



## Introduction

The Arctic Ocean is located north of the Arctic Circle, with close links to the Pacific Ocean through the Bering Strait and to the Atlantic Ocean through the Scandinavian Peninsula, Iceland and Greenland. The Arctic Ocean is bordered by the coasts of Russia, the United States (US), Canada, Denmark<sup>1</sup> and Norway .<sup>2</sup>

Due to its climate and geographical location, it is a sparsely populated area with little more than 4 million inhabitants, and these characteristics mean that it has been a secondary area of little geostrategic relevance, except in specific periods. For example, during the Cold War, Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom awaited a possible Soviet offensive in the event of war<sup>3</sup> . The end of mutual hostility and the effects of global warming lead to a coordinated management of the region. All this, together with the 1987 Murmansk speech in which Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev laid the foundations for the future Arctic Council .<sup>4</sup>

However, the current geopolitical situation in which certain actors such as Russia and China are seeking a revisionism of the current paradigm, as well as the technological revolution and climate change, place the Arctic as an area of major geostrategic and geopolitical relevance.

This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that it is an area with a large amount of energy reserves, both oil<sup>5</sup> and gas<sup>6</sup> . As well as minerals such as gold, platinum, diamonds, tin, nickel, rare earths, fishing and tourism resources .<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, climate change, which favours the melting of ice in the area, will make the Arctic navigable, creating new maritime routes, and given that 90% of trade takes place via the Arctic<sup>8</sup> , control of the new routes will generate greater weight and influence at the global level . Furthermore, the new sea routes that will be created will serve to link

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<sup>1</sup> Greenland.

<sup>2</sup> All are NATO countries except Russia.

<sup>3</sup> Surveillance and control of this space was ensured through Norway, a system against intercontinental ballistic missiles, etc. was installed.

<sup>4</sup> AGUILERA ARANDA, Félix. The Arctic and International Relations. Cuadernos de estrategia, 218, 107-156. 2023.

<sup>5</sup> OLABE, Antxon. and GONZÁLEZ, Mike. Climate change, a threat to global security. Política exterior, 175-185. 2008.

<sup>6</sup> 30% of world reserves

<sup>7</sup> DEL VALLE MELENDO, Javier. The Arctic. A fragile space between cooperation and the struggle for hegemony. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 80, 1-15. 2015

<sup>8</sup> SORENSEN, Camilla and KLIMENKO, Ekaterina. Emerging Chinese Russian cooperation in the Arctic. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 46, 1-56. 2017.

the Pacific Ocean with the Atlantic Ocean, reinforcing the current pivot of the economy and the world towards the Asia-Pacific.

Finally, the new escalation of war brought about by the war in Ukraine has boosted the integration of countries into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) such as Finland which, despite Finlandisation and its neutrality, became part of NATO on 4 April 2023, increasing the NATO-Russia border by more than 1,300 km. The struggle for control of the Arctic may lead to a new militarisation of the region, creating a new flank for NATO .<sup>9</sup>

In short, the Arctic has gone from being a secondary region with no geostrategic weight to a region of special relevance where today's powers are staking part of their influence and future status. For this reason, the opportunities and risks that the thaw will entail are analysed, as well as the specific interest of major players.

### **The Arctic Council**

Intergovernmental forum, which aims to promote environmental, social and economic aspects for the sustainable development of the Arctic.<sup>10</sup> . It was founded in 1996 with the Ottawa Declaration, and is composed of Canada, USA, Denmark, Russia, Norway<sup>11</sup> , Iceland, Finland and Sweden.<sup>12</sup> . In turn, six indigenous communities<sup>13</sup> were recognised as permanent representatives on the Arctic Council.<sup>14</sup> . In addition, 38 observers are members of the Council: countries that do not belong geographically to this part of the world, such as Spain; intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations .<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> ARTEAGA, Félix. La OTAN en el Ártico: el flanco sobrevenido. Real Instituto Elcano, 42, 1-9. 2023.

<sup>10</sup> GOVERNMENT OF CANADA. Compendium Of Canada's Engagement In International Environmental Agreements And Instruments. Environment and Climate Change Canada. 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/corporate/international-affairs/partnerships-organizations/arctic-council.html>

<sup>11</sup> Artic-5, with greater privileges for being riparian.

<sup>12</sup> It was established that states above the 66th parallel would be part of it, recognising each other as legitimately Arctic and excluding the rest, a situation that prevents other states from being considered Arctic like China.

<sup>13</sup> Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Grinch'in International Council, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Saami Council

<sup>14</sup> ARCTIC COUNCIL. The Arctic Council A Quick Guide. 2020. Retrieved from <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/items/5b1cf319-c3d0-427a-b874-78ce0e32bba4>

<sup>15</sup> MADUEÑO ÁLVAREZ, Miguel. Strategic plans for the Arctic: geopolitics, resources and neocolonialism. Revista de Pensamiento Estratégico y Seguridad CISDE, 9(2), 27-42, 2024.

The functioning of the Arctic Council has been conducive to international cooperation, although this is largely due to the exclusion of military competences<sup>16</sup>. Its main milestones are: the Agreement on Cooperation in Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic (2011), the Agreement on Cooperation in Preparedness and Response to Maritime Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic (2013) and the Agreement on Enhancing International Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic (2017)<sup>17</sup>.

However, the invasion of Crimea (2014) and the increased Russian military presence in the area has deteriorated its functioning, leading to tensions in the area<sup>18</sup>, which together with Chinese interest in the Arctic routes as a consequence of certain restrictions on the Indo-Pacific routes<sup>19</sup>, make compliance with the agreements difficult due to the non-binding nature of many initiatives.

### Climate situation

The Arctic climate is characterised by long, cold winters, with temperatures below -40°C, while summers are short and cool, with temperatures rarely exceeding 10°C. To this must be added extreme periods of solar radiation, with 24-hour days of daylight in summer and 24-hour nights of darkness in winter. Despite the existence of such an extreme climate, a great variety of fauna and flora emerges which, together with the permanently frozen ice sheet (*permafrost*), plays an essential role in global biodiversity and the regulation of the planet's climate. However, for just over 100 years, the Arctic has been undergoing a progressive and rapid warming that is endangering this ecosystem, which is so fundamental to our survival (see Figure 1).

<sup>16</sup> GROENING, Ranghild. Why Military Security should be kept out of the Arctic Council. The Arctic Institute. 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/why-military-security-should-be-kept-out-of-the-arctic-council/>

<sup>17</sup> LENNON, Erika. A Tale of Two Poles: A Comparative Look At The Legal Regimes in The Arctic And The Antarctic. Sustainable Development Law and Policy, 3(8), 32-36, 65-66. 2008.

<sup>18</sup> KLIMENKO, Ekaterina. The geopolitics of a changing Arctic. SIPRI Background Paper, 1-15. 2019.

<sup>19</sup> NG, Chew, WU, Yuhe, ZHANG, Wenrui, JIGEER, Shawuya, ZHANG, Jhingan and YU, Haiyue. China-Russia Cooperation in the Northern Sea Route Development. International Organisations Research Journal, 20(1), 1-25. 2025. DOI:10.17323/1996-7845-2025-01-03

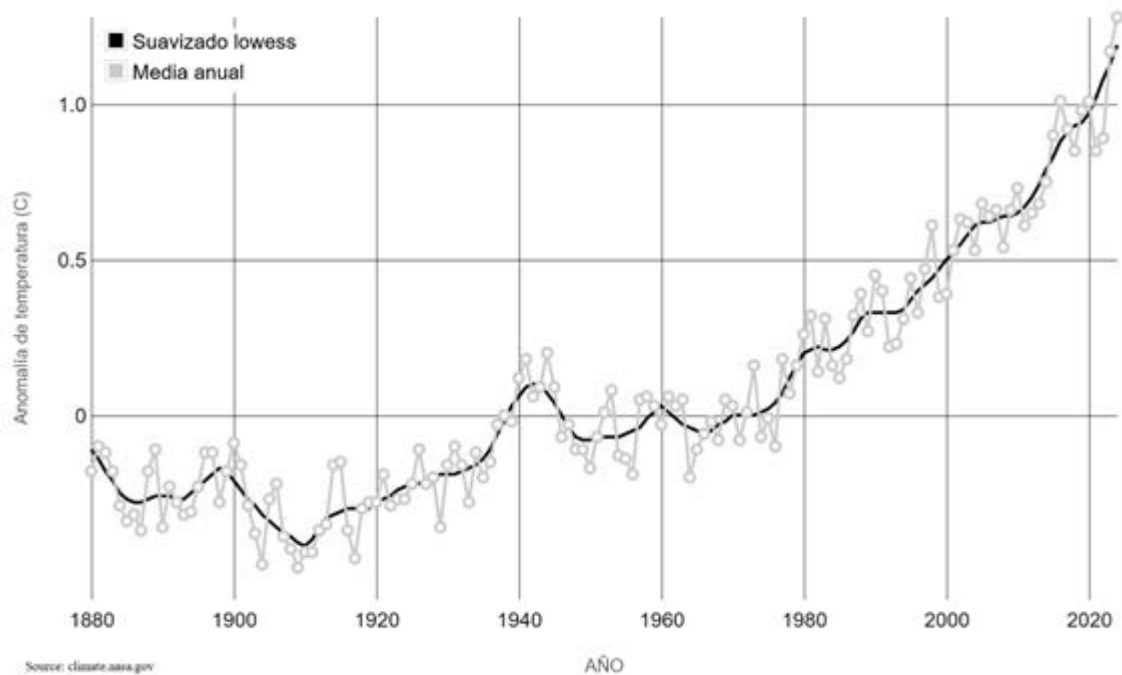


Figure 1. Arctic temperature evolution

As a result of this warming, the Arctic could lose more than 50% of its sea ice in the next 30 years.<sup>20</sup> This would lead to ecosystem disruption, as the thawing *permafrost* would increase global temperatures by releasing the large amounts of methane that have accumulated, further contributing to global warming. It also impacts on the wildlife of species that depend on sea ice, such as polar bears and indigenous communities. Climate change and melting ice may also increase the incidence of water- and vector-borne diseases.<sup>21</sup>, such as dengue fever and Zika.<sup>22</sup>

### Economic trends and investment opportunities

The thaw offers different opportunities, such as mining, fishing, tourism, maritime routes... increasing geopolitical competition for control of the area.

One of the main attractions of the Arctic is access to its natural resources. It is estimated to hold around 13% of undiscovered oil reserves and 30 % of natural gas reserves<sup>23</sup>, as

<sup>20</sup> IPCC. Special Report on Climate Change and the Earth. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2021. Retrieved from [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WG1\\_SPM\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WG1_SPM_Spanish.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Organisms that transmit infectious diseases to humans

<sup>22</sup> In addition, heat waves and air pollution can affect respiratory and cardiovascular health.

<sup>23</sup> Oil and gas extraction is perhaps the main focus of investment in the region, particularly in the Chukotka Sea, the Barents Sea and Greenland.

well as other natural resources such as iron, nickel, copper and so-called rare earths, which are essential for the development of current and future technology. Although the exploitation of these resources has been held back by harsh climatic conditions and high costs, climate change could make them more accessible, and technical advances in deep-water drilling could make their exploitation economically viable. However, all this also poses environmental and social risks, which raises a dichotomy: how to balance economic development and ecosystem sustainability. Greenpeace<sup>24</sup> has warned that entry into the Arctic could irreversibly affect local biodiversity, again putting the ethical and ecological dilemma of these future investments on the table (see Figure 1).

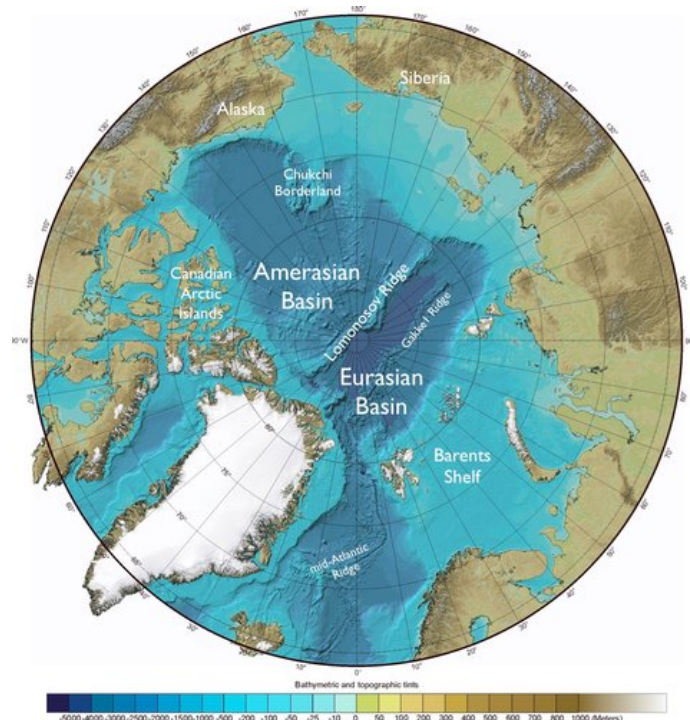


Figure 1. Location of ocean basins<sup>25</sup>

The melting ice will lead to the opening of new shipping routes, such as the Northern Sea Route, the Northwest Passage and the Transpolar Route, which can significantly reduce transport times between Asia, Europe and North America. According to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration<sup>26</sup>, by 2030 Arctic routes could be navigable for significantly longer periods of time, facilitating access to global markets (see Figure 2).

<sup>24</sup> GREENPEACE. Environmental impacts of mining in the Arctic. Greenpeace International. 2022.

<sup>25</sup> COAKLEY Bernard, Northern Lights on the Midnight Watch. 2011. Retrieved from <https://archive.nytimes.com/scientistatwork.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/15/northern-lights-on-the-midnight-watch/>

<sup>26</sup> NOAA. The Arctic: A Key to Global Weather and Climate. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. 2020. Retrieved from <https://arctic.noaa.gov/report-card/report-card-2020/>

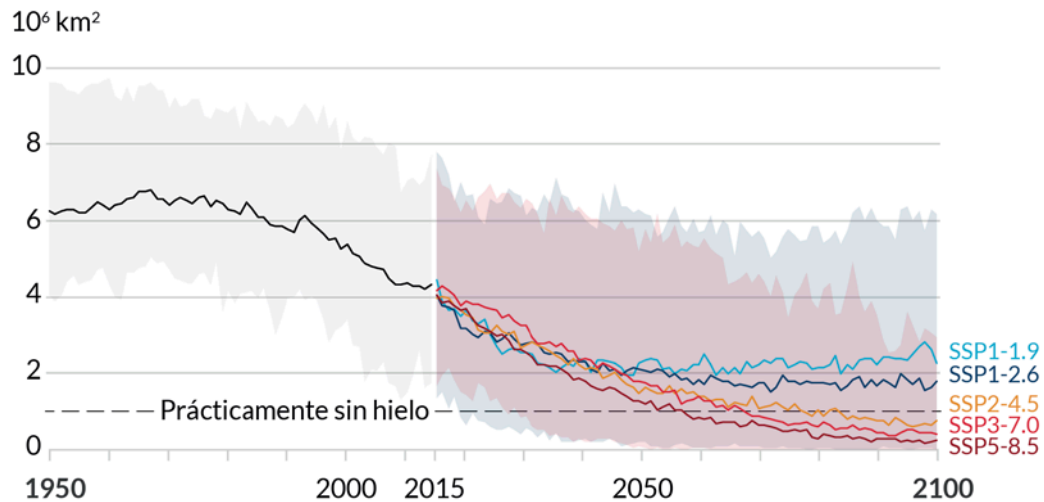


Figure 2. Arctic ice melt over the next few years<sup>27</sup>

The Northern Sea Route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, a shorter route than the Suez Canal and more economical because it would significantly reduce shipping time between Asia, Europe and North America, something that would influence global trade dynamics. On this route, Russia is currently the beneficiary of the tariffs charged and the leasing of icebreaker escort vessels, which are required for transit.

The Northwest Route, as an alternative to the Panama Canal, but there are currently areas that are difficult to navigate, and it does not have ports and infrastructure suitable for large vessels .<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the Transpolar Route, the most direct route between Europe and Asia, is being explored if the thaw continues as estimated.

These routes can reduce distances between northern Europe and northern China by up to 4,000 nautical miles, cutting shipping times by approximately two weeks (see Figure 2).

<sup>27</sup> IPCC. Special Report on Climate Change and the Earth. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2021. Retrieved from [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WG1\\_SPM\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WG1_SPM_Spanish.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> TORRENT, Jordi. New Arctic routes: breaking the ice of North Pole shipping. Pier Next. 2019. Retrieved from <https://piernext.portdebarcelona.cat/en/logistics/new-arctic-routes-breaking-the-ice-of-north-pole-shipping/>



Figure 2. Arctic routes<sup>29</sup>

In the coming years, fisheries may also be affected, as water temperatures change, species will migrate to colder waters, changing local people's livelihoods, trade and access to fisheries. For example, species such as cod and salmon are already moving northwards in search of colder waters, which could lead to tensions over control of new fishing grounds. The Arctic will therefore continue to gain in importance as a fishing area, thanks to melting ice and changing migration routes of marine species.

The new open waters that would open up in the region could be a source of fish resources, with the risk of overexploitation of species and tensions between countries disputing access to them.

Finally, tourism is also an industry that is seeing growth in the area, particularly in areas such as Greenland, Iceland and Norway. As the ice retreats, tourists are able to access previously impenetrable areas, leading to an increase in demand for eco- and adventure

<sup>29</sup> NAMMCO. 2022. Retrieved from [https://nammco.no/beluga/arctic-shipping-routes-grunnkort\\_siglingal\\_source\\_ap-edit/](https://nammco.no/beluga/arctic-shipping-routes-grunnkort_siglingal_source_ap-edit/)

travel. However, increased tourism in the region also poses challenges related to sustainability and the protection of fragile ecosystems.

### Political situation

Historically, the Arctic has been a region where international cooperation has been very present, especially under the auspices of the Arctic Council. However, growing interest in its resources and trade routes has led to tensions and territorial disputes. As the ice melts, new routes open up and maritime boundaries are reconfigured.

One of the hot spots is sovereignty over the Arctic seabed and waters. Countries such as Canada, Denmark -through Greenland-, Norway, Russia and the US have shown their interest and have even claimed several areas of this zone. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes a legal framework for the delimitation of maritime boundaries, but interpretations of the treaty vary<sup>30</sup>. This hampers the resolution of potential conflicts. For example, the dispute over sovereignty of resources on the seabed and in the waters surrounding Greenland between Denmark and Canada.

The Russian case deserves a separate mention. Its military presence in the Arctic has increased through the establishment of bases and the expansion of its fleet in the region: modernising former Soviet bases<sup>31</sup> and deploying air defence systems, missiles, fighter aircraft and a fleet of military-capable icebreakers. These moves are also related to the protection of trade routes and the security of natural resources. An example of this was the voyage made in August 2017 by the Russian LNG carrier Cristophe de Margerie, which completed the journey between Norway and South Korea through the Northwest Passage without icebreaker support. Moreover, it did so in a record time of 19 days, which is 30 % less time than the equivalent journey through the Suez Canal. There are other

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<sup>30</sup> UNITED NATIONS. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). 1982. Retrieved from <https://www.imo.org/es/OurWork/Legal/Pag%20inas/UnitedNationsConventionOnTheLawOfTheSea.aspx#:~:text=La%20Convenci%C3%B3n%20de%20las%20Naciones%20Unidas%20sobre%20el,usos%20posibles%20de%20los%20oc%C3%A1anos%20y%20sus%20recursos>

<sup>31</sup> Key Bases: Nagurskoye, Kotelny, Tiksi and Franz Josef Land

types of ships sailing in Arctic waters, but this milestone could be the start of a new merchant route that would redefine international shipping .<sup>32</sup>

The US, Canada and NATO are responding in turn by increasing their presence in the area. First, the US has reinforced its military bases in Alaska and Greenland<sup>33</sup> , especially for missile defence, and has carried out various military operations with nuclear submarines. Canada has strengthened surveillance in the Arctic with the Alert base and maritime patrols; and NATO has increased its exercises in the Arctic, with Norway and other Nordic countries increasing their presence, which could raise tensions between the two blocs if the situation is not managed from the right perspective.

China sees the Arctic as a strategic region for its economic growth and global influence. It seeks to expand its presence in the region, including by investing in infrastructure and exploiting natural resources.<sup>34</sup>

The European Union (EU) seeks to promote its economic interests in the Arctic, for which it has promoted different programmes such as the EU Arctic Strategy: in 2016, the EU adopted an Arctic strategy that sets out the EU's objectives and priorities in the region for the period 2016-2020. Its objectives were to promote its economic interests, protect the Arctic environment and promote international cooperation in the region. Economic objectives included the exploitation of natural resources, such as oil and gas, in order to reduce its energy dependence on Russia and the development of maritime routes that would allow it to reduce transport times and increase its capacity for international trade.

However, when we talk about the Arctic, it is not only about anticipating future conflicts, but also about cooperation. Key agreements in this regard include the Arctic Nuclear Freeze Treaty and the creation of protected fishing zones.

### **Strategic location**

The Arctic presents a complex geopolitical and strategic scenario involving a large number of states. The main forum for debate on issues concerning this area is the Arctic

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<sup>32</sup> TORRENT, Jordi. New Arctic routes: breaking the ice of North Pole shipping. Pier Next. 2019. Retrieved from <https://piernext.portdebarcelona.cat/en/logistics/new-arctic-routes-breaking-the-ice-of-north-pole-shipping/>

<sup>33</sup> Key base: Thule, with early warning radars.

<sup>34</sup> China is considered an "Arctic power" due to its growing interest and involvement in the Arctic region, despite not being an Arctic country in the traditional sense. China is an observer in the Arctic Council.

Council, which discusses matters concerning the states involved, but has no legislative or executive capacity. Its activity focuses particularly on the defence of the rights of indigenous groups, the defence of Arctic biodiversity, ecosystem care, rescue and rescue coordination, and emergency planning.

The culmination of this cooperation was reached with the Ilulissat declaration in 2008, in which the countries reached important agreements on maritime security and environmental issues and declared their intention to prevent the creation of a new international legal framework governing the Arctic. With this declaration, the states parties recognised each other as sovereign Arctic states and limited and excluded the rest of the world from decisions to be taken in the Arctic.

However, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Arctic Council's capacity for cooperation has been reduced<sup>35</sup>. Currently, countries with interests in the Arctic operate unilaterally. Our analysis focuses on Russia, the US, Canada and China.

## ***Russia***

It is the Arctic state that has shown the greatest interest in exploiting its resources. With some 20,000 kilometres of Arctic coastline, it is the country with the largest borders and population in Arctic territory, and has the largest territorial claims to the extent of the continental shelf seabed. If granted, would have exploitation rights over 1.2 million square kilometres of its continental shelf seabed, an area equivalent to four times the size of Spain, and over one of the largest known hydrocarbon reserves, the Lomonosov Ridge. These claims are based on years of exploration and research in the Arctic Ocean, culminating in the *Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf* (CSCL) report in 2015. Russia's post-Soviet economy is closely linked to energy production, so resources in the north are of great importance.

Another major controversy is that much of the Northern Passage is considered "internal waters", despite the US denial that international maritime law confirms a large part of Russia's claims.

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<sup>35</sup> ARTEAGA, Félix. La OTAN en el Ártico: el flanco sobrevenido. Real Instituto Elcano, 42, 1-9. 2023.

In 2020, Russia published its Arctic Agenda 2020-2035<sup>36</sup>. It reflects on the possibilities offered by the progressive recession of Arctic ice and points towards the exploitation of natural resources, especially oil and liquefied natural gas. Another goal of its Arctic agenda is to improve the living conditions of its Arctic settlements, which were drastically reduced after the decline of northern military detachments following the end of the Cold War and were in a serious state of neglect. Russia hopes to establish the Northern Route as a new international trade artery, being the main beneficiary.

As part of the military build-up that President Vladimir Putin has led over the past decade, he has revived the Northern Fleet, based on the Kola Peninsula, perhaps the most important of Russia's fleets, with two-thirds of its total naval power, including destroyers, submarines, supply ships and aircraft carriers. It has thus increased its military presence in the Arctic as a guarantor of its sovereignty and of a north it considers its own, as Artur Chilingarov demonstrated by placing the Russian flag on the seabed of the North Pole, "the north is Russian".

Russia, which has more icebreakers than the rest of the planet combined, includes some 45 large icebreakers (seven of them nuclear-powered) such as the Yamal part of the powered fleet, the 50 Let Pobedi, the Taimir, the Vaigach and the brand new vessels of the Project 22220 series: Arktika, Sibir and Ural, which entered service in 2020, 2021 and 2022, respectively, and later the Yakutiya.

Such a strategy serves the objectives of defending Russian commercial interests and security in northern transport, but we must not forget that the Northern Fleet is the defender of strategic reserves and the repository of the mission of pursuing Russian foreign policy interests. Russia has established a Joint Strategic Command in the Arctic with the aim of coordinating operations among all Russian military forces operating in the region. It should also be noted that Russia's new bases in the Arctic not only deploy strategic weaponry, but also confront NATO's flanks and secure its control over the Northern Sea Route.

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<sup>36</sup> KLUGE, Janis, and PAUL, Michael. Russia's Arctic Strategy through 2035. SWP, 1-4. 2020. doi: 10.18449/2020C57.

## **United States**

In contrast to Russia, US Arctic policy has undergone major changes in recent years. Recent US interest in the Arctic has been a reaction to Russia's advance in the region. Moreover, the recent improvement in the China-Russia Arctic relationship has raised concerns that the world's leading power needs to strengthen its Arctic presence. Unlike the other Arctic states, the US has not ratified the UNCLOS<sup>37</sup>, and so chooses to opt in to measures that benefit it, only *de facto* recognising the sovereignty of the signatory countries. This has a second important derivative: the US cannot make any claim to the continental shelf that would potentially be its right before the CLCS, but this has not prevented it from collecting data to support its eventual sovereignty over that portion of the seafloor.

However, its naval and air presence is not recent, as air patrols from Greenland and Denmark through the deployment of nuclear submarines have been a constant for years, with a reduction in air patrols being observed with the end of the Cold War.

Following statements in 2019 by the then US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo<sup>38</sup>, calling attention to the situation in the Arctic, and the growing Russian and Chinese approaches there, the US published a new Arctic strategy in early 2021, whose goals are a far cry from the international collaboration and environmental defence objectives of its previous strategy. The new strategy, entitled 'A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic', places particular emphasis on the need for an increased presence of naval surface forces in Arctic waters. This also extends to its allies, which for some years now have been conducting part of their permanent exercise schedule, the "Trident Juncture" manoeuvres in the North Sea, partly triggering a Russian self-defence mechanism.

Since the arrival of Donald Trump's second presidency, there has been a strong interest in the north of the globe, with the intention of gaining sovereignty over Greenland. One of the strong points of the American agenda is its defence of freedom of navigation in Arctic waters through the so-called *FONOP*. FONOPs are aggressive patrols already conducted by US naval forces in the China Sea as a response to China's non-acceptance

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<sup>37</sup> UNITED NATIONS. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). 1982. Retrieved from <https://www.imo.org/es/OurWork/Legal/Pag%20inas/UnitedNationsConventionOnTheLawOfTheSea.aspx#:~:text=La%20Convenci%C3%B3n%20de%20las%20Naciones%20Unidas%20sobre%20el,usos%20posibles%20de%20los%20oc%C3%A1anos%20y%20sus%20recursos>

<sup>38</sup> POMPEO, Mike. Artic Council Proceedings. Finland. 2019.

of maritime claims in Southeast Asia. Similarly, the US does not recognise Russian sovereignty over the Northern Passage, as its maritime trade could also benefit from this route. Thus, it has announced its readiness to implement *FONOPs* on Arctic routes as soon as they become navigable.

The US presence could be considered less than announced or expected, as it has not yet materialised the aforementioned patrols and its Arctic presence is limited to Alaskan monitoring stations, strategic submarine patrols and, at the allied level, NATO HQ in Greenland.

### **Canada**

After Russia, it is the country with the largest Arctic coastline and, as such, in a position to make a stronger claim on the Arctic seabed.

In December 2003, Canada submitted its claim to the CLCS over its Arctic continental shelf, which would give it control over a large portion of the circle, most likely rich in oil deposits. The particularity of Canada's claim lies in the way it, like Russia, considers the waters around its Arctic archipelagos. Canada considers these waters to be "internal waters", which in practical terms would give it absolute sovereignty over the Northwest Passage. This claim is based on historical grounds and is widely contested, especially by the US, its closest neighbour and perhaps the one with the most to lose if it were to be accorded this legal status. However, even if Canada were to claim these waters as internal, such an aspiration would not be supported under the terms of UNCLOS, as it would have to be a historical claim to sovereignty exercised for a "substantial" time<sup>39</sup>.

Canada's Arctic strategy revolves around increased cooperation with international organisations, increasing its military presence in the North to effectively exercise greater control of its borders, reinforcing its sovereignty and providing security in waters it considers inland.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> GARCÍA ESPADAS, Andrés. Approach to the legal regime of the Arctic and its relationship with America. Electronic journal published by the Spanish Association of Americanists, 18, 1-21. 2017.

<sup>40</sup> GOVERNMENT OF CANADA. Relations Couronne-Autochtones et Affaires du Nord Canada. 2019. Recuperado de <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1562939617400/1562939658000>

Canada has significantly stepped up its military presence in the Arctic in response to increased Russian and Chinese activities in the region. This strategy seeks to protect Canadian sovereignty, ensure control of emerging sea lanes and guarantee its national security.

The Canadian government has announced substantial investments to strengthen its military infrastructure in the Arctic: such as Operational Support Centres to modernise, maintain and expand bases and capabilities at Inuvik and Yellowknife in the northwest Arctic, its two predominant bases. It will also invest in other bases such as Iqaluit and Nunavut, where airstrips and improvements will be made to the logistical equipment essential for operations in the north. In addition, it is counting on Nanisivik Station, a former mining station, for the creation of a deep-water port, providing a strategic enclave of great importance in the western Arctic, as there are few port sites for large ships at present.

### **China**

China, although not an Arctic nation, has increased its presence in the Arctic, focusing mainly on scientific and economic activities. However, this growing involvement has raised concerns among other powers due to possible strategic and security implications.

China has established the "Yellow River" Arctic Research Station in Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, Norway, dedicated to studies on climate change and polar ecology. It has also participated in scientific expeditions in the region, using the icebreaker Xue Long ("Snow Dragon") to facilitate polar research. Economically, China promotes the 'Polar Silk Road', seeking to develop maritime routes through the Arctic that could significantly reduce transit times between Asia and Europe.

Although China does not maintain military bases in the Arctic, it has strengthened its military cooperation with Russia in the region. In September 2022, Chinese warships

operated alongside Russian units near the Aleutian Islands, approximately 160 kilometres from Kiska .<sup>41</sup>

In addition, in October 2021, the two countries conducted joint exercises in the Sea of Japan, focusing on air defence and anti-submarine warfare. Subsequently, they conducted their first combined naval patrol, crossing Japan's Tsugaru Strait .<sup>42</sup>

China's increasing activity in the Arctic has raised concerns in the US and among its allies. The Pentagon believes that China could use its commercial or scientific access to the Arctic for military advantage, representing a potentially destabilising force in the region.

Since former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo drew attention to Beijing's inordinate interest in the Arctic and how several of the supposedly scientific experiments could be used as cover for military objectives<sup>43</sup> , there is some evidence that the nature and purpose of China's experiments may be linked to obtaining information for future military deployments. These include the extensive acoustic propagation studies and the installation of sensors that China is conducting in much of the world and specifically in the Arctic. Ever since the American submarine *USN Kate* emerged from under the Arctic ice in 1959, China has been interested in the ability to deploy nuclear submarines in the region as part of its strategic nuclear deterrence programme. China's northern flank in ballistic missile defence involves closer control of polar trajectories<sup>44</sup> .

## Conclusions

The political situation in the Arctic is complex and dynamic, and until now it has been a region outside the major dynamics of geopolitics and the global economy. However, in recent decades, this area has been altered by environmental changes and transformed into a focal point for governments, businesses and other international organisations. This

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<sup>41</sup> ALÁEZ FEAL, Octavio. China in the Arctic. Global Strategy. 2022. Retrieved from [https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>42</sup> ALÁEZ FEAL, Octavio. China in the Arctic. Global Strategy. 2022. Retrieved from [https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://global-strategy.org/china-en-el-artico/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>43</sup> POMPEO, Mike. Artic Council Proceedings. Finland. 2019.

<sup>44</sup> KOH, Swee Lean. China's strategic interest in the Arctic goes beyond economics. Defence News. 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/05/11/chinas-strategic-interest-in-the-arctic-goes-beyond-economics/>

is due to its geographical position linking North America, Europe and Asia, the extraction of mineral and energy resources, and the opening of new trade routes linking the different oceans and bringing the Indo-Pacific region closer, towards which there is now a geostrategic pivot.

These possibilities are due to the gradual rise in temperature over the past century, with the Arctic being one of the most affected areas of the planet. This increase in temperature is causing the thawing of *permafrost*, ocean acidification and loss of sea ice, a situation that threatens the ecosystem not only of the Arctic, but of the planet as a whole<sup>45</sup>. Such a situation is a point of conflict between organisations that seek to protect the environment, culture and the rights of indigenous peoples; and those who see economic opportunities such as the opening of new sea routes and the exploitation of natural resources.

One of the greatest opportunities presented by the melting ice is the opening up of new shipping routes, as the periodic and increasing variation in ice extent in the Arctic area makes it navigable for a longer period of time. It is estimated that it will be navigable for 150 days a year in the next decade, whereas a few years ago this mobility was limited to a few days a year, and the use of icebreakers was necessary as an additional safety measure. This new scenario is conducive to the emergence of new trade routes, which will significantly change the global economic and commercial context<sup>46</sup>. However, the use of these new routes will require a trade infrastructure to support it, which will change the terrain and affect the indigenous tribes, who will have to change their way of life.

Another opportunity presented by the thaw is the extraction of large energy reserves in the region. Such activity has always been complicated and inefficient from an economic point of view, but the thaw opens up the opportunity to exploit these resources. To this must be added the conflict between the different countries that make up the Arctic Council to define borders and areas of control. This is why major powers such as Russia, whose economy has always been linked to hydrocarbons, has made efforts to control the area.<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion, Russia and Canada aim to extract natural resources, as well as control the Northern Passage and the Northwest Route, respectively, as they consider these waters

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<sup>45</sup> GREENPEACE. Environmental impacts of mining in the Arctic. Greenpeace International. 2022.

<sup>46</sup> The new routes significantly reduce freight costs by reducing time and fuel consumption.

<sup>47</sup> MADUEÑO ÁLVAREZ, Miguel. Strategic plans for the Arctic: geopolitics, resources and neocolonialism. Revista de Pensamiento Estratégico y Seguridad CISDE, 9(2), 27-42, 2024.

to be inland, and have invested in military infrastructures that allow them to control the area, most notably the Russian icebreaker fleet of 45 units. China focuses on economic and research activities, as well as military cooperation with Russia. Finally, the US has increased its military presence in Greenland bases, has attempted to buy Greenland<sup>48</sup> and is trying to get Canada to annex to the US.

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<sup>48</sup> A strategic island in the North Atlantic that has been of interest to the US since the 1860s.