Analysis
Paper

36/2026 05/05/2026

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The Arctic as a space of conflict

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This analysis is part of the Strategy Notebook:

Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts 2025. Published in December 2025

Abstract:

The Arctic has long been a distant, inhospitable and difficult space for human habitation. Historically, it has been a final frontier, which even became a space of separation between superpowers during the Cold War. During that period, large-scale exploitation began, gradually increasing due to the discovery of new hydrocarbon and mineral deposits, as well as fisheries. With the end of the bipolar conflict, it lost strategic interest, and the expression "Arctic exceptionalism" was used to highlight its limited influence in global geopolitics. However, after recovering from a deep internal crisis, Russia began to regain its position in the region. The exploitation of its resources, new maritime routes, and control of maritime and airspace are shaping the Arctic into a new space for cooperation or conflict between great powers in their struggle for global hegemony.

Keywords:

Strategic competition, Russia, United States, China, Arctic.

How to cite this document:

ROMERO JUNQUERA, Abel, AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico y PÉREZ GIL, Luis V. *The Artic as a space of conflict*. Documento de Analysis Paper IEEE 36/2026. enlace web IEEE y/o enlace bie[3] (consultado día/mes/año)

Introduction

The Arctic Circle, currently located at 66° 33′ 46″ N, is one of the five main terrestrial parallels of astronomical value. It delimits the region in which, during the summer and winter solstices, the sun does not set or rise for twenty-four hours. However, this definition is insufficient to describe a region with common characteristics. For this reason, other indicators are used, such as the 10° isotherm in July, or the tree line, which marks the area where trees cannot grow.

It is considered to cover some 14,050,000 square kilometres, equivalent to 8% of the Earth's surface. This is a politically and geographically diverse region, but it is also a Mediterranean, that is, a portion of sea completely surrounded by the Eurasian and American continents that physically delimit it (López Ibor *et al.*, 2014). These factors mean that this space, in every sense extreme, acts as a strategic junction.

Indeed, the Arctic is a strategic junction, because whoever controls it dominates an area where three continents converge and can be accessed simultaneously. It is the nexus of two oceans and the immediate environment of two major nuclear powers, so control of it contributes to the balance of power between the two (Aznar, 2023).

Its coastline is occupied by Russia, Canada, Denmark (through the Faroe Islands and Greenland), Norway and the United States. To these should be added Iceland, Finland and Sweden, which, although they do not have an ocean coastline, are part of this geographical area. Among these eight countries are two nuclear powers and seven NATO members, which divides this sea between blocs.

Figure 1. Map of Arctic space

In addition, the Arctic connects to the Atlantic through the passage known by NATO as GIUK (an acronym for Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom) or GIN (Greenland, Iceland and Norway), centred on the Svalbard Islands (Spitsbergen). These passages were of great strategic interest during the Cold War because, in the event of armed conflict, they were to be blockaded to prevent Soviet submarines from reaching the Atlantic, thereby exerting negative control over this ocean and interrupting the link between Europe and the United States. Denmark, with the Faroe Islands halfway between Iceland, Norway and Scotland, complements Danish control over both GIUK and GIN.

The geographical imperatives remain. The Scandinavian peninsula lies between north-western Russia and the open waters of the Atlantic, providing control of Russia's north-western sea approaches (the Barents and Baltic Seas). This wedge-like, spur-like or outpost-like character explains the pressure Norway is under from its Russian neighbour.

The Arctic and Antarctic, the polar regions, share many similarities, which, starting with their extreme nature, mean that they are treated in a similar way despite their opposite natures. In this sense, Antarctica is an isolated land mass, a continent (the fourth largest in the world or the largest island), while the Arctic is physically the opposite, an ocean basin, an enclosed space bounded by land.

The legal status of the polar regions is disparate. However, both have common bases that have allowed them to be treated jointly in the common ground that has shaped a kind of 'polar law'. All this has led to different statutes. The characteristics of the former have made an *ad hoc* agreement possible and it has become a legally ordered space. In the latter, the diversity, strength and multiplicity of interests involved have not allowed this. As a result, while Antarctica has been internationally declared a zone for research and science, free from commercial, economic or military activity ( ), a *global commons*, in the Arctic each coastal country decides on the exploitation of its resources.

Another issue is the incidence and effects of climate change in the region. In fact, the poles are the areas of the world most vulnerable to global warming, as melting ice gives way to water that absorbs sunlight instead of reflecting it, causing it to melt even more. It is this 'positive feedback' that explains why warming in the region is three to four times greater than global warming.

As a result, the Arctic is undergoing a thawing process that has reduced the thickness of its ice cap by 30 to 40 per cent over the last thirty years. In 2015, the ice surface area was 9.7 million square kilometres, compared to 13.38 million in 2007. It is estimated that since 1978, it has lost an ice surface area equivalent to five times the size of Spain, making a completely ice-free summer likely by 2035. Every year, between 200,000 and 250,000 tonnes of this ice melt, and it is worth remembering the discovery in Greenland of DNA dating back more than two million years as a result of the thaw. Thus, if all the ice in Greenland melted, the global sea level would rise by up to six metres.

The melting ice makes borders accessible that were previously impassable in practical terms, creating new security scenarios. This is happening at a time when the region has the shortest distance between Russia and the United States, which encourages militarisation, especially of its airspace.

The disappearance of the ice also brings with it improved accessibility to resources and the opening of new shipping routes. This convergence has led to the emergence of new players in the region, such as China and India. In the case of China, 46% of its GDP depends on maritime traffic and 80% of the oil it imports passes through Malacca, making an alternative route of utmost interest.

The so-called Northeast Passage and Northwest Passage are routes of increasing accessibility. The latter, seven thousand miles long in the Canadian Arctic, links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and would reduce the distance between the United States and Asia by 15%. The Northeast Passage or Northern Sea Route (NSR) is the easiest to navigate, running along the Russian coast and connecting the Pacific and Atlantic without having to pass through Suez, Panama or the Cape of Good Hope.

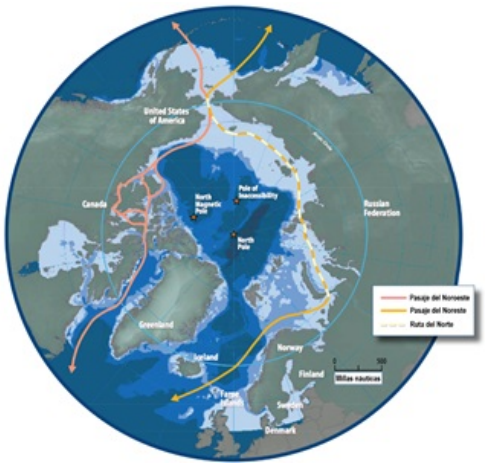

Figure 2. Map of Arctic routes

This second route was only navigable during part of the summer, but climate change is favouring its progressive expansion. In the summer of 2017, a merchant ship made the journey to South Korea in nineteen days, 30% faster than via the Suez route and without an icebreaker escort. A year later, in January 2018, another Russian ship, the first in the middle of winter, made the journey between South Korea and Sabetta, on the Yamal Peninsula.

This route is 40% shorter in distance between Europe and the Far East, some 3,900 miles, or twelve to fifteen days less, although the adverse weather conditions that can be expected and the dangers to navigation reduce the advantage to 30%. The distance between Tokyo and New York, to give another reference, is reduced by 3,700 miles. As a result, in 2018, eighteen million tonnes were transported along the Russian coastline, 80% more than the previous year; in 2019, the figure was twenty-six million, and in 2024, it reached 37.9 million. It is estimated that by 2035, this figure will reach 130 million tonnes (Pérez Gil, 2025a: 535-557).

The Arctic is an area rich in resources. In this undefined space where the great powers converge, it is estimated that around 30% of the world's gas reserves and between 13% and 20% of its oil reserves are located. Added to this are mineral resources, which account for 40% of the world's palladium, 26.8% of diamonds, 15% of platinum, 11% of cobalt, 10.6% of nickel, 9% of tungsten and 8% of zinc. Then there are the rare earths present in large quantities in Greenland and Sweden, which are of particular interest to China. In addition, fisheries account for between 4% and 5% of global catches. Most of these riches are still difficult to access, although in some comparatively warmer areas, such as the Barents Sea, this is already being achieved.

The melting ice, combined with other factors such as rising commodity prices and technological advances, has made natural resources, from hydrocarbons to fisheries, more accessible and profitable. These can also be exploited in a milder climate, which reduces production costs. All of this has contributed to changing the *status quo* in the region. In fact, it has encouraged a kind of "race for the Arctic" that runs counter to the cooperative reality that prevailed until the war in Ukraine. This race seeks to legally validate the domination of an ever-expanding space by consolidating previous advances that remain as milestones or references.

This is not, strictly speaking, a division of this ocean, but rather an expansion of the territory based on what has already been allocated; this serves as legitimisation and is the basis for further advances. The result is demands that, although formulated in legal and scientific terms, are in fact political in nature and are presented by exploiting existing grey areas and ambiguities.

In the Arctic Ocean, the Law of the Sea was used to delimit this space. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes, in general terms, a territorial sea of twelve miles, an adjacent area of another twelve miles and an exclusive economic zone of two hundred miles, which could be extended to the length of the continental shelf, each with its corresponding rights and obligations. Thus, approximately half of the Arctic Ocean is international waters, even though states claim rights over their continental shelf. This is the underwater continuation of the continents[1] .

The five circumpolar states seek to extend their sovereignty and economic zone under this regulation, as well as under the unique circumstances offered by their location and history. UNCLOS sets a deadline of ten years after signing to submit claims. Norway ratified it in 1996 and submitted its claims in 2006; Russia ratified it in 1997 and submitted its claim in 2001; Canada ratified it in 2003 and submitted its claims in 2013; Denmark ratified it in 2004 and submitted a claim in 2014. The United States, for its part, has not yet ratified it, although it submitted claims in 2025.

All this at a time when the period of low tension in the Arctic has come to an end, as it has been unable to escape the dynamics of confrontation sparked by the war in Ukraine. This has undermined an instrument of governance and consensus such as the Arctic Council, created in 1996, and has also broken the geopolitical balance in the region following the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. And the lack of governance encourages power struggles.

[1] UNCLOS, in Article 76, allows continental shelves to be extended when a State has scientific data demonstrating that certain geological or geographical features of the seabed are related to the continental shelves. However, the waters beyond the territorial sea are free seas, and the Convention limits the sovereignty of States by declaring that the seabed is the 'common heritage' of mankind and that its exploration and exploitation 'shall be carried out for the benefit of all mankind, irrespective of the geographical situation of States'.

The West and its geopolitical vision of the Arctic

In just a few years, the Arctic has gone from being a space of peace and cooperation to one of growing geopolitical tension, as a result of the return to strategic competition and scenarios of confrontation between major powers. Of the eight Arctic states (A8), all except Russia belong to the community known as the West, which has been responsible for designing and directing the global order in recent decades, based on rules that are now being challenged by many countries in the international system.

Since the end of the Cold War, relations in this predominantly maritime region have been governed by the Arctic Council at the institutional level and by UNCLOS at the regulatory level. For years, this form of governance facilitated a scenario marked by stability, low tension and cooperation, a period that has been called "Arctic exceptionalism", defined by the adage "High North, Low Tension" (Dams and Van Shaik, 2019). The premises were that geopolitical struggle should not play a leading role in the region and that climate change issues should be addressed as the main threat to the Arctic.

Despite growing tension between Russia and the West over the past two decades, which arguably began with NATO's eastward expansion and continued with Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, its intervention in Syria and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Arctic relations remained stable.

During this period, some exercises between NATO states and Russia were cancelled and activities in some cooperation forums were suspended, but cooperation continued in others, and attempts were made to preserve this Arctic exceptionalism. However, tension and mistrust have been growing to such an extent that Norway itself has called for a greater NATO presence and even an official Arctic policy (Bykova, 2024).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a turning point in relations between the A8, resulting, among other things, in the *de facto* paralysis of the Arctic Council, as the seven Western countries cut off cooperation with Russia. Thus, geopolitical tensions have returned and organisations such as NATO are regaining a prominence they had lost after the end of the Cold War. The accession of Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024 to NATO has complicated the unstable balance within the Arctic Council, where there are now five NATO members on one side and Russia on the other.

This war has therefore caused a rift that has changed the security landscape in the Arctic as well. Abruptly, geopolitics is once again determining regional relations, and the Arctic Council is ceding prominence to NATO and, to a lesser extent, to the European Union (EU). While for years the disputes and disagreements between the Arctic states, particularly between Russia and Norway, remained bilateral, the new situation created by the war in Europe has led to the emergence of NATO in a region where, until then, it had played a limited role. This presence has come about mainly at the request of Norway and Canada, which previously advocated keeping the Alliance out of Arctic disputes in order to facilitate some control over possible regional geopolitical tensions.

New approach to Arctic security by the United States

Since the end of the Cold War, and unlike Russia, the Arctic had not been a region of priority interest for the United States. In terms of energy resources, it has its needs adequately covered by using *fracking* technology, and in foreign policy it has more h r priority fronts such as the Indo-Pacific. In terms of security, the Arctic was an area of low tension and cooperation between states, including Russia, as the heir to the former Soviet Union.

However, in recent years, factors such as Russia's militarisation of the Arctic and China's growing presence, initially for economic reasons (access to resources and use of maritime routes), have attracted increasing attention and, it could be said, concern from the United States. This gradual change has been evident in recent strategic documents from the US government. In October 2022, the Biden administration approved the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (The White House, 2022a) and the current National Security Strategy (The White House, 2022b). The latter devotes a section to the Arctic for the first time and highlights the need to increase the US presence to preserve peace and stability in the face of growing Russian and Chinese power. The National Defence Strategy, also from October 2022, takes a similar approach, but emphasises that the main priority is the Indo-Pacific (US Department of Defence, 2022).

It can be said that its stance towards the Arctic is essentially reactive. The United States is not willing to allow either Russia or China to gain control of the region. There are four key elements of interest. First, ensuring freedom of navigation in Arctic sea routes,

countering Russian attempts to dominate the RMN. Second, control of the seas, in particular the outlet to the Atlantic through which Russian nuclear submarines of the Northern Fleet transit. Third, dominance over Greenland to exercise control over the airspace of the shortest route between Russia and the United States in the event of conflict (early warning and missile defence). And fourth, access to resources, particularly minerals and rare earths, where China's control of the global market leaves the United States in a vulnerable position.

These issues were consolidated in the US Department of Defence's 2024 Arctic Strategy (US Department of Defence , 2024), which adopts a *monitor and* respond approach and seeks integrated deterrence to be carried out with its partners and allies. This document contains numerous references to NATO, reflecting the United States' growing concern about the region, but also its awareness that its maritime priority lies in the Indo-Pacific and that it needs to work with its allies.

However, as a result of the low priority given to the Arctic in the US foreign agenda for decades, it does not have sufficient resources to deal with the new geopolitical scenario. An example of this reality is the small and ageing US icebreaker fleet (three ships, but only two operational) compared to Russia's nearly fifty[2] , the insufficient military presence in the region, and the lack of adequate maritime infrastructure, such as deep-water ports[3] .

In this unfavourable scenario, the attitude of the new Trump administration does not help, as it jeopardises critical alliances in the Arctic, particularly with Denmark over the issue of Greenland and with Canada, which it needs if it wants to compete with China and Russia (Conley, 2025), as pointed out in the 2024 Arctic Strategy.

The United States is strengthening its presence and capabilities in the region, but it would need to deploy more personnel, better port facilities, more sensors and satellite communications, and unmanned vehicles to be able to detect (*monitor*) Russian and Chinese activity and respond (*respond*) if necessary. The problem is that the Trump administration is taking unilateral action without consulting its allies, when it seems more

[2] Russia currently has more than fifty icebreakers, seven of which are nuclear-powered, as discussed below. As noted below, China is building its own fleet of icebreakers. See also: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2320887/artico_2025_dieeeo52.pdf/

[3] In any case, in recent years, increased geopolitical tension in the region has led to an increase in military presence, particularly in Alaska, as well as the announcement of plans to modernise old military installations in the region.

reasonable to strengthen cooperation in order to share efforts and jointly develop the necessary capabilities. According to the latest document cited, NATO should take the initiative to secure Europe's northern flank (*High North*)[4] , which would allow the United States to focus on the Indo-Pacific (Mckenzie, 2025).

In this Arctic scenario, characterised by growing geopolitical tension, the United States is taking important measures such as the reactivation of the 2nd Fleet based in Norfolk (2018), whose main mission is to ensure and defend freedom of navigation in the North Atlantic, with a special emphasis on the *High North* and the Arctic[5] . Thus, in 2018, an American aircraft carrier (*USS Harry S. Truman*) was deployed in the area for the first time in twenty-seven years (Mizokami, 2018); a presence that has been repeated, most recently in August and September 2025 with the *US Navy's* most modern aircraft carrier *(USS Gerald Ford)*, along with other allied naval vessels[6] .

Figure 3. US aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford in Arctic waters. Source: 6th Fleet Public Relations Office

[4] The *High North* is understood to be the European Arctic, stretching from Greenland in the west to the border between Norway and Russia in the *Barents* Sea in the east, and encompassing areas of strategic importance such as the GIUK.
[5] See: https://www.c2f.usff.navy.mil/About-Us/Mission/
[6] See: https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/display-news/Article/4296815/ford-carrier-strike-group-operates-in-the-high-north-with-nato-allies

NATO's return to the Arctic

Since its creation in 1949, NATO has focused on the security of Western Europe. However, the Arctic was a region of priority interest during the Cold War, a key area for halting Soviet expansion towards the west, as well as for ensuring the defence of North America and northern Europe.

During that period, Norway built important military installations in the north of the country to monitor the movements of the Soviet fleet towards the Atlantic[7] . Iceland and Greenland also played a key role in protecting the maritime gap between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom (the GIUK), considered a critical bottleneck for NATO security.

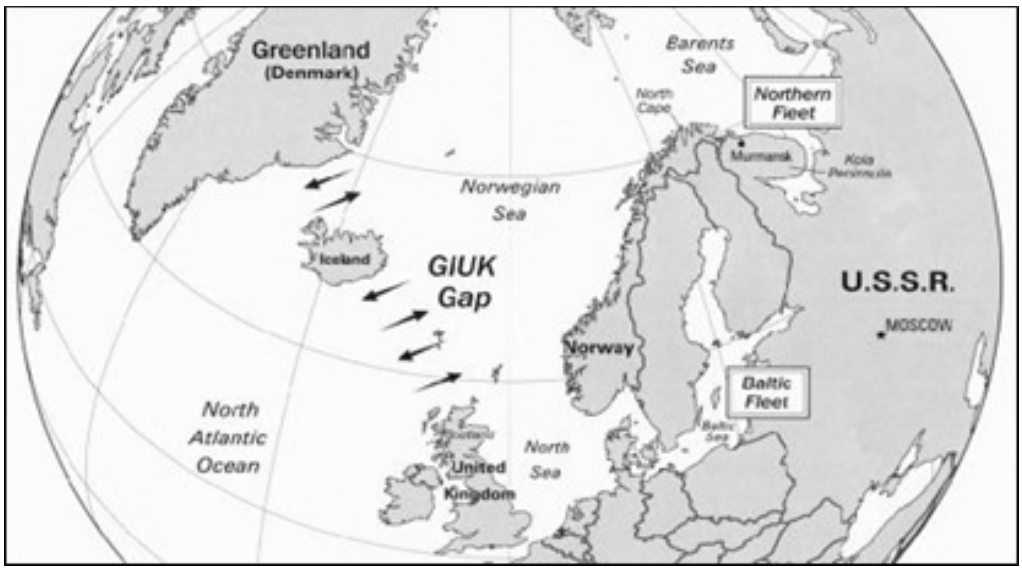

Figure 4. GIUK Gap during the Cold War

Greenland was vital to NATO's strategic and security interests in the North Atlantic, leading to the signing in 1951 of a Defence Agreement between the United States and Denmark on that territory, which allowed bases (many of which had existed since World War II) to be established for NATO defence activities and to operate with virtually no restrictions (e.g., the Thule Air Base, now called Pituffik, which housed bombers and a huge radar station) (Bykova, 2024).

[7] For Soviet leaders, the Svalbard Islands were essential for the security of their naval fleet stationed on the Kola Peninsula, as well as for their ships and submarines to access the Atlantic.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the definitive collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a new era in relations between the West and Russia, with the Arctic taking a back seat. The era of Arctic exceptionalism began, marked by regional stability and cooperation.

In this new scenario, the Arctic lost prominence in NATO, which focused on its expansion eastward and on crisis management operations and cooperative security activities, to the detriment of the deterrence and defence activities that had characterised its actions during the Cold War.

The post-Cold War strategic scenario, characterised by a more stable Arctic, led to the closure of military facilities and the region began to lose importance within the Alliance structure itself. It was decided to deactivate the Allied Command Atlantic (SACLANT), which was responsible for the security of maritime lines of communication between North America and Europe, key to reinforcement in the event of conflict. In 2003, it became the Allied Command Transformation (SACT), with the task of promoting continuous innovation of the Alliance's forces and capabilities, and lost its maritime focus.

A clear example of how the Arctic had taken a back seat is the current Maritime Strategy of March 2011[8] , which does not even mention the region. In fact, until 2021, references to the Arctic in official NATO documents are almost non-existent, when the concept of *the High North* is revived[9] . During the thirty years following the end of the Cold War, the lack of concern for the Arctic stemmed both from its having become an area of stability and from the lack of agreement among the allies on NATO's role in the region. Both Canada and Norway chose to keep a low profile in their disputes with Russia and sought to resolve them bilaterally.

Even as relations between Russia and the West grew more distant, the Arctic remained outside the growing tensions until the outbreak of war in Ukraine, which sparked renewed interest from the Alliance. Perhaps the most important geopolitical event has been the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, which has strengthened collective defence in the north-eastern region. Thus, as noted above, seven of the A8 countries are now NATO members, a situation that has further strained relations between Russia and the

[8] See: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_75615.htm

[9] NATO's Strategic Concept, approved at the Madrid summit on 29-30 June 2022, states that "In the *High North*, its ability to disrupt or interfere with reinforcement and freedom of navigation in the North Atlantic is a strategic challenge for the Alliance". Available at: https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/

West and seems to take us back to the bipolar balance of the Cold War period (Bykova and Houck, 2024).

The growing militarisation of the Arctic, the increased activity of the Northern Fleet and the growing presence of its nuclear submarines have led the West, and NATO in particular, to perceive the region as unstable. The main challenge it faces is Russia's zero-sum thinking based on political realism, with Russia seeking recognition of the Arctic as part of its sphere of influence (Piechowicz, 2025).

However, the Alliance countries are not well prepared for this competition. NATO currently lacks the means and critical infrastructure (ships with polar capabilities, surveillance systems, missile defence) to become a credible force in the Arctic, and its approach continues to be more reactive than strategic. Steps are being taken to regain a presence in the Arctic through exercises such as *Dynamic Mongoose* and *Nordic Response* (Odgaard, 2025).

At the structural level, some progress has been made. In 2018, the creation of *Joint Force Command Norfolk*[10] was approved. Its commander is also the commander of the US 2nd Fleet and is assigned the missions of protecting transatlantic maritime lines of communication, including the *High North* as a gateway for Russian naval forces to the Atlantic. In this way, it has become, to a certain extent, a successor to SACLANT. It reached operational capacity in 2021.

The European Union as a secondary player in Arctic geopolitics

Of the Arctic states, only three are members of the EU: Sweden, Finland and Denmark. Furthermore, the Arctic seas only wash the shores of Greenland, an autonomous region of Denmark, but one that does not formally belong to the EU due to an internal decision by that country. Thus, geographical constraints limit the EU's geopolitical role in the Arctic, particularly in its maritime dimension.

The Joint Communication 27/2021 on the EU's Engagement with the Arctic[11] addresses the challenges affecting the Arctic from a broad perspective conditioned by climate change and focused mainly on environmental issues, sustainable development, scientific

[10] See: https://jfcnorfolk.nato.int/about-us
[11] See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12683-EU-Arctic-policy-update_en

cooperation and indigenous issues. However, it barely addresses the geopolitical dimension.

The document states that climate change is a threat to global peace and security and considers that the militarisation of the Russian Arctic increases security challenges, which is why many countries, including NATO itself, are closely monitoring the situation with a view to responding to Russian assertiveness in Arctic waters and airspace if necessary. However, the EU is not involved and no actions are proposed to counter Russian power, which is left to NATO. This suggests that the EU limits its actions in the Arctic to its h contribution to consolidating NATO's role in security and defence, but without any ambition to become a geopolitical actor.

To understand this limited role of the EU, it is important to note that the Union requested observer status in the Arctic Council more than fifteen years ago, a request that has not yet been accepted, as Russia and Canada remain opposed on issues related to fisheries and it does not appear that, in the current context, the matter will be resolved.

As a result of its limited military power and capacity as a geopolitical actor, the EU plays a minor role in the tensions in the Arctic, which are essentially limited to the impact of sanctions against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, its three Arctic Member States address security issues either bilaterally with Russia or within the framework of NATO (the accession of Sweden and Finland to the Alliance is a clear reflection of the EU's inability in this regard), leaving the Union with a secondary role. In the future, either this situation will be corrected or the EU risks being politically marginalised and strategically overtaken in the Arctic (Komin and Hosa, 2025).

Although the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has committed to reviewing the Communication on the Arctic and has even announced negotiations with Iceland on defence issues, including its possible participation in the SAFE financial instrument[12] , these are competences that lie with the Council. Therefore, relevant decisions and actions must be taken by Member States and not by the Commission, whose powers in these matters are limited to the defence industry.

The fragmentation affecting NATO countries' stance on the Arctic is also replicated in the EU. Several European countries are reviewing their policies to adapt to the changing

[12] It makes available to Member States credits of up to €150 billion to develop common defence capabilities.

geopolitical, environmental and economic landscape in the region. In March 2025, France published its "Defence Strategy for the Arctic ", which focuses on maintaining regional stability and protecting its interests[13] . Germany published its own Arctic policy in 2024, and the Netherlands, in line with France, combines a military, technological and economic approach with the defence of its interests, which it will update in the next review of its Polar Strategy (2021-2025) (El Hajji, 2025). These initiatives, while reflecting a clear interest in the region on the part of various non-Arctic countries, reveal the division within the EU regarding the Arctic in all its dimensions, including geopolitics and military matters (Stępień and Raspotnik, 2023).

Disagreements between Denmark and the United States over Greenland

One of the issues that has negatively affected Western countries' stance on the Arctic has been the tensions between Denmark and the United States over Greenland. It is the largest island in the world, an autonomous territory of Denmark, with its own Parliament, and the 2009 Danish Self-Government Act would allow it to hold a referendum on independence. It is NATO territory but has not been part of the EU since 1985 by its own decision.

However, as the Arctic thaws, Greenland's economic and strategic importance is growing as a result of easier access to its enormous resources (energy, minerals, rare earths) and its geographical location in relation to polar sea routes, which are becoming increasingly navigable.

Furthermore, its geographical location gives it enormous geopolitical value. The United States considers it a key territory for its security, located halfway between Russia and the United States, as it is the shortest route between them in the event of conflict. Since the Second World War, it has been the guarantor of its security, a circumstance endorsed in 1949 by the Washington Treaty and in 1951 by the Greenland Defence Treaty. During this period, several US military bases were established to provide early warning and defence capabilities against missiles, as well as to station military assets for possible actions against Russia, including nuclear weapons.

[13] See: https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/enjeux-regionaux/poles/strategie-defense-larctique-fruk

At this point, it is worth mentioning the repeated US attempts to take over the island, always by peaceful means. There were initiatives to purchase the island in 1867 (coinciding with the acquisition of Alaska from the Russian Empire), in 1946 under President Harry Truman, and in 1955 by President Dwight Eisenhower. However, after the end of the Cold War, interest in Greenland waned, until in 2019 President Donald Trump brought the issue back to the table during his first term, citing national security, resource protection and control of Arctic sea routes as reasons. Therefore, the current proposals are not new and are based on solid geopolitical foundations (Carafano, 2025; Witker, 2025b: 89-93).

However, the emphasis of the current US administration has caused tensions between allied countries, which has had a negative impact on NATO's internal cohesion and generated mistrust in Denmark, but also in Canada, which is very sensitive to changes in the Arctic. Consequently, it is important to seek a consensus formula that avoids tensions over something that the United States already has *de facto*, namely military sovereignty over Greenland, ratified in 2004. In any case, it must be acknowledged that President Trump's rhetoric on Greenland has made Denmark pay more attention to it and announce extra military spending to guarantee its security.

Russian ambitions and capabilities in the Arctic

A glance at a world map is enough to recognise that Russia is the largest country on the planet, has the widest coastline on the Arctic Ocean and dominates its entrances to the Norwegian Sea and the Bering Strait. Furthermore, in the geographical area comprising the Arctic Ocean, its adjacent seas and the regions they wash, huge deposits of hydrocarbons and minerals have been discovered over the last hundred years. In more recent decades, processes associated with climate change are turning this area into a new promised land as a result of melting ice, but also into a new arena for strategic competition between major powers.

The current Russian leaders believe that the country's future lies in its development, within the framework of a new phase of strategic thinking, strengthening of state power and a return to traditional areas of influence , including strong support from the Russian

Orthodox Church as a legitimising force for state policies. To this end, they have long-term plans and strategies with policies that are driven directly from the Kremlin[14] .

At the institutional level, the Russian presidential structure includes a special envoy whose main mission is to coordinate state policies affecting these territories at the highest level. In the federal government, a deputy prime minister is responsible for coordinating the work of the ministries with jurisdiction over the Arctic, as well as monitoring and controlling the implementation of the federal programme for the development of the Far East and the Arctic, which is one of the most important. It covers everything from the development of the Arctic territories, the promotion of maritime transport through the NSR and rescue and salvage resources, to submarine and space cable connectivity in these regions[15] .

At a lower level is the special representative of the state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom for Arctic development and its Northern Sea Route Directorate, which has been assigned management responsibilities in this area, precisely because of its long experience in operating the world's most advanced icebreaker fleet, *Atomflot*. Its main task is to safely increase maritime transport through the NSR under the direct guidelines of the Kremlin (Pérez Gil, 2025a).

The aim of these plans, policies and strategies is to expand, dominate and control Russian sovereignty in the Arctic. To this end, in addition to increasing its permanent presence through military bases and scientific facilities, it is improving and expanding its scientific research programmes throughout the region. These plans go hand in hand with growing regulatory activity that aims to establish exclusive and exclusionary control over those territories that they consider to be under their sovereignty[16] and over which they intend to exercise state powers[17] . All this activity is part of long-term development plans, but now in a scenario of competition for global hegemony (Grady, 2024). However, they

[14] See statements by Russian President Vladimir Putin at the 10th Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok on 5 September 2025. Available at: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77927

[15] The federal Arctic Development programme, in conjunction with the federal space programme, envisages the creation of a constellation of satellites in full and permanent polar orbit over these territories.

[16] On 2 August 2007, a manned mini-submarine Mir descended to a depth of 4,261 metres to plant a Russian flag on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean, on the Lomonosov Ridge, with claims of sovereignty.

[17] The Russian Arctic continental shelf covers more than four million square kilometres and is a maritime area rich in oil, gas and raw materials. It is estimated that more than 20% of all the world's undiscovered hydrocarbon reserves are concentrated there.

boast that they have unique capabilities to control the Arctic, which are unmatched by other coastal states and other powers with Arctic aspirations.

It should be noted, first of all, that according to studies by the Russian Geological Institute, they have proven reserves of oil for seventy years, gas for a hundred years and coal for several hundred years, which ensures them a prominent position in the global energy markets for a very long period of time. This reality influences many political and strategic decisions and allows Russian leaders to exert an influence that goes far beyond their current material power.

Strategic approach to the Arctic

Historically, for Russia, the Arctic has been a frontier territory, explored since ancient times but almost unexploited until recent times. The Soviet Union focused on its development, mainly of ports and mining operations. During the Second World War, its ports received a large part of the supplies sent from the United States, which overcame the German naval blockade from occupied Norway. Shortly afterwards, the start of the Cold War pitted the first two nuclear powers in Europe and Asia against each other, but also in the High North, where the development of the first ballistic missiles showed that the shortest route to reach the enemy's territory was to fly directly across Arctic territory. At that point, a new vision of the world map emerged, centred on the Arctic, as illustrated by the United Nations emblem itself.

Figure 5. UN emblem

Consequently, it was this threat of nuclear war that determined the strategic vision for the Arctic. New naval bases were quickly built on the Kola and Kamchatka peninsulas, at opposite ends of the country, which began to house the new nuclear submarines equipped with ballistic missiles (SSBNs). The Russian Navy specialised in polar navigation, and its submarines dominated those waters, although they suffered heavy losses in their struggle with the United States (Giltsov, Mormul, and Ossipenko, 1993). At the same time, they began to build a fleet of large nuclear icebreakers with unique capabilities that allowed them to escort ships responsible for transporting supplies to military bases and scientific facilities in the Arctic territories. Their submarines and nuclear icebreakers also made regular incursions into the geographic North Pole (90º N).

The Russian authorities have sought to maintain these capabilities inherited from the Soviet era. Starting in 2010, they launched a programme to modernise naval bases in the Arctic and, shortly thereafter, began to receive new SSBNs that ensure the counterstrike capability of their nuclear deterrent force (Pérez Gil, 2025b). They also have new attack submarines (SSNs) equipped with cruise missiles with dual conventional and nuclear capabilities, enabling them to carry out sub-strategic and theatre missions. Russian Navy commanders emphasise that their submarines are proficient in polar navigation[18] , conduct regular exercises in the Arctic ice pack and have the capability to launch their weapons in icy conditions.

Figure 6. Strategic nuclear submarine emerging from Arctic sea ice, 2022

[18] President Putin said during a meeting with nuclear experts in the city of Sarov (formerly Arzamas-16) that "This is our military advantage. And research, even in this Arctic zone, is extremely important to us." Available at: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77837

Shortly thereafter, construction began on a new generation of Arktika-class nuclear icebreakers, with a displacement of 33,000 tonnes, to support civilian shipping operations, mainly in three maritime areas: the Kara Strait, the Gulf of Ob and the East Siberian Sea. There are four in service and plans are in place to have around ten by the beginning of the next decade[19] . Their main mission is to escort large gas tankers sailing from the Sabetta terminals to Asian ports (Staalesen, 2025), with the advantages of time and cost savings noted at the beginning.

Figure 7. Nuclear icebreakers, 2025

Russian military presence in the Arctic territories

The return to stability, together with a significant increase in hydrocarbon prices in the first decade of this century, facilitated the reorganisation and modernisation of its armed forces. The activation of a first state armaments programme for 2011-2017 (PEA-17) made it possible to begin improving remote bases and recovering settlements that had been abandoned in the 1990s due to lack of funds. From 2012 onwards, improvements were made to bases located in Novaya Zemlya, Franz Josef Land and the islands of Eastern Siberia, key positions for dominating and controlling the Arctic Ocean. To this end, they were equipped with advanced weaponry and equipment such as S-400 anti-

[19] On 26 May 2025, President Putin approved plans to build two new ships, with production scheduled to begin in 2026. Available at: https://portnews.ru/news/379923/

aircraft systems and Bastion-P and Bal anti-ship missiles, and anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) zones were created to confront any adversary. As can be seen, in Russian planning, military deployment and economic development go hand in hand .

Figure 8. Severny Klever Base in Kotelny, Sibir Islands

In addition to the permanent presence of its nuclear submarines, the Russian Navy began to carry out regular naval deployments along the RMN with several objectives: to ensure presence, to dominate navigation in icy seas, and to train ground forces in joint operations. On several occasions, due to weather conditions, they have required the escort of *Atomflot* nuclear icebreakers, demonstrating the suitability of having this type of vessel available at any time of year.

The Aerospace Forces also began to deploy combat aircraft to remote airfields. Sukhoi Su-33 and Su-35S fighters are regularly deployed to Novaya Zemlya. The improvement and extension of the runways allow for the refuelling of Ilyushin Il-76 heavy transport aircraft, as well as the deployment of strategic bombers to territories such as Anadyr, in the Chukotka region, close to Alaska.

In 2014, the joint strategic command of the Northern Fleet was established, and in January 2021, it became an independent military district with responsibilities throughout the Arctic territory. However, the reorganisation of the western strategic command as a

result of the war against Ukraine reversed this measure and reassigned resources, assets and personnel to the new Leningrad Military District. In addition, the creation of a new North-West Army Corps was ordered, which will be stationed on the Russian-Finnish border to respond to the new situation created by Finland and Sweden joining NATO.

It should also be noted that the Arctic is a testing ground for advanced Russian missiles, particularly at the Nenoksa firing range in the White Sea (Pérez Gil, 2025c). Ballistic missiles and military satellite launch vehicles are launched from Plesetsk, in the Arkhangelsk Oblast (province). They also have a nuclear test site in Novaya Zemlya, although for now there is a complete moratorium on testing by the major powers.

Plans for the development of the Northern Sea Route

The war in Ukraine has posed new challenges to the NSR's expansion plans. In the short and medium term, Western sanctions have affected the volume of cargo transported and prevented the milestones set by the Russian president himself from being met[20] . The sanctions have affected the volume and types of cargo, as well as the ships sailing in the Arctic seas, including fishing vessels[21] . However, these measures do not only affect maritime transport passing through the Arctic, but all modes of transport. Therefore, if we take the most recent data on both cargo traffic and Arctic ports, we can see a sustained increase in volumes which, although not offsetting the overall decline, does show the growth of the NAMR[22] and, therefore, progress in long-term development plans.

The focal points of the RMN are, from west to east, Murmansk, on the Kola Peninsula, with its large naval port, the main base for nuclear icebreakers and plans to convert it into a major distribution centre for coal and liquefied natural gas (LNG); Sabetta, in Yamal, where Russia's main gas fields are located, both in operation and in development[23] ; Dixon, at the mouth of the Yenisei River, with its port and logistical capabilities; much

[20] In 2024, cargo volume in the RMN was 37.9 million tonnes, less than half of the 80 million target set by the President in Russian in 2018. On 21 May 2025, GlavSevmorput Director General Sergey Zybko announced an ambitious target of 110 million tonnes by 2030. Available at: https://sudostroenie.info/novosti/45253.html

[21] On 27 August 2025, Russian authorities announced reciprocal measures against the ban on Russian fishing vessels operating in EU and Norwegian maritime areas and exclusive economic zones. Available at: https://fish.gov.ru/main-news/2025/08/27/ilya-shestakov-rossiya-primet-otvetnye-mery-v-otnoshenii-norvezhskih-rybopromyslovyh-sudov/

[22] Data available at: https://sudostroenie.info/novosti/45995.html

[23] The largest marine infrastructure ever built operates here, a 640,000-tonne gas processing platform, which was built in Kola and towed to its operating area.

further to the northeast, Pevek, in Chukotka, as a gateway to the Baimskaya mining basin[24] and, finally, beyond the Bering Strait in the Pacific Ocean, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, where there are also plans to build a major LNG redistribution centre for Asian ports.

Figure 9. Floating nuclear power plant in Pevek

In the long term, there are plans for the giant nuclear icebreakers of the new Leader class, with a displacement of 69,600 tonnes, to operate from a new base in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski. Their mission will be to cover the most difficult stretch of ice in the winter season, which is the sea area from the East Siberian Sea to the Bering Strait. The first ship, *Rossiya*, is being built at the Zvezda shipyard in Bolshoy Kamen, Vladivostok, at an estimated cost of more than 200 billion roubles (about £2.5 billion at current prices). In addition, AFRAMAX gas tankers are being built at these shipyards to transport LNG from Sabetta to ports on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts[25] . Although there is repeated talk of state plans, it should be borne in mind that all this infrastructure is financed by large

[24] As part of this project, in 2019, the first floating nuclear power plant was commissioned in the port of Pevek, and there are plans to build four more, under the leadership of Rosatom.
[25] On 26 May 2025, Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov (one of the Kremlin's protégés) chaired a government meeting on shipbuilding plans, where a target of 1,600 large-tonnage vessels by 2026 was set, particularly gas and oil tankers.

Russian energy corporations such as Gazprom, Novatek and Rosneft, which are owned by businessmen close to the Kremlin and, in some cases, by partners from its early days.

During the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok held from 2 to 6 September 2025, Rosatom signed an agreement with Rosmorrechflot for the development of river transport routes for goods from Siberia and the Far East to the RMN, as well as the creation of logistics centres in river ports. It also announced plans to build two new nuclear power plants, one in Fokino, Primorie, to be started in 2026, and another in Khabarovsk, to meet the electricity demands of these projects.

Cooperation with China and India in the Arctic

It was previously stated that the Russian authorities are actively working to establish an exclusive regime over the Arctic and, above all, to control its resources, from gas, oil and mining to fisheries. In the past, they only agreed to coordinate with other Arctic states within the Arctic Council and opposed interference by other countries in an area they consider to be under their exclusive control, a position shared by Canada and Norway.

However, the war in Ukraine has imposed a new political-strategic approach. On the one hand, the rejection by Western powers of Russian initiatives as part of their attempts to isolate Russia has led to the blockade of the Arctic Council, which had been so successful in regional cooperation, particularly between Russia and Norway on sensitive issues such as access to the Svalbard archipelago, fisheries in the Norwegian and Barents Sea limits, and search and rescue capabilities in those waters.

On the other hand, anti-Russian sanctions have forced Russia to seek new markets for its hydrocarbons, which has caused a huge shift in global energy flows. India stands out in this regard, having quickly become the main importer of Russian oil thanks to the discounts applied to the price, which it then re-exports to Europe and North America. The same has happened, albeit to a lesser extent, with China, some Persian Gulf countries and Africa. At the same time, Western sanctions also led to the withdrawal of Western energy companies from joint projects in Russian territory, with Japanese and South Korean companies being the last to pull out.

These measures have posed a huge challenge for the Russian authorities, firstly because they must maintain a high level of hydrocarbon exports in order to continue financing a

long war in Ukraine (Pérez Gil, 2024a). Secondly, because a substantial part of their exports, and therefore of their tax revenues, comes from these exports, which finance everything from the structure of the state to public services. Thus, they cannot afford to stop exploiting known deposits or deplete current deposits without replacement, such as Shtokman in the Barents Sea.

To this end, there are plans for Chinese and Indian companies to enter both the Yamal and Sakhalin projects, from which their Western counterparts have withdrawn. On 20 August 2025, First Deputy Prime Minister Manturov highlighted these aspects during the annual meeting of the Russian-Indian Intergovernmental Commission.

In the case of China, cooperation seems to be deeper and more long-term because, despite its remote geographical position, it has its own strategy for the Arctic and aspires to have free access to those seas[26] , a circumstance that, until now, had not occurred due to the consensus among the members of the Arctic Council on their undisputed possession of the assets and rights in that polar Mediterranean.

Thus, in March 2023, the Russian and Chinese governments created a joint group on the NMR, in October 2024 the Ministries of Foreign Affairs established a dialogue on the Arctic, and in December 2024 the first meeting of the NMR cooperation body was held. As a corollary, on 8 May 2025, Presidents Putin and Xi made a joint statement in Moscow emphasising their common position in favour of peace and stability in the Arctic, as well as their willingness to prevent military and political tensions in the region[27] . However, it is worth noting that the first summit between the Russian and US presidents since the start of the war in Ukraine was held in Alaska (15-16 August 2025), an Arctic territory.

On the Russian side, the Russian government appointed the vice-chairman of the State Commission for Arctic Development as special representative for Arctic Development and Cooperation with China. This collaboration therefore seeks to achieve Arctic development objectives, fill capacity gaps in critical sectors where sanctions have had the hardest

[26] Chinese President Xi Jinping stated during his visit to Moscow on 8 May 2025 that "there has been significant progress on issues related to the development and commercial use of the Northern Sea Route," while Putin mentioned plans for logistics centres in Murmansk and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. Available at: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76873

[27] Available at: http://kremlin.ru/supplement/6309

impact, such as shipbuilding[28] , and continue to bring in foreign currency through energy exports.

On the Chinese side, this has taken the form of the construction of new icebreakers (three so far), which are used for scientific expeditions in the Arctic and Antarctic. large Chinese merchant ships are increasingly frequent in the RMN, and since 2017, there has been talk of the Polar Silk Road as part of its global projection strategy (Pardo Delgado, 2025). In addition, they are showing increasing activity in deep-sea operations, where they can benefit from Russian capabilities and experience (Pérez Gil, 2024b: 575-597), in preparation for an upcoming confrontation with the United States in the Pacific. However, in the short term, a Russian-Chinese alliance does not seem likely (Myklebost and Lanteigne, 2024). These are strategic projections that are being considered in the face of a rapidly emerging new distribution of global power (Witker, 2025a).

Conclusions

Over the last decade, the major powers have entered a new phase of strategic competition, which has become clearly apparent since the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Two antagonistic blocs have emerged: the West on one side, and an informal and loosely structured bloc on the other, led by Russia and China, which seeks to attract most of the Global South. This division is gradually spreading to all areas of geopolitical interest, including the Arctic.

Russia's growing militarisation is creating a classic situation derived from the security dilemma, in a regional and global geopolitical scenario where force and deterrence are replacing rules and cooperation.

For many years, NATO has had a regional approach characterised by fragmentation. The traditional lack of interest on the part of the United States was compounded by the caution of some allies who sought to preserve their relations with Russia. The consequence is that, despite the importance of the High North, NATO continues to lack an official position on the Arctic, an issue that needs to be corrected in order to address the challenges that will arise in the coming decades.

[28] In 2024, New New Shipping established a joint venture with Rosatom registered and under jurisdiction in China to explore avenues of collaboration in the NSR.

For its part, the EU has a limited role confined to the implementation of environmental policies and sustainable development, despite official statements such as the Union's own Global Strategy of 2016. In a scenario of growing tension, aggravated by the escalation in Ukraine and with China increasingly present, it seems unlikely that it will gain prominence in the region.

For Russia, the Arctic is a key part of its strategy as a country. Despite the problems caused by Western sanctions, Russian leaders are sticking to their long-term plans. The development of the Arctic territories is conceived as a race for the next hundred years, ranging from dominance of the energy markets to scientific and technical leadership in areas such as nuclear energy. With this vision, they are implementing their strategy of expanding the Northern Sea Route.

But these plans are also part of their strategy to act as a major power in the Pacific, which is gradually becoming the main arena in the struggle for global hegemony.

In this scenario, complex issues arise, such as the reconfiguration of regional governance, either through the Arctic Council (the Arctic's governing body) or through the creation of new forums that allow other non-Arctic powers but which have an interest in the region, such as China or India; or the maintenance of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which has been widely respected by the Arctic states until now.

The existence of these institutions brings stability to the region, allows differences to be resolved peacefully and resolves the conflict dilemma in favour of negotiations. Because for the great powers, the alternative to achieving their vital interests is often the use of force, war.

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