

The Arctic, a new front for great power conflict?

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Since 2014, public debate in Europe has focused almost exclusively on what Russia would do on its western flank and how it would manifest its vexation over NATO enlargement. On 24 February 2022, analysts and policymakers in Europe woke up to news of a large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. What will the future hold for security on the European continent? An underexposed aspect of this security architecture is the accelerated militarisation and rise of tensions in the Arctic. Although the EU and NATO have both recognised the geopolitical importance of the Arctic, public debate in member states is still lagging behind. The Arctic is heating up, and not only literally. This paper will answer what is happening there, what the strategic interests are, and how the Russian invasion in Ukraine is linked to the Arctic.

Why the Arctic?

For centuries, the Arctic has been disregarded as an issue of world politics. This was because only the Indigenous populations and states with territory in the Arctic circle set foot in the dreary conditions of the North pole. Today however, the detrimental effects of global warming have brought new opportunities and improved access to natural resources, through the melting of Arctic ice. There are several reasons why the Arctic will become a new front for geopolitical tensions.

First, the improved accessibility has opened new shipping routes. The Northern Sea Route, Northwest Passage and Transpolar route are expected to influence global shipping in the coming decades. The Northern Sea Route, which

passes above Russia, connects Eastern China to Western Europe. Measuring from Shanghai to Antwerp, the route is around 40% or 7,000 km shorter than the current route through the Suez Canal. Next to that, passing the Arctic would mean avoiding the conflict-laden South-China Sea and Somalian coast, and major chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca. This can cause seismic shifts in the global economy, although there also is a lot of scepticism regarding the operationalisation of this route. The freezing temperatures are expected to hamper smooth passage during winter for decades to come.

Second, there is the abundance of oil and natural gas within the Arctic Circle. Due to the melting of Arctic ice, a large part of these reserves has only recently become attainable. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has lit up discussions on the geopolitics of natural resources, and shows us the power the supply-side holds. Therefore, gaining control over these resources is still considered necessary, despite the upcoming energy transition to renewables. What is even more interesting to all of this is also the potential the Arctic holds for renewable energy. With important minerals, such as lithium and copper, present in the area and the possibilities for housing wind and marine turbines, the Arctic has a crucial role in combatting climate change and implementing the UN and EU sustainability agenda.¹

Both reasons have heavily incentivised non-Arctic states to become involved, even though large parts of the Arctic are assigned to one of the eight Arctic states. The most obvious non-Arctic state, in this respect, is the People's Republic of China. With Beijing calling itself a "near-Arctic state" in 2018, they fully manifested themselves

in Arctic politics and sought to legitimise their presence.² Furthermore, China has been a permanent observer in the Arctic Council since 2011. Not only China, but several states have turned towards the Arctic, which may cause a spill-over of geopolitical competition. With all the great powers now invested in the Arctic, the narrative of peace and cooperation is making way for one of security and deterrence.

THE STRATEGIC INTERESTS OF THE GREAT POWERS

Optimists would see the opportunities for cooperation. History, however, tells us how great powers have always been protective of vital trade routes and in competition for natural resources, the sinews and lifeblood of societies. Why would this be any different in the Arctic? Since all great powers have certain strategic interests in the Arctic, now that it has become more accessible, the risk of tensions increases.

Russia is by nature an Arctic power: the Northern part of the country is located within the Arctic circle. Their presence signals continuity rather than change. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in their military presence within the region. The revival of military bases, the expansion and modernization of Russia's Northern fleet, the introduction of the first combat-ready icebreaker and the adaptation of military technology and personnel to Arctic conditions are only the most significant actions of the Kremlin. This military presence serves several purposes, such as protecting economic infrastructure, conducting search-and-rescue missions, etc. In terms of security, the melting of Arctic ice is improving accessibility, but for Russia this also means that their natural buffer is diminishing. Not only that, but the increase of other states' interests sets off alarm bells in Moscow. Large parts of the Arctic, together with the Northern Sea Route and natural resources, are theirs, in their eyes, and they would like to keep it that way.³

China, through a scientific narrative, has been able to establish itself in the region, where they have significant economic and strategic interests, even though they are located more than 1,500 km away from the Arctic.

This distance also means that their security interests are less pronounced. Nevertheless, there are some. Other than more general interests, such as scientific research, economic possibilities, and increased reach they would have, Beijing has its own military interests, such as intelligence and improved capabilities. There are Russian and US nuclear strategic submarines and missile launch facilities present in the region, providing first- and second-strike capability. China knows this, but because of their military absence they are mostly blindsided in their Arctic intelligence. An increased presence would rectify this and increase security, or at least the feeling of it, on the mainland.⁴ Intelligence does not extinguish the threat or risk, but diminishes the uncertainty surrounding it. Concerning improved capabilities, the dual use of scientific expeditions needs to be taken into consideration. Data collection provides the possibility for the Chinese military to adapt to Arctic conditions. All this collection of information slowly removes the Chinese veil of ignorance concerning the Arctic.

Lastly, the US, although having territory in the Arctic, only recently revived its policies toward the region, under Biden. This resurrection, considering the US aspiration to stay the *primus inter pares*, is necessary in the face of rising Russian and Chinese presence, because that in itself is a problem.⁵ An added security risk is that US Arctic capabilities have been absent in recent years, due to the domestic political polarization, which is unacceptable for the superpower. Militarily however, the US still reigns, which still provides several advantages in relation to Russia and China. Adding to this is the fact that the US is building a new fleet of icebreakers to replace the previous, now outdated ones.

Regarding the EU, its military incapability and foreign policy indecisiveness is negative for its great power status. Thus, any future military influence would mostly be indirectly manifested through NATO. However, not fully located within the Arctic (which is still better than China), the EU does have significant strategic interests within the Arctic. The new shipping routes, climate change, and the promotion of sustainability all hit close to home. Furthermore, the fact that some EU Member

States (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) also have territory within the Arctic means that it is both subject to foreign as well as domestic politics. Therefore, European influence on Arctic politics is substantial. The EU has proven time and time again that it is a capable global security provider, and it is also willing to pursue this role on the Arctic stage, which it has shown in recent years.

HOW LIKELY IS POLITICAL CONFLICT IN THE ARCTIC?

A first aspect, when answering this question, is that both Russia and NATO are conducting unprecedented military exercises within the Arctic, which give rise to political tensions. They are of course within their full right to do so. From Russia's side, *Umka-2021*, saw three nuclear submarines popping up through Arctic ice for the first time, carrying forty-eight ballistic missiles. In addition, a pair of MIG-31 aircraft soared through the skies and exercised air-to-air refuelling.⁶ As already stated, Russia's presence is to be expected, which does detract from the significance of this exercise.

On the NATO side there is the exercise Cold Response 2022. This Norwegian-led exercise focuses on air and sea defences, which are essential for an Arctic military presence and is a way of improving general Arctic competence within the alliance. The relevance of this operation can be seen in the impressive participation.⁷ Furthermore, the US has invested heavily in military equipment for Arctic operations. Both sides have already heavily criticised their counterparts, and Moscow considers the NATO exercise a serious threat as it seeks to remain the only military power in the Arctic.

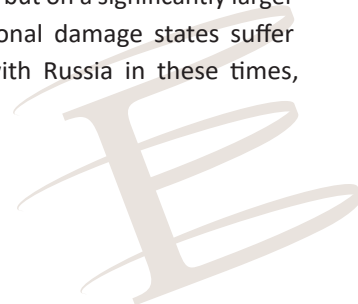
Second, combined with these military exercises, the strategic interests of the great powers and the rise in economic activity heighten the risks of small hiccups or political conflict between states. Incidents like accidental collisions are becoming more likely. The Arctic is getting crowded. Great powers historically pursue their own interests on their own terms. Cooperation can be of help, but every great power wants to outline the goals of this cooperation, which can prove conflictual. The increased presence of the Arctic in National Security Strategies signals that interest in the Arctic will only rise.

Third, several senior officials have already expressed their concerns for future political tensions in the Arctic. In recent years Russian minister of defence Shoigu noted the rising strategic and economic attraction of other powers to the Arctic, potentially culminating in conflict.⁸ Even Javier Solana, former High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, saw the Arctic as a place where tensions could be exacerbated, and instability heightened.⁹ Lastly, Michael Rühle, Head of the Climate and Energy security section at NATO, notices the rise of political tensions surrounding the Arctic.¹⁰ These references show the anxiety that lives inside policymakers' minds.

Finally, there is an aggressive rhetoric upheld by Moscow in the way they treat the Arctic, which can also be noticed today in the Ukrainian war. Although the circumstances differ substantially, Moscow is becoming more and more offensive in the way it relates to other Arctic countries. Manifestations of this are the sea and airspace incursion conducted in the Scandinavian countries. Next to that, the planting of a Russian flag in 2007 on the seabed of the Arctic Ocean illustrates they claim more than what is assigned to them.¹¹ Just as with Ukraine, they see the increased presence of the West as a threat to "Mother Russia" itself, leading to a self-defence rhetoric, even though every Arctic state stays within its territory. Thus, Cold Response 2022 is perceived by Russia as menacing. The invasion of Ukraine has proven they are ready to act on this rhetoric.

THE INVASION OF UKRAINE: THE INTER-CONNECTEDNESS.

How is Russia's invasion in Ukraine linked with political tensions in the Arctic? A first, recurring aspect, is that Russia's actions regarding Ukraine have undermined their standing and confidence internationally and have once again damaged cooperative relations for the Arctic, since the other seven members have decided to "pause" the work of the Arctic Council.¹² This is 2014 all over again for cooperation in the Arctic, but on a significantly larger scale. Beyond the reputational damage states suffer if they would cooperate with Russia in these times,



there is a great loss of trust. Keeping in mind that most interests align, apart from the military-strategic, this is disadvantageous to all stakeholders. Adding insult to injury, Russia currently holds the presidency of the Arctic Council, putting extra stress on further cooperation. Seeing that the Arctic becomes ever more relevant these are unfavourable times for Arctic governance.

If cooperation weakens, there is more room for miscommunication and even miscalculation, which is far worse. With the Arctic receiving more attention and the Northern Sea Route opening the way for large-scale sea-borne transport, the increased traffic improves the risk of incidents. Next to that there are recurring airspace incursions from Russia. This could potentially spark misinterpretation since the diplomats are currently not talking to each other. After 2014 military leaders in the Arctic had already stopped talking.¹³ Today, this has gone one step further by stopping the work of the Arctic Council – an unprecedentedly strong move by the other seven members.

Furthermore, the invasion of Ukraine is a confirmation of the worries surrounding Russia in the Arctic. There are concerns that Russia would push for buffer zones within the Arctic, or that they would be on high alert for any foreign action in “their” territory, maybe even cutting off the Northern Sea Route, which would only increase the risk of armed conflict. If they went as far as to wage war in Ukraine, who is to say that they will not do so at their Arctic borders? This risk has also pushed both Finland and Sweden closer to NATO, which is counterproductive to Moscow, and has also ramped up discussions on the modernization of defence systems in the Arctic within the US and Canada.¹⁴ The military future and the potential for armed conflict in the Arctic remains uncertain, but political tensions have definitely increased.

CONCLUSION

To end on a more positive note, it is safe to say that all states present in the Arctic have a high interest in avoiding any form of conflict. However, we cannot ignore the large-scale military build-up, increased interest in the region, and the possible risks this brings. Next to that, the Russian invasion of Ukraine only adds fuel to the Arctic fire. This means that all great powers, when deciding on an Arctic strategy, now must take each other’s position into close consideration, but also the possibility of future conflict, be it political or military. The EU and NATO have only recently, officially accepted the geopolitical nature of the Arctic. It is therefore disappointing to see that the Strategic Compass greatly undervalues the strategic relevance of the Arctic for the EU’s security. Nevertheless, both organisations need to stand tall against the backdrop of the invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s increased military presence, and China’s increased interest. Meanwhile, the Arctic remains a very underexposed area in public and academic debate, but with the way things are going, this is likely to change.

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Endnotes

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