

## Geo-Strategic Competition in the Arctic: What Next?

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In early May, the U.S. Sixth Fleet, together with the Royal Navy, conducted maritime security operations in the Barents Sea, just off the Arctic coast of Norway and Russia.<sup>1</sup> A few weeks later, the newly confirmed U.S. Secretary of the Navy, Kenneth J. Braithwaite, warned of increasing hostility in the Arctic, noting, “The Chinese and the Russians are everywhere, especially the Chinese.”<sup>2</sup> In late 2019, France’s Minister of the Armed Forces even compared the Arctic to the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> This followed a speech given a few months earlier on May 6 by the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, that represented a clear break with notions of the Arctic as a “zone of peace.”<sup>4</sup>

The Arctic is one of the spots on the planet most affected by climate change, as the sea ice and Greenlandic ice sheet continue to melt at an ever-increasing pace. The region is also home to some of world’s largest fish stocks and has tremendous undiscovered oil and gas resources as well as an abundance of rare minerals found only in a few places around the world. In addition, the increasingly ice-free waters can serve as a shortcut from Europe to Asia (or reverse) via the top of the world.

Therefore, few places have been the source of as much speculation, hype, and sweeping statements as the Arctic region at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since its (re)emergence in world politics around 2006–7, the region has been portrayed as the next arena for geopolitical conflict — the place where Russia, the U.S., NATO, and eventually China are bound to clash.<sup>5</sup>

However, it has now become clear that the idea of “resource wars” in the North are unlikely to emerge.<sup>6</sup> Oil and gas, minerals, or fish stocks are predominantly located in the maritime

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Naval Forces Europe, “U.S., U.K. Ships Operate in the Barents Sea,” News Articles, 2020, <https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/Article/2174342/us-uk-ships-operate-in-the-barents-sea/>.

<sup>2</sup> Malte Humpert, “U.S. Warns of Russian Arctic Military Buildup: ‘Who Puts Missiles on Icebreakers?’” *High North News*, May 25, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> French Ministry of Armed Forces, “France and the New Strategic Challenges in the Arctic,” 2019, [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/layout/set/print/content/download/565142/9742558/version/3/file/France+and+the+New+Strategic+Challenges+in+the+Arctic+-+DGRIS\\_2019.pdf](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/layout/set/print/content/download/565142/9742558/version/3/file/France+and+the+New+Strategic+Challenges+in+the+Arctic+-+DGRIS_2019.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> This refers to the so-called “Murmansk Initiative”, proposed by the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union - Mikhail Gorbachev - on October 1, 1987 in Murmansk.

<sup>5</sup> Shebonti Ray Dadwal, “Arctic: The Next Great Game in Energy Geopolitics?” *Strategic Analysis* 38, no. 6 (2014): 812–24.

<sup>6</sup> Rolf Tamnes and Kristine Offerdal, “Conclusion,” in *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World*, ed. Rolf Tamnes and Kristine Offerdal (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 166–77; Klaus Dodds and Mark Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles: The Geopolitics of the Arctic and Antarctica* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Andreas Østhagen, “Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic,” in *Routledge Handbook of the Polar Regions*, ed. Mark Nuttall, Torben R. Christensen, and Martin Siegert (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), 348–56.

zones or territories of the Arctic states.<sup>7</sup> Arctic states — including the U.S. and Russia — desire stable operating environments for extracting costly resources far away from their prospective markets. Therefore, ideas of the Arctic as an arena for political competition and rivalry are often juxtaposed with the view of the Arctic as a region of harmony and shared interests.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the notion of a discordant Arctic coupled with great-power politics still makes the headlines. The Arctic speech delivered by Secretary of State Pompeo did not change the facts on the ground in the region: yes, Russia *is* investing heavily in Arctic military capabilities, and yes, China *is* increasingly throwing its weight around, ranging from statements about fisheries to research and investments. What the speech did, however, was shatter the self-imposed separation between great power politics and regional relations that the Arctic states had, up until that point, made use of to promote constructive regional relations.

And yet, the U.S. (as a member), Russia (as a member), China (as an observer), and France (as an observer) are strong supporters of cooperative Arctic mechanisms, including the Arctic Council, and repeatedly stress their desire to ensure that the circumpolar region remains insulated from troubles elsewhere in surprisingly streamlined Arctic “strategies.”<sup>9</sup>

Why are statements by Arctic states about the region sometimes contradictory? The simple answer is that they are talking about different things taking place at the same time, in the same region. Separating between two “levels” of inter-state relations — global power politics and regional (Arctic) associations — explains why the idea of impending conflict persists and why this does not necessarily go against the reality of regional cooperation and stability. In other words, this analysis can help explain why rivalry and collaboration do co-exist in the Arctic.



*Caption:* Four U.S. Navy vessels and one Royal Navy vessel sailing in the Arctic / Barents Sea in May 2020. Photo by Dan Rosenbaum. Source: [U.S. 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet](#).

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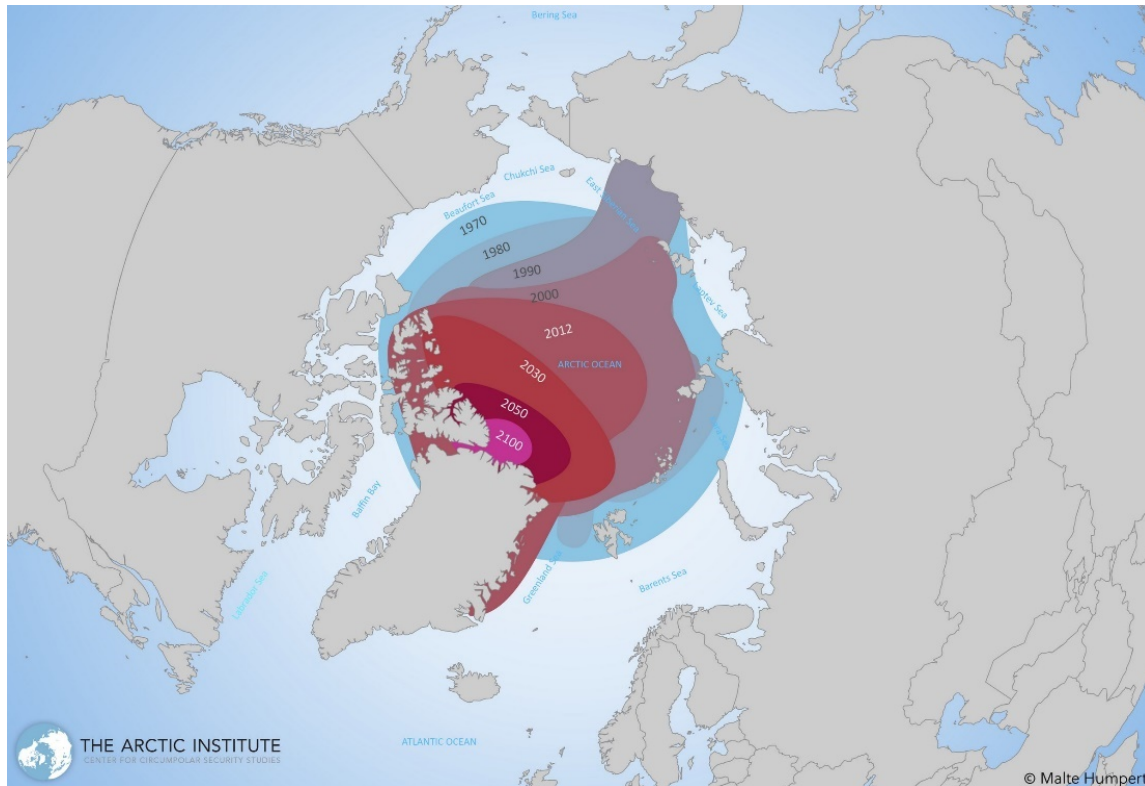
<sup>7</sup> Dag H. Claes and Arild Moe, “Arctic Offshore Petroleum: Resources and Political Fundamentals,” in *Arctic Governance: Energy, Living Marine Resources and Shipping*, ed. Svein Vigeland Rottem, Ida Folkestad Soltvedt, and Geir Hønneland (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 9-26f.

<sup>8</sup> Elana Wilson Rowe, “Analyzing Frenemies: An Arctic Repertoire of Cooperation and Rivalry,” *Political Geography* 76 (January 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102072>.

<sup>9</sup> Lassi Heininen et al., “Arctic Policies and Strategies — Analysis, Synthesis, and Trends” (Laxenburg: Austria, 2020), [http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/16175/1/ArcticReport\\_WEB\\_new.pdf](http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/16175/1/ArcticReport_WEB_new.pdf).

## Arctic Regional Relations — Still Positive

As the Cold War's systemic overlay faded away, regional interaction and cooperation in the North started to flourish. Further, as the melting ice at the turn of the millennium opened possibilities



for greater maritime activity (shipping, fisheries, oil and gas exploration/exploitation), the Arctic states began to look northwards in terms of investments as well as presence. In particular, Russia's ambitions concerning the Northern Sea Route has prompted a buildup of both in terms of military and civilian infrastructure and capacity.<sup>10</sup> The other Arctic countries have more or less been following suit.<sup>11</sup>

*Caption:* The Arctic sea ice is melting at an increasing pace. *Map:* Malte Humpert, *The Arctic Institute*.

Countries in the circumpolar region have recognized the value of creating a political environment favorable to investments and economic development. In response to the outcry and concerns about the “lack of governance” in the Arctic spurred by the growing international awareness of the region, top-level political representatives of the five Arctic coastal states — Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Norway, Russia, and the U.S. — met in Ilulissat, Greenland, where they publicly declared the Arctic to be a “region of cooperation.”<sup>12</sup> They also affirmed their intention to work within established international arrangements and agreements, especially the Law of the Sea.<sup>13</sup>

Since the Ilulissat meeting, the Arctic states, which include Finland, Iceland, and Sweden in addition to those mentioned above, have repeated this mantra of cooperation, articulating the same sentiment in relatively streamlined Arctic policy and strategy documents. This sentiment has not changed even with the deterioration in relations between Russia and its Arctic neighbors since

<sup>10</sup> Katarzyna Zysk, “Russia’s Arctic Strategy: Ambitions and Restraints,” in *The Fast-Changing Arctic: Rethinking Arctic Security for a Warmer World*, ed. Barry Scott Zellen (Calgary, AB: Calgary University Press, 2013), 281–96.

<sup>11</sup> See Andreas Østhagen, *Coast Guards and Ocean Politics in the Arctic* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Heather Exner-Pirot, “New Directions for Governance in the Arctic Region,” *Arctic Yearbook*, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Text available at : [http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat\\_Declaration.pdf](http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat_Declaration.pdf).

2014 as a result of Russian actions in the Ukraine and Crimea. Indeed, the foreign ministries of all Arctic Council members (including Russia) keep pro-actively emphasizing the “peaceful” and “cooperative” nature of regional politics.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, some would argue that low-level forms of regional interaction help relax tensions in the North.<sup>15</sup> To illustrate, the Arctic Council emerged in the wake of the Cold War’s close as the primary forum for regional affairs in the Arctic.<sup>16</sup> Founded in 1996, the Council serves as a platform from which its member-states can portray themselves as working harmoniously towards common goals.<sup>17</sup> Adding to its legitimacy, an increasing number of actors have, since the late 1990s, applied and gained observer status on the Council — initially Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the UK, and more recently China, Italy, India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Switzerland.<sup>18</sup>



*Caption:* The Arctic coastal states have basically divided the region among them, based on the law of the sea. There is little to argue about when it comes to resources and boundaries, although limited disputes exist, such as that over tiny, uninhabited Hans Island/Ø and that over the maritime boundary in the Beaufort Sea between Canada and the U.S. *Map: Malte Humpert, The Arctic Institute.*

<sup>14</sup> Wilson Rowe, “Analyzing Frenemies.”; Heininen et al., “Arctic Policies and Strategies.”

<sup>15</sup> Kathrin Keil and Sebastian Knecht, *Governing Arctic Change: Global Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-50884-3>.

<sup>16</sup> Svein Vigeland Rottem, “The Arctic Council: Challenges and Recommendations,” in *Arctic Governance: Law and Politics. Volume 1*, ed. Svein Vigeland Rottem and Ida Folkestad Soltvedt (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 231–51.

<sup>17</sup> Heather Exner-Pirot, “Arctic Council: The Evolving Role of Regions in Arctic Governance,” *Alaska Dispatch*, 2015, <http://www.adn.com/article/20150109/arctic-council-evolving-role-regions-arctic-governance>.

<sup>18</sup> Rottem, “The Arctic Council.”

The Arctic states therefore have few, if any, reasons for engaging in outright confrontation (bilateral or regional) over resources or territory. Notions of an impending scramble, as pedaled for over a decade now, were founded, as they say, on thin ice. Instead, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century relations have proven surprisingly peaceful, guided by the growing primacy of the Arctic Council and the desire of the Arctic states to shield mutual relations from the repercussions of conflict occurring elsewhere in the world.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Arctic in Global Politics**

Despite the history of peace in the region, there are no guarantees that relations between the Arctic states will always remain on an even keel and that such tensions or fractures may not be imported into the region. This brings us to the important difference between issues that narrowly concern the Arctic region and the overarching strategic considerations and developments on a global plane that feed back into the affairs of the North.

During the Cold War, the Arctic held a prominent place in the political and military standoffs between the two superpowers. This was important not because of interactions *in* the Arctic itself (though the cat-and-mouse games of submarines took place there), but because of its wider strategic role in the systemic competition between the U.S. and the USSR.

With the end of the Cold War, the Arctic was transformed from a region of geo-strategic rivalry to one where a (now diminished) Russian state would cooperate in various novel collaborative arrangements with its former Western adversaries. Several regional organizations (the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and the Northern Forum) emerged in the 1990s to tackle issues such as environmental degradation, regional and local development, and cultural and economic cross-border cooperation.<sup>20</sup> But whereas interaction increased during this period among Arctic states and also included Arctic indigenous peoples (as they gained more political visibility and an official voice), geopolitically the region seemed to disappear from the radar of global power politics.

Since the mid-2000s the Arctic's strategic importance has reappeared. Echoing the dynamics of the Cold War, this began to happen primarily because Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, started to re-build its military (and nuclear) prowess in order to re-assert its position at the head table of world politics. And given the country's geography and recent history, its obvious focus would be its Arctic lands and seas. In this terrain Russia could pursue, unobstructed, its policy of rebuilding its forces as well as expanding its defense and deterrence capabilities.<sup>21</sup>

This has not come primarily because of changing political circumstances in the Arctic, but because Russia maintains a naturally (that is, geographically) dominant position in the North and a historically strong naval presence, the Northern Fleet, on the Kola Peninsula<sup>22</sup> where its strategic submarines are based — essential to the country's status as a major nuclear power on the world stage.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Østhagen, "Geopolitics and Security."

<sup>20</sup> Svein Vigeland Rottem, *The Arctic Council: Between Environmental Protection and Geopolitics* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Oran R. Young, "Arctic Governance - Pathways to the Future," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 1, no. 2 (2010): 164–85.

<sup>21</sup> Paal S. Hilde, "Armed Forces and Security Challenges in the Arctic," in *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World*, ed. Rolf Tamnes and Kristine Offerdal (London: Routledge, 2014), 153–5.

<sup>22</sup> Zysk, "Russia's Arctic Strategy."

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Sergunin and Valery Konyshchev, "Russia in Search of Its Arctic Strategy: Between Hard and Soft Power?," *Polar Journal* 4, no. 1 (2014): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2014.913930>.



*Caption:* Russia's nuclear submarines based near Murmansk make the Arctic strategically important for Russia. This also defines the bilateral relationship with Norway, its nearest neighbor. These submarines are not, however, meant for the Arctic but for Russia's nuclear deterrence and strategic force posture.

*Source:* [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian\\_submarine\\_Tula\\_\(K-114\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_submarine_Tula_(K-114).jpg)

Into this evolutionary geo-economic and geo-strategic mix, China has surfaced as a new Arctic actor in recent years. Indeed, China has proclaimed itself as a “near-Arctic state.”<sup>24</sup> With Beijing's continuous efforts to assert influence through its global network of dominance, the Arctic has emerged as the latest arena where China's presence and interaction are components of its expanding power in both soft and hard terms, be it China's interests in scientific research or investments in Russia's fossil fuel and mineral extraction industries across Arctic countries.<sup>25</sup> China protects its range of interests — from businesses to opinions on developments related to the Law of the Sea — as part of this expansion of its political might in the region and worldwide.<sup>26</sup>

However, to the eight Arctic countries who hold regional power, China remains an outsider. Not only that, but the Arctic is emerging as yet another domain where the U.S. is throwing down the gauntlet to challenge China's global rise. Despite the inaccuracies of U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo's warning in 2019 that Beijing's Arctic activity risks creating a “new South China Sea,”<sup>27</sup> such statements do show how the U.S. sees the Arctic as a theater where the emerging systemic competition between the two countries is becoming apparent.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Timo Koivurova and Sanna Kopra, eds., *Chinese Policy and Presence in the Arctic* (Leiden, NLD: Brill Nijhoff, 2020), 5–11.

<sup>25</sup> For more on this, see Mia M. Bennett, “Arctic Law and Governance: The Role of China and Finland (2017),” *Jindal Global Law Review* 8, no. 1 (2017): 111–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41020-017-0038-y>; Kai Sun, “Beyond the Dragon and the Panda: Understanding China's Engagement in the Arctic,” *Asia Policy* 18, no. 1 (2014): 46–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2014.0023>; Koivurova and Kopra, *Chinese Policy and Presence*.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Willis and Duncan Depledge, “How We Learned to Stop Worrying About China's Arctic Ambitions: Understanding China's Admission to the Arctic Council, 2004-2013,” *The Arctic Institute*, September 22, 2014, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-arctic-ambitions-arctic-council/>; Sanna Kopra, “China's Arctic Interests,” *Arctic Yearbook 2013* (2013): 1–16, <http://www.arcticyearbook.com/2013-articles/51-china-s-arctic-interests>; Jiang Ye, “China's Role in Arctic Affairs in the Context of Global Governance,” *Strategic Analysis* 38, no. 6 (2014): 913–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2014.952938>.

<sup>27</sup> The Guardian, “US Warns Beijing's Arctic Activity Risks Creating ‘New South China Sea,’” *The Guardian*, May 6, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostuctural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

## Keeping the Arctic Separate?

The central question is how much the developments described here at the two different “levels” can be insulated or will overlap. If the goal is to keep the Arctic as a separate “exceptional” region of cooperation, the Arctic states have managed to do a relatively good job of late, despite setbacks due to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. This political situation is underpinned by the shared (economic) interest that the Arctic states have in maintaining stable regional relations.

Here we should also note the new agreements and/or institutions set up to deal with specific issues in the Arctic as they arise, such as the 2018 “A5+5” agreement (which included China, Iceland, Japan, South Korea, and the EU) to prevent unregulated fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean, or the Arctic Coast Guard Forum that was established in 2015.<sup>29</sup> Such agreements and interactions have a socializing effect on the Arctic states,<sup>30</sup> as cooperation becomes the modus operandi for dealing with Arctic issues.

The most pressing regional challenge, however, is how to deal with and talk about Arctic-specific security concerns, which are often excluded from the above-mentioned cooperative forums and venues. The debate about which mechanisms are best suited to further expand security cooperation has now been going on for a decade:<sup>31</sup> some hold that the Arctic Council should acquire a security component,<sup>32</sup> whereas others look to the Arctic Coast Guard Forum or other more ad-hoc venues for leadership or guidance.<sup>33</sup>

The Northern Chiefs of Defense Conference and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable were initiatives established to this end in 2011/2012,<sup>34</sup> but they fell apart after 2014. The difficulties encountered in trying to establish an arena for security discussions indicate the high sensitivity to, and influences from, events and evolutions elsewhere. Any Arctic security dialogue is fragile and risks being interpreted in terms of the increasingly tense NATO–Russia division in Europe at large. And, China is naturally excluded since it is not, per se, an Arctic actor.

Paradoxically, precisely what such an arena for dialogue is intended to achieve (preventing the spillover of tensions from other parts of the world to the Arctic?) is the very reason why progress is difficult. However, the Arctic states should push ahead in order to set up a venue that can deal with these questions in order to avoid unnecessary tension. An “Arctic Security Council” or similar types of arrangements will naturally not solve all security issues in the Arctic. Still, by including military officials, Arctic politicians and the wider community of “security experts”, some pressure can be alleviated and the Arctic states themselves would be seen as taking proactive steps to counter some of the rising security concerns in the region.

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<sup>29</sup> US Department of State, “Arctic Nations Sign Declaration to Prevent Unregulated Fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean,” Press Releases: July 2015, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/07/244969.htm>; Andreas Østhagen, “The Arctic Coast Guard Forum: Big Tasks, Small Solutions,” The Arctic Institute, November 3, 2015, <http://www.thearcticinstitute.org/2015/11/the-arctic-coast-guard-forum-big-tasks.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Keil and Knecht, *Governing Arctic Change*, A. I. Johnston, “Treating International Institutions as Social Environments,” *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2001): 487–515.

<sup>31</sup> Heather A. Conley et al., “A New Security Architecture for the Arctic: An American Perspective,” CSIS Report, January 20 (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Ragnhild Gronning, “Why Military Security Should Be Kept out of the Arctic Council,” *High North News*, June 7, 2016, <http://www.highnorthnews.com/op-ed-why-military-security-should-be-kept-out-of-the-arctic-council/>; Piotr Graczyk and Svein Vigeland Rottem, “The Arctic Council: Soft Actions, Hard Effects?,” in *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security*, ed. Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, Marc Lanteigne, and Horatio Sam-Aggrey (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Mike Sfraga et al., “A Governance and Risk Inventory for a Changing Arctic: Background Paper for the Arctic Security Roundtable at the Munich Security Conference 2020” (Washington DC, 2020), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/governance-and-risk-inventory-changing-arctic>; Andreas Østhagen, “Arctic Coast Guards: Why Cooperate?,” in *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security*, ed. Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, Marc Lanteigne, and Horatio Godfrey Sam-Aggrey (London: Routledge, 2020), 283–94.

<sup>34</sup> Duncan Depledge et al., “Why We Need to Talk about Military Activity in the Arctic: Towards an Arctic Military Code of Conduct,” *Arctic Yearbook 2019* (2019).

### Future Great-Power Politics in the Arctic

Regarding great-power politics in the Arctic (and elsewhere), the immediate concern is the growing hostility between what some refer to as the “two poles” — the U.S. and (its perceived challenger) China.<sup>35</sup> However, we can note that China’s increasing global engagement and influence has in fact (thus far) been rather subdued in the North. Beijing, for all its rhetoric about its ambitions for a “Polar Silk Route” has used all the correct Arctic buzzwords in tune with the preferences of the Arctic states.<sup>36</sup> However, there are fears that this may just be a mollifying tactic: merely the beginning of a more pushy Chinese presence where geo-economic actions — financial investments motivated by geopolitical goals.<sup>37</sup> — are part of a larger political strategy aimed at challenging the hegemony of the “West” as well as the balance of power in the North.<sup>38</sup>

The Arctic speech by Secretary of State Pompeo in 2019 fed directly into this narrative.<sup>39</sup> The U.S. obviously has a considerable security presence in the Arctic that ranges from military bases in Keflavik and Thule to troops in Canada and (rotating) troops in Norway, as well as its own Alaskan Arctic component. It is unlikely that Chinese actions in the region can challenge this presence. Moreover, its regional engagement assumes predominantly soft-power characteristics. At the same time, shifting power balances and greater regional interest from Beijing need not lead to tension and conflict; on the contrary, it might spur efforts to find ways of including China in regional forums, alleviating the (geo-economic) concerns of Arctic states.<sup>40</sup> In other words, “how” to balance these concerns will be at the core of Arctic geopolitical concerns in years to come.

The other great-power actor with global aspirations (which, in contrast to China, is actually *in* the Arctic region) is Russia, operating in tandem with its desire to project influence. As by far the largest Arctic country with the most ambition in terms of military investments and activity, Russia sets the parameters for much of the Arctic security trajectory. This is not likely to change, although exactly how the future Arctic security environment will look depends on the “West’s” response to Russian actions taking place predominantly in other regions around the world.

However, Russian military engagement in the Arctic does not have a uniform regional effect. This is where the sub-regional Arctic relations come into play, and geographic proximity should not be underestimated. After all, neighboring regions, like Norway and Russia, are forced to interact regardless of the positive or negative character of their relations. The U.S. Sixth Fleet had reasons for sailing in the Barents Sea just off the coast of NATO ally Norway: this is the part of the Arctic region that is experiencing the most military activity and might pose the highest security risk for the U.S. and its allies.

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<sup>35</sup> Tunsjø, *Return of Bipolarity*.

<sup>36</sup> State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Arctic Policy,” Chinese Government, 2018, [http://english.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm).

<sup>37</sup> M. Sparke, “From Geopolitics to Geoeconomics: Transnational State Effects in the Borderlands,” *Geopolitics* 3, no. 2 (1998): 62–98.

<sup>38</sup> Elina Brutschin and Samuel R. Schubert, “Icy Waters, Hot Tempers, and High Stakes: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics of the Arctic,” *Energy Research and Social Science*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2016.03.020>; Marc Lanteigne, “The Role of China in Emerging Arctic Security Discourses,” *S+F Security and Peace* 33, no. 3 (2015): 150–55.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Looking North: Sharpening America’s Arctic Focus,” Remarks, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus/>.

<sup>40</sup> Bjørnar Sverdrup-Thygeson and Espen Mathy, “Norges Debatt Om Kinesiske Investeringer: Fra Velvillig Til Varsom (Norway’s Debate about Chinese Investments: From Willing to Cautious),” *Internasjonal Politikk* 78, no. 1 (2020): 79–92.



## Conclusion

Crucially, what happens in the Arctic does not remain solely in the Arctic, be it related to the environment or politics. Conversely, events and processes elsewhere can in turn impact the Arctic in terms of global warming, security, and desires to exploit economic opportunities. There are some paradoxical dynamics — explaining the mix of cooperation and tension, if not conflict — that are best understood by distinguishing between the following concepts: international competition (why the U.S. is increasingly focused on China in an Arctic context) and regional interaction (why Arctic states still meet to sign new agreements hailing the cooperative spirit of the North).

Questions raised in this paper concern both whether the Arctic states will continue to attempt to insulate the region from great power politics elsewhere, and how to improve intra-regional cooperation on security matters. Regarding the former, it is clear that the Arctic will not become any less important on the strategic level, simply because the U.S. and Russia are already *in* the region, and China is increasingly demonstrating its (strategic) northern interests.

If global relations continue to deteriorate among these actors (i.e., increasingly bellicose statements, military posturing and exercises, sanctions regimes) greater tensions in the Arctic may well result. The Arctic is then to some extent used as an arena for symbolic gestures and power projection, which has little to do with resources or territory in the Arctic specifically. The Arctic states can, nevertheless, *choose* to keep the region “separate” in their statements and regional interactions, even if this is predominantly a rhetorical instrument in order to reduce northern tensions.

Regarding the latter question, it is clear that increasing attention has been paid for some time now to northern security challenges by Arctic actors (including Russia, the U.S., and, by proxy, the EU) and those with a growing interest in the Arctic, like China. Which forum or institution that might be an appropriate venue remains in debate. The most purposeful arrangement is likely to be an “Arctic security council”, separate from existing structures and involving officials from the military as well as politicians and the small community of Arctic security scholars. That might, in turn, help ensure that Arctic relations remain relatively peaceful, even as the region is becoming a focal point in global politics.

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