Documento
Opinión

98/2025 24 de noviembre de 2025

Mar Martínez Prieto *

Geopolitics and power relations in the Arctic



Geopolitics and power relations in the Arctic

Abstract:

The Arctic is no longer a peripheral region; it now occupies a central place in current geopolitics. Melting ice is facilitating access to the area's natural resources and opening up new maritime routes. This has sparked interest from the region's states and other external actors, intensifying competition between powers such as Russia, the United States and China.

Russia is leading a process of militarisation, strengthening its presence in the region, prompting a response from the United States, NATO and other countries. In turn, China has established an ambiguous presence in the region through the Polar Silk Road initiative.

Despite governance efforts through the Arctic Council and the legal framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, tensions between national interests, territorial disputes and strategic rivalries threaten to destabilise regional cooperation.

The Arctic is emerging as a strategic arena where economic, energy, environmental and military interests converge. Its future will depend on the ability of the actors involved to manage their differences and avoid an escalation of tensions.

Key Words:

Geopolitics, ice melting, sea routes, natural resources, militarization, Arctic Council, Russia, China, United States.

Cómo citar este documento:

MARTÍNEZ PRIETO, Mar. *Geopolítica y relaciones de poder en el Ártico*. Documento de Opinión IEEE 98/2025. enlace web IEEE y/o enlace bie[3] (consultado día/mes/año)

*__NOTA:__ Las ideas contenidas en los ***Documentos de Opinión*** son responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen necesariamente el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the Arctic has ceased to be a peripheral region, instead becoming an area of growing strategic importance on the global stage. Its geopolitical importance was evident during the Cold War, when the region became a theatre of rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The region was used as a platform for nuclear deterrence strategies, with submarines and aircraft patrolling its waters and skies to take advantage of its location as a transit point between the two blocs[1].

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the military presence in the region decreased significantly, paving the way for international cooperation. However, in recent years, tensions and the logic of militarisation have resurfaced due to the rediscovery of the region's strategic value.

Current geostrategic interest in the Arctic is a response to a series of transformations resulting from climate change. Rising temperatures are accelerating the melting of ice and reducing the size of the ice pack, making the region more accessible. This new reality allows previously impassable trade routes to open and new ones to be created. At the same time, the Arctic is establishing itself as a region with growing economic potential, in terms of both the exploitation of natural resources and the extraction of strategic minerals, gas and oil. These conditions have intensified the strategic interest of Arctic states and other international actors[2].

All of this is contributing to renewed geopolitical tensions in the region, where the economic, energy, and strategic interests of these actors converge and often compete with each other.

[1] Ana Belén López Tárraga, "Evolución del discurso de la Unión Europea sobre la seguridad en la región del Ártico," *Boletín de la Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles*, n.º 93 (2022), https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8515242

[2] Bartolomé Cánovas Sánchez, "La preocupante actividad militar de Rusia en el Ártico," *Boletín IEEE (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos)*, n.º 6 (abril-junio 2017): 347–67, https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6130219

2. The Arctic: Geopolitical Context

2.1. Geographical characteristics

The Arctic has evolved over time, acquiring greater political, economic and strategic importance and attracting more interest.

Due to its location at the opposite pole, Antarctica is often compared to the Arctic. However, despite sharing some similarities, the two regions are completely different. Antarctica is a continent spanning more than 14 million square kilometres and surrounded by the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. In contrast, the Arctic is an ocean surrounded by islands and the Eurasian and American continents, which have facilitated its delineation[3].

The Arctic is defined as the region north of the Arctic Circle, which encircles the globe at a latitude of 66° 33′ 45″ north. This region comprises the Arctic Ocean and the eight surrounding states, also known as the 'Arctic Eight' (A8): Russia, Canada, Norway, Denmark/Greenland, the United States, Finland, Iceland and Sweden.

The first five of these states are bordered by Arctic waters and are known as the Arctic Five (A5). Notably, seven of the eight Arctic states are NATO allies, with the exception of Russia[4].

Winter temperatures can vary significantly from -43 °C to -26 °C, with an average of around -34 °C. In summer, temperatures hover around freezing point (0 °C)[5].

The Arctic Ocean is characterised by its great average depth of over 1,200 metres and its extensive coastline of more than 45,000 kilometres, around half of which belongs to Russia. The ice cover, also known as pack ice, experiences significant seasonal variation: it is at its greatest extent in March and shrinks considerably in September. These

[3] López Tárraga, “Evolución del discurso.”

[4] Abel Romero Junquera, “El ámbito geopolítico y de seguridad del Ártico,” *Cuadernos de estrategia*, n.º 218 (2023): 51–106, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=9158048

[5] Assumpció Castellví Auví, Rocío López González, Julio Ayuso Miguel, José Antonio Sánchez Quintanilla, Pedro Arostegui Llama y Javier Estévez Zurita, “El Ártico,” *Documento de trabajo* DT/02-2022 (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2022), https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_trabajo/2022/DT02_2022_Artico.pdf

seasonal changes temporarily open up navigable sea corridors. The thickness of the ice also varies; multi-year ice layers can reach thicknesses of up to five or six metres, whereas ice that forms and melts in annual cycles is usually much thinner, rarely exceeding two metres[6].

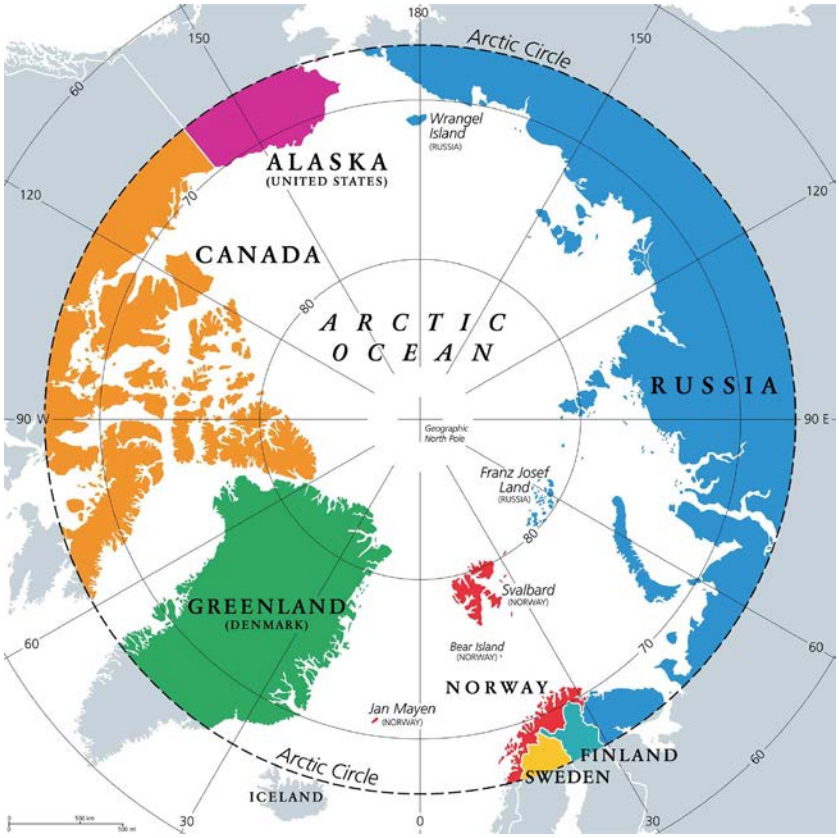


Figure 1. Map of the Arctic. Source: National Geographic

https://world.expeditions.com/travel-guide/arctic-travel-guide/how-to-get-to-the-arctic-circle

The region has a population of around 4 million. The indigenous Inuit people are predominant among the local communities, and they have two different cultures: the Dorset and the Thule. Many of them depend largely on the mammals they hunt for their livelihoods. They also face challenges in transitioning from a traditional to a modern culture, which has different values, techniques and customs[7].

[6] Romero Junquera, "El ámbito geopolítico y de seguridad."

[7] Castellví Auví et al., "El Ártico."

2.2. Why is the Arctic important?

As mentioned above, climate change is reshaping the Arctic's economic landscape. The melting ice is making strategic natural resources, specifically hydrocarbons, minerals, and fishing grounds, more accessible.

Added to this are the economic advantages of opening up new sea routes, which, by offering more efficient options for international trade that are less vulnerable to geopolitical tensions, further increase the interest of actors in the region.

However, the growing interest in the Arctic is not limited exclusively to its economic opportunities, but also has great strategic value in military terms.

Given its geographical location, the Arctic is a key area for the projection of military power among the main international actors. During the Cold War, the region was used as a transit corridor for strategic bombing, and today, strategic interest in the Arctic has resurfaced as a result of the possibility of using it as a platform for surveillance and control[8].

This combination of economic, energy and strategic factors has attracted the interest of numerous actors in the region.

2.3. Strategic resources and maritime routes

In recent years, the Arctic ice cap has shrunk significantly, making large quantities of natural resources, including minerals, energy and fisheries, available for exploration and exploitation.

The Arctic is estimated to account for around 13% of undiscovered oil, 30% of undiscovered natural gas, 26.8% of diamonds, 40% of palladium, 15% of platinum, 11%

[8] Rob Huebert, *The Newly Emerging Arctic Security Environment* (Calgary: Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, 2010), https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cdfai/pages/41/attachments/original/1413661956/The_Newly_Emerging_Arctic_Security_Environment.pdf?1413661956

of cobalt, 10.6% of nickel, 9% of tungsten, 8% of zinc, 3.8% of copper, 3.2% of gold, 2.3% of iron, and 2.1% of coal[9].

Russia has the most resources in the Arctic region and would therefore benefit most from potential exploitation. By 2022, only around 40% of the original hydrocarbon reserves had been explored, but it is estimated that several tens of billions of barrels of oil and gas remain to be discovered. Most of these unexplored resources are concentrated in Western Siberia and on the Russian continental shelf. Additionally, a significant oil and gas field has been identified in the Barents and Kara Sea waters.

Russia's Arctic territories also hold a significant proportion of the region's natural resources, particularly nickel and coal. Meanwhile, the northern slope of Alaska, located in the northernmost part of the state, is home to one of the most important oil fields for the US energy industry. Additionally, approximately 840 trillion cubic metres of natural gas are found in this area.

Denmark is another country set to benefit from the melting Arctic due to the wealth of Greenland's subsoil. The island is home to multiple mining operations, and the melting ice and gradual opening up of Greenland's coastal areas are creating new development opportunities and increasing international interest in projects linked to strategic metals. Notably, there are gold, platinum and rare earth metal deposits in the Kvanefjeld area that have high-tech applications[10].

The Arctic is home to significant reserves of rare earth elements, which are metallic elements with unique properties such as magnetism, luminescence and high resistance. These properties make rare earth elements essential for high-tech industries. Due to their unique properties, these elements play a key role in various industries. They are used to manufacture high-powered magnets for wind turbines, in oil refining processes, and as diesel additives in the oil industry. In the automotive industry, they are used in catalytic

[9] BBC News. “Who Owns the Arctic and Should They Drill for Oil and Gas?” (2022). https://www.bbc.com/news/world-61222653

[10] Javier López López, “Análisis de la militarización del Océano Ártico en base a su importancia en la sociedad internacional del Siglo XXI,” *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, n.º 25 (2022): 1–18, https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8709414

converters, hybrid vehicle batteries, engines and generators. They are also used in the electronics industry for the production of hard drives and mobile phones[11].

Today, the Arctic is considered one of the main sources of rare earth elements, arousing the interest of major powers and increasing competition between them. The region's abundant rare earth reserves could present a strategic challenge to China, which currently dominates global production of these minerals[12].

The Arctic's fishing potential is also worth noting, as melting ice expands access to fishing grounds, mainly concentrated in three areas: western Greenland, the Norwegian Sea, and the Barents Sea. Currently, fishing activity in the Arctic accounts for around 10% of the global total[13].

-Sea routes

The progressive melting of Arctic ice has opened up new maritime routes. There are three main emerging routes.

- **The Northern Route**: also known as the Northeast Route, it runs along the coast of Russia and connects eastern China with western Europe. It is currently the route with the best characteristics for navigation. From Shanghai to Antwerp, it is approximately 40% shorter, i.e. around 7,000 kilometres less than the current route, which runs through the Suez Canal. The use of this route has numerous advantages. On the one hand, it would avoid the South China Sea and the Somali coast, which are conflict zones that can present numerous obstacles. On the other hand, it would bypass bottlenecks such as the Strait of Malacca. The opening of this route could bring about changes in the global economy, although there are still some doubts about its viability in the short term. Finally, it should be noted that this route is mainly navigable in summer[14].

[11] Ibíd.

[12] Ibíd.

[13] Castellví Auví et al., "El Ártico."

[14] Berk Vindevogel, *The Arctic, a New Front for Great Power Conflict?* (Brussels: Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, abril 2022), https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2022/04/Berk-Vindevogel_PolicyBrief273_Final.pdf?type=pdf

- **The Northwest Passage**: located in the Canadian Arctic, it connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. It shortens the maritime distance between the United States and Asia by approximately 15%, but it is considered the most dangerous route for navigation, as it is the narrowest and its waters are more restricted and colder[15].
- **The Transpolar route**: this route runs directly between the Bering Strait and the GIUK corridor (Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom), crossing areas close to the North Pole. Unlike other alternatives, this route avoids straits, exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and shallow areas, although it is currently not navigable[16].

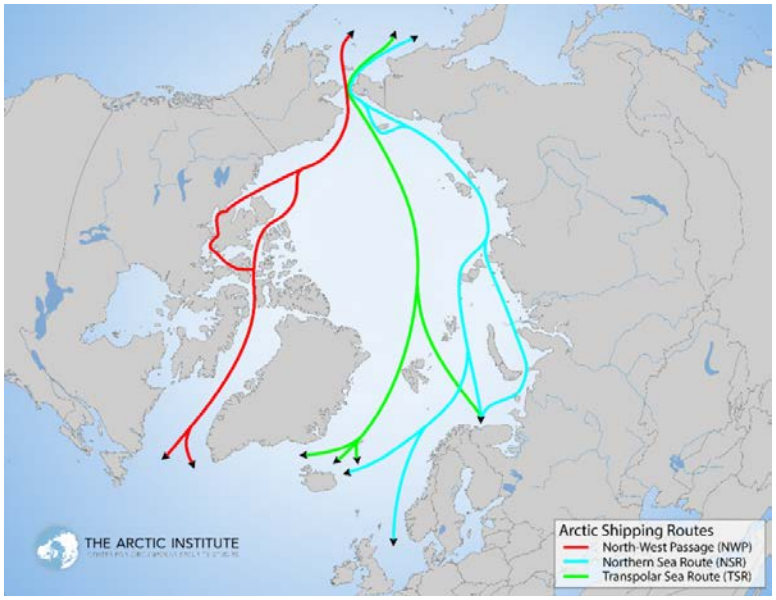


Figure 2. Maritime routes through the Arctic. Source: The Arctic Institute.

https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-maps/

Both the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage pass through territorial waters. Canada and Russia claim that these routes are internal waters, which would grant them exclusive control over them. Conversely, countries such as the United States and France argue that both routes should be open to free navigation in accordance with international law[17].

[15] Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos, "El Ártico como espacio de conflicto geopolítico (reedición)," *Boletín IEEE (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos)*, n.º 26 (2022): 142–70, https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=9050386

[16] Ibíd.

[17] Romero Junquera, "El ámbito geopolítico y de seguridad."

Opening and using these new routes would reduce logistics costs by between 25% and 40%, as well as cutting transit times between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

2.4. How is the Arctic governed?

Throughout much of its history, the Arctic has been characterised by a lack of formalised rules and governance structures. Following the end of the Cold War, the first efforts were made to establish a regional framework for cooperation and regulation.

The main institutions and governance structures are the Arctic Council and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which serves as a legal reference standard.

-Arctic Council:

The Arctic Council was established on 19 September 1996 through the Ottawa Declaration. It is the primary forum for interaction, cooperation and coordination between the A8, whose goal is to promote collaboration between these states in three key areas: environmental protection, the sustainable development of the region, and scientific research[18].

In addition to the A8, the Arctic Council comprises six indigenous Arctic communities, which participate in addressing common issues on a permanent basis. Similarly, non-Arctic countries, as well as multiple governmental and non-governmental organisations, can participate in the institution as observers if they support its objectives or are involved in Arctic issues, for example through polar research programmes.

The Arctic Council currently has 39 observers in total, including 13 non-Arctic states (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom, China, South Korea, India, Japan and Singapore), as well as 13 intergovernmental and interparliamentary organisations[19].

---

[18] Castellví Auví et al., “El Ártico.”

[19] Justin (Jong Deog) Kim, “Observer States in the Arctic Council: A Way Forward to Better Cooperation,” Shared Voices Magazine (Special Issue 2016, University of the Arctic), https://old.uarctic.org/shared-voices/shared-voices-magazine-2016-special-issue/observer-states-in-the-arctic-council-a-way-forward-to-better-cooperation/

Notably, the European Union's application to become an observer has been rejected several times, resulting in its special status as a "permanent guest". Finally, there are thirteen non-governmental organisations[20].

While the Arctic Council has facilitated the creation of a space for cooperation, it also has certain weaknesses that hinder its governance capacity. Firstly, it lacks the legal authority to impose decisions on its members as it is not binding.

However, most decisions are implemented by the parties themselves. Although the countries that comprise the Arctic Council have a high economic level, the Council's funds are limited[21].

It is important to note that the Council has excluded issues relating to military security, arms control and disarmament from its mandate, despite these being increasingly important in the current geopolitical context. For this reason, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR), a military forum, was established in 2011 to address military issues such as the use of Arctic waters. The first ASFR meetings took place in 2012 and 2013. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia was excluded from the forum[22].

Finally, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a diplomatic boycott of Russia by the other Arctic Council members, who suspended their cooperation with Russia within the organisation. While Russia has not been formally expelled, this suspension has interrupted dialogue and coordination on key regional issues.

Currently, the Arctic Council has resumed some activities with Russia, with progress being made at working project level, but not at political level. Nevertheless, this situation continues to present a significant challenge to Arctic governance, impeding the collaborative management of shared risks and the prevention of potential incidents amid escalating geopolitical tensions[23].

[20] Anurag Bisen, “The Arctic Council and Asian Observers: A Call for Enhanced Cooperation,” The Arctic Institute, 6 de junio de 2023, https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-council-asian-observers-call-enhanced-cooperation/

[21] Castellví Auví et al., “El Ártico.”

[22] Romero Junquera, "El ámbito geopolítico y de seguridad."

[23] Ibíd.

-United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

Signed in 1982 and entering into force in 1994, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is an international agreement that serves as a framework for the regulation of global maritime spaces. It promotes the peaceful use of the oceans, the fair and sustainable exploitation of their resources, scientific research, and the protection and conservation of the marine environment and marine life.

The convention also serves as a legal instrument that enables states to resolve conflicts over border delimitation. The five countries with Arctic coastlines — Canada, Denmark, the United States, Norway and Russia (the A5) — have the right to exploit resources within their maritime spaces and exclusive economic zones. It should be noted that, while the United States has not ratified the Treaty, it is informally accepted as customary international law by all Arctic states.

Although the Convention provides a defined regulatory framework, Arctic governance is complex and it does not have the capacity to address all the challenges posed by the region. This is because it applies a uniform set of rules to all oceans, ignoring the geographical and environmental characteristics of the Arctic region. Due to its fragility, the Arctic requires context-specific regulation. Consequently, there are ongoing disputes between the Arctic states, particularly regarding the division of the Arctic continental shelf, the legal status of the Northwest Passage (disputed by Canada and other countries), the delineation of maritime boundaries between Canada and the United States in the Beaufort Sea, the disagreement between Russia and the United States concerning the Bering Sea and Strait, and the territorial dispute between Canada and Denmark over Hans Island[24].

3. What is happening?

3.1. The evolution of Arctic militarisation and the current outlook

[24] Castellví Auví et al., “El Ártico.”

During the Cold War, the Arctic was of great strategic importance due to its geographical proximity to both the United States and the Soviet Union via the North Pole. This turned the region into a direct corridor for intercontinental missile flights and aerial surveillance.

However, with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, this high geopolitical value diminished, leading to progressive disarmament in the region. A key factor in making this possible was Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 speech, in which the then president of the USSR proposed objectives to transform the Arctic into a zone of peace and promote cooperation in areas such as environmental protection, navigation and scientific research. This paved the way for a period of peace and cooperation in the area, accompanied by the closure of numerous Russian bases in the north[25].

However, in the 2000s, particularly from 2008 onwards, the situation began to change again, as Russia initiated a process of re-militarising the Arctic, marking a shift in regional dynamics. The effects of melting ice and Moscow's interest in regaining influence in the international system have contributed to the restoration of the Arctic's strategic relevance in this context. For Russia, the region is a vital source of natural resources and a matter of national sovereignty, as well as being a central component of its geostrategic identity. Russia considers it to be a natural extension of its continental shelf, justifying its defence of preferential access to the energy resources located in the area. Furthermore, Russia considers these waters to be a vital space for its security and economic survival. Since then, Russian policy towards the Arctic has become more assertive, with the aim of reaffirming sovereignty, controlling shipping routes, and exploiting energy resources[26].

In recent years, Russian remilitarisation has resulted, among other things, in the reopening of former Soviet bases, the construction of new military facilities along its northern coast and the expansion of its fleet of icebreakers with military capabilities.

[25] Romero Junquera, "El ámbito geopolítico y de seguridad."

[26] Katarzyna Zysk, “Russia’s Military Build-Up in the Arctic: To What End?” CNA Occasional Paper (Arlington, VA: CNA, septiembre 2020), https://www.cna.org/analyses/2020/09/russian-military-in-the-arctic

These actions have caused concern among the other Arctic states, which have responded by also strengthening their presence in the region through the expansion and modernisation of their capabilities and infrastructure.

In short, the growing militarisation of the Arctic reflects escalating tensions between the major powers. This development can be understood as the direct result of strategic concerns related to military security and energy access. As the melting ice opens up new economic and geostrategic opportunities, states have strengthened their presence in the region to protect their national interests. Although there has been no direct confrontation so far, this dynamic is redefining the Arctic as an arena of global competition, where geopolitical rivalry, resource security and control of emerging maritime routes converge.

3.2. Key players in the region and their positions

Russia

Geographically, historically and militarily, Russia plays a key role in the Arctic and considers the region fundamental to its economic development, national security and international influence. Since Putin came to power, the Arctic has become one of the cornerstones of Russian foreign and security policy.

In August 2007, two Russian mini-submarines planted a flag on the Lomonosov Ridge, an underwater formation that Russia claims as an extension of its continental shelf. This was seen as an assertion of sovereignty over the area, marking a turning point in the tension between Russia and the West[27].

Furthermore, due to the deterioration of infrastructure following the end of the Cold War, Russia has begun to re-militarise the Arctic. This has resulted in the modernisation and reopening of air and naval bases, as well as the deployment of new units along the Arctic coastline.

[27] Vindevogel, “The Arctic, a New Front for Great Power Conflict?”.



Figure 3. Russian installations in the Arctic. Source: CSIS Research and Analysis

This rearmament has intensified in recent decades as a result of the retreating ice, which had always acted as a barrier against external threats. As climate change has gradually exposed the previously inaccessible northern lands and borders, Russia's sense of vulnerability has increased. In response, Russia has prioritised defence, adopting an approach that combines deterrence with territorial control to protect its resources, development opportunities in the region, and northern maritime borders.

A key part of this strategy is protecting the Kola Peninsula, home to the Northern Fleet and a significant portion of Russia's submarine fleet. To this end, efforts have been made to modernise naval and air capabilities.

The Northern Sea Route has become particularly important for Russia as it provides an economic alternative to its dependence on the European market. To exploit it commercially, Russia has built new ports, logistics systems and support stations. At the same time, Russia is seeking to impose regulations that restrict the navigation of foreign vessels, thereby reinforcing its sovereignty over the route[28].

[28] Cánovas Sánchez, “La preocupante actividad militar.”

Russia's stance is based on geostrategic anticipation, aimed at protecting its increasingly vulnerable borders. It also seeks to secure exclusive access to resources and consolidate its dominant position in the region, which has triggered a response from other states.

China

Although it is not an Arctic state, China seeks to establish itself in the region due to its economic interests, particularly with regard to exploiting the territory's mineral and energy resources. At the same time, China aims to expand its trade routes to strategic locations beyond its natural sphere of influence and to strengthen its image as a major power.

China has gradually consolidated its presence in the Arctic by investing in scientific research and participating in multilateral forums. Following Xi Jinping's arrival in 2012, China's interest in the region intensified, and in 2013 the country became a permanent observer of the Arctic Council, thereby increasing its influence in the area[29].

In 2018, China published its Arctic White Paper, in which it describes itself as a country closely associated with the Arctic, recognises the sovereignty of the A8 states, and asserts that other states also have rights in the area[30].

As part of this strategy, China is promoting the so-called 'Polar Silk Road', a project integrated into its Belt and Road Initiative which envisages using Arctic sea routes to connect Asia with Europe, thereby reducing distances and transport times. To this end, it has intensified its cooperation with Russia involves investments in key initiatives, such as the construction of ports and logistics infrastructure, as well as the development of joint naval exercises[31].

China also establishes its presence in the region through the development of dual-use technologies. One example of this is the installation of underwater sensor stations near the Arctic. Although these instruments are presented as scientific tools, they are part of

[29] Josep Baqués Quesada, "La geopolítica del Ártico: una nueva pieza en el gran tablero chino," Revista General de Marina 274, no. 3 (marzo 2018): 307–13, https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6365676

[30] Kong Soon Lim, "China's Arctic Policy & the Polar Silk Road Vision," *Arctic Yearbook 2018* (2018), https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2018/Scholarly_Papers/24_AY2018_Kong.pdf

[31] Castellví Auví et al., "El Ártico."

China's strategy of combining civilian and military uses, raising concerns in Western countries about their potential use for surveillance.

China advocates freedom of navigation in Arctic routes, which contradicts Russia's position. It has also expressed interest in fishing and the future exploitation of resources in the area, seeking to guarantee its access to them.

China's position in the Arctic could be considered one of calculated ambiguity: on the one hand, it strengthens its ties with Russia; on the other, it tries to avoid confrontation with the international order or a response from Western countries. Furthermore, although its activities are presented as scientific or commercial, there is some suspicion that China's interests may lead to a more militaristic stance in the future[32].

China's growing presence in the Arctic is therefore causing concern among the A5 countries, who are reluctant to accept it. At the same time, despite having strengthened its ties with China, Russia remains somewhat wary of the consequences of a strong Chinese presence in the region.

United States

The Arctic has not been a priority on the United States' strategic agenda for years. However, increased geopolitical tensions and Russia's growing military presence have prompted Washington to reconsider its role in the region and bolster its presence there. For instance, until 2017, the United States only had one operational large icebreaker despite having four. In 2018, however, it decided to reactivate the Second Fleet in the North Atlantic, which had previously been dismantled[33].

The United States' main objective in the Arctic is to promote a region that is secure, stable, peaceful, prosperous and sustainable. Nevertheless, this approach is accompanied by a firm message to Russia and China, making security the top priority for the region.

[32] NATO Allied Command Transformation, Regional Perspectives: Report on the Arctic (Brussels: NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2021), https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/regional-perspectives-2021-04.pdf

[33] Aznar Fernández-Montesinos, “El Ártico como espacio de conflicto geopolítico.”

The United States has a National Strategy for the Arctic Region, presented in 2024 and replacing and expanding on the 2013 version. The document reflects the country's concerns regarding cooperation between Russia and China, as well as the use of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, in Arctic operations[34].

The strategy's main objectives include improving surveillance in the Arctic to enable the monitoring of military movements, adversary activities, and environmental incidents. At the same time, the strategy advocates intensifying cooperation with Arctic allies and partners, expanding joint military exercises, and strengthening the United States' deterrent presence in the region to counteract the militarisation efforts of Russia and China[35].

It should also be noted in this context that interest in Greenland has increased among the United States.This is not a new interest, but it has intensified in recent years, especially during Donald Trump's presidency. There are various factors behind this, which we will analyse later.

While attention remains focused on the Indo-Pacific, the US position reflects a clear desire to play a significant role in the Arctic in order to counterbalance the positions of Russia and China.

Other relevant actors

The other Arctic states are committed to maintaining cooperation and peace in the region, despite being concerned about Russia's stance and growing tensions.

Canada, which has long been reluctant to accept an allied military presence in the Arctic, has begun to reconsider this position in light of growing geopolitical tensions and is now considering the Alliance's role in the area to be more relevant[36].

---

[34] Escenario Mundial, “La nueva estrategia ártica de EE. UU. se centra en contrarrestar la colaboración entre China y Rusia, y en impulsar tecnologías avanzadas,” 27 de julio de 2024, https://www.escenariomundial.com/2024/07/27/la-nueva-estrategia-artica-de-ee-uu-se-centra-en-contrarrestar-la-colaboracion-entre-china-y-rusia-y-en-impulsar-tecnologias-avanzadas/

[35] U.S. Department of Defense, *2024 Arctic Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, junio 2024), https://media.defense.gov/2024/Jul/22/2003507411/-1/-1/0/DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY-2024.PDF

[36] Romero Junquera, "El ámbito geopolítico y de seguridad."

Norway, for its part, is concerned about the Kremlin's actions in the region. Due to its geographical proximity to Russia, with whom it shares borders, Norway is more open to NATO's involvement in defence matters. The Arctic is a strategic priority for both Norway and Russia. For Norway, this focus is driven by economic and geopolitical considerations. For Russia, economic interests aside, the determining factor is defence concerns, given that the thaw is exposing its northern territory[37].

Consequently, Norway, whose deterrence capabilities are limited, perceives Russia as a close and tangible threat. Consequently, it is seeking the support of NATO and the United States, and is committed to increasing the Alliance's presence in the area.

Together with Greenland and the Faroe Islands, Denmark constitutes an Arctic state. Following statements about possible US acquisitions in Greenland, it has adopted a much more active stance in recent months.

In 2021, Denmark established an Office for Arctic Affairs. Four years later, in 2025, the country approved the Defence Agreement for the Arctic–North Atlantic region. This plan includes significant investment in response to security and defence challenges in the area, with the aim of increasing military presence and strengthening the capacity to respond to threats[38].

Denmark currently intends to increase investment in Greenland to bolster defence and security by improving infrastructure, such as ports and communications, and promoting self-sufficiency in sectors like tourism and mining[39].

Notably, Denmark will assume the presidency of the Arctic Council during the period 2025–2027, promoting an agenda focused on biodiversity, climate change, pollution, and sustainable development.

[37] Aznar Fernández-Montesinos, “El Ártico como espacio de conflicto geopolítico.”

[38] Danish Ministry of Defence, *New agreement strengthens the presence of the Danish Defence in the Arctic and North Atlantic region* (Copenhagen: Danish Ministry of Defence, 27 January 2025), https://www.fmn.dk/en/news/2025/new-agreement-strengthens-the-presence-of-the-danish-defence-in-the-arctic-and-north-atlantic-region/

[39] Reuters, “Denmark willing to invest more in Greenland, Danish PM says,” Reuters, 17 de junio de 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/denmark-willing-invest-more-greenland-danish-pm-says-2025-06-17/

Denmark advocates robust defence and active Arctic governance to protect its interests in security, sovereignty, and sustainable development.

Meanwhile, Iceland, which played a pivotal role as a strategic base during the Second World War, is once again gaining geopolitical significance in the Arctic region. This resurgence in importance could pave the way for an eventual return of US troops to the country.

Generally speaking, Arctic countries are seeking to reconcile defending their interests — particularly with regard to access to resources and emerging maritime routes — with maintaining regional stability and avoiding increased tension.

NATO

Although it is not an Arctic organisation, seven of the eight Arctic states are NATO members. In the current geopolitical context, NATO's role in the Arctic is becoming increasingly important.

During the Cold War, the Arctic played a pivotal role in NATO's strategies. Despite decades of calm and stability following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Alliance's concern about the area has grown significantly in recent years due to geopolitical tensions and Russia's increased presence in the region.

The Alliance is concerned about Russia's ability to block access and movement in the north, as well as China's potential destabilising actions in the region. The Alliance is particularly focusing its attention on the GIUK Gap — the passage between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom — as it is a key access point for Russian naval forces, particularly submarines, to the North Atlantic[40].

To this end, NATO is promoting a strategy of deterrence against Russia and surveillance of Chinese activities in the Arctic, while strengthening the protection and security of its member states. While the Alliance is not considering the active militarisation of the Arctic, there is greater coordination in the deployment of defensive capabilities on its northern

[40] Romero Junquera, "El ámbito geopolítico y de seguridad."

flank. There is also a growing interest in defining a common strategy to ensure stability in the region without unnecessarily increasing tension[41].

European Union

Although the EU's involvement in the Arctic is minimal, it is worth briefly mentioning its presence in the region.

The EU's active Arctic strategy aims to promote a secure, sustainable, stable and prosperous region. However, it addresses broader issues and leaves security and defence matters, in which its powers are limited, in the background.

The Union's key policies in the Arctic focus on promoting sustainable development and driving the transition to a green economy. These policies also aim to strengthen the region's resilience to climate change and environmental degradation, protect the marine ecosystem — particularly fishery resources — and encourage more dynamic scientific cooperation.

The EU has also expressed its willingness to cooperate with Arctic countries, only three of which are EU members (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), and to collaborate with NATO in the strategic assessment of emerging regional challenges (23 of the EU's 27 Member States are also NATO allies).

Notably, the EU's application to join the Arctic Council as an observer was rejected due to a veto by Canada and Russia, partly motivated by disagreements on fisheries policy. This limits the EU's ability to influence multilateral decisions on the region's future directly and highlights geopolitical tensions between the EU and certain Arctic actors[42].

4. The case of Greenland and US interests

Following the dissolution of the Danish and Norwegian crowns in 1814, Greenland came under Danish control. Over the last two centuries, it has experienced various changes,

[41] Félix Arteaga, "La OTAN en el Ártico: el flanco sobrevenido," ARI 42/2023 (Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, 19 de mayo de 2023): 1–8, https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ari42-2023-arteaga-la-otan-en-el-artico-el-flanco-sobrevenido.pdf

[42] Caty Arévalo, "El Consejo Ártico se enfrenta al reto de preservar el océano helado," ABC, 22 de enero de 2013, https://www.abc.es/natural-biodiversidad/20130122/abci-consejo-artico-201301221113.html

finally becoming formally incorporated into Denmark as a county in the 1953 Danish Constitution. It is a sparsely populated, semi-autonomous island which, since 2009, has had the right to declare independence in a referendum; however, it remains heavily dependent on Danish state funds[43].

The United States has been interested in the island for a long time. In 1946, the then US President, Harry Truman, wanted to purchase Greenland for $100 million in gold. Denmark rejected the offer but later permitted a permanent US military presence[44].

In 2019, Donald Trump expressed his intention to purchase Greenland, a proposal that was rejected by Denmark once again. Since then, the US president's interest in the island has grown due to its enormous strategic value in the context of the Arctic. Greenland is a key gateway to the region thanks to its geographical position and the valuable resources it harbours, including oil, gas and rare earth minerals. Its proximity to the emerging north-east and north-west shipping routes, which skirt its eastern and western coasts, makes it a geostrategic location of the first order. This makes Greenland an ideal location for building support and supply centres (ports, warehouses and refuelling stations) for ships sailing the new Arctic routes. It would also allow for greater control over these trade routes, easier access to important minerals, and a stronger military presence in the region[45].

Donald Trump's actions in relation to Greenland are primarily driven by security concerns. Firstly, the island enables the United States to monitor the North Atlantic and the North Pole more effectively, since the flight paths of intercontinental missiles flying over Greenland are controlled from there, it is home to Thule Air Base (now known as Pituffik), a vital facility for the US missile defence and early warning system.

[43] Sarah Romero, "Por qué Trump quiere conseguir a toda costa el control de Groenlandia," National Geographic España, 2025, https://www.nationalgeographic.com.es/mundo-ng/por-que-trump-quiere-conseguir-a-toda-costa-control-groenlandia_24616/

[44] Christoph Hasselbach, "¿Por qué Donald Trump quiere comprar Groenlandia?," DW, 19 de enero de 2025, https://www.dw.com/es/por-qu%C3%A9-donald-trump-quiere-comprar-groenlandia/a-71342204

[45] Bartolomé Cánovas Sánchez, "¿Por qué Groenlandia es un factor estratégico en el Ártico?," Boletín IEEE (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos), n.º 20 (noviembre de 2020): 582–604, https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7772840

Greenland's resources are another reason why Trump is interested in the country. The island is home to deposits of gold, lithium, copper, iron, nickel, cobalt and uranium, and the melting ice is making them more accessible. However, it should be noted that the Greenlandic government has banned mining for environmental reasons[46].

Another reason for concern is the potential for expansion by China or Russia on the island. China has expressed interest in investing in Greenland's strategic infrastructure, which could facilitate the establishment of a permanent presence under a civilian guise. In response to Russia's increased military presence in the Arctic, the United States is seeking to prevent Moscow from strengthening its position and gaining a strategic advantage in the region[47].

In short, Greenland is a key piece for the United States, whose importance has intensified with the melting of the ice. In the context of the current competition between powers such as China, Russia and the US, establishing a presence in Greenland enables Trump to anticipate potential threats and consolidate his role as a dominant regional player.

5. Conclusions

A combination of strategic, economic and environmental factors has made the Arctic a priority geopolitical arena. The melting ice caused by climate change is transforming the region from an inaccessible area into one full of opportunities — and tensions. The opening of new maritime routes and access to vast natural resources have sparked interest among the region's states and external actors, such as China.

Each actor asserts its presence in the Arctic based on national security and geopolitical positioning, which has led to the deterioration of existing channels of cooperation. The Arctic Council is limited in its powers and has been weakened by Russia's boycott, reflecting the difficulty of sustaining inclusive governance spaces in an increasingly strategic and polarised environment.

[46] Jordan Friedman, “Por qué Trump quiere conseguir a toda costa el control de Groenlandia,” National Geographic España, 24 de enero de 2025, https://www.nationalgeographic.com.es/mundo-ng/por-que-trump-quiere-conseguir-a-toda-costa-el-control-de-groenlandia_24616/

[47] Hasselbach, “¿Por qué Donald Trump quiere comprar Groenlandia?”

The region is undergoing progressive and strategic militarisation, driven by perceptions of vulnerability, competition for resources, and disputes over sovereignty. Russia, in particular, has led this process by reactivating and expanding its military infrastructure in the region as part of its defence and resource control strategy. This has prompted a response from the United States, NATO and other Arctic countries, reacting with dynamics of rivalry reminiscent of the Cold War era. Meanwhile, China is seeking to consolidate its influence through a strategic presence that it presents as scientific and commercial, thereby adding complexity to multilateral relations in the area.

In short, the Arctic reflects the tensions of the new international order, where concerns about military security and access to strategic resources are reshaping its global role.

The region is heading towards an unstable equilibrium in which cooperation and confrontation coexist. Its future remains uncertain and presents a significant dilemma: it could either evolve towards greater cooperation or descend into a state of potential conflict, where the logic of competition and territorial control takes precedence over shared interests. The ability of the involved parties to manage their interests without escalating tensions will be crucial.

Mar Martínez Prieto

Grado en RRII por la UCM