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Arctic geopolitics after the Ukrainian war

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Abstract:

On May 11, Norway replace Russia in the presidency of the Arctic Council, a body created to tackle environmental problems, and which has expanded its functions to become an essential soft law instrument for the governance of the region.

The Arctic Council is a space which, until 2022, had remained "exceptionally" on the sidelines of the war in Ukraine since the conflict began in 2014. A dynamic of competition but also of cooperation had also been maintained in the region.

However, since Russia's invasion, the other seven states have stopped collaborating with Russia, including in the Arctic Council. Finland has joined NATO and Sweden has also applied to join, upsetting the balance.

This is all happening at a time when global warming is altering the status quo and the arctic morphology in the region due to melting ice. This points to the opening of new maritime routes, while making more accessible and profitable the exploitation of the important natural resources present in the area. The backdrop to these events is the struggle between the states with a coastline to extend control of the sea, and the arrival of China, which declares itself an "almost Arctic" state, thereby engulfing Russia as far as Central Asia, leaving it just one paradoxical exit: Europe.

Keywords:

Arctic, geopolitics, China, Russia, the United States, Greenland, Canada, natural resources, polar routes.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

***NOTE:** This work has been inspired by some of the contributions of various authors collected in the Strategy Paper 218 "The Arctic: Region for collaboration (or disputes)" that will soon be published by the IEEE.

La geopolítica ártica después de la guerra de Ucrania

Resumen:

El 11 de mayo de 2023 Noruega releva a Rusia en la presidencia del Consejo Ártico, un organismo creado para afrontar la problemática medioambiental, y que ha ido ampliando sus funciones hasta convertirse en un instrumento de *softlaw* esencial para la gobernanza de una región en transformación.

El Ártico es un espacio que, hasta 2022, había permanecido *excepcionalmente* al margen de la guerra en Ucrania desde 2014. En la región se ha mantenido, como hasta entonces, una dinámica de competición, pero también de cooperación. Sin embargo, tras la invasión de Ucrania, los otros siete Estados dejaron de colaborar con Rusia, inclusive en el Consejo Ártico. Finlandia ha entrado en la OTAN y Suecia también ha solicitado su ingreso, todo lo cual ha alterado los equilibrios establecidos.

Y tal cosa sucede en un momento en que el calentamiento global está alterando el *statu quo* de la región al provocar el deshielo y con ello la morfología ártica. Esto está suponiendo la apertura de nuevas rutas marítimas mientras hace accesibles y rentables la explotación de los importantes recursos naturales presentes en la zona; y ello en el contexto de la pugna entre los Estados litorales por extender el control del mar y con la llegada de China que se declara un Estado «casi ártico» y con ello está envolviendo a Rusia hasta Asia central, a la que solo deja una paradójica salida: Europa.

Palabras clave:

Ártico, geopolítica, China, Rusia, Estados Unidos, Groenlandia, Canadá, recursos naturales, rutas polares.

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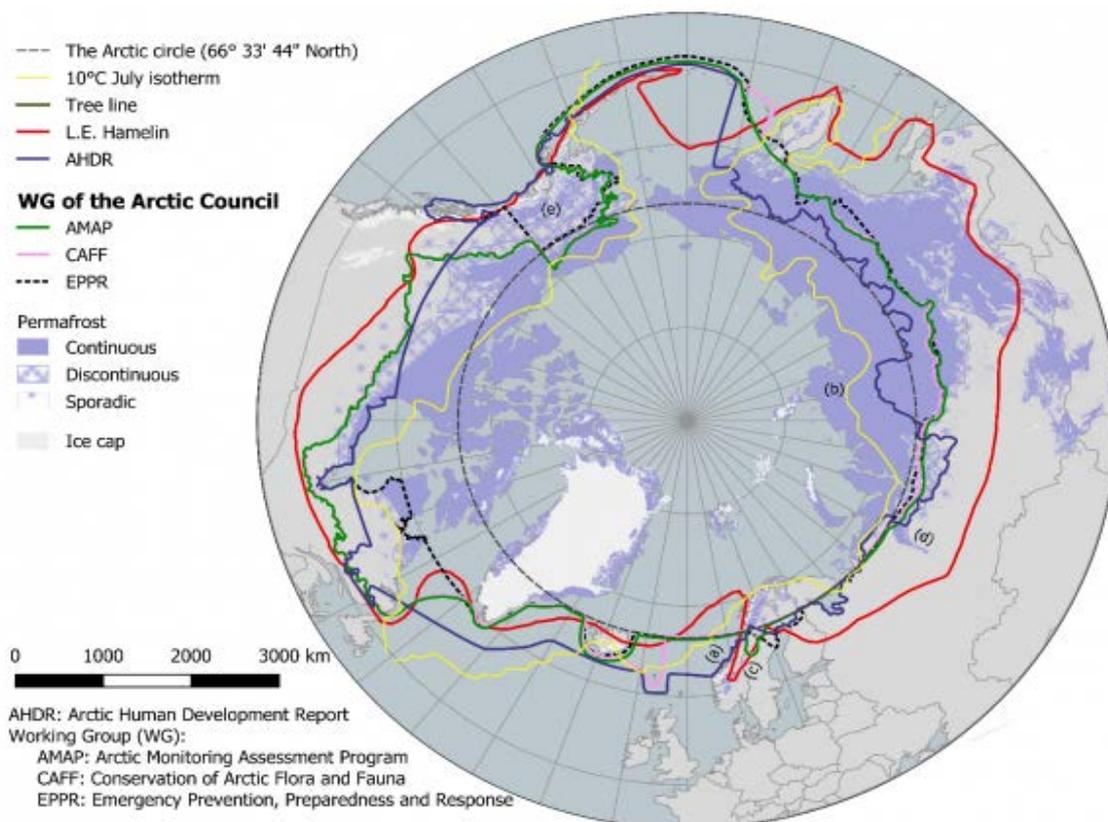
THE ARCTIC AS A PHYSICAL REALITY

The Arctic Circle, currently located at 66° 33' 46"N, is one of Earth's five major parallels from an astronomical perspective. It demarcates the region where, on the summer or winter solstices, the sun does not set or rise for 24 hours. The others are the Equator, the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn and the Antarctic Circle, defined by other astronomical events.

However, this definition is insufficient to refer to that specific physical space. For this reason, other indicators are used in an attempt to define the region as an area with common characteristics, such as, among others, the 10°C isotherm in the month of July, or the so-called "tree growth line", which marks the space in which tree growth is not possible.

It is an area of some 14,050,000 km², or 8% of the earth's surface. It is a politically and geographically diverse region – an enclosed ocean, completely surrounded by the Eurasian and American continents that physically delimit it. Its coastline is occupied by Russia, Canada, Denmark (through the Faroe Islands and Greenland), Norway and the United States. To these should be added Iceland, Finland and Sweden, which, although they do not have an ocean coastline, are part of this geographical area.

These eight countries include two nuclear powers and six NATO members, along with one NATO aspirant (Sweden). For example, Greenland, although geographically part of North America – of whose tectonic plate it forms part – is politically and culturally recognised as part of Europe, with which it has been associated for more than a millennium. And this is despite 88% of its population being of Inuit origin.



- Figure: Different definitions of the Arctic space

Source: Vaguet, Yvette; Ourng, Chanvoleak; Moriconi-Ebrard, François "Is the Arctic really a frontier? Settlement dynamics within various Arctic Limits based on the *Arcticapolis* geohistorical database" 2020/3-2021/1 | 2021

Arctic spaces and societies <https://journals.openedition.org/eps/10277>

ARCTIC AND ANTARCTIC

The terms Arctic and Antarctic are derived from the Greek word *arktos* meaning "bear". This referred to the northern region which correlated with the "Ursa Major" constellation. The symmetrical presence (anti-arktos) of the Antarctic continent, called *Terra Australis Incognita*, was suspected since antiquity under the same logic that naturally led to the existence of the northern border.

The polar spaces have many similarities between them, starting with their extreme characteristics which mean that, quite often, they are treated in a similar way despite their opposite nature. Antarctica is an isolated land mass, a continent – in size, the fourth largest in the world or the largest island, depending on how you look at it – while the Arctic

is physically the opposite, an ocean basin, an enclosed space bounded by land. A sea in the middle of the earth, an extreme Mediterranean.¹

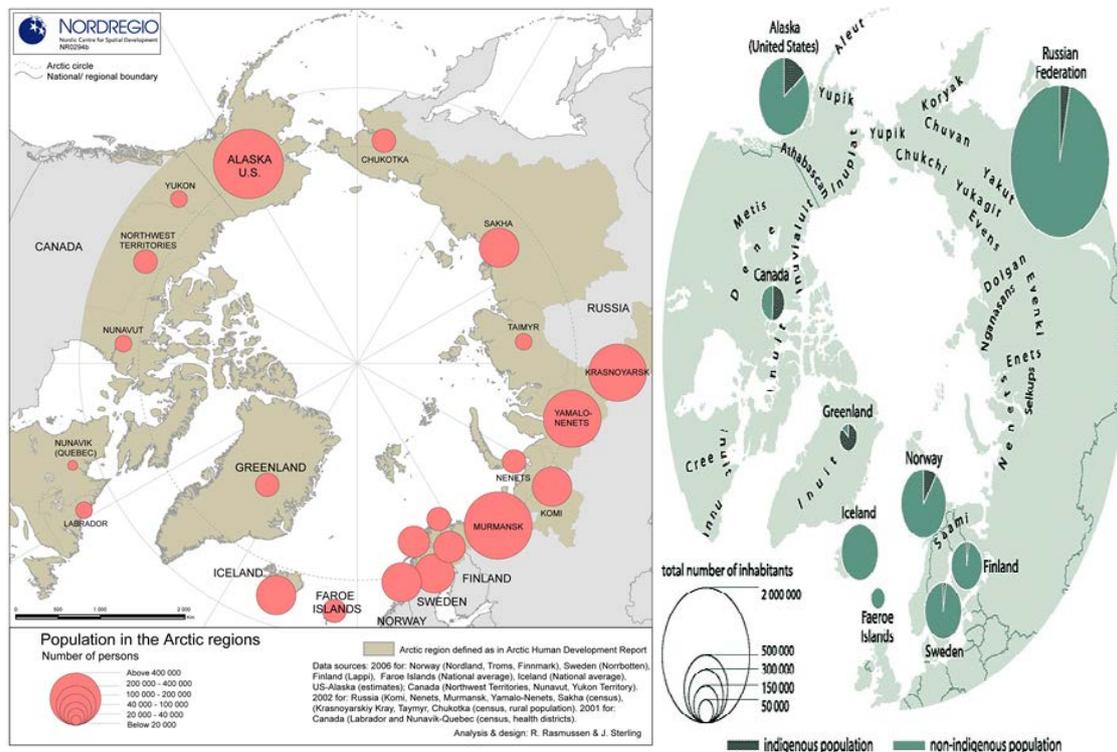


Figure: Arctic population distribution. Indigenous peoples.

Source: 1. Nordregio. <https://archive.nordregio.se/en/Maps/01-Population-and-demography/Population-in-the-Arctic-regions/index.html> 2. "Arctic Subsistence economy." *Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterrey*. <https://www.oceanoeconomics.org/arctic/subsistence/default.aspx>

One is uninhabited, although it has a population of around 10,000 researchers in summer and 1,000 in winter. The other has a stable population of some 4,250,000 inhabitants. Of these, more than two million live in the Russian Arctic; 1.28 million in the European Arctic; and 827,000 in the American Arctic.

The Indigenous population is around 450,000, about 10 percent of the polar population: Aleut and Yupik (USA); Inuit (Canada, Greenland and USA); Chukchi, Evenk, Khanty, Nenets and Sakha (Russia); and Sami (Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden). Although these communities are represented by six organisations on the Arctic Council: the Aleut International Association, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, the Gwich'in Council, the Inuit Circumpolar Council and the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North and

¹ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. "The layout of the polar spaces: the arctic space". <https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20EI%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>

the Sami Council; their voices have been further silenced during the intensification of the Ukraine conflict.²

Temperatures in the Arctic are not as extreme as those in the Antarctic, which makes it possible for centuries-old settlements of tribal groups to occur alongside the fauna that exists in both. Both spaces do, however, play a uniquely relevant role in global climate as their large surfaces of ice facilitate solar reflection, acting as a refrigerant and stabiliser of global temperatures.

The Arctic is in fact, and in contrast to Antarctica, a paradoxically solid set of seas. These make up 90% of the region, even though they are covered by an ice floe, and enclosed by continental land and an icy subsoil.

Antarctica has a surface area of 14.2 million km² in summer that becomes 32 million km in winter, with an average ice surface that is 1.9 km thick. It has been identified as the “continent of extremes” in that it is the coldest (temperatures reach -89.3°C), the driest (rainfall is similar to a desert; no more than 150mm on the coast and even less inland), the windiest and highest (its average height reaches 2000m above sea level, which explains its unique climate).

But it is not only the Antarctic continent but also the space surrounding it. This is because the troposphere in this area is between 6.5 and 7.5 km high, compared to 14-15 km at intertropical latitudes, which can be added to a very low circumferential rotation speed (non-existent at the pole) that does not cause the dynamic effect of centrifugal expansion. It is also free of radio interference, which facilitates deep space research and satellite tracking. We have a “window open to cosmic space”.³

Another issue in relation to all of the above is the legal status of the polar areas. Both have shared characteristics that have allowed them to be treated jointly in what they have in common, forming a kind of “Polar Law” as there are shared and overlapping models. However, their sources of law take full account of their different constitution and the circumstances and interests surrounding them.⁴

² PRASHAD, Vijay "The Winds of the New Cold War Howl in the Arctic Circle". *Rebelión.org* _ <https://rebelion.org/los-vientos-de-la-nueva-guerra-fria-aullan-en-el-circulo-polar-artico/>

³RIESCO, Ricardo. "Antarctica: Some geopolitical considerations". *Estudios Públicos No. 25/ 1987 Centro de Estudios Políticos*. <https://www.cepchile.cl/la-antartida-algunas-consideraciones-geopoliticas/cep/2016-03-03/183932.html>

⁴ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. "The layout of the polar spaces: the arctic space". <https://www.investigadoresporel mundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20EI%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>



- Figure: Images of the Arctic and the Antarctic

Source: "Some curious differences between the Arctic and Antarctica". *Cambio Climático Chile*, 2017. <https://www.cambioclimaticochile.cl/2017/07/algunas-curiosas-diferencias-entre-el-artico-y-la-antartida/>

All this has led to different statutes. The characteristics of Antarctica have made an *ad hoc* agreement possible, thus making it a legally ordered space. As for the Arctic, the diversity, strength and multiplicity of the interests involved have not allowed this to happen. As a result, while Antarctica has been internationally declared a zone for research and science, free of commercial, economic or military activity, a true *global commons*; in the Arctic region, on the contrary, each country decides on how it should exploit its resources.⁵

However, in view of both the complications and the strategic importance of the area concerned, the legal fates of the Arctic and Antarctic regions were separated in the early years of the Cold War, and an *ad hoc* regulatory framework was established for the latter. The fact is that Antarctica's nature as an isolated continent has made it possible to create a cohesive legal form, known as the Antarctic Treaty System centred on the Antarctic Treaty of 1959.⁶

This Treaty was a historic break in the current practice as it meant the birth of a new paradigm, insofar as it brought with it a prototype in how states could deal with one another. This is the idea of *global commons*: such principles permeate to a large extent

⁵ MOLTÓ, Aurea. "The Arctic and Canada's foreign policy" *Revista Política Exterior*, March 2011 Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/actualidad/el-artico-y-la-politica-exterior-de-canada>

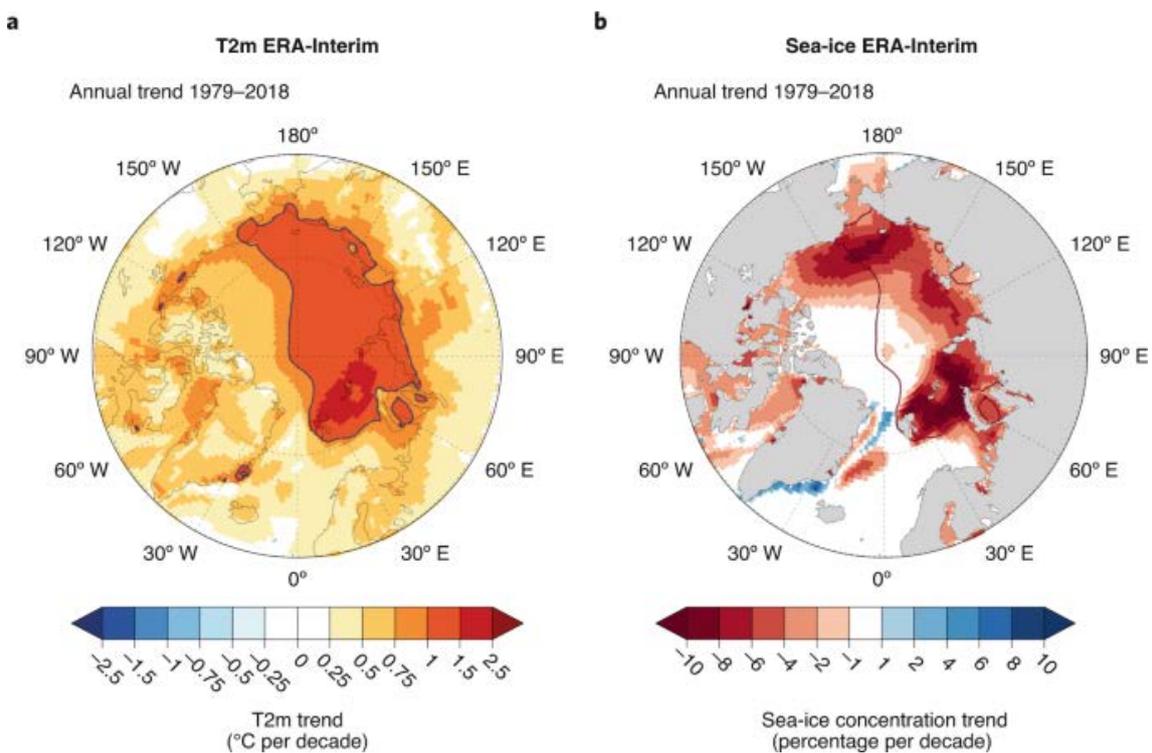
⁶ The treaty, with all its imperfections and loopholes, including the different way it treats those who have or may have legitimate interests, has created a well-established management regime that can be presented – despite its lack of a central institutionality – as an example of global governance, as well as the fact that it allowed the continent to be removed from the Cold War and demilitarised. The Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (1991), also known as the Madrid Protocol, is noteworthy for its relevance.

the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, although this would not have been as demanding for the parties. The treaty has led to Antarctica becoming a unique nature reserve and a special laboratory.⁷

The standard that was imposed on the Arctic was the Law of the Sea, which was explicitly invoked as a counter to what was seen as an outside attempt at meddling, when the European Union backed a specific treaty for the region.

CONSEQUENCES OF GLOBAL WARMING: DISRUPTION TO THE *STATUS QUO*

Another issue is the occurrence and effects of climate change in the region. The poles also happen to be the areas of the world most vulnerable to warming because, as the ice melts, it gives way to water that absorbs sunlight instead of reflecting it, further melting the ice. It is this ‘positive feedback loop’ that explains why the warming in the territory is three or four times higher than the global average.



- Trends in Arctic temperature increase and ice concentration

⁷ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. “The layout of the polar spaces: the arctic space”. <https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20EI%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>

Source: WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM. "Global warming: scientists 'stunned' by how much ice we have lost". <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/arctic-sea-ice-global-warming-climate-change-predictions/>

As a result, the Arctic is undergoing a melting process that, over the past 30 years, has reduced the thickness of its ice cover by 30-40%, according to various studies. In 2015, the ice surface in January had fallen to 9.7 million km² from 13.38 million km² in 2007. It is estimated that since 1978 it has lost an area of ice equivalent to 5 times the size of Spain, making a completely ice-free summer foreseeable within a reasonable timeframe, which some sources put at 2035. Every year, 200-250,000 tonnes of this ice melt. The discovery of DNA from Greenland more than 2 million years ago was a result of melting ice. Thus, if all the ice in Greenland were to melt, global sea levels would rise by up to six metres.⁸

It is worth noting that the melting ice also causes the Arctic to acidify at a rate three times faster than in other regions, affecting the life of the marine fauna there and thus the ecosystem as a whole.

The melting is not symmetrical as it is affected by the sea currents that support it with waters of different temperatures. Moreover, melting in the region takes place in three distinct areas: the freshwater layer, which covers most of Greenland and comes from glaciers and rainfall (permafrost, on the frozen ground); the glacial Arctic Ocean layer, i.e. the ice floe (sea ice), whose layer of frozen salt water is usually a few metres thick, which is also decreasing; and finally melting from the waters of the great Siberian rivers.⁹

Permafrost is the layer of frozen ground in polar areas. Its disappearance causes the release of the gases it contains. It is estimated to contain between 1,460 and 1,600 Gt of organic carbon, almost twice the amount of carbon present in the atmosphere. In addition, the resulting ground instability could destroy some of the existing infrastructure in the Arctic. It is estimated that, by 2050, the movement would affect approximately 20% of all industrial facilities and infrastructure and approximately 45% of family dwellings.¹⁰ The resulting cost to Greenland alone would be about US\$100 billion.¹¹ This has the

⁸ AL ACHKAR, Ziad. "Melting Arctic: Implications for the 21st Century" *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, Autumn-Winter 2018, p. 48.

⁹ ALBERT FERRERO, Julio. "Melting in the Arctic's geopolitics" *Revista de Marina* November 2011 pp. 681-690.

¹⁰ SMINK, Veronica. "What is permafrost and why it could pose one of the greatest threats to our atmosphere". *BBC News World* 5 November 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-59058465>

¹¹ CANOVAS SANCHEZ, Bartolomé. "Why Greenland is a strategic factor in the Arctic" *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*. DIEEEO 148/2020

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO148_2020BARCAN_Groenlandia.pdf

precedent of the abandonment of the *Camp Century* project, a major missile base 900 km from the pole in Greenland, which could not be completed due to unstable ice sheets and whose abandonment has meant that nuclear waste still exists today.

This disappearance of the ice also brings with it improved accessibility of resources and the opening of new shipping routes. This has resulted in the emergence of a new actor in the region, China.

New navigation routes

The opening of new shipping routes is not a minor issue; not only because of the savings in time and freight costs, but also because it serves as an alternative route to the existing ones, widening the range of existing options and making it possible to escape from the current choke points (Panama, Suez, Malacca, Hormuz and Cape of Good Hope). The *Ever Given* incident, which kept the Suez Canal closed between 23 and 29 March 2021, had an estimated cost of \$54 billion. Furthermore, more than 90% of the world's international trade is conducted by sea.

The case of China is notorious and explains its interest in the region. It needs raw materials to be "the world's factory". Forty-six percent of its GDP depends on maritime traffic, 80% of China's oil passes through the Strait of Malacca. That is why it owns seven of the 20 largest container terminals in the world. Companies such as COSCO and China Shipping are among the ten largest container service operators in the world.¹²

The Northeast passage and the Northwest passage in the Arctic are increasingly accessible passes. The latter, located in the Canadian Arctic and covering a distance of 7,000 miles, links the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and will reduce the distance between the United States and Asia by approximately 15%.

But it is the Northeast passage that currently has the best sailing characteristics. It runs along the Russian Arctic coast and directly connects the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans without the need to cross the Suez and Panama Canals or the Cape of Good Hope. This route was already known in the 17th century, but did not begin to be used as an alternative until the period after the Russian Revolution, when the country was subjected to international isolation.

¹² VV.AA. *Security and Defence Documents 66 Arctic Geopolitics. Two complementary visions. Spain-Singapore*. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

This route was only usable during part of the summer. However, climate change is favouring the progressive expansion of its use. In summer 2017, a ship made the route between Norway and South Korea in just nineteen days, 30% faster than the route through the Suez Canal and without the need of an icebreaker. A year later, in January 2018, another Russian vessel, in the middle of winter, made the journey between South Korea and Sableta. It was also the first to do so at that time of the year.¹³

This route is 40% shorter in distance between Europe and the Far East, some 3,900 miles, or 12 to 15 days, although the adverse climate to be expected in the Arctic and the dangers for navigation reduce the advantage factor to 30%. The distance between Tokyo and New York, to give another benchmark, is reduced by 3,700 miles.

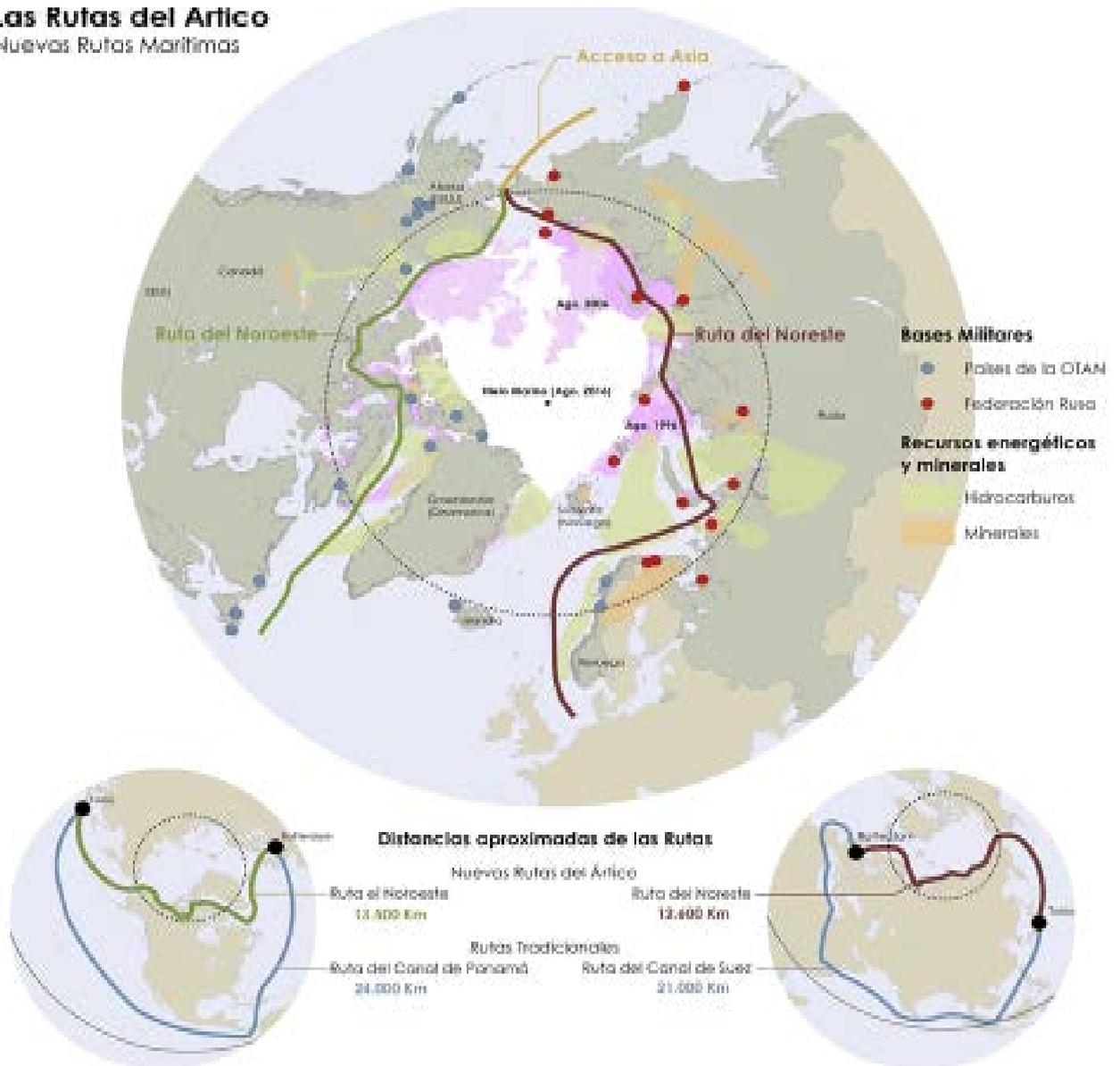
The result was that, in 2018, 18 million tonnes were transported along the Russian maritime littoral, which meant an increase of 80% from 2017. In 2019, 26 million tonnes moved through the same area.¹⁴ It is estimated that 130 million tonnes will circulate in the region by 2035.

¹³ MERINO, Álvaro. "Towards the Arctic route". *The World Order*, 2020.

<https://elordenmundial.com/mapas/hacia-la-ruta-del-artico/>

¹⁴ <http://www.elojodigital.com/contenido/18017-el-plan-de-rusia-para-avanzar-en-el-artico>

Las Rutas del Ártico
 Nuevas Rutas Marítimas



Fuente: Sea Ice Index, NSIDC (National Snow & Ice Data Center) | Shipping on Chukchi, the New York Times | Rusia Política

Comandante Acuarista Pinarolón 2014



- New Routes and Bases in the Arctic

Source: The World Order. Towards the Arctic Route - World Order Maps - EOM.

<https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/hacia-la-ruta-del-artico/?nab=0>

Natural resources

The concentration of raw materials in some regions of the world contributes to their visibility, but at the cost of increasing their geopolitical risk. The Arctic is a resource-rich area. It is estimated that around 30% of the world's gas reserves, and between 20% and 13% of the world's oil, depending on the source considered, are located in this ill-defined space competed over by major powers. Specifically, the locations of the largest

reserves are the Amerasia Basin, the Arctic Alaska Basin, the East Barents Basin, the East Greenland Rift Basin, the West Greenland-East Canada Basin, the West Siberian Basin and the Yenisey-Khatanga Basin.¹⁵



- Figure: Oil and gas resources in the Arctic
Source: KING, Hobart M.-"Arctic oil and natural gas resources" *U.S. Energy Information Administration*. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=4650>

This is in addition to mineral resources (as a percentage of the global resources): 40% of palladium, 26.8% of diamonds, 15% of platinum, 11% of cobalt, 10.6% of nickel, 9% of tungsten and 8% of zinc.¹⁶ Cryolite, for example, is important for the production of aluminium; in fact, Greenland cryolite was already used in World War II for aircraft manufacturing. This contributed to the Americans protecting the source during this specific period. Then there are, of course, fish stocks. Not surprisingly, catches in the area account for between 4% and 5% of the world's catches.

These riches, for the most part, are still difficult to access, although in some comparatively warmer areas – such as the Barents Sea – this is already being achieved. In fact, the cooperation that takes place in the area between Russia and Norway explains very well the technology transfers that have made its exploitation possible.

¹⁵ LÓPEZ TÁRRAGA, A.B. "Evolution of the European Union's discourse on security in the Arctic region". *Boletín de la Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles*, 93/2022. <https://doi.org/10.21138/bage.3268>

¹⁶ LÓPEZ TÁRRAGA, A.B. "Evolution of the European Union's discourse on security in the Arctic region". *Boletín de la Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles*, 93/2022. <https://doi.org/10.21138/bage.3268>

Another issue concerns rare-earth elements (REE). Rare-earths is the name given to 17 chemical elements. They are described as "rare" because it is very uncommon to find them in a pure form, although there are deposits of some of them all over the world.¹⁷

To understand their strategic relevance, it should be noted that they are essential for the production of electronic devices such as catalytic converters, magnets, turbines, pumps, etc. Their magnetic properties make it possible to reduce the weight of the equipment. Rare-earths are thus central to the implementation of renewable energies which, in turn, are central to the green economy and the transformation of the energy and transport sectors.

These goods are growing exponentially. In fact, it is estimated that, by 2040, they will account for more than half of all vehicle sales. Each electric car uses around one kilogram of REE for the engine alone, but offshore wind turbines require around 200 kilos per megawatt. In addition, REE are relevant from a military technology perspective. According to a NATO report, a US Virginia-class submarine requires about 400 tonnes of REE, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer needs more than two tonnes and an F-35 fighter 400 kilos.¹⁸

The 2019 US Geological Survey put the global rare-earth reserve at about 120 million tonnes and current demand at about 200,000 tonnes. Assuming its annual consumption doubles to 500,000 tonnes per year, reserves would be sufficient for the next 250 years. The issue is therefore not so much about reserves as it is about China's dominance of the sector.¹⁹

Greenland has the largest untapped deposits of rare earths. Some sources put them at 10% of the world's total. It is estimated that this territory can provide some 30,000 tonnes per year, around 20% of the world's demand for rare-earths.²⁰ This would be in addition to the 1 million tonnes discovered in Sweden in 2023.

¹⁷ ELCACHO, Joaquim. "Crisis in Greenland over uranium and rare-earths mining project. La Vanguardia". *La Vanguardia* 16/02/2021. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/natural/20210216/6250291/crisis-groenlandia-proyecto-minas-uranio-tierras-raras.html>

¹⁸ VESTERGAARD, Cindy; BOURGOUIN, France. "New U.S. policies Towards Greenland Should Greenland Mine its Uranium?" *DIIS policy brief*, April 2012.

¹⁹ KALVIG, Per; LUCHT, Hans, "No green future without China Greenland's minerals to consolidate China's rare earth dominance?" *DIIS Policy Brief*, February 2021.

²⁰ OLE, Bent; MORTENSEN, Gram. "The Quest for Resources - the Case of Greenland". *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*. *Centre of Military and Strategic Studies* Volume 15, Issue 2, 2013.

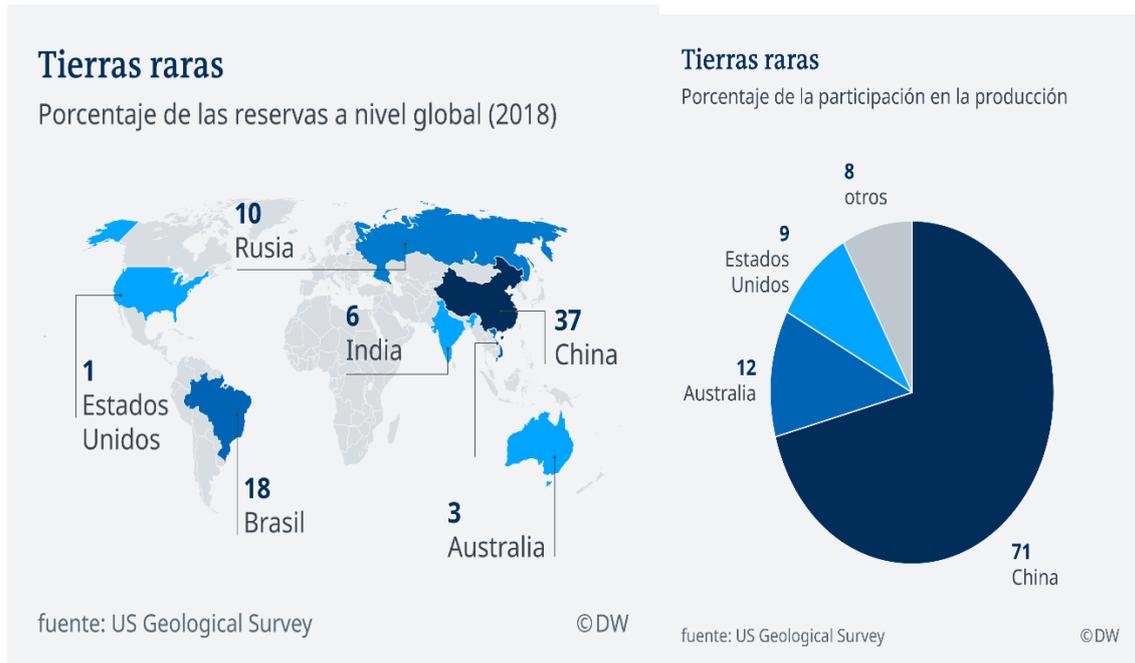


Figure: Rare-earths in the world and Chinese control
 Source "When-rare earths become a weapon". Dw.com <https://www.dw.com/es/cuando-las-tierras-raras-se-convierten-en-un-arma/a-49109708>

China's control over these elements, of which it holds 36% of known reserves, is worth mentioning in this context. It should be noted that such control began in the early 1980s, when the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission tightened restrictions on rare-earth mining and production, leading to the collapse of the US rare-earth industry.

China stepped into the vacuum and acquired the technology and intellectual property rights, while implementing a national strategy to dominate production and the market in this sector relevant to the global supply chain, creating a de facto monopoly (some sources put it as high as 97%, others 80%; in any case a very large majority). It took over global production chains,²¹ established export quotas and price controls, which have not been broken by the West whose companies depend on Chinese supplies of these critical and high demand materials, giving China significant industrial and political advantages.²² The apparent thinking behind China's resource lust is that, as they have about 25% of the world's population, they are entitled to 25% of the resources in the commons. In this

²¹ WANG, Nils. "Arctic Security - An Equation with Multiple Unknowns" *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* Centre of Military and Strategic Studies, 2013 *Journal* VOLUME 15, ISSUE 2, 2013.

²² OLE, Bent; MORTENSEN, Gram. "The Quest for Resources - the Case of Greenland". *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*. *Centre of Military and Strategic Studies* Volume 15, Issue 2, 2013.

regard, China managed to become part of the 9-nation agreement with the EU to ban unregulated fishing until 2037 in the Central Arctic.²³

THE ARCTIC AS A STRATEGIC ENCLAVE

The Arctic is a strategic juncture. Whoever controls the Arctic is controlling a space in which three continents compete against and gain access to one another. It is the nexus of two oceans and the immediate environment of two superpowers, and its control thus helps to measure the balance of power between the two.

The melting Arctic ice cap makes accessible borders that, in practical terms, were not accessible before, creating a security shift. And not only for Russia. The new routes add to the strategic importance that the Arctic has in itself and that it already had during the Cold War: it was the shortest distance between the USSR – succeeded by Russia as well as, it must not be forgotten, by China – and the United States, which led to its militarisation, especially in terms of its airspace. It is a prime area for deploying radar chains and advanced detection systems.

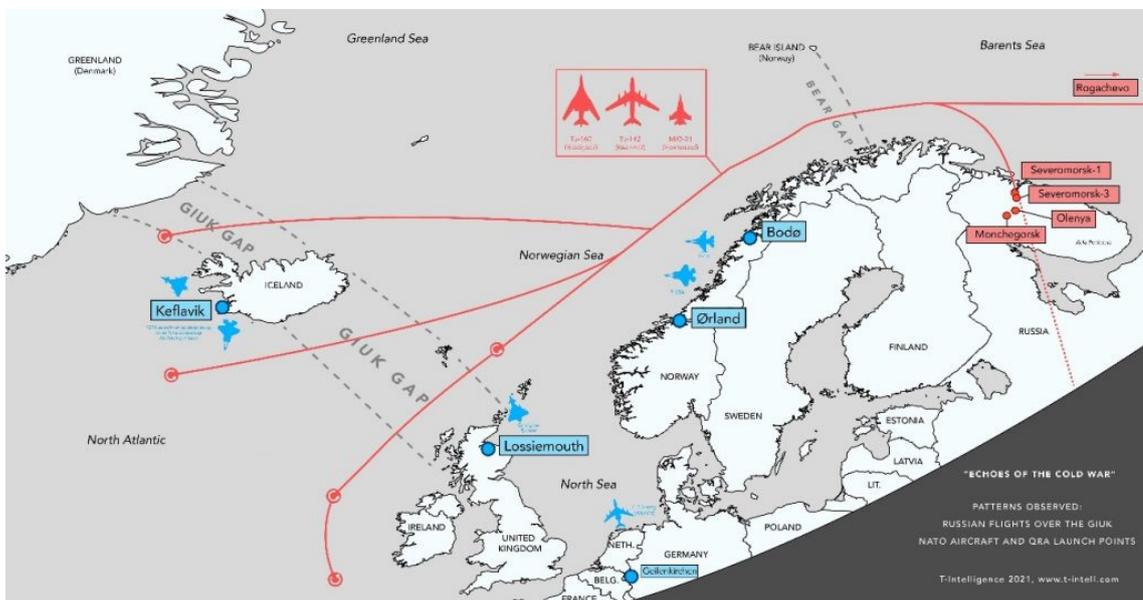
In addition, the Arctic meets with the Atlantic, in the passages known by NATO as GIUK (acronym for Greenland, Iceland and United Kingdom) and GIN (Greenland, Iceland and Norway), centred in the Svalbard Islands. These passages were of great strategic interest because, in the event of armed conflict, it was planned to block it in order to prevent Soviet submarines from accessing the Atlantic and thus exercising a negative domination of this ocean and interrupting the link between Europe and the United States.²⁴ Denmark with the Faroes midway between Iceland, Norway and Scotland complements Danish control over both the GIUK and the GIN.

This is still the case today, not least because the geographical imperatives remain. Now, as then, the Scandinavian peninsula stands between northwest Russia and the free waters of the Atlantic, providing control of Russia's north-western sea lanes (Barents and Baltic Seas), a highly important strategic space. This wedge, spur or outpost character explains the pressures Norway is under from its Russian neighbour. It should be noted in this context that following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, one of the mainland's fibre-optic cables to the Svalbard Islands was cut – with Russia having questioned Norway's

²³ ALAEZ FEAL, Octavio. "China in the Arctic". *Global strategy*. no. 27/2022.
<https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/>

²⁴ ALBERT FERRERO, Julio. "Melting in the Arctic's geopolitics" *Revista de Marina* November 2011 pp. 681-690.

compliance with the treaty regulating the international and demilitarised nature of its international status – and the country has suffered numerous cyber-security incidents.



- Map of the North Atlantic and the Norwegian Sea, showing the area covered by the Russian bastion strategy. Source - RUSI

Source: Vázquez Orbaiceta, Gonzalo W. "Scotland and its strategic value for NATO" *Ejércitos Magazine* 08/02/2023 <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/2023/02/08/escocia-y-su-valor-estrategico-para-la-otan/>

Norway has become a NATO outpost in the region with close proximity to Russia, with which it shares a land and sea border, forcing it to maintain as reasonable a relationship as possible.

The area north to the Scandinavian peninsula and the Barents Sea is known as the 'bastion area'. It gives access to the most developed and populated region of the Russian Arctic. This includes both the support bases and the SSBN deployment areas; it is a huge, year-round ice-free area with the only passable access to it being at the GIUK gap.²⁵

It is home to the port of Murmansk (the largest Arctic settlement), and, as in the past, to the Northern Fleet bases where the nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) are based; in fact, two-thirds of Soviet submarines were based there. These strategic sites are located about 100 kilometres from the borders of NATO members Finland and Norway.

²⁵ MACKINLAY, Alejandro. "Scandinavia: geopolitics with a sea flavour" Research Paper 46/2018 from the *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos* 20 April 2018. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEEO46-2018_Escandinavia_A.Mackinlay.pdf

Russia perceives this situation as a vulnerability, both because of insufficient strategic depth to defend its Arctic ports, and because of the compromise in the Northern Fleet's freedom of action. Its units have to operate in areas where Allied naval superiority is manifest, which, if it were the case, would prevent both their transit to the free waters of the Atlantic, and an effective defence of the SSBN deployment areas.²⁶



- Map of the GIUK Gap and the Norwegian Sea, illustrating Scotland's position and incursions by Russian aircraft in the area. Source - T-Intelligence.
 Source: Vázquez Orbaiceta, Gonzalo W. "Scotland and its strategic value for NATO" *Ejércitos Magazine* 08/02/2023 <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/2023/02/08/escocia-y-su-valor-estrategico-para-la-otan/>

China's presence in the Arctic, coupled with the 4,000 kilometres of shared border and the fact that its Belt and Road Initiative is replacing Russia in Central Asia, where the

²⁶ MACKINLAY, Alejandro. "Scandinavia: geopolitics with a sea flavour" Research Paper 46/2018 from the *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos* 20 April 2018. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEEO46-2018_Escandinavia_A.Mackinlay.pdf

programme even makes historical sense, may eventually lead to Russia's strategic involvement. And this when Siberia is China's natural hinterland and China has a GDP ten times that of Russia. And relations are not as good as you might think. Thus, in 2020, Russia arrested the head of the Civic Academy of Arctic Sciences in St Petersburg on charges of passing classified information to China. Beijing is clearly aware of Russian mistrust.²⁷

It must be considered that Chinese and Russian interests are neither the same nor overlapping. To begin with, Russia's economy is based on oil and gas, while China's is based on trade with major economies, although not exclusively. In fact, the relationship between the two powers is as much about collaboration as it is about competition. The Chinese Polar Route can co-opt a hub for maritime traffic and world trade in the Russian Arctic. As a result of this complementarity and in order to maintain its pre-eminence, Russian activities in the Arctic and North Atlantic can be expected to increase.²⁸ A transpolar route would partially free China from the control that the Russians claim over its adjacent maritime space.

In addition, China has two icebreakers and, as part of its naval programme, plans for a nuclear-powered one, which, in practical terms, signals the importance it attaches to the region. These can act as escorts or support vessels for nuclear submarines, helping to balance the presence of US SSBNs and the balance of nuclear forces in the region.²⁹

Their partnership has been strengthened by the conflict in Ukraine. They seem to have created a kind of cartel between them and in the same geographical space. In this, each actor tries to maximise its own interests while at the same time limiting them so as not to break up a mutually advantageous cooperation. This has been made possible by a Chinese attitude of restraint, which has led it to curb impulses in order to accelerate the pace of crucial interests.

Meanwhile, Russia seeks to prevent outside powers from influencing Arctic affairs and therefore sees China's claim to be a 'near-Arctic state' and advocacy for non-Arctic states to have a greater say in Arctic affairs as an unwelcome boost to the internationalisation of the region.

²⁷ GREENWOOD, Jeremy; [SHUXIAN luo](https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/could-the-arctic-be-a-wedge-between-russia-and-china/) "Could the Arctic be a wedge between Russia and China?" *War on the Rocks*. 04/04/2022. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/could-the-arctic-be-a-wedge-between-russia-and-china/>

²⁸ ALAEZ FEAL, Octavio. "China in the Arctic". *Global strategy*. no. 27/2022. <https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/>

²⁹ ALAEZ FEAL, Octavio. "China in the Arctic". *Global strategy*. no. 27/2022. <https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/>

China's move towards the Arctic also brings it closer to the living space of the United States, to whose very backyard the struggle between the two superpowers is transferred while contributing to the strengthening of Russia within this context. Just as the Romans did with the Carthaginians in the context of the Second Punic War.

The geopolitical relevance of areas such as Greenland deserves to be mentioned here. Geographically, it is located at the barycentre of the triangle formed by North America, Russia and Europe. Bordering its western and eastern coastline are the new shipping routes known as the Northwest and Northeast passages, respectively. This situation could turn the island into a major supply and support centre.³⁰

Moreover, Greenland is located, with respect to the United States, between Russia and the Atlantic and has therefore been integrated as part of the US early warning systems, giving it an important strategic military value.

The US-operated Thule air base, halfway between New York and Moscow on the northwest coast of Greenland, contributes to the defence of US territory as part of the US missile defence shield and is therefore, although located outside the US, integrated into the US national sphere, within Homeland Security. The base is home to the *Twelfth Space Warning Squadron*, which is part of the *Ballistic Missile Early Warning System* (BMEWS). It is also home to the *Third Detachment of the 22nd Space Operations Squadron*, a global satellite monitoring network³¹.

It should also be noted that the Arctic is a relevant space for tracking satellites in polar orbit. Satellite projects such as Galileo are controlled from Thule (Greenland). China sought to have a satellite station in Greenland but to no avail. However, it has built a station in Kiruna (Sweden). And it signed an agreement with Finland in 2018 to establish a joint research centre for Arctic space observation and data-sharing services.³² In 2019 China launched its first polar-orbiting satellite.

³⁰ CANOVAS SANCHEZ, Bartolomé. "Why Greenland is a strategic factor in the Arctic" *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*. DIEEEO 148/2020
https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO148_2020BARCAN_Groenlandia.pdf

³¹ CANOVAS SANCHEZ, Bartolomé. "Why Greenland is a strategic factor in the Arctic" *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*. DIEEEO 148/2020
https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO148_2020BARCAN_Groenlandia.pdf

³² ALAEZ FEAL, Octavio. "China in the Arctic". *Global strategy*. no. 27/2022.
<https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/>

CLAIMS OVER THE ADJACENT SEAS

Melting ice, coupled with other factors such as rising commodity prices and technological advances, has made natural resources – from hydrocarbons to fish – more accessible and profitable. They can also be exploited in a milder climate, which reduces production costs. All this has contributed to a change in the status quo in the region.

In fact, it has encouraged a kind of "race for the Arctic" that runs counter to the cooperative reality that existed in this extreme region, at least until the war in Ukraine. This "race" aims to legally validate the dominance of a growing space that is achieved by consolidating previous advances that remain as a milestone or benchmark.

Strictly speaking, we are not dealing with a sharing out of this ocean, but rather with an extension of the territory from that already allocated; this serves as legitimisation and is the basis for further progress. Such a tendency is accentuated in areas where hydrocarbon deposits have previously been detected, the possession of which is questionable on more or less techno-scientific grounds.

The result is the emergence of demands that, while formulated in legal and scientific terms, are actually political in nature, and they are put forward by exploiting existing grey and undefined areas.

In this permanent *pro domo sua*, it is worth mentioning that it was Canada that, in 1907, gave birth to the so-called sector theory for the demarcation of Arctic territory. On the basis of this theory, the polar regions were seen as an extension of the coasts of the countries they surround; it goes without saying that theirs and Russia's were and are the largest (Russia has 21,140 km of Arctic coastline, 53% of the total). This would be done by drawing converging lines from the extremities of the circumpolar territories towards the pole, thus marking the territory corresponding to each State.³³ Using this logic, in 1926, the Soviet Union claimed the maritime space between 32°04'35 "E and 168°49'30 "W. This theory, it is clear, did not prosper in the case of the Arctic. Whereas with Antarctica, it was possible to do something along these lines from scratch.

Meanwhile, in the Arctic Ocean, the Law of the Sea was used for the delimitation of the Arctic Ocean. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides for a general territorial sea of 12 nautical miles from the low-water mark of its

³³ NAVAS ITURRALDE, María Fernanda. "The Arctic question" *Afese Journal, International Issues* ,Vol 65, No 65 (2017)

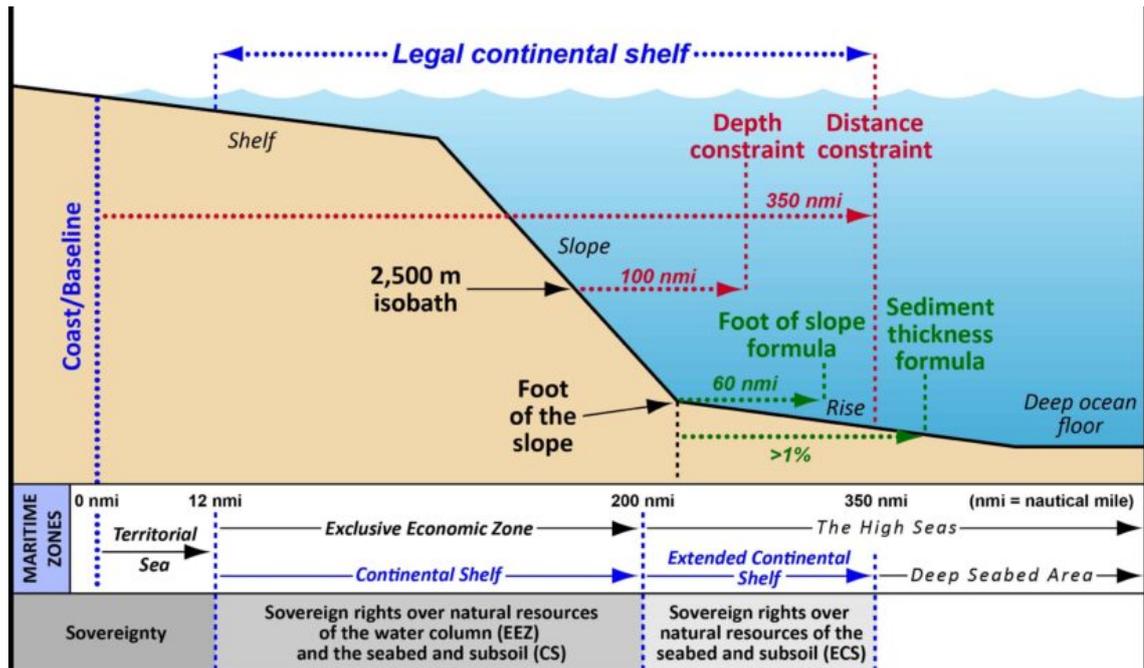
coast, a contiguous area of 12 nautical miles, and an Exclusive Economic Zone of 200 miles, which could extend to the continental shelf, each with its corresponding obligations and rights. Thus, approximately half of the Arctic Ocean is international waters, even if states have rights over the shelf.

The shelf is the submarine continuation of the continents, so the Convention (Art. 76) allows continental shelves to be extended when a State has scientific data showing that certain geological or geographical features of the seabed are related to the continental shelves. But the waters beyond the territorial sea are free seas, high seas, international waters.

In any event, the outer limit of the continental shelf must be less than 350 nautical miles or 100 nautical miles from the 2,500-metre isobath, but such an extension must be authorised by the United Nations International Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.

As a result, the exploitation of Arctic resources falls primarily within the competence of Council member states and is largely outside multilateral control. However, UNCLOS limits the sovereignty of States by declaring that the seabed is the "common heritage" of mankind and that its exploration and exploitation "shall be carried out for the benefit of mankind as a whole, irrespective of the geographical location of States."³⁴

³⁴ PRASHAD, Vijay "The Winds of the New Cold War Howl in the Arctic Circle". *Rebelión.org* _ <https://rebelion.org/los-vientos-de-la-nueva-guerra-fria-aullan-en-el-circulo-polar-artico/>



- Territorial sea and continental shelf
 International Institute for Law at the Sea Studies. www.iilss.net/tag/outer-limits-of-the-continental-shelf/

The five circumpolar states seek to extend their economic zone and sovereignty on the basis of these rules, as well as the unique features of their location and history. The Convention provides for a time limit of 10 years after signing the Convention to submit claims.

Norway ratified in 1996 and submitted its claims in 2006. Russia ratified the Convention in 1997 and submitted its claim in 2001. Canada ratified in 2003 and submitted its claims in 2013. Denmark in 2004 and filed a claim in 2014. The United States, for its part, has not yet ratified it, which does not imply a loss of its rights, although the legitimacy of its claims is undermined and, apart from other considerations on a global scale, makes it difficult to find a solution in global terms for the region.

Thus, when the US, as a member of the Arctic Council, contests excessive claims on the basis of international law, Russia and China point out that it has no legal standing to object because it has not ratified UNCLOS. Moreover, some authors consider that the United States does not have sufficient power to globally impose its interpretation of the Law of the Sea without being part of it. From this perspective, they consider it advisable to accompany its overall policy, particularly its military policy, with the corresponding legal backing.

In its case, it is estimated that the US shelf would overlap with the Canadian claim, while the border with Russia would be governed by the 1990 bilateral agreement with the USSR which, in this case, was ratified by the US Senate but not by the Russian Duma.

In this context, 2008 saw the issuance of the so-called Ilulissat (Greenland) Declaration, which, along with the pre-eminence of the Arctic littoral states in the resolution of regional issues, and collaboration on the marine environment, maritime security and the division of responsibilities, established the basis for the "orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims". It provides the political and legal basis for the division of the Arctic region, including the enlargement of the continental shelves, and is based on UNCLOS and bilateral negotiations.

The debate on the Lomonosov mountain range or submarine ridge, which practically reaches the North Pole and is simultaneously claimed by Canada, Denmark and Russia (which adds the Mendeleev mountain range to its claims) as part of the continental shelf or margin for extending their waters, is based on this logic and reason. In 2007, Russia, in the context of the *Arktika* expedition, placed a flag at a depth of 4,200 metres for the purpose of making a claim.

In 2021, Russia filed a claim with the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf that reaches into Canada's exclusive economic zone in the Arctic. And Canada in 2022 submitted an addendum to the 2019 partial submission claiming approximately 1.2 million square kilometres of the Arctic Ocean seabed and subsoil, including the Lomonosov and Alpha-Mendeleev mountain ranges, thereby covering the entire Central Arctic Plateau and significantly increasing its overlap with Russia's claims.³⁵

³⁵ QUINN Eilís. "Canada extends continental shelf claim, increasing overlaps with Russia in the Arctic". *The Barents Observer*. 23/12/2022
<https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2022/12/canada-extends-continental-shelf-claim-increasing-overlaps-russia-arctic>

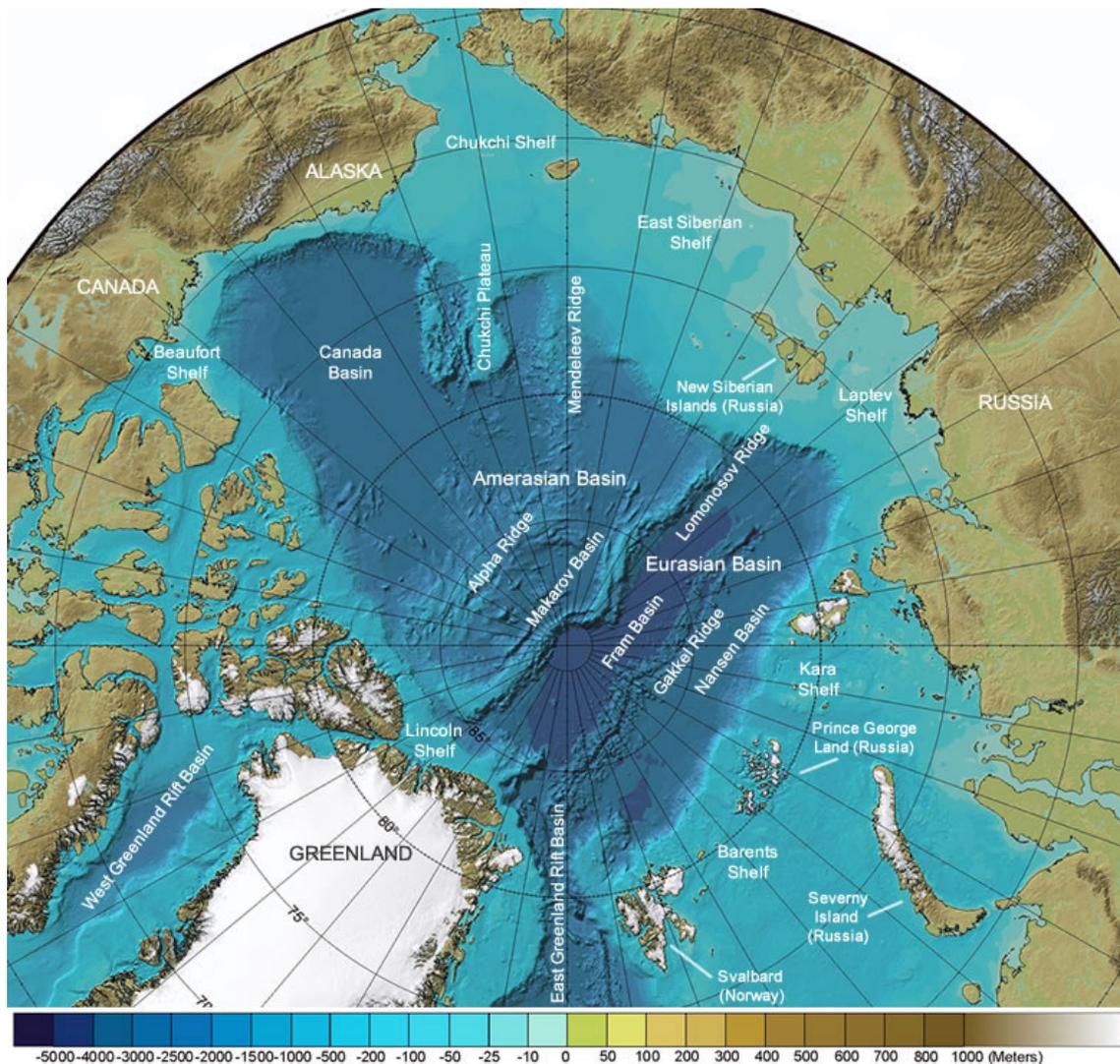


Figure. Arctic backgrounds.

Source: KING, Hobart M. "Arctic Ocean Seafloor Features Map Major Basins, Ridges, Shelves and Bathymetry". Geology.com <https://geology.com/articles/arctic-ocean-features/>

In doing so, both countries are trying to move their continental shelf beyond 350 miles, but within the 100-mile limit from the 2,500-metre isobath. In this regard, Russia placed a titanium flag at a depth of 4,200 metres. Canada rejected Russia's approach as archaic – as it had an aftertaste of the so-called Age of Discovery – while announcing the installation of new military bases and a satellite surveillance system in the area. The US (which has undertaken scientific exploration to demarcate its maritime boundary with Canada) also joined in this rejection, although its foreign policy commitment to the Arctic had hitherto been more limited, which was reflected in the resources and means available

in the region. Denmark sent a scientific expedition to reconnoitre the area and validate its right.³⁶

What is relevant about the Russian and Canadian approaches is that, if accepted, the 200-mile exclusive economic zone in which countries have the right to exploit existing resources would be counted from the mountain ranges, and given that the mountain ranges run through the Arctic, both countries are claiming sovereignty over a wide expanse of its waters. Acceptance implies, for example, in both the Russian and Canadian cases, a claim to a portion of the Arctic Ocean that exceeds 1.2 million square kilometres.

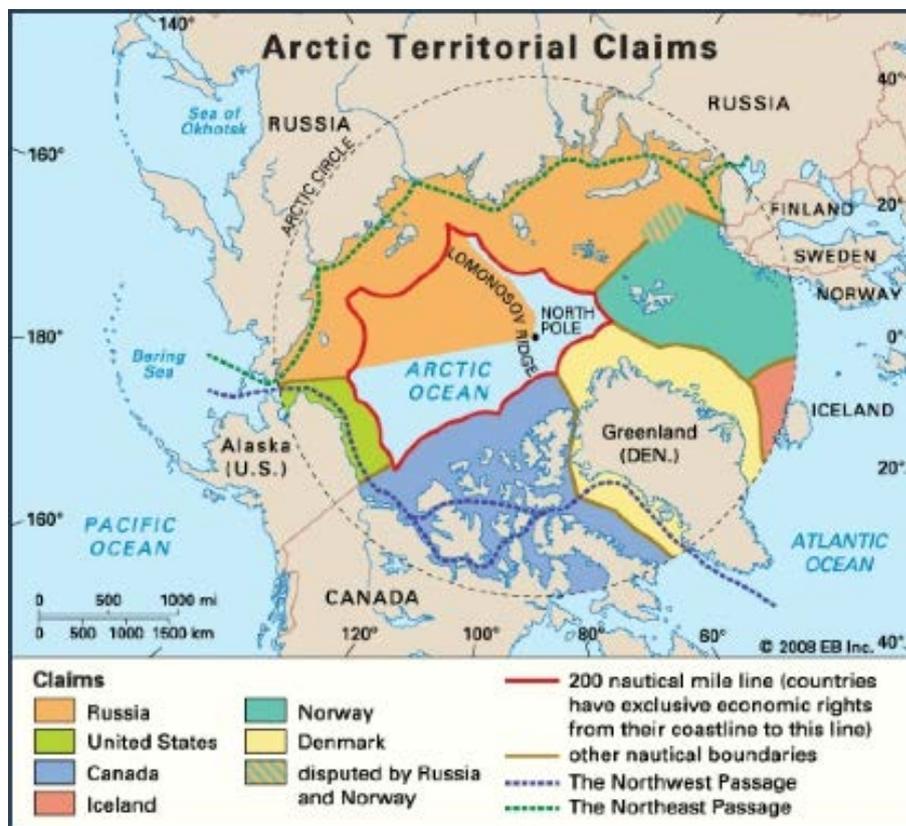


Figure. Territorial claims in the Arctic

Source: BIRDWELL, Ian. "Rival Claims to a Changing Arctic". *The Maritime Executive* 15.08.2016 <https://maritime-executive.com/article/rival-claims-to-the-changing-arctic>

The Norwegian claim, on the other hand, is 235,000 km² and spread over three areas: *Loop Hole* in the Barents Sea; *Western Nansen Bay* in the Arctic Ocean; and *Banana Hole* in the Norwegian Sea.

³⁶ FIGUEROA GONZÁLEZ, Silvia. "The Arctic in dispute". Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Guadalajara. <https://biblat.unam.mx/hevila/TendenciasZapopan/primavera/7.pdf>

Due to its cooperative nature, it is worth highlighting the agreement reached in 2010 between Russia and Norway on the basis of which they divided in half an area of 175,000 square kilometres corresponding to their disputed Exclusive Economic Zones in the Barents Sea (the area known as Loop Hole). It established a regime of co-management of hydrocarbons and fishing, and technological cooperation for the exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits in the area. And also the one that, in 2022, Canada and Denmark signed concerning Hans Island.

There are also territories that are disputed, but these cannot be classified as major disputes. For example, the island of Franz Joseph Land, 1,100 kilometres from the North Pole, held by Russia since 1926, has been claimed by Norway since that time. Franz Josef Land had been considered *terra nullius* and the Soviet Union declared its annexation on the basis of the Canadian sector theory. To this end, they declared all the land between the Soviet continent and the North Pole to be Soviet territory.

The Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, the northernmost inhabited area, deserves special mention. Its legal regime is governed by the eponymous treaty signed in 1920 after the First World War. It gives all parties equal and non-discriminatory access to its resources and is a demilitarised space.

Norway cannot profit from the exploitation of the islands and must manage them and protect their environment. Nor does it make much profit through companies based in the country, as they have to compete on a level playing field with companies from third countries.

In the case of Denmark, the question of Greenland stands out: a large part of the island's territory is part of the Arctic up to the 80°N parallel. This latitude is exceeded only by some Canadian archipelagos, the remaining space being sea.

Greenland thus has the closest coastline to the North Pole. For this reason, Denmark claims an area of 895,000 square kilometres of the Arctic. This includes the Lomonosov mountain range,³⁷ which they consider part of their continental shelf, as well as the North Pole up to the Russian Exclusive Economic Zone. American patronage, if the US were to take over the island, would enhance the strength of its claims.

³⁷ An underwater mountain range almost 1,800 kilometres long. If shown to be physically attached to the continental shelf of Russia, Greenland or Canada, it would mean that the North Pole could be attributed to any one of these countries. CANOVAS SANCHEZ, Bartolomé. "Why Greenland is a strategic factor in the Arctic" *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*. DIEEEO 148/2020. https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO148_2020BARCAN_Groenlandia.pdf

Its claims are also in some areas at odds with those of Canada and Norway. The maritime boundary between Greenland and Canada was largely defined in 1973 – with some adjustments added in 2004 – as well as another agreement in 2012 specifically on the Lincoln Sea. Only one dispute remained, concerning sovereignty over a small island (the 1.3 km² Hans Island) in the Nares Strait, which the two states agreed to divide in 2022, establishing a land border. In fact, the two states had set up a joint working group in 2018 to resolve disagreements. The maritime boundaries between Greenland and Norway (Svalbard) were established in 2006.³⁸

To the question of claims relating to the maritime shelf, we must add claims relating to the territorial sea, a significant space, since, in addition to economic rights, states exercise full sovereignty. And here again there are discrepancies. These are not infrequent for two reasons. Some rely on the drawing of the baselines that serve to define the maritime areas³⁹ and which are made by stretching the rules and with them the points that define them, causing maritime areas to become inland. The other way is to enforce the environmental control regulations to which the treaty confers on coastal countries.⁴⁰

³⁸ LOZIER, Jean-Louis. "Arctic: Toward the End of the Exception? Strategic, Nuclear and Maritime Issues in the Region", *Proliferation Papers*, No. 64, Ifri, April 2022.

³⁹ UNCLOS Part II, Art. 8. "*Internal waters*: 1. Except as provided in Part IV, waters on the landward side of the baseline of the territorial sea form part of the internal waters of the State. 2. Where the establishment of a straight baseline in accordance with the method set forth in article 7 has the effect of enclosing as internal waters areas which had not previously been considered as such, a right of innocent passage as provided in this Convention shall exist in those waters."

⁴⁰ UNCLOS, Part I Section 8, Art. 234, Ice-Covered Areas: "Coastal States have the right to adopt and enforce non-discriminatory laws and regulations for the prevention, reduction and control of marine pollution from vessels in ice-covered areas within the limits of the exclusive economic zone, where particularly severe climatic conditions and the presence of ice covering such areas for most of the year create obstructions or exceptional hazards to navigation, and pollution of the marine environment could cause major harm to or irreversible disturbance of the ecological balance. Such laws and regulations shall have due regard to navigation and the protection and preservation of the marine environment based on the best available scientific evidence."

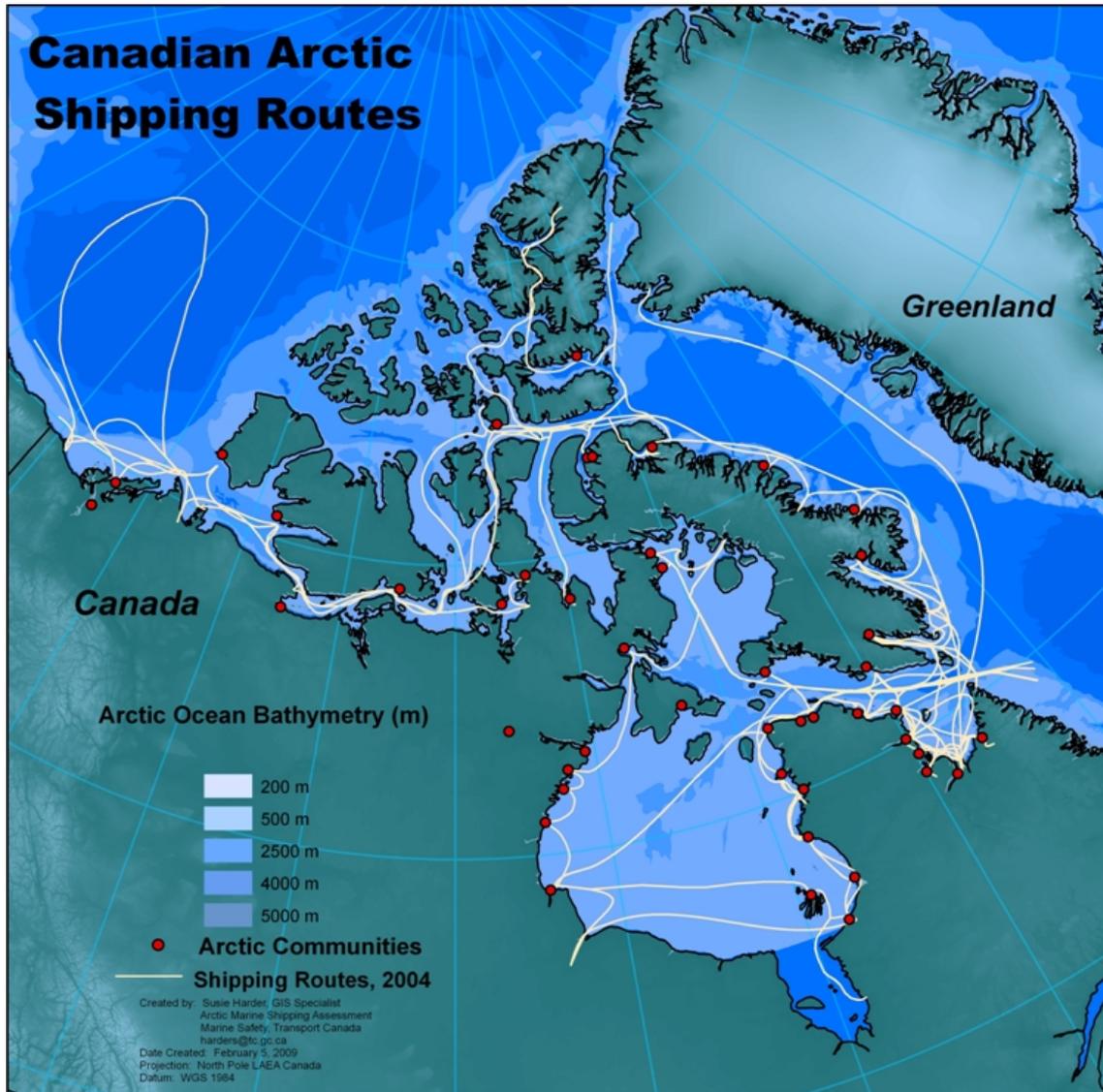


Figure: Canada's navigation routes.

Source: Government of Canada. "Canadian Arctic Shipping routes."

<https://tc.canada.ca/en/marine-transportation/arctic-shipping/canadian-arctic-shipping-routes>

In this way, Canada claims part of the Northern Passage, the Beaufort Sea, as territorial waters, while the United States (and the European Union) maintains that they are international waters, as the territorial sea extends up to 12 miles and the channel extends in some stretches to 60 miles. To justify its reasons, Canada cites, in addition to technical criteria relating to islands, that Inuit tribes camp on it during the time it is frozen.⁴¹ In fact, during the Cold War, Canada relocated several Inuit populations to strengthen the legitimacy of its claims.

⁴¹ FIGUEROA GONZÁLEZ, Silvia. "The Arctic in dispute". Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Guadalajara. <https://biblat.unam.mx/hevila/TendenciasZapopan/primavera/7.pdf>

Russia also seeks to make the waters of the Northeast Passage part of its territorial sea, which would allow it to dictate access conditions, which the United States and the European Union are opposed to. Russia considers the region to be a sort of "underbelly", a space where it is militarily more vulnerable. Despite lacking a reinforced border, it was safe due to weather conditions. This creates a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, it must control and protect the sea route and, at the same time, defend itself against any attack from the poles and avoid a possible strategic surprise.

On this basis, it tries to dictate the rules under which activities are carried out in its immediate vicinity even though it runs outside its territorial sea, claiming a legitimate interest, at least of an environmental nature.⁴² It is a way to mark its political leadership in the region: imposing the rules that regulate life in the region as a form of recognition of its primacy. Thus, Russia has given *Rosatom*, its nuclear agency, administrative control over the route and the ability to limit the traffic of foreign warships by requiring forty-five days' notice and permission from the Russian government.⁴³

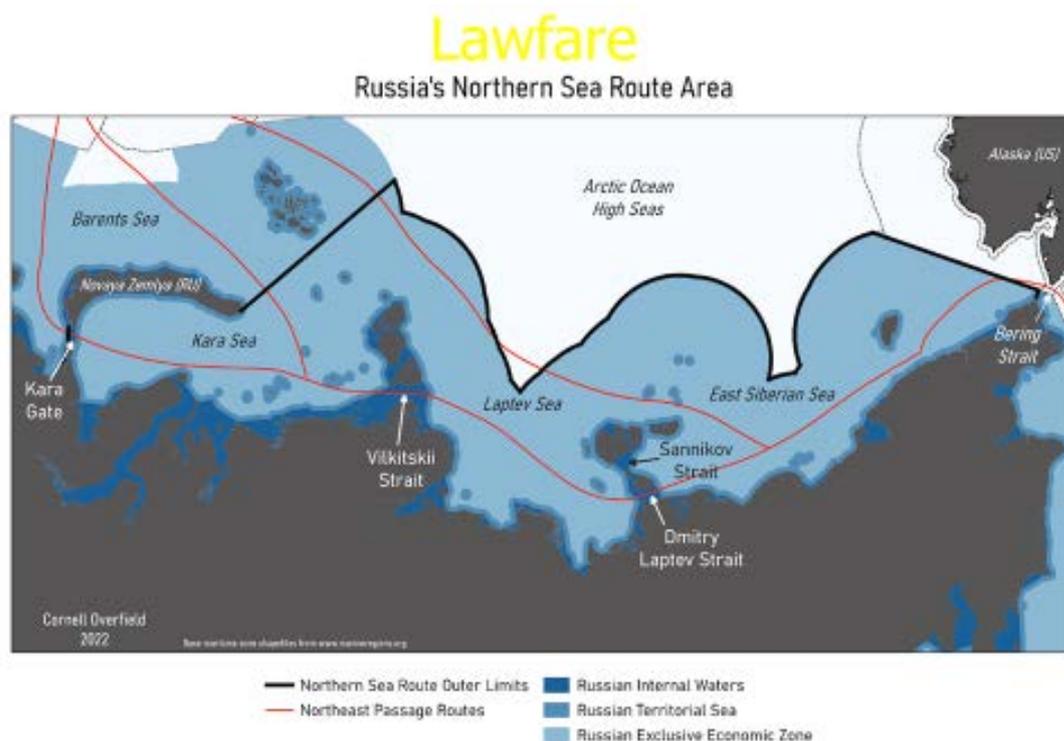


Figure: Russian waters, inland, territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone.

Source: OVERFIELD Cornell Wrangling "Warships: Russia's Proposed Law on Northern Sea Route Navigation" *Lawfare Institute* <https://www.lawfareblog.com/wrangling-warships-russias-proposed-law-northern-sea-route-navigation>

⁴² SÁNCHEZ ANDRÉS, Antonio. "Russia and Arctic geostrategy". *Real Instituto Elcano*. ARI 63/2010 06/04/ 2010

⁴³ <https://israelnoticias.com/militar/la-presencia-militar-de-rusia-en-el-artico/>

Canada has a similar logic, although not as pronounced. Note that the Canada-US disagreement was partially resolved with the signing of the Canada-US Arctic Co-operation Agreement in 1988.

It is worth noting that in 2011, in the face of increasing accessibility and under the auspices of the Arctic Council, an agreement was reached on search and rescue in the region, which may serve as an indicator of what could be the keys to an eventual future agreement.



Figure. Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement.

Source: Arctic Portal. <https://arcticportal.org/ap-library/yar-features/421-arctic-search-and-rescue-agreement>

ARCTIC POLICIES OF ARCTIC ACTORS

As we have seen, disputes have been resolved in a cooperative manner, particularly after the Cold War, when the physical thaw has increased significantly in the region and, with it, the intensity of relations. And globalisation has brought the Arctic out of its isolation, inevitably installing it in the global space and its logic.

The Arctic is relevant for Russia. It is not for nothing that it derives between 10 and 20% of its GDP and 20% of its exports from it. The point is that, until the conflict in

Ukraine, the Arctic was not high on the agendas of the major powers as it is now. Russian strategic publications insisted on preserving the Arctic as a space of peace and cooperation. In this regard, Russia has promoted both bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other states with Arctic interests and has repeatedly stressed that it adheres to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.⁴⁴

But this assertion is not supported by the facts. Thus, the increase of Russian armaments in the Arctic and the modernisation of existing ones that has taken place since 2000 has a point of contradiction with such statements. This is all the greater considering that this rearmament has occurred at the same time as military spending has been reduced in relation to the country's GDP. This gives greater significance to the political intentionality with which it is done. In 2007 Russia, as it did in the Cold War, resumed its air patrols in the area right up to the border of neighbouring states.

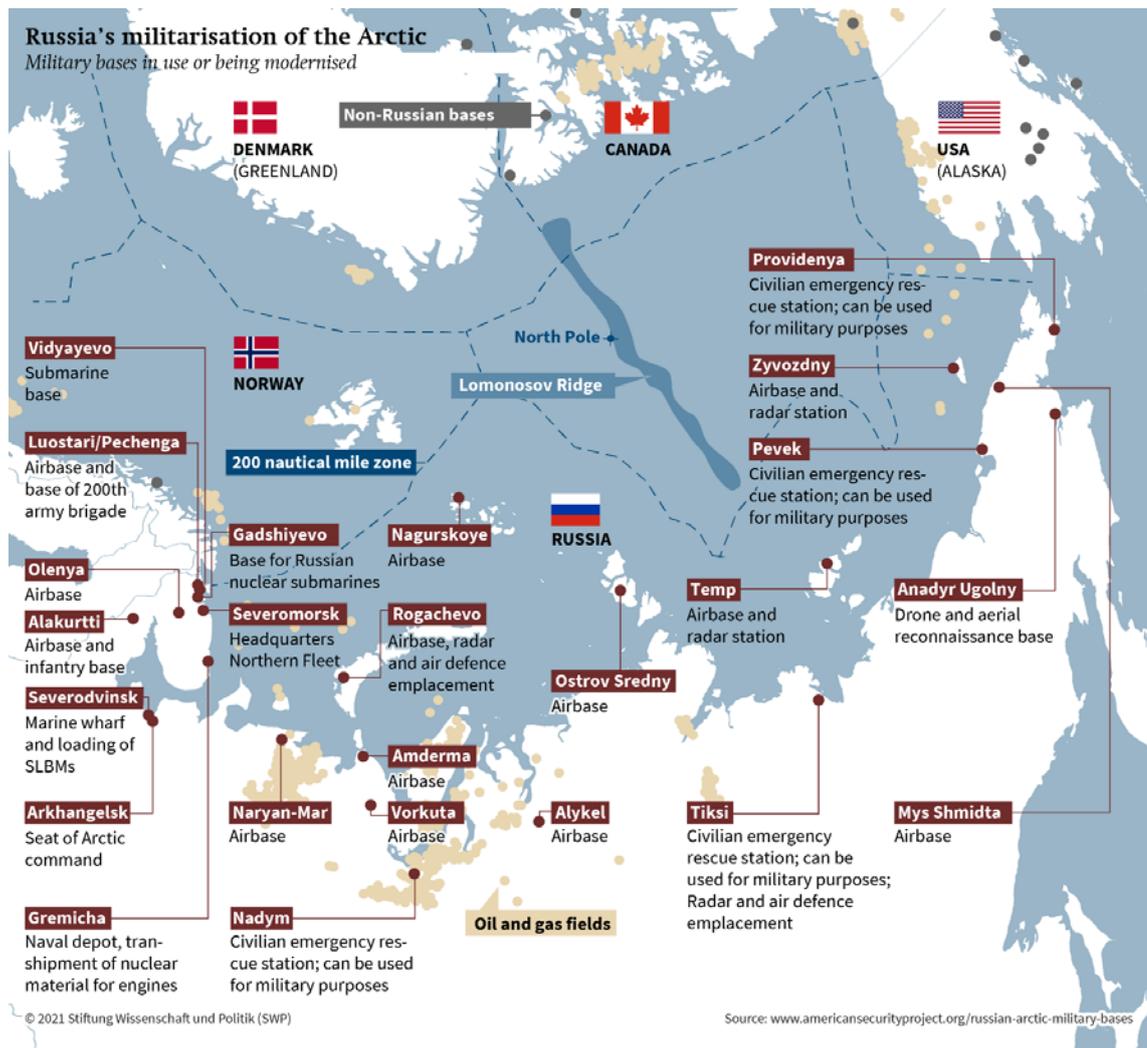
In any case, after Putin took office, Russia's Arctic policy took on a more assertive dimension. The Arctic became a key point of Russia's strategy in 2008, when the document 'Fundamentals of the Russian Federation's state policy in the Arctic until 2020 and beyond' was drafted. In this document, Russia's Arctic policy presented two divergent approaches: on the one hand, cooperation and, on the other, military rearmament with a view to defending its sovereignty.⁴⁵

Following these guidelines Russia placed the Arctic as a regional priority in its 2013 Foreign Policy Concept. In 2014, it established a Joint Strategic Command for the Arctic and air bases have been reopened, coastal defence elements deployed. In 2017, the country had six military bases, sixteen deep-water ports and thirteen air bases, four brigades, and has since installed an 'Air Defence Dome', equipped with S-400 missiles. Russia has renovated the Nagurskoye air base in Alexandra Land and the Temp air base on the island of Kotelný. Its Northern Fleet with ballistic missile submarines, nuclear attack submarines, aircraft carriers... It also has, as proof of the adaptation of its force to the environment, six nuclear icebreakers with Arctic navigation capability, together with twenty conventional icebreakers.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván. "(Re)militarisation of the Arctic: a captive of security concerns? Universidad de Barcelona, 2019. <https://www.recercat.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/362319/Fern%C3%A1ndez%20G%C3%B3mez%2C%20Iv%C3%A1n.pdf?sequence=1>

⁴⁵ BAQUÉS QUESADA, Josep, y ARRIETA RUIZ, Andrea. "Russia's Arctic strategy". *Revista General de Marina*, November 2019, pp. 731-745.

⁴⁶ FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván. "(Re)militarisation of the Arctic: a captive of security concerns?", Universidad de Barcelona, 2019.



Source: Paul, Michael; Swistek, "Russia in the Arctic". *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*. 02/02/2022 https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/assets/Research_Paper/2022RP03/images/2022RP03_Russia_Arctic_004.png

At the end of 2019, Russia published its Northern Sea Route Development Plan. It is a comprehensive strategy for the next fifteen years that incorporates "84 points and covers a wide range of priorities, from developing the necessary infrastructure and building new ships, to mapping natural resources and launching new satellites and meteorological

<https://www.recercat.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/362319/Fern%C3%A1ndez%20G%C3%B3mez%2C%20Iv%C3%A1n.pdf?sequence=1>

equipment". This plan foresees the construction of up to forty ships, including eight icebreakers and sixteen rescue and support vessels, all with a 2035 horizon.⁴⁷

But as Alejandro Mackinlay reminds us, the problem with the ports and naval bases in the Russian Arctic West is that, in addition to being located close to the Finnish and Norwegian borders, transit between them and the open waters of the Atlantic must, especially during the winter, hug the Norwegian coast. In fact, up to 80% of this Arctic traffic passes through the vicinity of Norway. Thus, the situation of Russia's main maritime accesses is complicated to say the least, something that becomes evident in times of tension and which also ties in with Russia's traditional perception of security of its vast territory.⁴⁸ The final entry of Finland and Sweden prompted by the invasion of Ukraine, for which Russia has already planned retaliation, will exacerbate this situation.

In any case, the weight of the Arctic has historically been greater in Russia than in the rest of the countries in the region, which, as noted above, explains the greater development of its coastline and the better quality and quantity of its technical resources. Today Russia is the only country with nuclear-powered civilian ships, namely 12 nuclear-powered icebreakers out of a total of 40. Icebreakers are the key capability for navigation control.⁴⁹ And they serve as a measure of real interest in the region.

Russia considers the region to be of paramount importance. In fact, its policies imply a certain patrimony over this space, as if history and geography granted it a greater right than the rest of the regional actors. When Putin visited the Franz Josef Land archipelago in 2008 he already argued that, geopolitically, the Russian state's deepest interests were related to the Arctic and that the region should be tamed.⁵⁰

The energy demands of increased human presence and traffic in the region have even led to the deployment of floating nuclear power production platforms, with the Russian Arctic expected to have the most nuclearised waters on the planet by 2035.⁵¹ Of the sixty-

⁴⁷ MENOSKY Rachael. "Russia's plan to advance in the Arctic". *El ojo digital*. <https://www.elojodigital.com/contenido/18017-el-plan-de-rusia-para-avanzar-en-el-artico>

⁴⁸ MACKINLAY, Alejandro. "Scandinavia: geopolitics with a sea flavour". Research Paper 46/2018 of the Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 20 April 2018. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEEO46-2018_Escandinavia_A.Mackinlay.pdf

⁴⁹ ALAEZ FEAL, Octavio. "China in the Arctic". *Global strategy*. no. 27/2022. <https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/>

⁵⁰ BAQUÉS QUESADA, Josep, y ARRIETA RUIZ, Andrea. "Russia's Arctic strategy". *Revista General de Marina*, November 2019, pp. 731-745.

⁵¹ <https://www.infodefensa.com/latam/2019/09/02/opinion-artico-nuclear.php>

one large oil and gas fields in the Arctic, forty-three are located in Russia.⁵² To use the words of Vladimir Putin in 2014, in the Arctic there is “a concentration of virtually all aspects of national security: military, political, economic, technological, environmental and resource”.⁵³

The thaw has opened up a new frontier to protect. Russia's interests, as we have seen, relate to resources and control of the passes. And there are psychosocial elements to consider: the US presence in the region brings back the old rivalry, in the context of which it also rejects NATO's presence. In this respect, it calls the inclusion of Finland and Sweden in this defence organisation as a hostile act, as a serious alteration of the *status quo* in the vicinity of its territory. Its fear is that the melting ice could replicate in the Arctic what happened in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War.⁵⁴

US interests, for their part, are in the Alaskan region. The US bought Alaska for \$7 million in 1867, and the region now contributes 0.24% of US GDP. Alaska has been an effective member of the Union since 1959, having previously had territorial status but no political representation in Washington.

Alaska has significant mineral, oil and timber resources, but its Arctic coastline is small, even if it is located in the vicinity of the Arctic. Likewise, it gives a defensive interpretation of its own intentions but, at the same time, shows its mistrust of Russian rearmament and, above all, of the Chinese presence in the context of the current geopolitical rivalry between the two countries. Moreover, it has always been dogmatic on freedom of the seas, leading it to confront both Canada and Russia over Arctic routes and their right to control them.

The US looks at the region from a security perspective and has increased its political status by appointing an ambassador to the region. In military terms, and because of its superpower status, its overall superiority over any potential contender is clear, especially

⁵² CONNOLLY, Gerald E. "NATO and Security in the Arctic report", *NATO, Subcommittee on Transatlantic Relations*, October 2017.

<https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2017-11/2017%20-%20172%20PCTR%2017%20E%20rev.1%20fin%20-%20NATO%20AND%20SECURITY%20IN%20THE%20ARCTIC.pdf>

⁵³ CÁNOVAS SÁNCHEZ; Bartolomé. "The concerning increase in Russian activity in the Arctic". Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. DIEEEO39/2017. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2017/DIEEEO39-2017_ActividadRusa_Artico_BartolomeCanovas.pdf

⁵⁴ FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván. "(Re)militarisation of the Arctic: a captive of security concerns?" Universidad de Barcelona, 2019.

<https://www.recercat.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/362319/Fern%C3%A1ndez%20G%C3%B3mez%20Iv%C3%A1n.pdf?sequence=1>

considering its nuclear capabilities, to which only Russia can compare. And it is able to translate that global superiority to the Arctic arena.

Consequently, there has not so much been a rearmament as a moderate build-up of its forces in the region, as the region is covered by its global capacity to act. However, in 2017 it had only one large icebreaker in operation out of four, suggesting that the Arctic is not as relevant for the Americans as it seems to be for Russia, at least until recently.

But in August 2018, the US Navy reactivated the second Fleet in the North Atlantic. It has deployed aircraft carriers to the Arctic, submarine operations have been conducted, the 11th Airborne Division has been established in the region, a new Regional Combat Training Centre and Arctic Security Studies Centre have been established, and a new Office of Arctic and Global Resilience has been created under the aegis of the Department of Defence.



Figure: Distribution of Arctic US military commands.

Source: "2011 Unified Command Plan streamlines U.S. military responsibilities in the Arctic" - CRYOPOLITICS, 2011. <https://www.cryopolitics.com/2011/05/09/2011-unified-command-plan-streamlines-u-s-military-responsibilities-in-the-arctic/>

The Cold Response 2022 exercise, which has been organised regularly since 2006 and in which, on this occasion, 30,000 troops from 23 countries took part, should be highlighted. However, the scale did not exceed the NATO exercise Trident Juncture 2018, which Norway hosted that year. Fifty thousand troops from 31 alliance and partner countries participated. Trident Juncture therefore still holds the record as the largest military exercise on Norwegian territory since 1981.

Other relevant exercises in the region have been the Noble Defender exercises, which are an explicit expression of the Alliance's will and commitment to the countries of these latitudes.

On the Russian side, and in the best of Cold War traditions, Russia has reactivated military exercises. Thus, the Northern Fleet's Ocean Shield Exercise, held in August 2019, took place before or concurrently with Vostok-18, Tsentri-19 and Grom-19 exercises elsewhere in the Arctic. It should be noted that the Umka-2022 exercises involved the firing of cruise missiles off the coast of Alaska. The Vostok-18 exercise was conducted in September 2018 in eastern Russia and partially in the Bering Sea. It involved a total of 300,000 soldiers and was the largest military exercise conducted by Russia since 1981.⁵⁵ The Norwegian Defence Minister made public his concerns about the Tsentri-19 exercises. Norway, because of its proximity to Russia, is very sensitive to security issues and politically very active, having given considerable impetus to the concept of *High North* (another way of referring to the Arctic as well as a strategic concept) at the NATO level in its attempt to try to involve NATO more in the Arctic.

High North is the most important strategic priority for Norwegian foreign policy, especially in terms of trade and social opportunities. At the same time, however, it seeks to maintain a constructive, friendly and cooperative relationship with Russia. Norway is obviously concerned about the actions of Moscow in the region, which has aggressively increased its forces on its own borders and organises exercises there. However, it promotes stability and uses its technological advantage as an element of attraction and exchange to promote it. A sort of official mantra that captures this logic and is often used to refer to the region is 'High North-Low Tension'.

Forty percent of Canada is in the Arctic, so Canada accounts for 25% of the Arctic land mass. Despite this and the symbolic character of the Arctic in Canadian identity, the

⁵⁵ <https://israelnoticias.com/militar/la-presencia-militar-de-rusia-en-el-artico/>

country does not play a key role in the area – and this is explicitly recognised at the political level – when it claims to be trying to encourage its development in order not to be left behind in the current strife.⁵⁶

From its rhetoric and political gestures one can deduce its intention to exchange the country's traditional internationalism and middle power status for "continentalism" and great power status. In this logic, it has obstructed the European Union's access to the area (vetoing, for example, its entry as an observer to the Arctic Council) and is trying to distance NATO from the region.⁵⁷ Let us not forget that Canada's nationalistic exclusivism led to the halibut conflict in the mid-1990s, when the country unilaterally extended its Exclusive Economic Zone beyond 200 miles.

A ten-year strategic plan for the country's Arctic region was presented in 2019, which included a reinforced military presence in that area in relation to the Northwest Passage, which has seen a 17% increase in traffic since 2017. It asserted that "Canada remains committed to exercising its sovereignty" over that passage, which other countries, including the United States, consider to be international waters. It further states that "there is growing international interest and competition in the Canadian Arctic from state and non-state actors who seek to share in the region's rich natural resources and strategic position."⁵⁸

Canada (and Russia, as we have seen) seeks to limit access to the affairs of the zone to coastal states only, i.e. also excluding Iceland, Finland and Sweden. This undoubtedly weakens the EU's position in the Arctic and also NATO's own position, whose presence it does not want in the area. However, the lack of legislation is a window of opportunity for governments outside the area to try to become involved in Arctic affairs.⁵⁹

Denmark incorporates the contradictions of its relationship with the largely self-governing Greenland and Faroe Islands. The country is an example of how the Arctic space overlaps with other spaces – in this case the European space – without taking precedence over them and contributing to both its diversity and its identity. The logical consequence of this

⁵⁶ VELÁZQUEZ LEÓN, Sonia. "The internationalisation of ice: new actors in the Arctic". Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. DIEEA 024/2015.

http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2015/DIEEEO24-2015_Artico_SoniaVelazquez.pdf

⁵⁷ PERREAULT, Francois. "The 'tug-of-war' policy on Arctic governance: China's journey to becoming a permanent observer", in VV. AA. "Security and Defence Documents 66 Arctic Geopolitics. Two complementary visions. Spain-Singapore". Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

⁵⁸ <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2019/09/11/canada-anuncio-un-plan-para-aumentar-su-presencia-militar-en-el-artico/>

⁵⁹ SÁNCHEZ ANDRÉS, Antonio. "Russia and Arctic geostrategy". *Real Instituto Elcano*. ARI 63/2010, 6 April 2010.

mixture is that EU law does not apply to either the Faroe Islands or Greenland because of their autonomy from the Danes.

The Danish strategy has a clear global perspective, and economic opportunities, scientific knowledge and global cooperation are key components of its policy. It has invested heavily in recent years to strengthen its military capabilities and plans to create an Arctic Response Force. China's presence in Greenland is viewed with particular suspicion by the United States, which has attempted to acquire the island, a request that was once publicly rejected as ridiculous.

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE ARCTIC

Denmark brings us to the role of the European Union in the Arctic. Thus, in the face of apparent Chinese success, we find undeniable European disenchantment. Europe's relationship with the Arctic is complex, and has not been as successful as it could be.

Its policies towards the Arctic, which have experienced swings in intensity and direction, making it seen as a "hesitant actor", have been held back despite the fact that EU member states, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, are Arctic states and have obvious interests in the region. And the region is not only contiguous to the European space but can be seen or presented as part of it.

Thus, against its wishes, it can be said that a ceiling has been imposed on its capacity for political action, even leading to a relative reversal of its policies towards the region.

Its contribution to the economic, scientific and social development of the area is noteworthy. The European Union's interests in the Arctic region cover different aspects such as the environment, energy, transport and fisheries. In line with this, the EU aspired to influence its legal regulation, but this was not possible due to the reluctance of both Canada and Russia. Both countries in 2008 also prevented it from obtaining observer status in the Arctic Council,⁶⁰ citing its ban on seal hunting.

The European Union has the status of "pending observer state", granted at the Arctic Council Summit in Kiruna in 2013, and must therefore request permission for its presence at each individual meeting. This status does not correspond either to the Union's political weight in the region or to its research effort in the region.

⁶⁰ VV. AA. "Security and Defence Documents 66 Arctic Geopolitics. Two complementary visions. Spain-Singapore". Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

And this at a time when six EU countries, including Spain, have been granted observer state status. They add to their national identities a specific identity whose weight varies according to the average latitude of the country as a whole.⁶¹ However, the EU has been heavily involved in the Nordic dimension working with Russia (at the time), Norway, Iceland and Finland.

In their relations with the EU, Arctic states fall into three categories: member states (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), associate states (Norway and Iceland) and strategic partners (Canada, the United States and the Russian Federation).⁶²

Denmark is an example of how the Arctic space overlaps with other spaces, in this case the European space, without taking precedence over them, contributing to its diversity but also transforming into a source of its identity.

The logical and reasonable consequence of this mix is that EU legislation does not apply to either the Faroe Islands or Greenland because of their autonomy from the Danish mainland, which gives the whole a confederal character that is not surprising given the diversity of identities and the distances between them.

The Kingdom of Denmark incorporates the contradictions of its relationship with the largely self-governing Greenland and Faroe Islands. Its 2011-2020 Arctic strategy is clearly global in scope, with a focus on economic, scientific and cooperative opportunities (the subsequent edition for the 2021-2030 cycle has seen significant political delays and, as of April 2023, is still unpublished).

Denmark is a signatory to the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008, named after a town in Greenland. Greenland's exit from the European Economic Community in 1985 is a precedent for BREXIT that has not received much attention. This is no small matter, as it caused the EU to lose almost half of its then current size and limited it geographically, when its physical space used to extend as far as the Arctic.

Greenland's relationship with the European Union after it left its institutions took the form of fisheries agreements, the first of which was as early as 1985. The European subsidy

⁶¹ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. "The layout of the polar spaces: the Arctic space" in PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Carmen; Cebada Romero, Alicia . MARIÑO MENÉNDEZ Fernando M (ed.), *International cooperation tools and regimes*, Editorial Trotta, 2017

<https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20EI%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>

⁶² CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. "The layout of the polar spaces: the Arctic space" in PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Carmen; Cebada Romero, Alicia . MARIÑO MENÉNDEZ Fernando M (ed.), *International cooperation tools and regimes*, Editorial Trotta, 2017

<https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20EI%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>

for fishing rights is paid from the general budget; it was a "fish for cash" system that was in force between 1985 and 2006.⁶³

On the basis of a report by the EU Court of Auditors that reported low quantities of fish available in Greenland waters, so that the EU "paid for fish that potentially did not exist", "the need to improve future relations between the European Union and Greenland" was agreed on in 2003. This led to a decision that the financial assistance disbursed by the European Commission to Greenland should be partially decoupled from fishing quotas, so that, alongside this, policies for Inuit education and development were established.⁶⁴

Finally, Greenland has been linked to the EU through the *Overseas Countries and Territories Association* (OCTA; its individual members are OCTs). It was founded in 2000 and brings together 13 special territories of member states such as Aruba and French Polynesia. This is a post-colonial space in which Greenland's presence is certainly atypical. Its case, as the only OCT in the Arctic, leads to the expansion of EU interests and actions in this region but also, conversely and in a reverse move, brings Greenland into Europe.

Europe's engagement with this part of the world is not only a necessity stemming from its role as a global actor. Europe has interests in both the 'European' Arctic and the Arctic in general, making the EU an important but not a dominant actor in the region, which is not in line with its *soft power* philosophy.

And this when Greenland's Arctic location may be in the interests of the European Union. For its part, Greenland can look to the EU as an ally in the region. The EU cannot substitute for Denmark but it can provide a reference point for an OCT, provide political patronage, and economic and regulatory support. And above all, support and protection from external pressures.⁶⁵

Consequently, the island is called upon to be an essential part of the European Arctic strategy, since it is a territory that is not an EU territory but belongs to a country that is; and it is a territory that, due to its size, resources and location, is geopolitically relevant. It is also the only territory rich in raw materials with a connection to the European Union. And that is when, as a result of melting ice, access to resources becomes possible and

⁶³ KOBZA, Piotr. "European Union-Greenland relations after 2015 - a partnership beyond fisheries". *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*. VOLUME 16, ISSUE 4 (2016).

⁶⁴ KOBZA, Piotr. "European Union-Greenland relations after 2015 - a partnership beyond fisheries". *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*. VOLUME 16, ISSUE 4 (2016).

⁶⁵ KOBZA, Piotr. "European Union-Greenland relations after 2015 - a partnership beyond fisheries". *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*. VOLUME 16, ISSUE 4 (2016).

new transport routes emerge. This, moreover, exacerbates geopolitical rivalry and is also a major reason for the EU's emphasis on this region. Nuuk's enhanced autonomy may prove useful in making the EU's presence felt in the area and thus on the global agenda, while reframing its policies locally.

But it is not only the variability in the intensity of its interest in the region but also its direction. Some analysts decry Europe's lack of sensitivity towards the region in general and Greenland in particular. Thus, in 2006, the European Parliament, influenced by animal rights groups, passed a regulation banning the trade and import of sealskin goods when sealskin hunting is a traditional Inuit livelihood and is even considered a symbol of national identity, while in some areas it is the only means of livelihood. This generated a backlash, even though, in 2009, seal skins hunted by the Inuit were excluded from the ban.⁶⁶

But it is also true that in 2006, the European Commission issued its first specific pronouncement on the region – a Joint Declaration on the partnership between the European Union, Denmark and Greenland – which clearly went beyond fisheries for the first time since 1984. However, its call for specific legislation for the region, in likeness to the Antarctic Treaty, was criticised as inappropriate meddling, and rejected by the Ilulissat declaration that it encouraged⁶⁷.

And climate change and global warming have made the Arctic and the island more visible, which, coupled with the population's yearnings for autonomy and independence, as well as attempts by the United States to purchase it, have generated concern and contributed to increased attention.

Moreover, the present set of circumstances in the Arctic has increased the willingness to cooperate with the European Union, which had already materialised in the creation of an "Arctic window" in the *Northern Dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy* and in the Arctic policies of a number of Member States.⁶⁸

In this way, the EU's interests in the Arctic region first focused on environmental issues, mainly related to the phenomenon of climate change. Subsequently, it oriented towards

⁶⁶ ADLER-NISSEN, Rebecca. "Diplomacy as Impression Management: Strategic Face-Work and Post-Colonial Embarrassment". *CIPSS Speaker Series on International Security and Economy McGill University*, 2012.

⁶⁷ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. "Arctic geopolitics: special reference of Spain's interests in the Arctic region" in VV. AA, "Security and Defence Documents 66 Arctic Geopolitics Two complementary visions. Spain-Singapore". Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

⁶⁸ CINELLI, Claudia. "[The 'Arctic Question' and the European Union](#)" *Revista Española de Relaciones Internacionales*, 2009, pp. 138-163.

the geopolitical and strategic aspects of this space, integrating them into the design of its maritime policy, only to lose strength later on before recovering again.⁶⁹

After 2013, the EU-Greenland relationship has been enriched with new areas of regional and multilateral cooperation in the context of the "Global Europe" concept.⁷⁰ However, despite all the declarations and efforts to initiate a new "post-fishing" phase, the fisheries sector remains, in economic terms, by far the most important, if not the only significant one, accounting for more than 90% of Greenland's exports to the EU between 2011-2014. As far as raw materials are concerned, and even more so in view of Greenland's political ups and downs in this respect, the EU remains on the lookout.⁷¹

The policy lines towards the Arctic in general set by the Declaration of the Commission and the European Parliament show that, since 2016, it considers climate change as a major issue. And in its 2021 declaration it proposed to highlight the essential role of Arctic states; foster constructive dialogue and cooperation in an environment of geopolitical change; highlight UNCLOS's role in terms of governance; promote sustainable development and development for Indigenous peoples while seeking to improve understanding of the environment; seek to promote civil protection and emergency response capabilities; combat pollution; and fisheries protection and control. And among the concrete actions that have materialised this interest is the creation of a consulate in Nuuk and an EU envoy for the Arctic.⁷²

CHINA AND THE ARCTIC

China's presence in the Arctic is part of its revisionist policy—the rethinking of its status as a global power. This would be expressed in its participation in the governance of the Arctic, a relevant geopolitical space from which, for this reason alone, a global power cannot be absent. In addition, its presence contributes to improving its brokering capacity

⁶⁹ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. "Arctic geopolitics: special reference of Spain's interests in the Arctic region" in VV. AA, "Security and Defence Documents 66 Arctic Geopolitics Two complementary visions. Spain-Singapore". Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

⁷⁰ EUROPEAN UNION. "Annex Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2021-2027 for EU cooperation with Greenland".

https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-12/mip-2021-c2021-9159-greenland-annex_en.pdf

⁷¹ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic", Brussels, 13/10/2021.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2_en_act_part1_v7.pdf

⁷² IBID.

in other regions. It should be noted that China was already a signatory to the 1925 Svalbard Treaty.

Thus, in 2005, it began to express its willingness to become more active in the Arctic. In 2013, after moving closer to Moscow, it was granted observer status in the Arctic Council. In 2017, President Putin invited President Xi to link the Silk Road to the Northwest Arctic Route. All of which led to the publication in 2018 of a strategy for the region under the name of *China's Arctic policy* in which it defines itself as a "quasi-arctic state", despite its closest point to the Arctic being 811 miles away, while recalling that non-coastal countries also hold rights. It should be noted that China launched its first polar observation satellite in 2019.

The Asian country acts in the Arctic with the same principles and political logic as it does in other territories: a policy of mediation and seduction oriented towards the long term. At the local level, this translates into the creation of networks of cooperation and economic influence in the Arctic Council members.

This is a political strategy for the area defined as the Polar Silk Road. This name is intended to signify the global nature of the Chinese project, of which China's Arctic strategy is one dimension and a coherent part.

This is underpinned by a kind of Marshall Plan – implemented on the principle of non-interference in internal affairs – that serves to create lasting links based on China's financing capacity. Through this strategy, it aims to gain access to hydrocarbons and raw materials, but also to have an alternative route in case of the eventual closure of the strategic Strait of Malacca.

China's Arctic policy practice translates into bilateral partnerships, mainly with European Arctic states. In this way, it aims to prevent the Arctic from being consigned exclusively to the Arctic countries by recognising its own interests.

As a result, China has gradually, and even pedagogically, introduced itself into the region, with success and failure, discreetly through soft, often scientific and cooperative actions, which also bring it into contact with the physical and political environment, and readapting its actions to its surroundings.

Accordingly, it exploits its strategic partnership with Russia while using its geo-economic and geo-strategic weaknesses to ensure that Russia does not obstruct its presence in the area, as it has done in other cases. In this way it can take part in the design of Arctic policies and promote the development of the Russian Arctic for its own benefit. With the

progressive cooling of relations with the West, China has moved closer to Russia in an attempt to gain strategic depth and avoid an eventual Western encirclement.

China began operating in the region around 2015. However, it has not had permanent military forces in the Arctic, which would obviously require Russian acquiescence. The Russian-Chinese manoeuvres that have been taking place in the region since 2017 and have even been used to put pressure on Asia-Pacific countries such as Japan deserve to be highlighted for their symbolism. The two countries have been conducting joint air patrols in the East China Sea since 2019, and in 2021, during the *Maritime Interaction* exercises in the Sea of Japan, these patrols crossed Japan's Tsugaru Strait. In addition, China has asked Russia to conduct submarine operations in the Arctic, which may further affect the military balance.

The Russian Arctic accounts for the lion's share of Chinese investment in the region. There are the economic aspects of the relationship, such as the 2014 agreement between *Gazprom* and China's *National Petroleum Corporation* to export more than one trillion cubic metres of Russian gas from Eastern Siberia to China over the next 30 years.

This has been reinforced by other hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation ventures in the Russian Arctic, thus directly inserting China into the region. The most important project has been the *Yamal LNG* project, which started production in December 2017 and in which China cooperates with Russia (Novatek) and France (Total). This project consists of a complex of natural gas production fields in the east of the Yamal peninsula, as well as a liquefaction plant and a logistics port in Sabetta, from where the extracted gas is liquefied and transported to East Asia.⁷³ In this way, Russia needs China for the export of liquefied gas.

In addition, *Artic LNG-2* is currently being completed and is scheduled for commissioning in 2023. Chinese state-owned oil corporations hold 20% of the project, and are partnering with *Novatek*, *Total* and *Japan Arctic LNG* (a Japanese consortium). China's *National Chemical Engineering* and Russia's *Neftegazholding* signed a \$5 billion contract in 2019 to build infrastructure at the Payakha oil field.⁷⁴

⁷³ FUSTER LEAL, Ruben. "Russian-Chinese collusion in the Arctic: explaining the Polar Silk Road" *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*. 16 November 2021

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEO128_2021_RUBFUS_Artico.pdf

⁷⁴ GREENWOOD, Jeremy; SHUXIAN, Luo "Could the Arctic be a wedge between Russia and China?" *War on the Rocks*. 04/04/2022. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/could-the-arctic-be-a-wedge-between-russia-and-china/>

Notably, China's COSCO Shipping Company has partnered with Russia's PAO SOVCOMFLOT to operate LNG carriers from the Yamal refinery. And it is building, what is currently in the planning stage, - a deep-water port at Arkhangelsk as a logistics base.⁷⁵

The Ukraine war puts China at the juncture of maintaining its relationship with Russia but differentiating situations and maintaining its ties with the other Arctic states, if only as a way of trying to dodge sanctions, particularly on business and technology.

With regard to China's actions in the case of the Arctic middle powers, many sources point to the possible instrumentalisation of its commercial activities, which, in some cases, are difficult to justify from a purely business perspective. This has generated no small amount of mistrust on the part of large and small actors who have opted first to protect their activities and then to restrict them.

Beyond the attempt to link the Arctic Polar route with the Silk Road, for which it sought to build Scandinavia's largest port in Sweden and link Finland with China via rail, there are several Chinese infrastructure projects that could be dual-use and that, in any case, are strange or contradictory.

A few such cases would be the attempts to acquire a 250 km² plot of land in Iceland for a golf course and an airfield in an area where golf is not allowed; the purchase of another 200 km² plot of land in Svalbard; the acquisition of a former naval base and the construction of three airports in Greenland; and the acquisition of a Swedish submarine base.⁷⁶

The Chinese Arctic policy document published in 2018 stated that scientific research to "explore and understand" the Arctic is the "priority and focus" of China's engagement in Arctic affairs. But for the US, in its 2022 strategy, China has "used these scientific commitments to conduct dual-use research with intelligence or military applications in the Arctic", requiring the US to respond by positioning itself to "effectively compete and manage tensions" in the region.⁷⁷

In the case of Iceland, the country was badly broken by the 2008 financial crisis. That is why it opened up to Chinese loans and reached a free trade agreement in 2013, with the

⁷⁵ ALAEZ FEAL, Octavio. "China in the Arctic". *Global strategy*. no. 27/2022.

<https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/>

⁷⁶ DOSHI, Rush; DALE-HUANG, Alexis; ZANG, Gaoqi "Expeditions to the North: China's Arctic Activities and Ambitions". *Brookings*, April 2021 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/northern-expedition-chinas-arctic-activities-and-ambitions/>

⁷⁷ LIPIN, Michael. "China starts reviving Arctic land-based science projects after setbacks" *Voa News* 05/12/2022 <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-begins-to-revive-arctic-scientific-ground-projects-after-setbacks-/6860756.html>

intention of turning the country into a kind of logistics base. China has opened a large embassy in the country (Iceland has reciprocated in kind) in which it is claimed 500 officials could work but only 5 are employed. China wants to show its ambition for the country and for the Arctic itself.

However, this has not been reciprocated as Iceland has rejected proposals for port infrastructure, in particular two deep-water ports, and even the purchase of large tracts of land by Chinese investors, all of which led it to be congratulated by the United States. However, since 2018 China has had an Arctic Science Observatory in Karholl. Science stations (such as the *Yellow River* station in the Svarbald or Iceland) and expeditions, of which it had sent 10 by 2021, give it a better understanding of the region and help it to operate in the region.



- Figure: Chinese Arctic projects -

LIPIN, Michael. "China starts reviving Arctic land-based science projects after setbacks" *Voa News* 05/12/2022 <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-begins-to-revive-arctic-scientific-ground-projects-after-setbacks-/6860756.html>

With the same logic, it has deployed its political and financial efforts in the countries of the Arctic environment with which it does not compete geopolitically. Norway was the first country to allow China to build an Arctic science station; and Sweden was the first country

in the world to allow China to build its own satellite facility.⁷⁸ Finland has a centre for space research and data exchange. But both the Finnish and Swedish projects are being challenged.⁷⁹

Finland has a significant trade relationship with China; Sweden is part of the project financing of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), as are Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Norway.⁸⁰

Relations between China and Norway have improved since 2016 and they are seeking a free trade agreement that allows Chinese investments, which, on the one hand, favours their position vis-à-vis Russia, and on the other hand, gives China access to Norwegian oil, in addition to Norway's possession of the Svalbard archipelago.

The point is that Norway, Iceland, Denmark and now also Finland are NATO members. And Sweden seeks to be one too. And the organisation takes a dim view of China's increased presence in the region, placing countries at odds with their own interests.



- Figure: Polar Silk Road connections with Norway, Sweden and Russia - Source: "The Arctic Link: Connecting Norway, Sweden, and Russia to China Trade". *Silk Road Initiative*. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2018/03/15/arctic-link-connecting-norway-sweden-russia-china-trade/>

⁷⁸ DOSHI, Rush; DALE-HUANG, Alexis; ZANG, Gaoqi "Expeditions to the North: China's Arctic Activities and Ambitions". *Brooking*, April 2021 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/northern-expedition-chinas-arctic-activities-and-ambitions/>

⁷⁹ LIPIN, Michael. "China starts reviving Arctic land-based science projects after setbacks" *Voa News* 05/12/2022 <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-begins-to-revive-arctic-scientific-ground-projects-after-setbacks-/6860756.html>

⁸⁰ FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván. '(Re)militarisation of the Arctic: a captive of security concerns?' Universidad de Barcelona, 2019. Available at: <https://www.recercat.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/362319/Fernández%20Gómez%2C%20Iván.pdf?sequence=1>

A key part of China's Arctic strategy centres on Greenland. China sought to use this territory as a gateway to the region, both because of its strategic position and the resources at its disposal.

This was compounded by the circumstances of Greenland's internal politics. It has a population of 59,000 people, 88% of whom are ethnic Inuit, living on territory located in a strategic position, with significant natural resources and the size of half the European Union. The people mostly want independence from Denmark, a country several thousand kilometres away, provided that this does not mean a reduction in their quality of life. After independence, it would lose the generous budgetary subsidy it receives as a member of the Danish Crown. This explains President Trump's attempts to buy the island, something the United States has tried to do in the past.

The aim of China's investments in Greenland has been to gain a foothold in the Arctic, to move closer to US territory and to source critical resources such as oil and rare-earth elements in order to strengthen its monopoly. Between 2011 and 2012, shortly after expanding its autonomy, there was an exchange of governmental visits between Beijing and Nuuk, which was viewed with concern by Danes because of the possibility that it could provoke an imbalance in the Arctic. And in 2020, 19.2%, a significant share, of Greenland's exports were already going to China.

China is a major investor, endowed with abundant cheap labour, something necessary for large projects, in which it also has experience, especially in rare-earths. It is not for nothing that it has a near monopoly.

That is why its penetration policy has been contested in concert from both Washington and Copenhagen, which have managed to practically nullify it, to the extent of leaving only a few workers in the fishing sector. Their total number is estimated at around 50 people working in factories along the west coast of Greenland.⁸¹

Thus, in 2016, China attempted to acquire a former Greenlandic naval station, but this was vetoed by Denmark, and there were even attempts to reopen it in order to prevent any such sale. And in 2018, Copenhagen committed to upgrading Nuuk and Ilulissat airports, after a Chinese state-owned company – convened at the behest of local authorities – was pre-approved for performing the construction.⁸²

⁸¹ VAN BRUNNERSUM, Sou-Jie "China failed in its Arctic ambitions in Greenland" *Politico.eu* 22/10/2022 <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-arctic-greenland-united-states/>

⁸² WINTHER POULSEN, Regin. "How Greenland's Mineral Wealth Made It a Geopolitical Battleground". *Foreign Policy* 18/12/2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/18/how-greenlands-mineral-wealth-made-it-a-geopolitical-battleground/>

It is interesting to note how the expansion of Nuuk airport was dealt with. Thus, when it came to financing the airport, a Chinese investment company, the *Chinese Communication Construction Company (CCCC)*, offered to finance the construction of the entire project. In the end, Denmark considered the Chinese funding an unacceptable risk and decided to take 33% of the expenditure for itself, which is why CCCC withdrew its offer.⁸³

The point is that an independent Greenland could not have proceeded in this way. However, it is worth noting that in the end the pro-independence party in power in the autonomous region banned uranium mining, the extraction of which is essential to obtain rare-earths and which would have provided the country with the financial autonomy that independence from Denmark requires. However, the damage it could have caused to the environment and fisheries, which are the basis of the territory's income, could have been very high.

Among Greenlanders, according to polls, the pro-US bias (69%) is much higher than the pro-China bias (39%)⁸⁴. But this sympathy for China is not negligible.

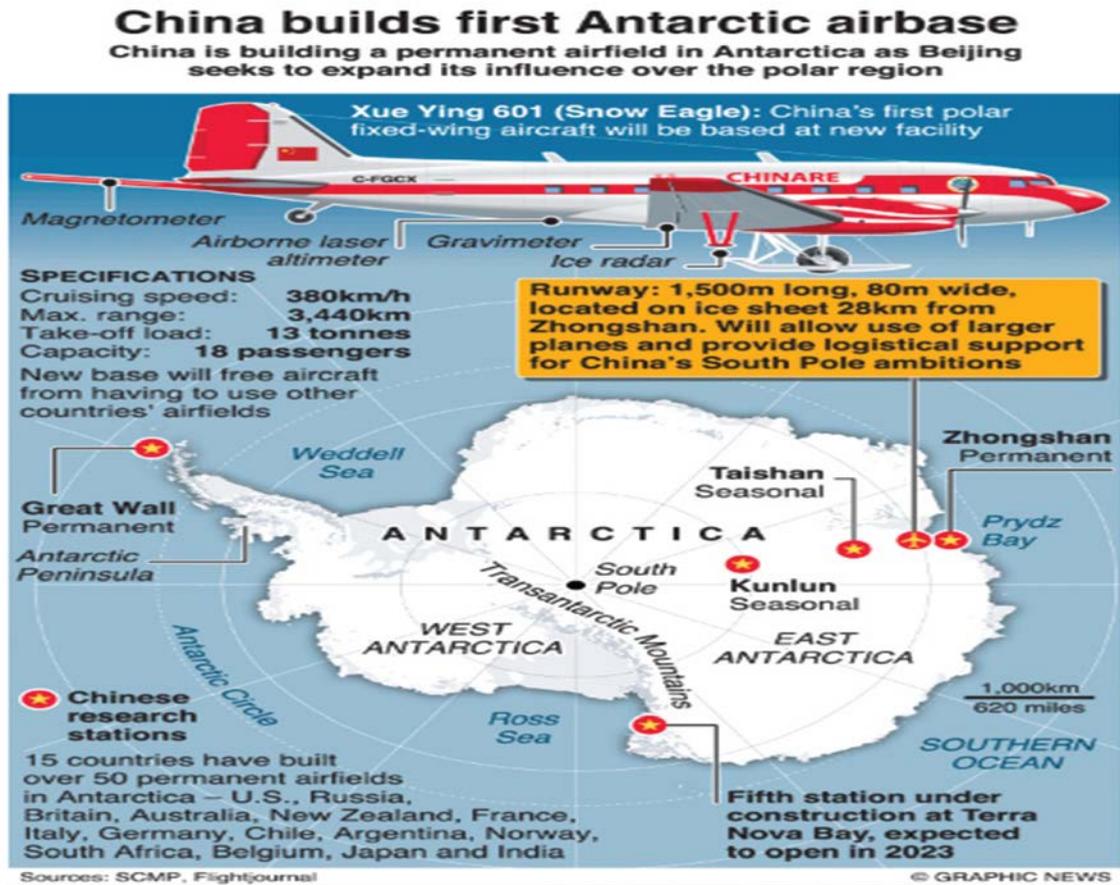
Meanwhile, China has also maintained an active presence in Antarctica since it was admitted to the Antarctic Treaty System in 1983. Up until 2020, China had carried out 36 expeditions to the region where it already has four stations, three of them located in the area claimed by Australia, and a fifth in the Ross Sea area, in the territory claimed by New Zealand.⁸⁵ In this way, it is strategically positioning itself pending a possible review of the regulatory framework. This could help to legitimise any future claims. In addition, it is one of the countries in the world that allocates the most budget to this continent in terms of scientific research and infrastructure development.⁸⁶

⁸³ PARSONS, ERIN. "Is China's debt trap diplomacy in Greenland simply on ice?" *The Diplomat*. 05/01/2022 <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/is-chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy-in-greenland-simply-on-ice/>

⁸⁴ BOHNERT, Michael; SAVITZ, Scott; "Should Greenland and Denmark become part of NORAD?" *Breaking Defence* 15/09/2022 <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/09/should-greenland-and-denmark-become-part-of-norad/>

⁸⁵ HERRING BAZO, Alexia. "Is the Antarctic 'status quo' being challenged by the new geopolitical context with the emergence of China as a global power?", DIEEA 42/2020 29 April 2020, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos.

⁸⁶ Idem.



- Figure: China in Antarctica. -

Source: Infographic: China builds permanent airfield in Antarctic. *My republic*.

<https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/infographic-china-builds-permanent-airfield-in-antarctic/>

In the case of Canada, the fact is that the country has the second longest coastline in the Arctic and the future potential of the Northeast route is something that China cannot ignore. China has invested in Canada, especially in minerals, but these investments have declined as hostility with the US has increased. Despite this, there is a strong Canadian desire, particularly by Indigenous communities, to secure investment for the Arctic.⁸⁷

In October 2022, the annual Arctic Circle Assembly took place in Reykjavik, to which Russia was not invited but China was. During the meeting, Dutch Admiral Rob Bauer, chairman of NATO's Military Committee, said that NATO must have a stronger presence in the Arctic to control both Russia and China because the Polar Silk Road is just a shield behind which "Chinese naval formations could move more quickly from the Pacific to the

⁸⁷ LIPIN, Michael. "China starts reviving Arctic land-based science projects after setbacks" *Voa News* 05/12/2022 <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-begins-to-revive-arctic-scientific-ground-projects-after-setbacks-/6860756.html>

Atlantic, and submarines could take refuge in the Arctic".⁸⁸ This provoked a response from the Chinese Ambassador to Iceland present at the meeting.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The Arctic Council is a cooperative, soft law, intergovernmental forum whose origins date back to the end of the Cold War and can be seen as an expression of environmental concern in the region that later spread to other areas. It was formally established in 1996. It is made up of the 8 Arctic countries and incorporates other states as observers, including Spain.

After the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, it continued to operate, to the extent that it gave rise to the term "Arctic exceptionalism": the Arctic seemed to be a space removed from international politics. This was not the case with other regional institutions such as the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff conference, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, or the military forum founded by Norway and the US European Command (EUCOM) in 2010.⁸⁹

The rationale for this was that stability in the region was crucial for Russia, not only because it was Russia's backyard but also because it needed significant foreign investment and support to exploit its oil and gas resources.

But this turned out to be a mirage that reality eventually put an end to. On 3 March 2022, seven countries, i.e. all members of the Arctic Council except Russia, which had held the two-year chairmanship since May 2021, ceased to participate, rendering the body inoperative during Russia's term of office.

⁸⁸ PRASHAD, Vijay "The Winds of the New Cold War Howl in the Arctic Circle". *Rebelión.org* . <https://rebelion.org/los-vientos-de-la-nueva-guerra-fria-aullan-en-el-circulo-polar-artico/>

⁸⁹ ALAEZ FEAL, Octavio. "The rising strategic significance of the Arctic Ocean region" in Cuadernos de Pensamiento Naval No. 34. *Escuela de Guerra Naval Armada Española*, 2023. https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/p/e/pensamiento_naval__34.pdf

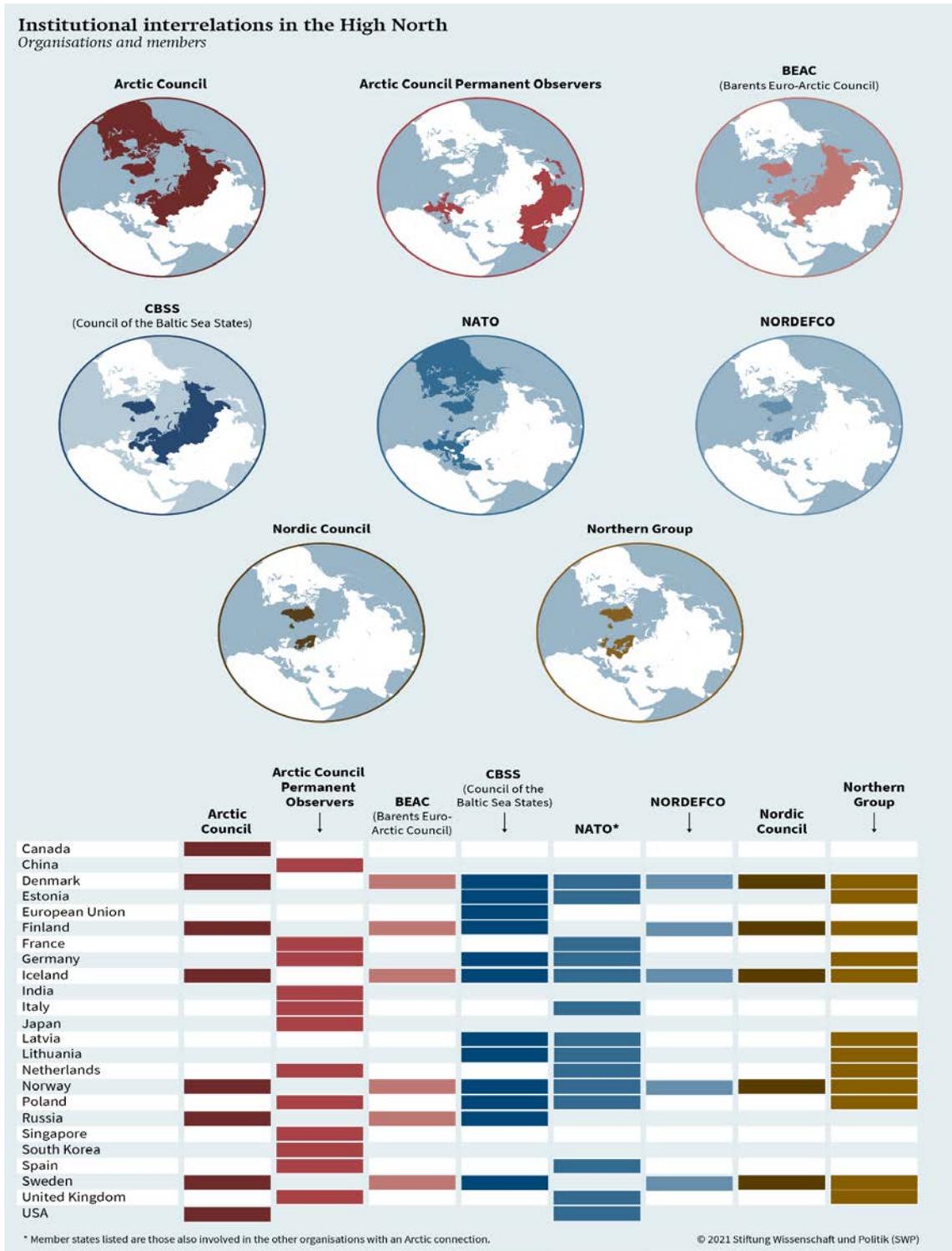


Figure. Arctic Institutional Architecture.

Source: Paul, Michael; Swistek, “Russia in the Arctic”. *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*. 02/02/2022 https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/assets/Research_Paper/2022RP03/images/2022RP03_Russia_Arctic_004.png

Thus, as a consequence of the ongoing war, the main forum for Arctic governance, which was intended to be immune from geopolitical tensions, could no longer function in a consensus-based format, thus ending its purported exceptionality. Three other

Arctic diplomatic institutions have taken the same step: the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council.

This dysfunction is the return of power politics that affects the governance of the region and its environmental problems. It also affects research and the Indigenous peoples who live there.

In June 2022, these seven countries decided to "carry out a limited resumption of our work in the Arctic Council on projects that do not involve the participation of the Russian Federation".⁹⁰ This is a serious questioning of the existence of the Arctic Council. And it implies its de facto replacement by a sort of *Nordic Council plus one* or *Arctic Council 2.0*. This obviously cannot make up for the absence of a Russia whose actions have made it an international pariah. But it may also, on the other hand, confer a greater relevance to other non-regional actors with growing interests in the area, while effectively reducing the relevance of the Council and the *Arctic-5*.⁹¹

On the other hand, this shift in the balance of power, which would also be accompanied by the entry of Sweden and Finland into NATO, enhances NATO's position in the Arctic, which can also be called upon as an Arctic cooperation actor. If this, on the one hand, contributes to the entry of extra-regional actors, on the other hand, it also entails the militarisation of the region.

And this at a time when NATO sees China as a strategic challenge in general, with all the contradictions it embodies in the policies of many of its member states. Canada has so far opposed NATO's entry into Arctic affairs contrary to the view of Norway, which has always sought precisely this, embodied in the *High North* concept.

Canada, for its part, sees Russian action, with the accompanying loss of reliability, as an opportunity to improve the position of the Northwest Passage as a route, but the problem remains the navigability of an area that is otherwise not on par with the Russian Arctic in terms of infrastructure.

The effects of the war on China are also relevant. Until the 2022 invasion, China had managed to stay relatively aloof from the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the Western Arctic states. But the sanctions that the West has imposed on Russia over this war also affect China – however much it rejects them – both in terms of its relationship

⁹⁰ "The Winds of the New Cold War Howl in the Arctic Circle". *Thetricontinental.org* 12.01.2023
<https://thetricontinental.org/es/newsletterissue/circulo-artico-nueva-guerra-fria/>

⁹¹ TORONDEL LARA, María. "New scenarios in the Arctic: climate change and the war in Ukraine" Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Opinion Paper 90/2022 18 October 2022 *

with Russia and the Arctic region, and in terms of its eventual stance on the division of the Arctic into two parts and the confrontation between them. This forces China to make a number of trade-offs, since on the one hand it has a cartelised relationship with Russia that sets limits for it in every sense of the word, and at the same time it needs to balance and rebalance its relationship with the West. And Western Arctic actors, for their part, are obliged to redefine their relationship with China in the region depending on their attitude to the Ukrainian conflict and to Russia.

Moreover, the technological and financial sanctions imposed on Russia, and on companies that cooperate with Russia, are likely to affect the complex and advanced projects undertaken in the region, further altering the business landscape by strengthening some companies while harming others. And all this is against the backdrop of a slowdown in the Chinese economy.

CONCLUSIONS

Climate change through melting ice sheets has broken the remoteness and marginality of the Arctic, establishing it in the logic of globalisation. This has altered the socio-economic foundations of the geographical environment and makes it foreseeable that human activity will intensify in the not-too-distant future.⁹²

After the Cold War, it went from being an area of major armaments and strategic competition to the centre of various initiatives related to transnational cooperation. It was a stable region marked by a balance between conventional and nuclear powers, in which militarisation and cooperation coexisted at the same time. The Russia-Norway toleration may be an example of this.

Yet the Arctic has been incorporated into the globalisation process and subjected to its dynamics; it is no longer and cannot be a world apart, no matter what anyone would wish. The geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the United States is here transposed to a local level. Even nature is involved: for example, the climate in the region influences the climate of Eurasia as a whole. Similarly, in the logic of globalisation, the Arctic does not belong exclusively to the Arctic states.

⁹² CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. "The layout of the polar spaces: the Arctic space" in PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Carmen; Cebada Romero, Alicia . MARIÑO MENÉNDEZ Fernando M (ed.), *International cooperation tools and regimes*, Editorial Trotta, 2017

<https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20EI%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>

In any case, the era of low tension in the Arctic has come to an end, as it has been unable to escape the geopolitical dynamics of the second Ukrainian war. The war has undermined an instrument of governance and consensus—the Arctic Council. Geopolitical balances in the region have been broken following Finland and Sweden's application to join NATO. And the lack of governance favours power plays.

On the other hand, this space is not exempt from previous confrontational dynamics. Thus, the lack of agreement on sovereignty over the Arctic seas, the discovery of important resources in its subsoil, the improvement of access brought about by climate change, and the trade routes opening up, all point to the emergence of future disputes. All of which implies, in turn, a higher level of international effervescence.

In the Arctic, there are contradictions and a kind of rivalry has developed over access to resources. The struggle between states is being waged in terms of the future and in terms of international law, and on the basis of a change that has not yet fully materialised. But even if it is approached in legal terms, we should never lose sight of the fact that we are facing political confrontation.

It cannot be ignored that it was cooperation that prevailed until the war in Ukraine. However, the intense militarisation process that has taken place in the region in recent years cannot be overlooked either.

A correct understanding of the situation cannot be made solely in a local context, but must be carried out within the context of global logics. Whenever international normalcy returns, Arctic states need to strike a balance between regionalising some issues and excluding non-Arctic states, and internationalising other issues while including non-Arctic Council members in the decision-making process.⁹³ This is unavoidable, as evidenced by the growing presence of powers outside this environment such as India, Japan, Singapore... as well as China.

But the Arctic's importance weighs differently for each of the circumpolar countries and in their reality. Thus, the Arctic looms large in Canadian identity construction discourse that incorporates great power tics, but Canada's presence in this ocean is not comparable to that of Russia. Denmark is far from Greenland, which puts significant stress on its self-government relationship and attracts the interest of other actors in the area. The proximity

⁹³ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. "The layout of the polar spaces: the Arctic space" in PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Carmen; Cebada Romero, Alicia . MARIÑO MENÉNDEZ Fernando M (ed.), *International cooperation tools and regimes*, Editorial Trotta, 2017

of the Scandinavian peninsula and Finland to strategic Russian territories means that they come under significant pressure from Russia. Russia is the historical and emotional heir of the former USSR. It regards the Arctic as its backyard and seeks to avoid its strategic envelopment, stemming from the accessibility that melting ice brings.

China's presence in the region is a result of its global power status, geographic imperatives and the significance of the resources available in the Arctic. Its ascendance marked a first shift in the balance of power in the region. In any case, its permanent membership on the UN Security Council, its observer status on the Arctic Council and emerging bilateral and multilateral partnerships with several Arctic nations allow it to claim a legitimate presence in Arctic affairs.

The Sino-Russian relationship is based on complementary and overlapping interests but is limited in nature. China is encircling Russia via a Silk Road linking the Arctic to Central Asia, while its GDP is ten times higher than Russia and Siberia is its natural hinterland. Europe is, oddly enough, the only way for Russia to escape, and the war in Ukraine has blinded it.

That is why everything in the region now depends on what happens in this war.

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