

# THE ARCTIC

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A geopolitical ocean appearing in real-time

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# The Arctic

## A geopolitical ocean opening in real-time

### Abstract

The Arctic's 21 million square kilometer landmass has been the Earth's most unknown and underdeveloped region. The ice caps and low temperatures have maintained impregnable the most northern point of the planet even for the great powers. However, as ice melts as a result of climate change, it reveals a wealth of natural resources and new routes for navigation that are becoming more and more accessible and, hence, attractive. Moreover, it provides a military strategic position which brings the two old enemies of the Cold War, Russia and the United States, very close. In addition, the Asian rising hegemon claims its own right to this region of the world as part of its strategy to challenge USA's leadership all over the globe. The starting gun for an arm race has already been shot in the Arctic. Therefore, it is a question of waiting to see to what extent the key actors are willing to clash in the north or to amicably fall back to a realm of political diplomacy in which they can take the advantages of this new ocean that is steadily emerging.

**Keywords:** Arctic Ocean, the Arctic Council, the United States, Russia Federation, China, climate change, natural resources, shipping lines, the Polar Silk Road, security dilemma, security competition, power, strategy, NATO, Nordic countries, economy, Cold War and UNCLOS.

### Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, the British geographer H.J. Mackinder noted that the continental power capable of ensuring control from the agricultural areas of East Europe, extending over vast territories as far as Central Asia and reaching into the Siberian's forests and plains, was destined to dominate the world. One of the main reasons for this supremacy was that the "Heartland", as he called this extensive area, was gifted with the eternally frozen north, making it impregnable to attacks by sea powers such as Great Britain.

However, since Mackinder published his theory in 1904, the world has changed faster than any previous time in history. There is no longer any eternity in the Arctic's ice caps and icebergs. Humans have pressed the accelerator in all realms during the last century: from transportation and energy consumption to human development, food supply, and waste production. However, every day is more evident that nature cannot put up with human growth speed any longer. Among a long list of consequences arising

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out of climate change, the Arctic has warmed roughly twice the entire globe rate in the last 30 years<sup>1</sup>. The scientific community have concluded that the Arctic will have changed from an ice-covered environment to a recurrent ice-free ocean during the summers as early as the late 2050s<sup>2</sup>. This situation means that an ocean is appearing before our eyes in real-time.

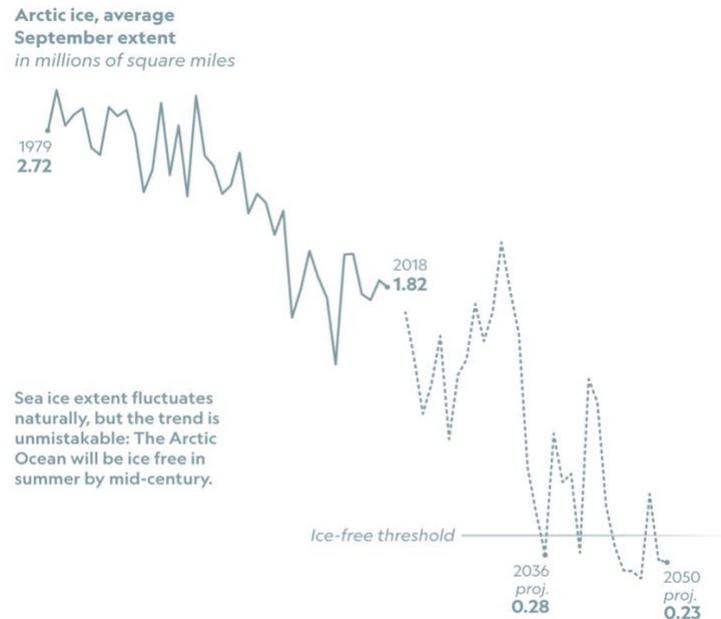


Figure 1: Arctic ice decrease<sup>3</sup>

While ecologists and scientists see a looming natural disaster in the Arctic, political powers see a wealth of opportunity. As melting ice opens shipping lanes and unveils incredible riches, the region emerges as a new geopolitical and economic scenario where all the big hegemony, mainly the United States, Russia and China, want their share of the spoils and are preparing to defend it if needed by tooth and nail.

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<sup>1</sup> National Snow & Ice Data Center (NSIDC) "Climate Change in the Arctic". Last updated: 4 May 2020 Retrieved 8 January 2020 from [https://nsidc.org/cryosphere/arctic-meteorology/climate\\_change.html](https://nsidc.org/cryosphere/arctic-meteorology/climate_change.html)

<sup>2</sup> Notz, D et al. (SIMIP Community) "Arctic Sea Ice in CMIP6" *Geophysical Research Letters*. 17 April 2020. Retrieve January 9, 2021 from <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1029/2019GL086749>

<sup>3</sup> National Geographic. "Open for Business" September 2019 issue. Retrieved January 11, 2021 from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/08/map-shows-how-ships-navigate-melting-arctic-feature/>

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## The Arctic's landmass and sovereignty disputes

Firstly, it is relevant to establish what region the Arctic encompasses because there is no set agreement. In general, most states consider that it includes all areas north of the Arctic Circle and the associated eight Arctic states: Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway (Svalbard), Russia, the United States (Alaska) and Sweden<sup>4</sup>. These eight nations are also full members of the Arctic Council founded in 1996 as an international forum of cooperation regarding protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development. In contrast, it does not address security issues. Upon its foundation, the USA intentionally prohibited this last matter<sup>5</sup>. In addition, five out of the eight countries mentioned above are Arctic coastal states: Russia, the USA, Canada, Denmark and Norway. As a result of this proximity in the northernmost area of the globe, some overlapping claims collide.

In 2008, the Arctic Five jointly agreed on the Ilulissat Declaration to adopt the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the appropriate framework for the delimitation of maritime boundaries among the Arctic states<sup>6</sup>. In short, the UNCLOS is the backbone for Arctic governance. Maritime states can claim a 200-mile-wide Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off their coasts. This EEZ can be extended up to 350 miles if a country shows it has an expanded continental shelf that extends beyond the 200-mile limit<sup>7</sup>. It also prescribes that states should submit their territorial claims to the U.N. Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), a committee made up of scientists whose job is to determine whether or not the claim is scientifically valid.

Although the Arctic states have shown a preference for a stable political environment and most of the maritime boundary disputes have been resolved through bilateral negotiations<sup>8</sup>, there is one area that no state is going to give in diplomatically. Roughly one-third of the Arctic Ocean sits atop the Eurasian

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<sup>4</sup> K. Schönfeldt (Eds.). "The Arctic in International Law and Policy" (Documents in International Law, pp. xcix–cxc). Oxford: Hart Publishing. Page 288. Retrieved January 8, 2021, from <https://bit.ly/2XnYEU0>

<sup>5</sup> Information available in the official Arctic Council's website. Retrieved 8 January 2020 from <https://arctic-council.org/en/about/>

<sup>6</sup> The Fletcher School: Tufts University "The Arctic and the LOSC". Chapter 8: The Arctic & the LOSC. Law of the Sea: A Policy Primer. Retrieved January 8, 2021, from <https://sites.tufts.edu/lawofthesea/chapter-eight/>

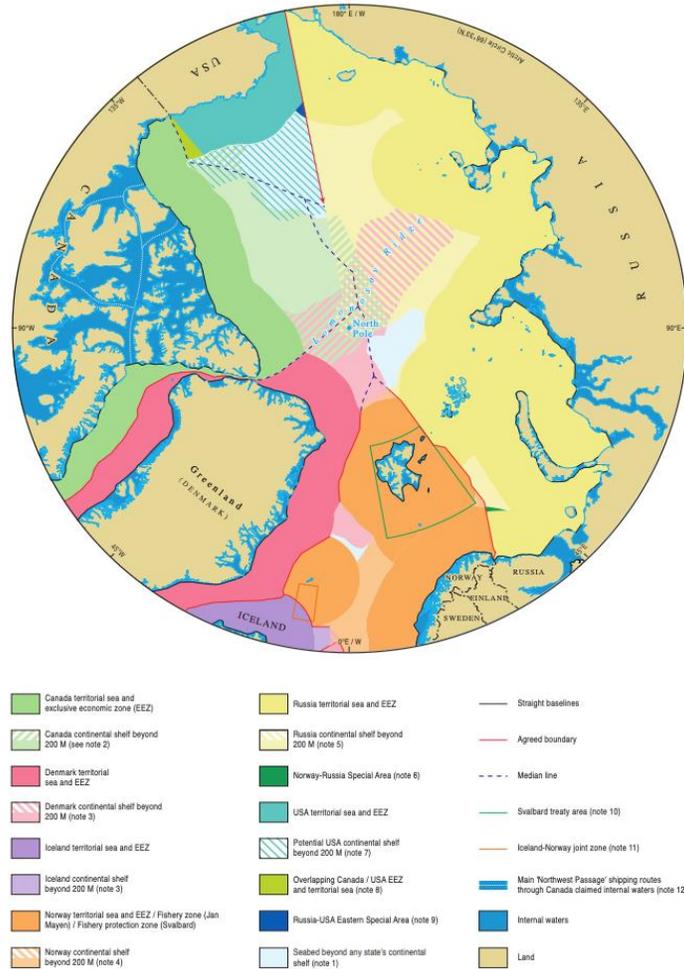
<sup>7</sup> United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNLOSC) December 10, 1982. Retrieved January 9, 2021 from [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention\\_agreements/convention\\_overview\\_convention.htm](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Østhagen, A. "The Different Levels of Geopolitics of the Arctic". *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. Published 5 December 2019. Retrieved January 8, 2021 from <https://sites.tufts.edu/lawofthesea/chapter-eight/>

and North American continental shelf where the Mendeleev and Lomonosov ridges are located<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, depending on whether they are adjudicated to the Eurasian or North American continental shelf, the country or countries granted the area will increase their sovereignty in the Arctic region.



**Maritime jurisdiction and boundaries in the Arctic region**



*Figure 2: Maritime jurisdiction and boundaries in the Arctic region (IBRU)<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> Laursen, L. "Russian claim heats up battle to control Arctic sea floor" *Science*. 14 Aug 2015: Vol. 349, Issue 6249, pp. 678 DOI: 10.1126/science.349.6249.678 Retrieved January 8, 2021 from <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/349/6249/678>

<sup>10</sup> IBRU: The Centre for Borders Research at Durham University. "Maritime jurisdiction and boundaries in the Arctic region". Last Updated May, 2020 Retrieve January 9 2021 from

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ibru/resources/ArcticMapsMay2020/IBRUArcticmap06-05-20revisedUSAclaimed-compressedpp.pdf>

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As is described in the following chapters, the growing relevance of the Arctic is prompting tension escalation between the coastal states. By 2007, Russia sent an expedition to deposit a national flag made of titanium more than two miles under the ice cap on the North Pole seabed, awakening an international consciousness in the area. This symbolic manoeuvre attempted to emphasise Russia's right to nearly half of the Arctic Ocean floor<sup>11</sup>. Since then, Canada and the USA have increased their efforts to prove that it belongs to their continental shelf. The dispute remains unresolved at present, and tensions have flared as competition has heated up between the global powers around this contentious issue.

### **A coveted realm: precious minerals and shipping routes**

The rich natural resources largely influence the competitive race for Arctic ownership. The yearned treasure includes petroleum, natural gas, fish supply and minerals such as gold, diamonds and rare earth metals. Its value estimation rises to trillions of dollars.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the exploration and exploitation of this fortune in the Arctic are still complicated and expensive.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the US Geological Survey estimated in 2008 that the Arctic holds 30% of the world's remaining natural gas and 18% of the world's remaining oil reserves.<sup>14</sup> However, experts predict that investment costs are three to five times higher in the Arctic than in other petroleum regions.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, energy transitions towards zero-carbon economies are taking place all over the world. Governments are increasing their interests in renewable energies which will eventually amount to the decline of the oil and natural gas prices. As it happens, China which is the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide, recently announced its commitment to become carbon-neutral before 2060 and to begin

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<sup>11</sup> C. J. Chivers. "Russians Plant Flag on the Arctic Seabed". *The New York Times*. August 3, 2007. Retrieved January 9, 2020 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/03/world/europe/03arctic.html>

<sup>12</sup> Pedrozo, R. "Arctic Climate Change and U.S. Accession to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea." *International Law Studies*. Vol. 89. (2013) Page: 164. Retrieved January 9, 2021 from <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1021&context=ils>

<sup>13</sup> Buchanan, E. "Arctic Thaw". *Foreign Affairs*. January 21, 2016. Retrieved January 9, 2021 from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2016-01-21/arctic-thaw>

<sup>14</sup> The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). "Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle". USGS Fact Sheet 2008-3049. Retrieved January 9, 2021 from <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/fs2008-3049.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Peters, G.P. (et a.) "Future emissions from shipping and petroleum activities in the Arctic". *Atmospheric chemistry and physics*. June 2011 DOI: 10.5194/acp-11-5305-2011. Retrieved January 9, 2020 from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241427639\\_Future\\_emissions\\_from\\_shipping\\_and\\_petroleum\\_activities\\_in\\_the\\_Arctic](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241427639_Future_emissions_from_shipping_and_petroleum_activities_in_the_Arctic)

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cutting its emissions within the next ten years. Thus, a drop in oil prices could deter investments and, thereby, cool the states' interest in the Arctic resources.

However, even if this forecast comes to fruition, a new navigable ocean will still be incredibly attractive for world trade. The Arctic Ocean opens two main possible routes: The Northern Sea Route (over Eurasia) and the Northwest Passage (over North America). These shipping shortcuts offer a great advantage: the reduction of existing oceanic transit times by days which amounts to the saving of thousands of miles in travel for shipping companies. For example, Rotterdam and Yokohama's sailing distance through the Suez Canal imply 11,200 nautical miles while only 6,500 nautical miles took the Northern Sea Route. It represents a save of more than 40%. Likewise, the Northwest Passage would trim a trip from Seattle to Rotterdam by 2,000 nautical miles, making it nearly 25% shorter than the current route, via the Panama Canal<sup>16</sup>. Consequently, costs, time, fuel consumption and CO2 emissions will all decline as a result.

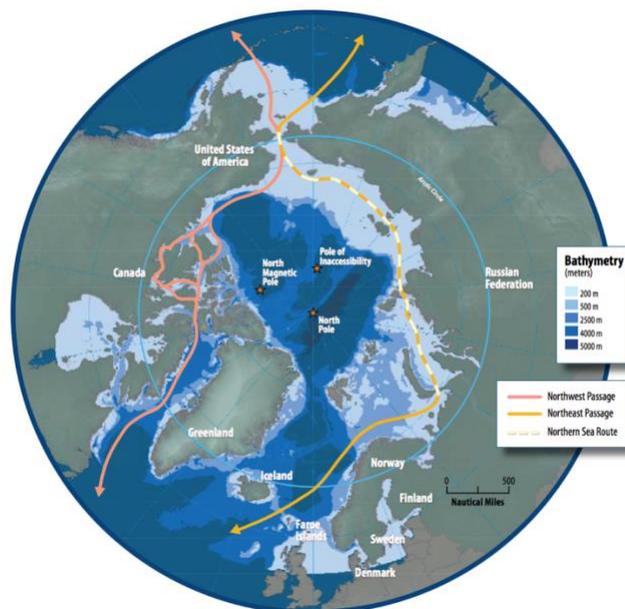


Figure 3: Arctic Shipping Routes<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Chinyong Liow, J. "Arctic Summer Who Should Benefit From Global Warming?" *Foreign Affairs* June 21, 2014 Retrieved January 5, 2021 from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/arctic-antarctic/2014-06-21/arctic-summer>

<sup>17</sup> Harder, S. "Arctic Council - Arctic marine shipping assessment". Retrieved January 9, 2020 from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=36253405>

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Nonetheless, there is still some time before both passages become real shipping lanes. Heavy investments in infrastructure and advances in technology, such as ports for cargo and ice breaker equipment are required. Moreover, the sea ice variation continues to be an obstacle to the aim of establishing permanent routes. For instance, Russia's Arctic seas can only be utilised for two to three months per year, maybe longer with the appropriate heavy equipment to forge routes in the ice. Therefore, there is little scope for significant economic development in the Arctic should changes be solely short-term resolutions.

## **Northern security race**

Not long ago, the Arctic also played an essential strategic role in the rivalry of the big powers. During the Cold War, it represented the shortest air corridor for intercontinental bombers flying between the USA and their enemy, the Soviet Union. Nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines often hid beneath the polar ice cap because it provided cover from detection. Also, the region's proximity to Asia reduced the missiles' flight time. The need to fulfil these strategies faded away with the fall of the Soviet Union, although they did not die. In fact, they are being revived today.

Regardless of the Arctic hypothetical economic development, the area has once again become "an arena for power and for competition"<sup>18</sup> as the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo expressed in a speech given at an Arctic Council ministerial meeting in May 2019. Despite decades of stable political environment, each country is getting prepared to defend their national interest and reputation at all costs as they become wary of each other's intentions in the Arctic.

Russia's significant rise in military capabilities and operations in recent years combined with the Chinese's growing interests in the region is stirring fear amongst the rest of the dormant Arctic states. There is a growing urgency to redefine their strategy towards the North Pole and to prepare for consequent action. In the following paragraphs, we will analyse Russia, China and the US-NATO's members current position in the Arctic race for power.

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<sup>18</sup> Congressional Research Service. "Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress". Updated 6 January 2021. Retrieved 8 January 2020 from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41153.pdf>

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- **Russian revival in the north**

Given the fact that Russia's principal rivers run north to south, the Kremlin wants to take advantage of a permanent Arctic sea route which would see Russia become both a continental and maritime power. This transformation was unthinkable barely a few decades ago (needless to say for Mackinder!). However, thirty years after the end of the Cold War, it is irrefutable that the Russian Federation is today, by measures of territory, population and military presence, the dominant player in the Arctic.

With about 50 icebreakers, Moscow has the world's largest fleet capable of operating year-round in extreme northern waters<sup>19</sup>. Second to Russia are Finland with approximately 10 icebreakers, Canada and Sweden with around seven each and the USA with roughly five<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, Russia is the only country in the world in possession of nuclear-powered icebreakers, numbering 5.<sup>21</sup> In addition, there are also dozens of Russian military bases above the Arctic Circle with more under construction. In contrast, the USA only maintains Thule Air Base, an airfield located approximately 750 miles north of the Arctic Circle on borrowed ground in northern Greenland.

The process of creating a long maritime frontier also implies risks for Russia. Its Arctic coastline adds 4,000 miles to the country borders which entails a challenge to its security. Consequently, the Kremlin is training the army to be ready to protect the new frontier. Among several drills Russia is undertaking in the Arctic, it should be highlighted the one which took in place in November 2019. By then, Russia conducted a major military exercise involving 12,000 soldiers, five nuclear submarines, fifteen warships, and one hundred aircraft. It even launched the world's first combat icebreaker<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Shea, N. "A thawing Arctic is heating up a new Cold War". *National Geographic*. September 2019 issue. Retrieved January 10, 2021 from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/2019/08/how-climate-change-is-setting-the-stage-for-the-new-arctic-cold-war-feature/>

<sup>20</sup> The Coast Guard Office of Waterways and Ocean Policy "Major icebreakers of the world". *United States Coast Guard (USCG)*. May 1, 2017. Retrieved January 10, 2021 from <https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/DCO%20Documents/Office%20of%20Waterways%20and%20Ocean%20Policy/20170501%20major%20icebreaker%20chart.pdf?ver=2017-06-08-091723-907>

<sup>21</sup> Pflüger, F. "A new security challenge: The geopolitical implications of climate change" *Atlantic Council*. February 10, 2020. Retrieved January 11, 2021 from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/energysource/a-new-security-challenge-the-geopolitical-implications-of-climate-change/>

<sup>22</sup> Dettmer, J. "Russia Ups the Ante in the Arctic" *VOA News*. November 6, 2019. Retrieved January 11, 2021 from <https://www.voanews.com/europe/russia-ups-ante-arctic>



Figure 4: Russia's militarization of the Arctic<sup>23</sup>

Assessing the current demographic, Russia is leading the way in the Arctic race. Approximately half of the four million Arctic inhabitants live in Russia<sup>24</sup>. This disproportion with the rest of the Arctic states is one of the reasons for the higher development of the Russian Siberia front in contrast to the North American one. Moreover, the region generates about one-fifth of Russia's GDP, compared to only 1% of that of the United States respectively.<sup>25</sup>

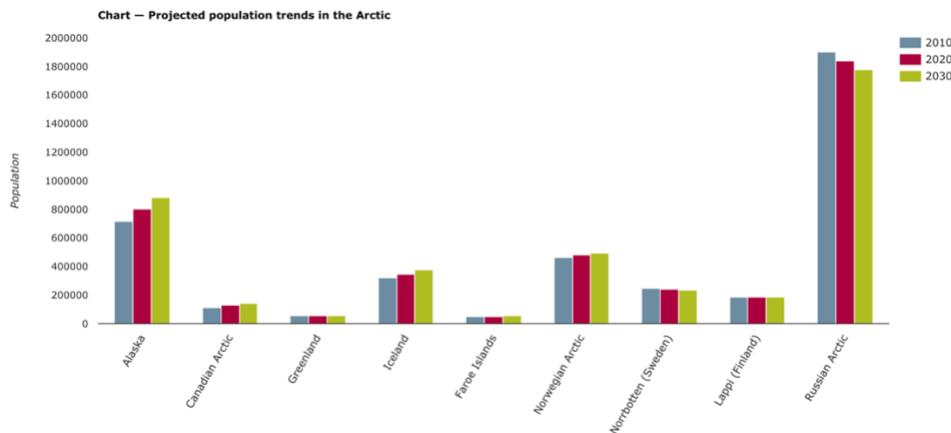


Figure 5: Projected population trends in the Arctic<sup>26</sup>

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Assumptions aside, Russian military escalation is not reflected in topical political speech. During a meeting of the Arctic International Forum in 2017, Vladimir Putin declared that "there is no potential for a conflict in the Arctic" and expressed his desire of preserving the Arctic "as a territory of peace" through "stability and mutually beneficial cooperation".<sup>27</sup> Whether Putin's words were uttered with best intentions, there can be no dispute with regards to Russian Arctic militarisation. Furthermore, Russia's actions in other parts of the world, such as the annexation of the peninsula Crimea, have undermined its reliability internationally.

Finally, it is highly important to bear in mind that the gradual thawing of the Arctic Ocean presents Russia with the opportunity to recover its projection of world power. As a revisionist power of USA leadership, the Arctic could become the place for Russia to heal its damaged honour after the demise of the Soviet Union which brought an end to the Cold War.

- **Chinese declaration of intentions in the Arctic**

Like Russia, the Asian giant is challenging USA's dominance all over the globe and the Arctic is no exception. As a result, China has self-proclaimed a "near-Arctic state" even though its northernmost point of land is located 900 miles south of the Arctic Circle, in the Heilongjiang province. Moreover, their application to become a permanent observer state in the Arctic Council was accepted last year showing its growing interest in the Arctic as a strategic value to global economy and security.

Consequently, Beijing seeks to extend the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the north coined Polar Silk Road. In short, the BRI is part of China's project to develop heavy infrastructure including railways,

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<sup>23</sup> Nudelman, M. & Bender, J. "This map shows Russia's dominant militarization of the Arctic" *Business Insider*. August 7, 2015. Retrieved January 11, 2021 from <https://www.businessinsider.com/chart-of-russias-militarization-of-arctic-2015-8>

<sup>24</sup> Arctic Centre, University of Lapland official website. "Basic information about the Arctic". Retrieved January 11, 2021 from <https://www.arcticcentre.org/EN/arcticregion>

<sup>25</sup> Weitz, R. "US Policy Towards the Arctic: Adapting to a Changing Environment" International Center for defense and security (EESTI-Estonia). October 24, 2019. Retrieved January 11, 2021 from <https://icds.ee/en/us-policy-towards-the-arctic-adapting-to-a-changing-environment/>

<sup>26</sup> European Environment Agency (EEA). "Projected population trends in the Arctic. Published January 14, 2017 and last modified June 14, 2017. Retrieved January 11, 2021 from [https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/daviz/projected-population-trends-in-the-arctic#tab-chart\\_1](https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/daviz/projected-population-trends-in-the-arctic#tab-chart_1)

<sup>27</sup> Russian Insight Youtube Channel. "Putin Addresses Arctic International Forum: There is no potential for conflict in the Arctic". March 31, 2017. Retrieved January 12, 2021 from <https://youtu.be/1ySZ-Ut9194>

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ports and other facilities in dozens of countries. The goal is to connect China with all the central Asian and European countries through all possible manners by land, sea and air. Hence, thanks to the Arctic Ocean melting ice caps, China expects to link Asia to Europe across the frozen far north.<sup>28</sup> Apart from the shipping routes, the Asian giant is also interested in the oil, natural gas and earth rare minerals held in the Arctic.

In order to achieve its ambitions, China is partnering with Russia at the moment. Both actors are set to gain with this alliance. From the Russian perspective because it relies on Chinese money, technology and other economic assets to develop its natural resources and build the infrastructure to support the Northern Sea Route mentioned above. From the Chinese side because an open Northern Sea Route provides China with a unique commercial and geostrategic opportunity. It would become the major shipping hub between Asia and Europe free from US dominance<sup>29</sup>.

Apart from Russia, China is luring more countries with unlimited investment capability. For instance, it has also reached out to Greenland, given its strategical Arctic coastal dimension and the enormous reserves of natural resources, many of them related to the production of high technology, a market monopolised by China. This interest has been welcomed by Greenland's authorities which seek economic independence from Denmark. Nowadays, the Asian giant has become the second most important export destination for Greenland, although Greenland still imports very little from China<sup>30</sup>.

It is not clear whether China's approach to the Arctic is only based on economic and commercial purposes. China's investments in icebreakers and plans to build the first nuclear-powered icebreaker in the national Navy should serve as a wake-up call about likely Chinese military presence in the Arctic Ocean. Thus, although it has not expressed any military objectives, China's aggressive stance in the South China Sea sets a dangerous precedence. In this region, it has demonstrated how it will remain steadfast to justify military intervention if its interests are threatened. On a daily basis China is becoming increasingly prepared to confront an eventual scenario in the Arctic.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>29</sup> Dams, T. & van Schaik, L. & Stoetman, A. "Presence before power". *Clingendael Report*, June 2020 Retrieved January 11, 2021 from <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/presence-before-power.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*

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- **The USA-NATO at stake**

More recently the rest of the parties involved in the Arctic are starting to react to the expansion of Russian and Chinese influence and projected military force. As Mr. Pompeo recognized in the speech aforementioned, concerns have arisen about whether the United States, Canada, and the Nordic countries are adequately prepared militarily to defend their interests in the region. Thus, with the renewal of great power competition in the Arctic, NATO have undertaken several Arctic military exercises in recent times to ready its forces in the difficult northern conditions after lack of training for years.

The most relevant training drill, the Trident Juncture 2018, was carried out in Norway and adjacent waters of the Baltic and the Norwegian Sea with the goal of ensuring "that NATO forces are trained, able to operate together, and ready to respond to any threat from any direction" as the organization stated in a press release<sup>31</sup>. The operation involved 50,000 troops from 31 NATO allies plus non-NATO Nordic countries personnel. This vast deployment represented NATO's largest exercise since the Cold War, and it included the first deployment of a US Navy aircraft carrier above the Arctic Circle since 1991<sup>32</sup>.

Moreover, in September 2020, NATO established a new Atlantic Command, called Joint Force Command Norfolk. Its goal is to protect sea lanes between Europe and North America covering vast geographic areas, from the US East Coast, past the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap and into the Arctic. It is NATO's first command dedicated to the Atlantic since 2003.

Regarding China, both the USA and the EU<sup>33</sup>, have welcomed Chinese investments and scientific activities in the Arctic. However, they have expressed their concerns about China attempting to alter Arctic governance through its economic outreach<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> NATO's official website. "Trident Juncture 18". Media resources. Retrieved January 13, 2021 from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_158620.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_158620.htm)

<sup>32</sup> US Department of Defence Press Release. "HST Strike Group Enters Arctic Circle, Prepares for NATO Exercise". *Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*. Retrieved November 12, 2018. January 13, 2020 from <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/297015/hst-strike-group-enters-arctic-circle-prepares-nato-exercise>

<sup>33</sup> European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council. *EU-China – A strategic outlook*. March 12, 2019 Retrieved January 17, 2021 from <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Department of Defense. Report to Congress. Arctic Strategy. June 2019. Retrieved January 17, 2021 from <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF>

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The West is arriving late and with much fewer resources to this race. The starting signal happened years ago but the USA and NATO members never really acknowledged it until they realized their vulnerability. However, despite all the disadvantages the West faces, there is one scenario in which it could try to counterbalance Russia and China's influence: The Arctic Council.

Five out its eight permanent members are part of NATO and those who are not -Finland and Sweden- have a long experience in military and political cooperation with the alliance. It is time to use the international forum to halt some of Moscow's aggressive actions and Beijing's larger expansion, if a peaceful north wants to be maintained. Whilst distrust amongst the actors remains apparent, USA and NATO members should urgently involve themselves in the Arctic and offer solutions to avoid a clash in the north.

## **Conclusion**

Two significant evaluations can be concluded with regards to tensions amongst the key players. Firstly, in the Arctic realm, we can clearly identify the three aspects that Athenian general Thucydides (c. 460 – c. 400 BC) noted as basic grounds to cause a war: fear, honour and interest. Western countries are looking anxiously at Russian and Chinese economic and military deployment. The NATO allies fear that China and Russia together are already too powerful to contain, thus their national security is under threat. The situation is pushing them to join an arms race which does not bode well for future peace in the region.

In Russia's case, the Arctic is a principle of honour. After the Soviet Union's demise, Russia has never had the chance to regain its lost power. However, currently, the Arctic presents itself as the opportunity that Russian has been looking for to demonstrate its military and political clout on a global scale. The key actors all have a high interest in the region due to its natural resources, shipping lines and the strategic geopolitical position to dominate the north side of the globe. In this sense, currently, China is best positioned to overthrow the USA's leadership with swift action in the polar region and therefore will employ any measure to protect Chinese national interest.

Should countries attempt to escape the vicious circle of security, they must evaluate to what extent a war is conducive to their national objectives. The dramatic past experiences of world wars have shown

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that only destruction and loss follows an arm race. Based on inflamed tensions, the Arctic Council should work better as a space for dialogue to leverage and negotiate with countries to reach an arrangement that benefits all. Nonetheless, this is unlikely to happen in the current world political climate with the USA democracy in free fall and China and Russia's authoritative rule in full expansion. Thus, for now, we can only wait and hope that the Arctic serves as an exception to theory of Thucydides' triangular prophesy.

Secondly, it is essential to remember that the primary source of the Arctic's emergence is climate change. Therefore, regardless of geopolitics, the consequences of the Arctic seas ice loss are forecasted to be detrimental to us as a collective human race. Extreme weather, ocean acidification and rising sea-levels are some of the many disasters that the thawing of the Arctic can produce. Big powers should take a minute to reflect on this key issue as the existence of the world they want to rule is at risk. Consequently, the price they have to pay to reverse the situation is to decline any aspiration over Arctic richness and take actions to avoid the meltdown. The globe has enough power confrontation scenarios, but the Arctic is a unique area whose survival is linked to our own.

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