

# Cooperation and Competition in the Arctic

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# Introduction

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In October 2022, President Joe Biden released his administration's National Security Strategy, delayed for several months because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Maintaining a peaceful Arctic appeared for the first time as a strategic priority. Though it has long been seen as a region of stability and cooperation, it has undergone significant changes that have made it an arena of growing tensions among states. The Arctic is in many ways a microcosm reflecting the same dynamics as articulated in the National Security Strategy: how to maintain cooperation in a rapidly changing environment increasingly defined by geopolitical competition among major powers.

The primary driver of change is climate change and the cascade effects of global warming. Ice melt has made maritime routes in the Arctic increasingly navigable, which has spurred intense interest in the region's rich resources and the possibilities of trade, economic development, and resource extraction. The prospect of trading lanes between Asia and Europe that will save time and money has led to growing major power competition between the United States and Russia—both Arctic states—and with China, which has defined itself as a "near-Arctic state" with growing interests in the region.

A second driver of change has been the impact of Russia's brutal war against Ukraine. When the war commenced, Russia held the chair in the region's intergovernmental body, the Arctic Council. In response to Russia's invasion, the remaining seven members—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States—"paused" its proceedings in early March and later announced it would resume work in some areas but without Russian participation. Thus, regional cooperation has been a casualty of Russia's war. Given existing competitive pressures, continued environmental degradation, and security concerns, the indefinite interruption in Arctic regional governance is a great cause for concern.

This paper looks at the conflicting issues affecting the Arctic, the many ripple effects of climate change, and the consequences for cooperation and the geopolitics of competition for the United States and its allies, and for Russia and China. It will examine the relationships between their strategic goals and actions and assess current dynamics and what the future holds for the Arctic.

# Drivers of Change

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**Climate Change.** The Arctic is on the frontline of climate change. Though much of the change originates in regions outside the Arctic, it is the Arctic where the effects have been the most rapid, severe, and unprecedented. Rising temperatures in the region are 2-3 times higher than the global average.<sup>1</sup> In the Arctic itself, thawing ice has increased Arctic navigability along its sea routes and thus opened the possibility of a cheaper and shorter trade route from Asia to Europe and led to growing geopolitical competition for access to valuable resources and regional influence.

**Maritime Routes.** The growing prospects for navigable maritime routes have brought other states to the Arctic and have challenged the Arctic states' exclusivity, both in terms of governance in the region as well as access to natural resources—oil and gas, minerals, fishing, and mining.<sup>2</sup> The possibility of a shorter route than the Suez Canal has states jockeying for influence and for making bigger claims on resources. However, experts warn that opening the Arctic for commercial navigation on the scale envisioned is unrealistic and highly unlikely for a number of reasons: higher risks because of environmental conditions, economic costs, unreliability for navigation (e.g. unstable ice), and the short season in which vessels can navigate the Arctic sea lanes.<sup>3</sup>

**Geopolitical Competition.** The possible opening of navigable routes across the Arctic has increased tensions at several levels. The active engagement by non-Arctic states has raised concerns between Arctic and non-Arctic states, among the Arctic states themselves, and has amplified geopolitical competition among major powers present in the region.

# Arctic Regional Governance

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The Arctic was a region of strategic and military contestation during the Cold War and critical to both the U.S. and Soviet strategic nuclear postures and assets. After the Cold War, the Arctic states moved to establish the Arctic as a region committed to cooperation and peaceful resolution of conflict—a “high north, low tension” area with a functioning regional forum, the Arctic Council.<sup>4</sup>

The Arctic Council, established in 1996, is an international and intergovernmental framework for cooperation among the eight states with sovereignty over territory in the Arctic region: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. Four organizations serve as “Permanent Participants” representing the indigenous peoples in the region and participate fully in all aspects of the Council’s work. There are also 38 observer states and organizations.<sup>5</sup>

The Arctic Council is not a treaty-based organization but, rather, an international forum based on consensus and cooperation. Rule 7 of the Arctic Council Rules of Procedure states that “...all decisions of the Arctic Council and its subsidiary bodies...shall be by consensus of all eight Arctic States.”<sup>6</sup>

It was established to promote coordination on two specific issues: environmental protection of the region, and sustainable economic development generally and specifically for the indigenous residents of the Arctic within the context of safeguarding the environment. Operating by consensus, the Arctic Council writ covers environmental protection, sustainable development, science research, and indigenous rights.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, its mandate explicitly excludes military security, as stated in the Ottawa Declaration, the Council’s founding document.<sup>8</sup>

The Arctic Council has brought stability to the region, but the effects of climate change and polar ice melt that have opened the prospect of navigable shipping lanes have intensified geopolitical competition and tensions among Arctic and non-Arctic states. As one expert puts it: “what happens in the Arctic doesn’t stay in the Arctic.”<sup>9</sup>

***Impact of Ukraine War.*** The Ukraine war has had serious consequences for the Arctic, but particularly for Arctic governance and cooperation, placing the future of the Arctic Council in doubt. On March 3, 2022, the seven remaining Arctic states condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and announced they were “temporarily pausing” participation in all Council meetings.<sup>10</sup> But concern for the need to continue

the Council's research on climate change and other vital topics grew, and on June 8, the seven members of the Council announced the Council would restart projects that could be continued without Russian participation.<sup>11</sup>

There is serious doubt, however, that the Council can fulfill its mandate and responsibilities without Russian cooperation on such issues as climate change. Furthermore, it is unclear how the Council will interact with the observer states, the indigenous Permanent Partners, and the non-Arctic states. The broader securitization of the Arctic region has challenged the Council's ability to govern the Arctic. With greater competition and confrontation come calls for the Arctic Council to be replaced or to be substantially restructured and for the establishment of a separate body to manage the growing security concerns in the Arctic.<sup>12</sup>

# Major Actors

## Russia

Russia is the largest Arctic actor, possessing over 50% of the landmass in the Arctic. Strategically, since the beginning of the Cold War, the United States and Russia have placed significant strategic nuclear and conventional assets in the Arctic region. In that sense, the Arctic has long been an arena of military confrontation.

### Russian Arctic Strategy

- > Protecting its second nuclear strike capability
- > Protecting the Northern Sea Route as a potential major trade route between East Asia and Europe
- > Protecting its energy industry in the region

Militarily, Russia's Northern Fleet dominates the Arctic geographically and in terms of capability and infrastructure. Since 2005, Russia has focused on upgrading and expanding its Arctic capabilities. Russia's July 2022 maritime doctrine defined the Arctic as its most important maritime priority, elevating it from third to first place (the Atlantic having been its previous top priority), and elevated the Northern Fleet to a military district. Significantly, the Arctic holds Russia's vast nuclear weapons systems, as well as the infrastructure capabilities and the conventional forces to protect it, and it has added new hypersonic missiles designed to evade U.S. defenses.<sup>13</sup>

Economically, Russia is heavily dependent on its oil and gas reserves. In 2020, oil and gas comprised more than half of its exports, and revenues from oil and natural gas in 2021 totaled 45% of Russia's federal budget.<sup>14</sup> Russia controls the largest share of the oil and natural gas reserves that have been mapped in the Arctic, and 75 % of Russia's oil and 95% of its natural gas reserves lie in the Arctic.<sup>15</sup> Thus, a key strategic objective for Russia in the Arctic is the protection of access rights to its extractive resources. Russia controls the North Sea Route (NSR, which stretches along Russia's entire Arctic coastline and is thus critical to Russia achieving its military and economic objectives.

***Impact of the Ukraine War.*** The Ukraine war has fundamentally changed the security landscape in the Far North, but it has not fundamentally altered the centrality of the Arctic in Russia's military strategy. There are differing views of whether Russia's military losses in Ukraine have any significant impact on Russia's military capabilities in the region. There have been reports of a decline in Russian conventional strength in the Arctic—of troop transfers and Russian vessels being sent to the Black Sea—though what impact this has had on Russia's overall defenses is unclear.<sup>16</sup> What is clear,

however, is that in the Arctic, Russian military superiority vis-à-vis the United States and its western allies is undiminished.

There are mixed views on the question of whether events in Ukraine have increased the chances for confrontation in the Arctic. For Russia, how events play out in Ukraine will influence the Russian leadership's perception of the potential threat to their strategic interests in the Far North. Observers believe that at least in the near term, the probability of real conflict in the Arctic is low. While Russian leaders have threatened to use smaller tactical nuclear weapons, analysts have seen no movement of such weapons towards the battlefield. Secondly, the Biden administration has repeatedly warned Russia and, importantly, China of the consequences of such an action. One year into the Ukraine war, communications and diplomatic signaling have also provided better assessments of the conflict. And in the Arctic, none of the three major powers wishes to increase the chance of confrontation in the region. Mutual restraint, thus far, appears to hold.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, there are some reasons for concern. Putin's February 21, 2023 speech denied any responsibility for the war in Ukraine and placed the blame solely on NATO's expansion and European states' decisions to increase their defense systems. Finland and Sweden's decisions to join NATO may well have repercussions in the Arctic, since all seven of the remaining Arctic Council members would also be NATO members.

There are further worries that if Russia suffers further losses in Ukraine, it might be tempted to use a tactical nuclear weapon as a game changer, to save face, or to force Ukraine to capitulate. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that the chances of that are low, reminding Russia of "serious consequences" should such weapons be used in Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> More likely is Russia's use of unconventional "hybrid" instruments such as cyber-attacks, propaganda, sabotage, spying, and other tools intended to exploit vulnerabilities. Norway has been the target of several such incidents—drones flying over sensitive infrastructure, damage to seabed fiber-optic cables and gas pipelines—and has arrested Russian citizens for spying.<sup>19</sup>

## The United States

The United States has been an Arctic power since the purchase of the Alaska territory in 1867, but the strategic importance of the Arctic began with the Cold War and the military confrontation between Russia and the United States. In the post-Cold War era, the Arctic was not considered a key national security priority for U.S. administrations. For the United States, the question of Arctic security has national, regional, and strategic dimensions: territorial defense of Alaska and its economic development; its role in NATO and North Atlantic defense in close cooperation with its allies; and geopolitical competition with Russia and China. The Ukraine war has raised the Arctic to a major strategic concern.

The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) has, for the first time, declared the Arctic as a national priority. The NSS points to an increasingly aggressive Russia and a China extending its influence as reasons for concern and emphasizes the U.S. role as an Arctic state in protecting the established order: deepen cooperation with allies, protect Arctic institutions, and continue the critical work of the Arctic Council on climate, pollution, economic development, and protection of indigenous rights.<sup>20</sup> The designation of a national priority is consequential; it activates a process by which the Arctic region will gain a greater share of mandated funding support and legislative backing. And the creation of an ambassador-at-large for the Arctic has added diplomatic weight and increased U.S. soft power in the region.<sup>21</sup>

## Pillars of U.S. Arctic Strategy

- > **Security:** deter threats to homeland and to U.S. allies and protect U.S. sovereign territory
- > **Climate change:** national and global actions to build resilience to effects of climate change
- > **Economic development:** for Alaska and with allies for sustainable development
- > **International Cooperation and Governance:** support existing institutions and uphold international law, rules, norms, and standards

The U.S. Arctic Strategy, released in October 2022, lays out four pillars [see box] that reflect the key role the Arctic plays at the national, regional, and global levels while placing greater urgency on fighting climate change, economic development, and the threat of strategic competition.<sup>22</sup>

By elevating the Arctic as a strategic priority, the Biden administration will move to strengthen U.S. presence, capabilities, and cooperation with the aim of balancing Russia in the region. Though committed to action, the United States will remain "cautious" to avoid upsetting the relative balance that currently exists.

Militarily, the United States and its allies lag far behind Russia's military presence in the Arctic, which outnumbers NATO's forces by about a third. Experts estimate it would take a decade for the West to match Russia's military capabilities in the region.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, there are other ways of enhancing Arctic security that don't involve the high level of expenditures that a military buildup or deployment would require. A strong

deterrence can be maintained through regular military exercises and increasing interoperability. Strong sanctions can make dual-use computer chips much harder for Russia to obtain. Russia's hybrid threat can be mapped by increasing surveillance, reconnaissance, communications, and understanding of the complex dynamics in the Arctic. The Air Force's Arctic Strategy calls for more use of space satellite capabilities to cover the vast Arctic region, which is more than twice the size of the continental United States. The United States, for example, is collaborating with Norway to fill gaps in satellite surveillance by integrating U.S. military communications systems on Norwegian satellites.<sup>24</sup>

Deploying these strategies is dependent on close cooperation with its allies. Investing in the Arctic means investing in America's allies and partners. Russia's aggression has triggered significant changes in European defense and security. In August 2022, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called for NATO to strengthen its presence in the Arctic, and NATO has moved to close gaps in the North Atlantic and the European

Arctic.<sup>25</sup> It has conducted joint military exercises and is expanding in strategically significant areas: icebreakers, submarines, ships, surveillance systems—including drones, deterrence capabilities, and aircraft. Canada will invest \$3.8 billion to modernize the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).<sup>26</sup>

However, U.S. experts point out that the Arctic is not the top strategic priority. The 2022 NSS places China and countering its global ambitions as its first strategic priority. This means that strengthening Arctic defenses will have to compete for needed funds, and some experts have testified that the U.S. 2022 defense budget has failed to commit the funding required to implement the stated Arctic strategy.<sup>27</sup> The expectation is that America's allies will assume greater responsibility in Europe—more defense spending, capabilities, and engagement. A recent report by the Center for New American Security laid out the argument: facing serious challenges from Russia and China while faced with other simmering threats, such as North Korea, the United States must rely on its allies and partners to manage these tiered threats. What is needed, strategically, is deep multilateral defense cooperation and the political will and commitment to see it through.<sup>28</sup>

## China

China's drive for great power status and economic development defines its Arctic strategy. China prioritizes three lines of effort to achieve these goals: infrastructure development projects, science diplomacy, and norm-changing behavior. The longer-term goal is to establish the Arctic as a Chinese strategic frontier and China as a legitimate Arctic actor with an active role in regional governance.<sup>29</sup>

**Strategic Considerations.** The promise of new sea lanes through the Arctic is linked to both its strategic and economic goals. Strategically, China sees these maritime trading routes as a means of reducing its dependence on the use of the Suez Canal, which it sees as a wedge against U.S. influence on Chinese activities. Militarily, China has a very limited military presence in the Arctic, though experts point out that its vessels and communications equipment are “dual-use” and can be used for civilian or military purposes, but are seen primarily as a means of protecting its economic and commercial interests.<sup>30</sup>

**Economic Considerations.** China sees significant advantages in a northern route to support its economic development and energy needs. Sending ships through the Arctic would cut transit times by 10-15 days, reducing a trip between Europe and East Asia from 21,000 km by way of the Suez Canal to 12,800 km.<sup>31</sup> Of the four potential routes through the Arctic region, the Northern Sea Route (NSR, which runs along the coast of Russia, is the route most likely to be free of ice first, followed by the Northwest Passage, which crosses Canada's Arctic Ocean.<sup>32</sup>

China has gradually increased its foreign direct investment in infrastructure projects in the Arctic and declared the Arctic a “Polar Silk Road” (PSR, thereby integrating the

Arctic into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In cooperation with Russia, China has built infrastructure projects along the NSR as well as with other Arctic states such as Finland and Iceland.

**Scientific Diplomacy.** In its 2018 Arctic White Paper, the Chinese government outlines a detailed roadmap for scientific exploration and research in the Arctic--a core tool for extending China's reach in the region.<sup>33</sup> It maintains several research stations and operates polar icebreaker vessels in the region, stating that its research focuses on collecting data on environmental changes, weather patterns, and other climate-related issues. But other efforts at purchasing properties, such as in Denmark (military facility) and Sweden (radar station), raised suspicions and were rejected due to security concerns, signaling growing concerns over China's intentions in the Arctic.<sup>34</sup>

**Norm-changing Behavior.** Experts have also commented on China's efforts to change existing institutional norms and practices to better reflect its interests ("norm entrepreneur"). In the Arctic, China is playing the long game. Already in 2009, China applied for observer status in the Arctic Council, which was granted in 2012. By 2018, it had released its first Arctic White Paper in which it declared itself a "near-Arctic state" with legitimate "rights" in the region: to scientific research, freedom of navigation, resource exploitation and fishing, and to use of resources and commercial activities.<sup>35</sup> It pursues norm-changing behavior in other areas. China leads four of the 15 specialized agencies of the United Nations that set international standards in civil aviation, telecommunication, food and agriculture, and industrial development, and it has attacked a number of Western-backed human rights norms in the UN as well.<sup>36</sup>

China's focus in the Arctic serves its strategic and economic interests while working to create an environment more supportive of its longer-term goal of becoming an influential voice in Arctic affairs.

For the United States, the issue that merits close attention is Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Arctic. Russian leaders continue to actively engage with China but are reluctant to give it a larger role to become a permanent player in the region. China sees Russia as a way to secure its role in the Arctic, but Russia's military failures in Ukraine have damaged China's view of Russia as a reliable partner.<sup>37</sup>

## Conflict vs. Cooperation?

If conflict in the Arctic can no longer be excluded, what are the prospects for cooperation? There are no diplomatic initiatives and little prospect for a reopening of dialogue anytime soon. The Arctic Council has resumed some activities without Russian participation, but its future is uncertain. It is clear alternative approaches and forms of Arctic governance are needed, and that scientific research with Russian institutes and organizations must continue, but it seems there is little willingness in Moscow to return to cooperative engagement for the time being.<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of Russian non-cooperation, the United States and its allies must cooperate to mitigate threats to Arctic security and construct a framework for Arctic governance that maintains Council's work and task forces while acting to preserve regional stability and existing formal agreements and informal arrangements. Of critical importance is the continuation of the Council's contribution to global efforts to find solutions to environmental degradation and the protection of the Arctic's fragile ecosystem. Such efforts can be supplemented by pressuring the non-Arctic states actively engaged in pursuing economic interests in the region to do more. Communication with Russia will likely flow through informal channels, but it should be reciprocal and transparent to reduce misunderstandings or accidents. This will be particularly relevant for military-to-military lines of communication for the United States and its allies to find a balance between ensuring a strong Western deterrence and defense while taking care to avoid increasing tensions.<sup>39</sup>

# Conclusion

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The driver of change in the Arctic is climate change. Melting ice is exposing the potential for lucrative alternative sea routes whose economic and strategic advantages have drawn non-Arctic states to the Arctic. Challenges to the existing governance framework of the Arctic Council are contributing to rising major power competition in the region. The Arctic has always been an area of cooperation and competition, but what happens in the Arctic has national, regional, and global ramifications.

The brutal war in Ukraine initiated by Russia has had a substantial impact on the Arctic. For Russia, the law of unintended consequences has brought the expansion of NATO (Finland, Sweden), extensive degradation of Russian conventional forces and capabilities, strains to its relationship with China, and greater unity in Europe, which has fundamentally reduced its dependence on Russian energy and damaged the Russian economy. Some or all of the negative consequences may play out in the Arctic at various levels.

More important, perhaps, is the significant degree of uncertainty that pervades Arctic affairs. Fundamental questions about the future of the region—its cooperative governance, its fragile ecosystem, growing military positioning, and the insertion of non-Arctic state interests into the region are all problems that are expanding and accelerating, requiring greater attention and focus than in the recent past.

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