



65/2025

08/09/2025

María Remiro Soriano*

**The Geopolitical Rise of the
Arctic: Factors and Dynamics at
Play***The Geopolitical Rise of the Arctic: Factors and
Dynamics at Play**Abstract:*

The Arctic is becoming a key arena of contemporary geopolitics due to climate change and its implications for access to natural resources and new sea routes. As the melting ice transforms the region, actors such as Russia, China, the United States and the European Union are redefining their strategies and priorities in the area. This study analyses the evolution of Arctic governance, competing interests and the dynamics of cooperation and rivalry between powers. Finally, through a prospective analysis, it assesses the main challenges shaping the future of the Arctic, as well as the possible implications for the global order.

Keywords:

Arctic, geopolitics, Greenland, climate change, natural resources, Northeast Sea Route (NSR).

How to quote:

REMIRO SORIANO, María. *The Geopolitical Rise of the Arctic: Factors and Dynamics at Play*. Opinion Paper. IEEE 65/2025. [web link IEEE](#) and/or [link bie](#)³ (accessed on the web day/month/year).

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

The Arctic has historically been characterized by cooperation and low levels of tension, with its unique governance frameworks fostering a relatively stable environment. However, the region is currently undergoing a rapid transformation, driven by three critical global processes —climate change, globalization, and shifts in power dynamics— that have reshaped its strategic significance¹.

In this context, the acceleration of climate change is one of the main drivers of this transformation. Over the past three decades, the region has experienced significant ice loss, opening up access to untapped natural resources and new maritime routes, such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR), thereby amplifying its economic and strategic value². At the same time, globalization has integrated the Arctic into broader international systems, where external actors such as China seek political and economic cooperation. Lastly, changes in global power dynamics, particularly among the United States, China, and Russia, have also been reflected in the Arctic region. In this regard, the Arctic has become a stage for future-oriented rivalries. Although an open military conflict is unlikely in the near future, the region's geopolitical tensions, including security concerns and military deployments, mirror broader shifts in the global system. Nonetheless, and adding further complexity, international law and cooperative mechanisms remain the main bases of governance, making this duality —where tensions coexist with cooperation— the configuration of the current Arctic geopolitical landscape.

Context: Governance in the Arctic

Historically, the Arctic was of strategic importance during the Cold War as the shortest point between the USSR and the United States. However, after the fall of the Soviet

¹ KAUPPILA, Liisa & KOPRA, Sanna, "China's rise and the Arctic region up to 2049 – three scenarios for regional futures in an era of climate change and power transition", *The Polar Journal*, 12:1 (2022): 148-171. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2022.2058216>

² AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico, "El Ártico como espacio de conflicto geopolítico", In *Panorama geopolítico de los conflictos 2020*, ed. Ministerio de Defensa, 2020. Available at: <https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/panorama-geopolitico-de-los-conflictos-2020-revistas-ebook.html>

Union, it changed from a “theater of war” to a “mosaic of cooperation”³.

For this reason, in the early post-Cold War period, the Arctic went through a period of great uncertainty as the Arctic states —Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States— debated how to manage the region, ruling out a global framework similar to the Antarctic Treaty. Finally, in 1996, the Arctic Council (AC) was created, focusing on environmental protection, scientific collaboration and sustainable development, but excluding hard power issues such as security.

In this context, Arctic governance remains a highly complex issue due to the existence of multiple regulatory layers. First, the Arctic Council is a key forum for cooperation, albeit without binding power. On the other hand, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) acts as the primary legal framework by defining jurisdictional rights in Arctic waters and establishing mechanisms for resolving disputes, complemented by the national policies of each Arctic state⁴. And to this is added the layer of European Union law⁵, in addition to indigenous customary law⁶. However, in the face of opposition to a specific treaty by Canada, Denmark, Norway, the United States and Russia the Arctic 5 countries, arguing that UNCLOS is a sufficient instrument, the Arctic lacks an exclusive international legal regime. For this reason, the weakness of Arctic governance lies in the lack of a specific operational mechanism to resolve disputes between the parties.

Added to this is the fact that despite its narrative of “Arctic exceptionalism”, which suggested that the region could remain untouched by geopolitical rivalries, growing global interest has challenged that view. Melting ice due to climate change has facilitated access to natural resources and new sea routes, attracting players such as China and expanding the Arctic's strategic relevance. In this sense, it could be said that the turning point in the 21st century began in 2009, when the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that it was home

³ YOUNG, Oran R., “Governing the Arctic: From Cold War Theater to Mosaic of Cooperation.” *Global Governance* 11, no. 1 (2005): 9–15. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27800550>

⁴ Nordic Council of Ministers. “Common Concern for the Arctic”. (Conference report, Nordic Council of Ministers, 9–10 September 2008, Ilulissat, Greenland). Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/11374/887>

⁵ DEBANK, Lena, “The EU as an Actor in the Arctic”, *The Arctic Institute*, April 25 2023. Available at: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/eu-actor-arctic/>

⁶ LOUKACHEVA, Natalia, “Indigenous Inuit Law, ‘Western’ Law and Northern Issues”. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 3 (2), 2012. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v3.33>.

to 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of the world's undiscovered natural gas⁷. Since then, interest has been growing.

So while there are no immediate signs of conflict, the future of the Arctic remains uncertain. With the major powers pursuing their own agendas, continuing developments in the region merit close monitoring and analysis.

The major geopolitical actors

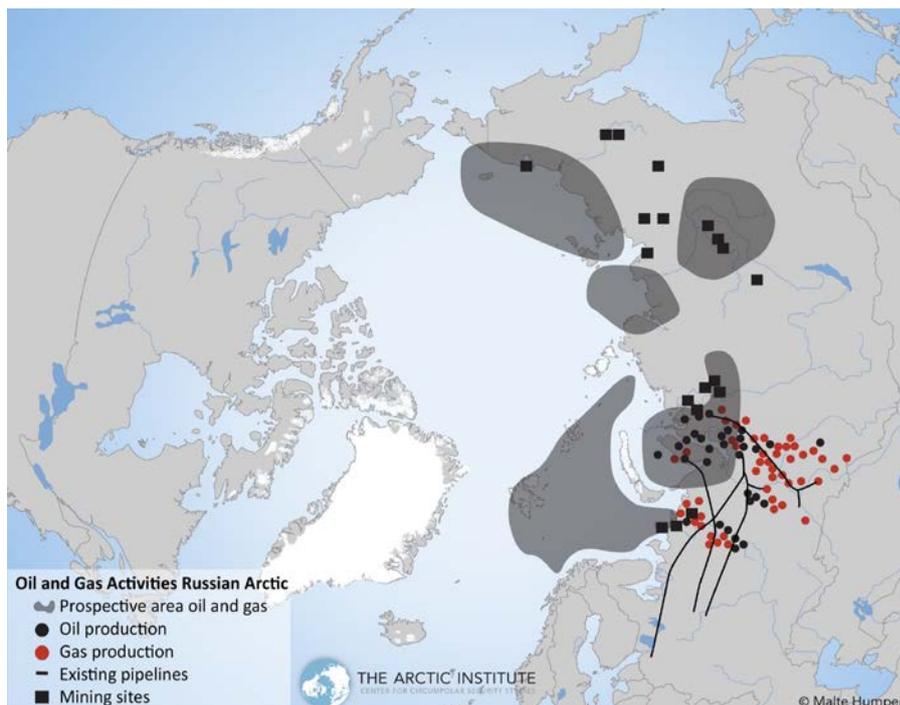
Russia

The Russian Federation is the largest Arctic power in territorial terms, with approximately 24,000 km of Arctic coastline (more than 53% of the total) and a large part of the Northeast Route (NSR). This region accounts for 20% of Russia's GDP⁸, due to its vast hydrocarbon resources, as of the 61 largest Arctic oil and gas fields, 43 are on Russian territory⁹.

⁷ Donald L. Gautier et al, "Assessment of undiscovered oil and gas in the Arctic", *USGS Publications Warehouse*, 2009. Available at: [10.1126/science.1169467](https://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2009/1169467/)

⁸ KEIL, Kathrin, "The Arctic: A new region of conflict? The case of oil and gas", *Cooperation and Conflict* 49, no. 2 (2014): 162–90. Available at: [http://www.jstor.org/stable/45084252](https://www.jstor.org/stable/45084252)

⁹ CONNOLLY, Gerald E. "NATO and Security in the Arctic report", OTAN, *Subcomité de Relaciones Transatlánticas*, octubre de 2017. Available at: <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>



Oil and gas activities in the Russian Arctic. Source: Malte Humpert and The Arctic Institute (2016).

Although Russia maintains that it seeks to preserve peace and cooperation in the Arctic, its increasing militarization contradicts this stance. Since Vladimir Putin came to power, Russian Arctic policy has become more assertive. In 2008, the *"Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic until 2020 and Beyond"* set out a two-pronged approach: cooperation and military rearmament. Russia currently has two-thirds of its ballistic missile submarines (ICBMs) in the Kola Peninsula¹⁰, and plans to deploy more floating nuclear production platforms, which could make the region the most nuclearized in the world by 2035¹¹. From the Russian perspective, a strong presence in the Arctic serves as both a deterrent and a line of defense, especially in the face of increasing NATO activity in the region.

Thus, control of the Northeast Passage (NSR) is key to Russia's ambitions and categorically defends its historical rights. Although Russia touts this route as an international route comparable to the Suez Canal or the Strait of Malacca, it insists on

¹⁰ MORRISON, Charles E. y BENNETT, Mia, "1: The fall and rise of global geopolitics in the Arctic". In *North Pacific Perspectives On The Arctic*, (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035344956.00007>

¹¹ AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico, "El Ártico como espacio de conflicto geopolítico", In *Panorama geopolítico de los conflictos 2020*, ed. Ministerio de Defensa, 2020. Available at: <https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/panorama-geopolitico-de-los-conflictos-2020-revistas-ebook.html>

considering it a domestic passage, reflecting its dilemma between gaining economic benefits and maintaining its sovereignty. However, the development of the NSR faces financial and technical obstacles, for the overcoming of which Russia seeks external partners, particularly China.

China

China, although not an Arctic nation, has developed a growing interest in the region, mainly for economic reasons. With 46% of its GDP dependent on maritime trade¹², securing access to Arctic routes is critical. In addition, the region's vast natural resources, such as rare earths and hydrocarbons, increase its strategic importance to Beijing.

Therefore, since becoming an observer member of the Arctic Council in 2013 and publishing the Arctic White Paper in 2018, where it defined itself as a “near-Arctic state”, China has expressed its interest in strengthening international cooperation to develop infrastructure and exploit maritime routes in the region¹³. Along these lines, the development of the Northeast Route is an essential pillar of this strategy, as it would connect Europe and East Asia via the Polar Silk Road. This shorter trade route would thus offer an alternative in the event of a closure of the Strait of Malacca. This strategy is still in its infancy, which may be partly explained by China's preference for slow development given the current geopolitical uncertainties.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, “China's Arctic Policy”, *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*, Beijing, January 2018. Available at: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm



Comparison between the Northeast Route and the Southeast Route. Source: Eddy Bekkers, Joseph F. Francois and Hugo Rojas-Romagosa (2015)

Moreover, in addition to securing maritime routes, China has strengthened economic ties with Greenland, Iceland, Finland, Sweden and Norway¹⁴ through major investments in infrastructure, energy and resource extraction. Its collaboration with Russia on large-scale energy projects such as Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2 has been key. However, this relationship is not without its challenges, as Russia continues to protect its control over the Northern Sea Route.

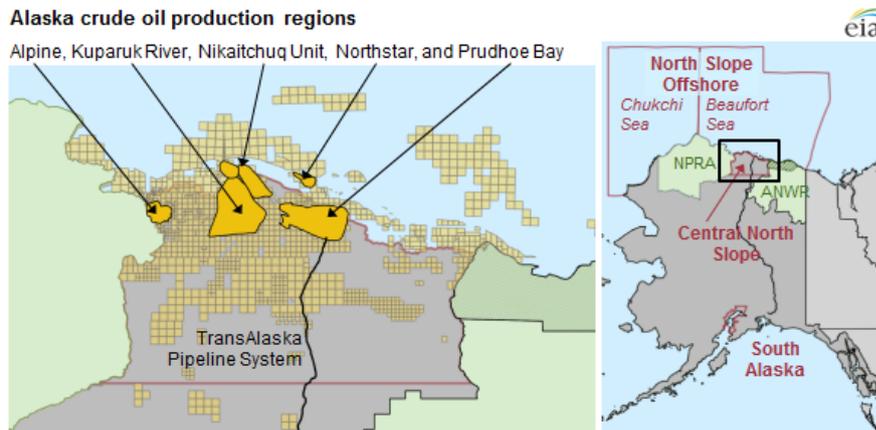
On a military level, China is not yet a relevant player in the region. It does not possess land access, nor does it have a fleet suitable for Arctic operations. However, the development of its northeastern ports suggests a future expansion in the North Pacific, where its container ships and fishing vessels are already present. In this sense, the drift of China's Arctic strategy will depend on the evolution of its “no limit” relationship with Russia and the global geopolitical landscape, especially its rivalry with the United States. The key question is to what extent Beijing will collaborate with Moscow to achieve common goals or whether its economic and strategic interests will lead to increased

¹⁴FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván, «(Re)militarización del Ártico: ¿cautivos de un dilema de seguridad?». Universidad de Barcelona, 2019. Available at: <https://www.recercat.cat/handle/2072/362319>

competition in this crucial region.

United States of America

The United States consolidated its status as an Arctic nation with the 1867 purchase from the Russian Empire of Alaska, rich in mineral and oil resources, albeit with a relatively limited Arctic coastline. Historically, it has been considered a “reluctant Arctic nation” because of its limited engagement in the region, but in recent years it has taken a more active stance due to increasing Russian militarization and Chinese economic expansion.



Crude oil production regions in Alaska. Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration (June 2015).

During the Obama administration, the Arctic was linked to climate change as a national security priority¹⁵. However, under the first Trump administration, U.S. Arctic policy pivoted to a more unilateral and nationalistic view. In 2019, former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo described the Arctic as an “arena of power struggles and competition”, criticizing Russian activities and warning about mirroring China's South Sea strategy in the Arctic¹⁶. Washington also views the Polar Silk Road with caution, considering it part of its Belt and Road strategy. On the other hand, it should be noted that the Biden administration has maintained this concern about the strengthening of Russian military

¹⁵ President of the United States, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, DC: White House, 2013). Available at: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/nat_arctic_strategy.pdf

¹⁶ POMPEO, Michael R., “Sharpening America’s Arctic Focus”. *U.S. Department of State*, (May 6, 2019). Available at: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus/index.html>

capabilities and Chinese influence, thus revealing the identification of China as a national security threat also with effects in the Arctic.



U.S. perspective of maritime routes. Source: Paul Horn and Inside Climate News (2023)

That is why in recent years, Washington has bolstered its military capabilities in the Arctic, deploying F-35 fighters, upgrading radars and defense systems in Alaska, and investing in port infrastructure in Nome. Diplomatically, it has reopened its consulate in Nuuk (Greenland) and established a presence in Tromsø (Norway)¹⁷. All of this reflects a remarkable transition from multilateralism to unilateralism in U.S. Arctic policy in recent times.

Arctic-specific investments, such as icebreakers, have historically been insufficient. However, the reactivation of the Second Fleet and increased military presence indicate a recognition of the strategic importance of the region¹⁸. Moreover, this interest was underscored by President Trump's proposal to purchase Greenland in 2019. Initially pitched as an economic opportunity akin to a “big real estate deal”, earlier this year 2025

¹⁷ MORRISON, Charles E. y BENNETT, Mia, "1: The fall and rise of global geopolitics in the Arctic". In *North Pacific Perspectives On The Arctic*, (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035344956.00007>

¹⁸ AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico, “El Ártico como espacio de conflicto geopolítico”, In *Panorama geopolítico de los conflictos 2020*, ed. Ministerio de Defensa, 2020. Available at: <https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/panorama-geopolitico-de-los-conflictos-2020-revistas-ebook.html>

was framed as national security concerns, underscoring Greenland's role in countering Russian and Chinese influence in the Arctic¹⁹.

In conclusion, the United States is wary of Russia's military activities and China's growing presence, positioning the Arctic as a critical space in geopolitical rivalries and a new center of its geopolitical vision of the world. In this sense, it seems that the “Mahanian” theory is gaining prominence for all three actors; for the power that succeeds in asserting its dominance over the Arctic, whether in times of peace or conflict, will command the sea lanes, control trade and secure Arctic supremacy.

The European Union

The European Union (EU) has sought to position itself in the Arctic because of the presence in the region of three of its member states: Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Initially, its interest was focused on environmental concerns. However, events such as the placement of a Russian flag at the North Pole and the record meltdown in 2007 set off alarm bells in Brussels, prompting a more geopolitical approach to its Arctic strategy, although this subsequently lost momentum²⁰.

Despite this, since 2008 the European Union has developed various strategies to reassert its role in the region. The most recent document, “*A Stronger EU Commitment to a Peaceful, Sustainable and Prosperous Arctic*”, published in 2021, identifies climate change as the main threat, but also recognizes the growing interest in resources and sea routes as potential sources of geopolitical competition and conflict²¹.

However, the European Union faces several obstacles to consolidate its position in the Arctic, one of the most relevant being its exclusion from the Arctic Council. Despite these

¹⁹ CARAFANO, James Jay, “Greenland and Trump's strategy to deal with China and Russia”, GIS, febrero de 2025. Available at: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/us-greenland/>

²⁰ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena, “Geopolítica del Ártico. Especial referencia de los intereses de España en la región ártica” en VV. AA, *Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur*. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

²¹ European Commission, “*A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic*”, (Joint Communication, European Commission, 13th October 2021, Brussels). JOIN/2021/27 final. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52021JC0027>

restrictions, the EU remains a relevant economic player in the region. It imports between 30% and 40% of Arctic fish and 24% of the demand for oil and gas products²². On the other hand, its climate change and renewable energy policies are reshaping demand for Arctic resources, increasing the need for critical minerals found in the region. However, the Arctic —along with the East and South— represents one of its three key regional neighborhoods.

But recent statements by Donald Trump on Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, evidenced the lack of a coordinated response. Overcoming its reactive approach and adjusting its strategy to current geopolitical challenges, to prevent expansionist powers from taking advantage of its strategic hesitations, is the Union's key mission in the Arctic. It is therefore no exaggeration to consider that if Brussels does not take action soon it will run the risk of being relegated to a marginal role in a key region for the global balance of power.

Possible future scenarios

The Arctic, traditionally a region of low geopolitical tension and remarkable international cooperation, is no longer oblivious to the uncertain global context. Faced with the end of “Arctic exceptionalism”, three possible scenarios have been proposed for its future: from cooperation and “peaceful competition” to more intense competition or even conflict.

²² Sandra Cavaliere et al, “*EU Arctic footprint and policy assessment: Final report*”. Ecologic Institute, (Berlin, 21 December 2010). Available at: https://www.arctic-footprint.eu/sites/default/files/AFPA_Final_Report.pdf

“Peaceful competition” in the Arctic

The concept of “peaceful competition” provides a framework for managing emerging rivalries while maintaining cooperation under international law²³. Although it remains relatively stable, competition for its resources and sea routes has increased in recent years. For more than a century there have been no critical active disputes over land and sea areas, even during periods of heightened global rivalry. However, recent incidents, such as the cutting of submarine cables between Svalbard and Norway in 2022 or possible Chinese interference in the Gulf of Finland in 2023²⁴, underline its growing strategic relevance.

The Arctic is thus not exempt from global geopolitical tensions, especially in the North Atlantic and Europe, where NATO expansion and Russian presence converge. While it remains possible to contain militarization and avoid direct conflict, the intensification of competition and rearmament carries significant costs. Especially given that as the perception of the Arctic shifts toward a “theater of operations” and strategic resource center, a triangular competition between China, Russia and the United States is very likely to construct the dominant geopolitical narrative for years to come.

However, despite these tensions, Arctic governance has proven to be more resilient than is often perceived. The Arctic is not a land without rules, but has a complex but functional regulatory framework, with the Arctic Council and UNCLOS having achieved stability even in the face of major challenges, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Since then, all parties involved, by virtue of their own individual interests, have reaffirmed their commitment to legal principles, recognizing that the costs of direct conflict would outweigh its benefits. Ultimately, Arctic actors share common interests such as climate change, biodiversity protection, and scientific cooperation²⁵. This context suggests that conflict

²³ YOUNG, Oran R., YANG, Jian, ZAGORSKI, Andrei, “The “New” Arctic as a Zone of Peaceful Competition”, *Polar Perspectives*, 11, (Wilson Center: March 2022). Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/polar-perspectives-no-11-new-arctic-zone-peaceful-competition>

²⁴ HUMPERT, Malte, “Northern Sea Route Saw Seven Containership Voyages in 2023, Including Controversial Chinese Vessel”, High North News, (December 2023). Available at: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/northern-sea-route-saw-seven-containership-voyages-2023-including-controversial-chinese-container#:~:text=Northern%20Sea%20Route%20shipping%20activity,of%20damaging%20the%20Balticconnector%20pipeline>

²⁵ YOUNG, Oran R., YANG, Jian, ZAGORSKI, Andrei, “The “New” Arctic as a Zone of Peaceful Competition”, *Polar Perspectives*, 11, (Wilson Center: March 2022). Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/polar-perspectives-no-11-new-arctic-zone-peaceful-competition>

and cooperation are not mutually exclusive, thus validating the “peaceful competition” model. Likewise, ignoring the links between the Arctic and the unstable global system would be unwise, but, at the same time, the success of ongoing efforts and the opportunities that may arise in the future should not be underestimated. Looking ahead, however, the Arctic Council must adapt in the face of growing global interest, balancing economic opportunities, environmental concerns, and strategic issues to preserve regional stability.

The Arctic as a theater of global conflict. The case of Greenland.

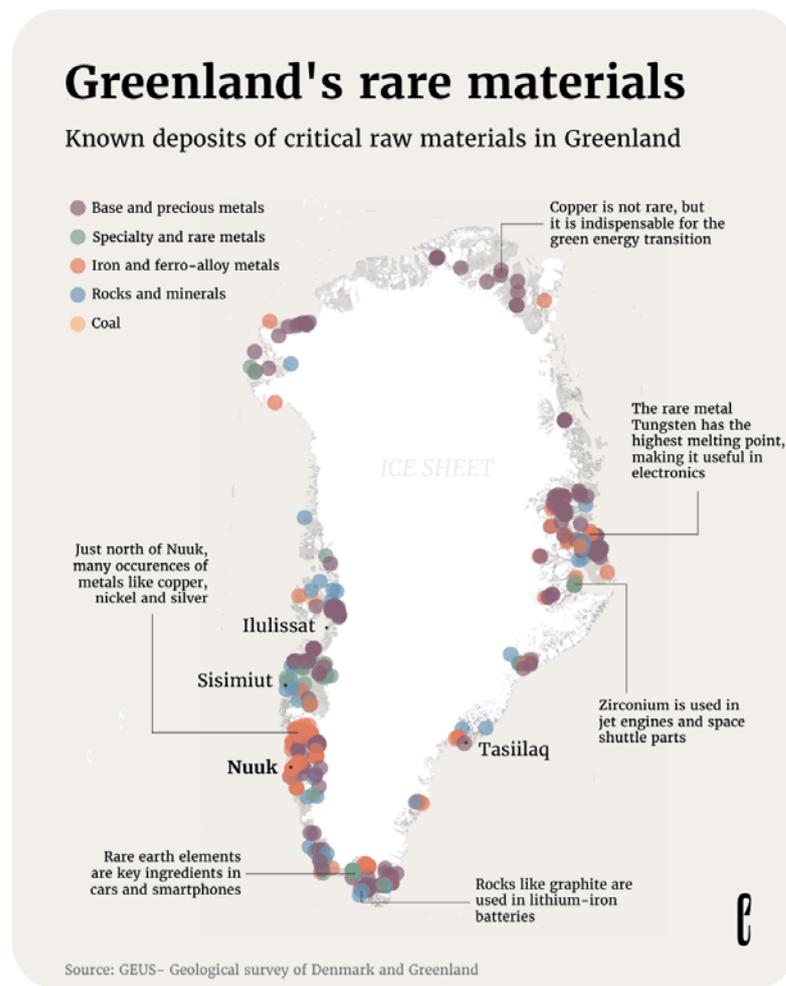
The following scenario explores how competition for Greenland's strategic resources could trigger an open geopolitical crisis. With the acceleration of melting ice and the opening of sea routes, Greenland becomes crucial because of its strategic position and its essential minerals for energy transition and advanced technologies. Moreover, its role within the NATO security framework is critical, especially in the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap, where the Pituffik Space Base reinforces the U.S. military presence in surveillance and missile defense issues²⁶.



²⁶ CHUFFART, Romain y JOHNSTONE, Rachael Lorna, “Trump Sparks Renewed Interest in Greenland: But ‘Greenland Belongs to the People of Greenland’”, *The Arctic Institute*, January 10 2025. Available at: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/trump-sparks-renewed-interest-greenland-greenland-belongs-people-greenland/>

GIUK gap. Source: UK Parliament (2023)

However, its vast reserves of rare earths —25 of the 34 critical minerals identified by the European Commission²⁷— have attracted the attention of the United States, the European Union and other countries seeking to reduce their dependence on Chinese-dominated supply chains. Against this backdrop, President Trump's renewed interest in Greenland underscores these strategic and economic priorities.



Greenland's mineral resources. Created by: Laura Bejder Jensen (2025). First published in The European Correspondent

All this comes into focus in view of the results of the Greenlandic elections in 2025, in which the future coalition government will have to design a timetable for independence.

²⁷ European Commission, “EU and Greenland sign strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials value chains”, (Press Release, European Commission, November 30 2023, Brussels). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6166

The most voted party, Demokraatit, advocates a gradual independence process, but needs the support of another party to form a government: Naleraq, which promotes a quick independence close to the US, or Inuit Araqatigiit, which advocates a slow transition. The key issue is that, in the event of an already independent Greenland, the island, extremely dependent on its fishing industry —90% of its exports of raw materials²⁸— would need alliances with other powers for its self-government. This context could therefore create a strategic vacuum that would be quickly perceived as an opportunity by key players such as the United States, China and the European Union.

Therefore, the most alarming scenario suggests that, faced with the possibility of China entering into strategic agreements with Greenland, the United States could take unilateral action to secure control of key areas, justifying this as a matter of “national security”. This act, rooted in the desire to make the island part of the U.S. sphere of influence, could trigger a sustained militarization of the Arctic and transform the region into a new theater of global conflict.

However, while the desire for independence is in the majority, it diminishes significantly if it entails a loss of quality of life²⁹. Recent polls have revealed that 60% of Greenlanders would vote in favor of rejoining the European Union³⁰, which could deter the United States. If, in a worst-case scenario, the United States were to employ aggressive tactics to secure a favorable agreement, in the long run it could destabilize the NATO alliance and erode the order it had previously created.

Nevertheless, this scenario is worth considering. Underestimating that President Trump is revisiting the idea of spheres of influence, akin to a revamped version of the Monroe Doctrine, as the basis for his vision of world order —and whose rhetoric is becoming increasingly threatening— could be a catastrophic mistake.

²⁸Statistics Greenland, “Foreign Trade”, s.f. Available at: <https://stat.gl/dialog/topmain.asp?lang=en&sc=IE>

²⁹AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico, “Groenlandia en la geopolítica ártica”, *Boletín IEEE*, no. 34 Abril-Junio, (2024): 179-202. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/bolet%C3%ADn-del-ieee-34>

³⁰NIELSEN, Rasmus Leander y ACKRÉN, Maria, “The Second Foreign and Security Policy Opinion Poll in Greenland”. Nuuk: Nasiffik / Ilisimatusarfik (University of Greenland), 2024. Available at: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/nordische/single-title/-/content/the-second-foreign-and-security-policy-opinion-poll-in-greenland>

Climate crisis as a tipping point in the Arctic

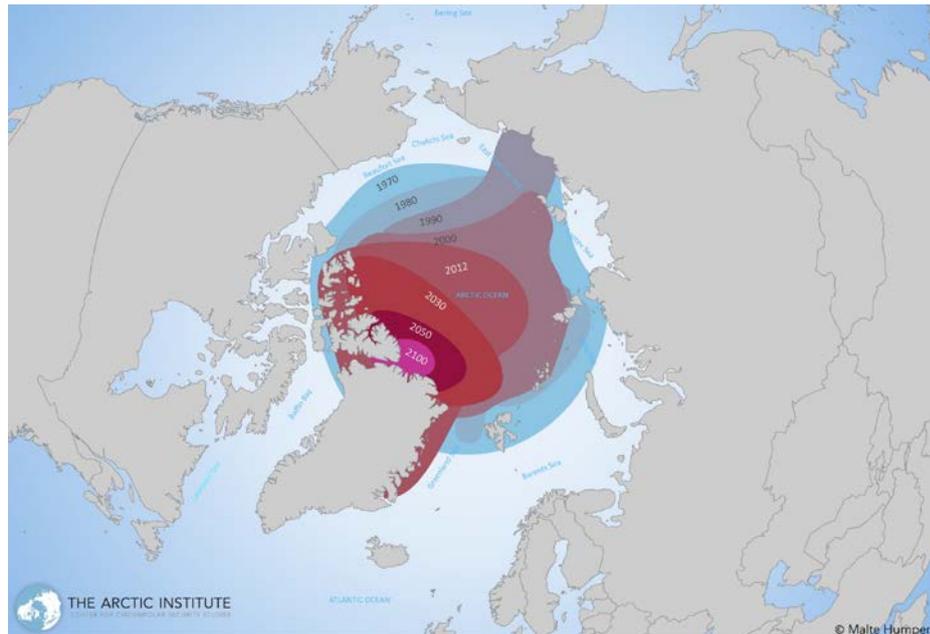
The Arctic is experiencing the impacts of climate change more rapidly and severely than any other region on Earth. Accelerated loss of sea ice and glaciers, coastal erosion, thawing permafrost, wildfires and flooding are no longer future threats. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), global temperatures are projected to rise between 3.7°C and 4.8°C—or up to 7.8°C—by the end of the century compared to pre-industrial levels³¹.

Moreover, a particularly alarming projection suggests that the Arctic Ocean could become ice-free in summer as early as the 2030s, paving the way for increased economic activity in the region. By mid-century, new sea lanes, such as the Northeast Passage, could be fully navigable, and energy projects in the Arctic could be greatly expanded. However, all of this comes at a cost. As the Arctic becomes more accessible, geopolitical competition for control of these emerging seaway opportunities and newly exposed land masses is stoked. We must therefore intuitively assume that the climate crisis not only exacerbates geopolitical tensions, but also threatens to create “zero-sum” dynamics between states and fundamentally alter the international order³².

It is therefore a devastating mistake to envision scenarios of new sea routes while ignoring the fact that the melting of the Arctic ice is not a minor issue but possibly the most traumatic turning point that will reshape how we understand international relations, geopolitics or even life itself.

³¹ IPCC, “Cambio climático 2014: Informe de síntesis”. *Contribución de los Grupos de trabajo I, II y III al Quinto Informe de Evaluación del Grupo Intergubernamental de Expertos sobre el Cambio Climático* [Equipo principal de redacción, R.K. Pachauri y L.A. Meyer (eds.)]. IPCC, Ginebra, Suiza, (2014). Available at: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/SYR_AR5_FINAL_full_es.pdf

³² Paul Samson et al, “Scenarios of Evolving Global Order”, Special Report, *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, October 24 2024. Available at: <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/scenarios-of-evolving-global-order/>



Arctic summer ice extent 1970-2100. Source: Malte Humpert and The Arctic Institute (2016).

For this reason, it is tempting to consider the most dangerous scenario of the climate crisis, forcing actors, not only in the Arctic, to cooperate. The dangers of climate change demand urgent and coordinated action, and it is precisely in the Arctic that a threat to both regional and global security is posed, and only a joint response can guarantee if we are to secure a viable future on this planet.

Conclusions

The Arctic, where urgent environmental challenges, economic opportunities and strategic rivalries converge, has become a “hot spot” on the global geopolitical landscape.

Thus, rapid transformations driven by climate change, globalization, and the realignment of power dynamics are redefining the region, where the interconnection between the Arctic and global trends is irrefutable. Ultimately, this duality reflects both the fragility and potential of Arctic governance frameworks, especially in the interplay between multilateral initiatives such as the Arctic Council and the rise of unilateral actions by key actors. Likewise, the growing strategic relevance of the Arctic has captured the attention of Russia, China, and the United States, each with distinct interests. While Russia emphasizes its sovereignty, resource exploitation and military dominance, China's

declaration of itself as a “near-Arctic” country reflects its economic ambitions and influence in the region. For its part, the United States views the Chinese presence with suspicion and considers the Arctic a critical space for securing its strategic interests. At the same time, the European Union seeks to assert its position in the midst of this power struggle, advocating sustainable development and international cooperation.

On the other hand, considering that the Arctic is on the cusp of a change that has not yet fully materialized, there is an urgent need for a prospective analysis of the Arctic's future based on key factors such as governance effectiveness, resource competition and international relations. Thus, in posing scenarios where the current peaceful competition expands, the importance of establishing proactive policy measures to mitigate risks and develop resilient governance frameworks is noted.

Above all, the Arctic represents a region of immense potential and enormous challenges. While pathways towards cooperation have been pointed out, there is also a need to highlight the fragility of existing governance structures in the face of climate change pressures, resource contestation and geopolitical tensions. The scenarios discussed, including Greenland as a hotspot, illustrate how rapidly evolving global dynamics could transform the region in unpredictable ways. It has also sought to highlight the danger of viewing new Arctic sea routes as mere economic opportunities without recognizing the profound challenges posed by the climate crisis.

To conclude, the future of the Arctic remains deeply uncertain and will depend on the ability of key actors to balance their national ambitions with their collective responsibilities. In this sense, if this article had an ambition, it would be to place the Arctic at the center of the geopolitical debate through a thoughtful analysis that demands navigating this uncertainty in a context where the stakes for both the region and the world could not be more critical.

*María Remiro Soriano**

Master's Degree in Geopolitics and Strategic Studies
at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid