg meets NATO soldiers during the Cold Response 2022 exercise in Norway. A few weeks earlier, Russia had invaded Ukraine. Photo: © Annika Byrde, AP, picture alliance.

by the ruling class and that serve to maintain the stability of the regime. The export of these resources not only serves to enrich individuals, however; it also generates the funds needed to increase military spending. By contrast, China also needs the resources for the purpose of economic production and private consumption. Russia and China therefore both have particularly strong state-backed interests in expanding their spheres of influence in the Arctic and exploiting the abundant natural resources such as oil, gas, metals and fish. These state interests clash with largely private-sector interests in the Western industrialised countries – and for the latter, too, preservation of valuable ecosystems and the interests of indigenous populations are not always the principal concern. For this reason, enforceable international agreements will continue to be important in the future.

Moreover, the isolation of the Russian Federation is expected to result in Moscow becoming more economically and technically dependent on Beijing over time, which could strengthen China's influence in the Russian Arctic zone and lead to intensified development of polar infrastructure projects in connection with the Chinese Silk Roads. The closure of EU ports to Russian ships as a result of sanctions remains significant in this respect. For this reason, the Arctic route could become an important link between Russia and Asia, as illustrated by recent shipments of oil from Russia to China.

Policy Recommendations for the German Government

In view of Russian and Chinese expansionist policies and climate change, Germany's Arctic policy should be adapted and supplemented with security aspects. There have mainly been declarations of intent in the areas of environmental protection and multilateralism to date, but little has changed.

Compared to its partners, Germany has so far mainly been involved in science and research activities in the Arctic. Through its official observer status in the Arctic Council, it also

takes part in working group meetings, however, and as a signatory to the Svalbard Treaty it has a right to economic use of the Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic. Due to its large trade volume, Germany is dependent on open access to the sea and secure sea routes. Much of Germany's energy is imported by sea and 60 per cent of German trade is carried by ship. This trade requires Russia and China to respect international agreements and decisions by courts with international jurisdiction. They are increasingly unwilling to do so, however. Both countries have repeatedly violated international law unilaterally and without notice. Under the current regime, it is unlikely that Russia will abide by agreements. The same applies to China: the situation in the South China Sea or around Taiwan, for example, could potentially come to a head and end in another war.

NATO is planning greater involvement in the Arctic and is set to increase its presence there.

This is why the containment of Russian and Chinese power is of interest in the Arctic too. Both powers must be discouraged from unilateral or bilateral changes to the status quo. As in the case of Denmark and the United States in Greenland, strategic investments by the West should be undertaken to prevent China from building new bases and creating economic dependencies through infrastructure investments. Wherever possible, China should be involved responsibly so that the free world can set the rules – not the Chinese Communist Party. This requires political will, a common position towards China and Russia, and instruments of military deterrence.

NATO regularly conducts exercises in the High North, and Germany participates in these. According to Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the Alliance is planning greater involvement in the Arctic and is set to increase its presence

there. Having served as a forum for Arctic issues from 2002 onwards, the NATO-Russia Council has now ceased its work, so there is an increasing need to organise security in the Arctic against Russia. This is also the purpose of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable and of the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF), which comprises the five northern European Arctic states Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Finland's recently formalised and Sweden's probable future NATO membership will make NATO's northern flank more secure, as both countries have powerful armed forces. Russia has withdrawn Arctic-capable forces from the border with Finland and Norway; these have since been deployed in Ukraine and have suffered heavy losses.⁹ The withdrawal shows that Russia does not consider its borders with NATO to be at risk, thereby contradicting the rhetoric from the Kremlin claiming that it is threatened by NATO.

In order to assess the situation in the Arctic, NATO needs to gain an overview of the state of affairs in the air, in the sea, underwater and on the seabed, especially around critical infrastructure facilities. For this, it needs the appropriate sensors and communication infrastructure. Since very specialised capabilities are needed in the Arctic, it is important to reconnoitre any such capabilities that potential adversaries may have, such as Russian or Chinese specialist submarines, to make operations visible to the public and, if necessary, to prevent any missions from being carried out. NATO itself must have the capabilities to operate and intervene in the Arctic should this become necessary.

There is an urgent need for protection of critical infrastructure on the coasts, in the sea and on the seabed, and NATO needs the appropriate equipment for this purpose: icebreakers, submarines with special capabilities to carry out operations on the seabed, very long-lasting underwater drones, Arctic-capable ships and maritime patrol aircraft, as well as special forces. All in all, it would make sense for European

states to become less dependent on the military capabilities of the United States, which has now become virtually indispensable for all such operations. The German government should propose the development of joint capabilities within the framework of NATO and the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, the procurement of the relevant material and, if necessary, its deployment.

Germany is now also called upon to make a military contribution in the Arctic.

Denmark has already responded by abolishing its opt-out clause from the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and significantly increasing its military budget to strengthen air and sea surveillance of the important sea lanes around Greenland. Finland, too, sees hard security as a key criterion for economic growth and stability in the Arctic, maintaining very powerful armed forces as well as a resilient infrastructure.

Germany is now also called upon to make a military contribution in the Arctic. The German Navy has been demanding capabilities for underwater and seabed operations for years, for example, but has been put off time and again. The German fleet now comprises only six submarines, while Russia has expanded its submarine fleet from 13 to 60 since 2014.¹⁰ The announced cuts to procurements to be paid for out of the special fund established for the armed forces mainly affect the German Navy. It would be wrong to cut capabilities such as the P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft or the Interactive Defence and Attack System (IDAS), which can be used to counter threats from aircraft, helicopters and other ships from a submarine: these are highly relevant in the Arctic too. With a declining defence budget and a special fund that has long since been earmarked for other purposes, the situation will not improve in the medium term. It is high time that Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz acts on his *Zeitenwende* and backs up his words with actions.

At the same time, the EU should consider promoting more Arctic exploration in the civilian sector too so as to protect key ecosystems. It is also important to understand the consequences of climate change, since they are particularly drastic in the Arctic.

The mining or extraction of raw materials requires particular caution in the Arctic, as ecosystems regenerate much more slowly than in our latitudes if crude oil escapes, for example. Protection of the particularly fragile natural environment is of paramount importance. It is also threatened by legacy issues in the form of Russian submarine wrecks on the seabed of the Arctic. If we are to bequeath our children a planet worth living on, both the German and the international agenda should include a response to military contamination, the lack of environmental standards and their implementation, old munitions on the seabed and toxic waste dumping.

Due to the energy transition and the almost complete discontinuation of energy deliveries from Russia to Europe, consideration should also be given to how the exploitation of fossil resources in the Arctic might be limited or at least carried out in an environmentally responsible manner. The same applies to industrial fishing and the prevention of new sources of contamination, such as that caused by floating nuclear reactors. As we can see, there are plenty of controversial issues to negotiate with a Russian government after the war so as to prevent or repair widespread environmental damage. At the same time, it remains sensible and necessary for Germany to strengthen international bodies, even without Russia's involvement, and to work on joint projects.

- translated from German -

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