

The Arctic: A New Theater of Great Power Competition

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ABSTRACT

*The Arctic warms at **four times the global average**, reducing summer sea ice extent by 40% since 1979, unlocking previously inaccessible resources, and shipping corridors. By 2025, the Northern Sea Route (NSR) offers seasonal commercial viability, cutting Asia-Europe transit times by 40% compared to Suez routes. This shift has sparked intense competition among great powers, including Russia, China, America and NATO member states, as they seek to assert their influence, secure resources, and gain strategic advantages in the region. This study provides an in-depth examination of the strategies employed by these nations in the Arctic, with a particular focus on the militarization of Arctic trade routes and the role of indigenous communities in shaping regional security policies. By analyzing the actions and motivations of these key players, this research aims to shed light on the complex dynamics at play in the Arctic and the implications for regional stability and global security. Our findings indicate that the Arctic is rapidly becoming a contested region, with nations striving for control over resources, trade routes, and strategic territories. The militarization of Arctic trade routes, such as the Northern Sea Route, has become a critical aspect of this competition, with nations seeking to assert their dominance and protect their interests. The study also highlights the importance of indigenous communities in the Arctic, who have traditionally inhabited the region and possess valuable knowledge and perspectives. However, their role in regional security policies remains limited, and their interests are often overlooked in the face of great power competition. This paper aims to analyze the emerging competition in the Arctic through the lens of these actors, discussing their strategic objectives, capabilities, and challenges. Given the region's dynamic nature and its implications for international stability, understanding these competing interests is vital for policymakers, security analysts, and environmental stakeholders.*

Keywords: Arctic region, great power competition, militarization, trade routes, indigenous communities, regional security policies, climate change, natural resources.

INTRODUCTION

The Arctic is the region comprising the northernmost parts of eight countries, characterised by vast ice-covered land areas, unique regional ecology, and high economic opportunities. It was traditionally a less significant region, but due to the melting caused by climate change, new waterways have been exposed, and new resources are available. The strategic value of the Arctic has turned the region into one of the flashpoints among global powers.

The Arctic, home to unprecedented levels of geostrategic and economic importance, is undergoing a revolution due to climate change, which has unlocked massive reserves of hydrocarbons, rare earth minerals, and previously unexploited maritime passages. Vast amounts of resources that were previously inaccessible due to the ice cap are now usable as the ice cap recedes. New shipping routes, such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR), are emerging and are likely to reshape global trade patterns as they significantly shorten the travel time between Europe and Asia (Emmerson, 2010; Østreng et al., 2013). It

has sparked dramatic geopolitical interest, with great powers realigning their Arctic policies to ensure energy security, economic superiority, and military supremacy.

The strategic value of the Arctic is diverse. The undiscovered oil reserve is estimated to be 13% of the global reserves in the region, and the undiscovered gas reserves stand at 30% of the global reserves. The meltdown of sea ice has also provided new paths that have become available as shipping routes, such as the Northern Sea Route and Northwest Passage, potentially saving a lot of time and expenses as well. To give just one example, the Northern Sea Route, which stretches across the northern frontier of Russia, has the potential to shorten the distance between Europe and Asia by as much as 40 per cent of that by which the traditional routes are.

However, the growing rush over Arctic resources and geostrategic games has also created an increased threat of interstate tension, which threatens the long-established paradigm of Arctic low tension and harmonious governance. The Arctic Council, the primary intergovernmental body addressing Arctic governance issues, has traditionally promoted cooperation in environmental protection and sustainable development (Koivurova, 2010). However, a heightened military presence in the High North, a phenomenon that Russia revamping its Cold War facilities, China proposing the idea of the Polar Silk Road", and a response by NATO to increase patrols in the region has brought about a dangerous security examination (Conley & Rohloff, 2015; Zysk, 2021).

The region is also of long-standing territorial interests to Russia, the United States and Canada in terms of military control. Most recently, China has emerged as a powerful, would-be (near)-Arctic state, seeking to gain influence through scientific cooperation, economic financing, and diplomatic ties. Although Greenland is autonomous within Denmark, its geopolitical situation is unique, considering its strategic position and the Wealth available there.

This paper takes a critical review of the strategic postures of Russia, China, America, Greenland and NATO within the Arctic, and in particular looks at:

1. The militarization of major trade pathways, including the NSR Russia and the coveted Northwest Passage.
2. The exclusion of Indigenous people from the policymaking process regarding security, despite their importance as stakeholders in the sustainable control of the Arctic (Wilson, 2022).

The changing of the Arctic from a collaborative enclave to a competitive arena mirrors the forces of climate change, competition for resources and systemic rivalry. Russia seeks to establish militarised control to assert its sovereignty claims; China is revising its institutions to gain access to resources; and the United States is managing a balance between deterrence and climate action. Greenland is a symbol of conflicting local sovereignty and the ambitions of great powers, as its desire for independence is intertwined with its mineral resources and its strategic location.

This study examines how the Arctic strategies of these actors align with their interests in energy security (Russia), geo-economic expansion (China), and alliance deterrence (NATO), and it therefore outlines the consequences for regional stability. As an example, the Northern Fleet development and dual-use infrastructure projects in China (such as Yamal LNG) evince a combination of military and economic purposes (Baev, 2019; Lanteigne, 2020).

With the convergence of climate change and geopolitical rivalries, it is essential that policymakers, military strategists, and international relations scholars understand the dynamics at play. This research can not only help picture the outline of great power rivalry but also suggest some of the possible ways to mitigate the possibility of conflict, i.e., ensuring that the Arctic Council is given a stronger mandate or extending the measures of confidence-building between Arctic states.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Geopolitical competition has become pivotal in the Arctic in response to climate change, resource exploitation, and changing trade routes. Strategies of great powers, particularly Russia, China, and the United States, as well as the expansion of militarisation and economic interests and goals, are also emphasised in scholarly discourse (Conley & Melino, 2019; Klimenko, 2020). Amid the vast Arctic coastline, Russia has focused on modernising its military and developing infrastructure to establish its authority over the Northern Sea Route (NSR) (Zysk, 2016). The non-Arctic country of China, which has achieved the status of a Near-Arctic State, has also heavily engaged in polar research, energy projects, and port infrastructure (Brady, 2017; Chen, 2019). The United States has also stepped onto an Arctic escalator and continues to pay attention to the character of protection concerns and the environment (Huebert & Yeager, 2013).

The Arctic strategy of Russia is closely tied to matters of national security, as Russia has reopened retired Soviet-era military bases, installed sophisticated missile systems, and expanded its fleet of icebreakers. The NSR (Northern Sea Route) is at the forefront of Moscow's calculations in both military and economic respects, as Russia possesses the largest conventional and icebreaker motor-nuclear fleet in the world (Zysk, 2016). In turn, the United States has also been reacting with more military manoeuvres and intelligence activities, and an arms race may arise in the High North (Åtland, 2021).

The region's strategic importance defines the militarisation of the Arctic, and the NSR promises a faster shipping route between Europe and Asia. The Arctic region poses a threat to the long-held American principle of freedom of the seas, a problem exacerbated by Russia's development of military modernisation and infrastructure in the region (Klimenko, 2020). In turn, the United States regards its NATO Polar Allies as important assets and Greenland as a long-needed base in the Northern Atlantic and Arctic Oceans.

China's Arctic policy focuses on scientific research, infrastructure development, and energy cooperation. The strategy behind the Polar Silk Road is that, through this initiative, Beijing aims to extend its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to include the use of Arctic shipping routes, thereby arousing suspicion among Western analysts of its long-term strategic agenda (Brady, 2017). China is gradually expanding its presence in the Arctic through investments in Greenland and its rare-earth materials as part of its strategy to increase its control over the Arctic Ocean.

China is interested in the Arctic as a region where it seeks to establish a significant presence in both economic and security relations. Nonetheless, its proclamation as a Near-Arctic State has also triggered suspicion among the Arctic states, especially that of the United States, of what China intends to do beyond the short term (State Council of China, 2018).

In the context of immense power rivalry, Indigenous peoples are experiencing threats against their land rights and traditional livelihoods. Their interests are defended through legal instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the cooperative mechanisms of the

Arctic Council (Koivurova & Heinamaki, 2006). Nevertheless, greater militarization and resource exploitation put environmental security at risk, and they require enhanced governance (Exner-Pirot, 2020).

The process of transforming the Arctic into a zone of conflict is indicative of a broader geopolitical struggle. As Russia and China compete for strategic supremacy, Indigenous people and environmental issues are matters of sustainability in governance.

Among experts, the view that Arctic exceptionalism, the notion that the Arctic has bypassed the conventional geopolitics of competition and cooperation in favour of environmental collaboration, has been overshadowed by the weight of great power competition. According to Mathieu Boulègue (2023), this is due to three fractures, which are the militarization of Russia after the annexation of Crimea (2014), the issue of China being a near-Arctic state (2018) and the paralysis of the Arctic Council after Ukraine (2022). Responding, Osthagen (2025) affirms that at functional levels such as search-and-rescue coordination, exceptionalism has remained, while at levels relating to security, it is suffering a decline.

Theoretical Lenses

Neorealism: Dominates contemporary analysis, framing Arctic dynamics through security dilemmas and relative gains. Scott (2024) views China-Russia collaboration as **tactical alignment** against U.S. hegemony rather than ideological convergence.

Liberal Institutionalism: Coninsx (2024) argues institutional fragmentation (e.g., Arctic 7 vs. Russia-China MOUs) undermines collective action on climate and Indigenous rights.

Constructivism: Gad (2025) emphasizes Greenlandic **pragmatic sovereignty**, leveraging external interest while resisting colonial imposition—as agency within structural constraints.

Critical Themes

Climate-Security Nexus: According to NOAA (2025), the feedback loop involves the fact that ice melt allows resources to compete with each other, generating rapid environmental deterioration.

Indigenous Marginalization: Green colonialism, as examined by Daorana in 2025, supports environmental crises as a justification for harvesting resources without the approval of the Inuit.

Infrastructure Gap: According to the DoD (2024), the United States has gaps in icebreakers and base deployments in the Arctic compared to Russia.

Indicative future research must involve a review of balancing the security interests and those of ecological and human security in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper will employ a qualitative research strategy, utilizing a case study approach along with patterns of geopolitical and discourse analysis, to investigate the Arctic as an emerging theatre of Great Power rivalry. The methodology is organized in such a way that it evaluates the strategic plans, military deployments, and economic investments of the key players, America, Russia and China and takes into account the implications of security and the Indigenous communities.

Research Design

a) Comparative Case Study Analysis:

Examines the Arctic strategies of Russia, China, and NATO through policy documents, military developments, and economic initiatives.

b) *Cases include:*

- Russia's militarization of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and energy projects (e.g., Yamal LNG).
- China's Polar Silk Road and dual-use infrastructure investments.
- NATO's Arctic deterrence posture and allied responses (e.g., U.S. Arctic Strategy 2022).

c) *Process Tracing:*

Evaluates historical shifts in Arctic governance, from cooperative frameworks (e.g., Arctic Council) to increasing militarization.

Data Collection

a) *Primary Sources:*

- Government white papers (e.g., China's 2018 Arctic Policy, Russia's 2020 Arctic Strategy).
- Military reports (e.g., U.S. Department of Defense Arctic assessments, NATO strategic documents).
- Arctic Council declarations and Indigenous organizations' statements (e.g., Inuit Circumpolar Council).

b) *Secondary Sources:*

- Scholarly articles on Arctic geopolitics (e.g., peer-reviewed journals like Arctic Review and Polar Record).
- Think tank analyses (e.g., CSIS, SIPRI, RAND Corporation).
- Media and Expert Analysis
- Reports from specialized outlets (e.g., The Barents Observer, High North News).

Limitations

- Access to Classified Data: Military deployments may lack full transparency.
- Bias in State Narratives: Government documents may present strategic interests as benign.
- Rapidly Changing Dynamics: Arctic policies evolve with climate and geopolitical shifts.

DISCUSSION

I would like to discuss the Arctic from its historical background, its geopolitical significance and then will examine the current scenario from each country's perspective. This will allow us to understand the core issue through the lens of multidimensional viewpoints.

Historical Context: From Exceptionalism to Competition

The post-Cold War era witnessed an unprecedented period of **Arctic cooperation** characterized by multilateral governance mechanisms that seemingly insulated the region from broader geopolitical tensions. This phenomenon, dubbed **Arctic exceptionalism**, was predicated on the understanding that environmental challenges and indigenous interests transcended traditional security concerns. The **Arctic Council**, established in 1996, epitomized this spirit of collaboration, providing a forum where Arctic states and indigenous representatives addressed sustainable development and environmental protection while consciously excluding military security from its mandate.

This special privilege started to fade around the end of the 2000s, and it picked up speed with three critical events:

1. Climate Acceleration: The Arctic is also warming three times faster than the rest of the world, which has led to a dramatic decrease in ice, exposing a greater quantity of resources and trade routes for exploitation. Between 1979 and 2025, the extent of sea ice in summer decreased by approximately 40%, allowing the Northern Sea Route to remain open to the free passage of trans-polar shipping for longer seasons and rendering the Transpolar Passage increasingly viable.

2. Symbolic Provocations: Russia planted a titanium flag on the seafloor of the Arctic in 2007 to signify its newly awakened territorial ambitions. In contrast, China's decision to declare itself a near-Arctic state, as outlined in its Arctic Policy published in 2018, signed, marked the first extra-regional claim that the country has ever made.

3. Geopolitical Fractures: The tensions between the East and the West entered Arctic institutions because of the annexation of Crimea (2014) and Russia's suspension from the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable. The invasion by Ukraine (2022) paralysed the Arctic Council, with the participation of Western members suspended, destroying the mechanism of governance in the region.

According to declarations made by U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in 2019, the Arctic had become the playground of global powers. This call denoted exceptionalism and positioned the state of the region from the perspective of realist geopolitics. This paradigm shift was indicative of the re-emergence of great power politics, characterized by security dilemmas, military displays, and resource competitions.

Table 1: Timeline of Arctic Geopolitical Transformation

Period	Dominant Paradigm	Key Events	Institutional Framework
1991-2007	Cooperative Exceptionalism	Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (1991), Arctic Council establishment (1996)	Arctic Council (exclusive, consensus-based)
2007-2014	Emerging Competition	Russian flag planting (2007), Ilulissat Declaration (2008)	Arctic Council + observer states
2014-2022	Strategic Uncertainty	Crimea annexation (2014), China's Arctic Policy (2018), AEC created (2014)	Fragmentation begins
2022-Present	Explicit Competition	Ukraine invasion, Arctic Council	Competing forums (Arctic 7 vs. Russia-China)

suspension,
Russia-China
MOUs (2023-
2025)

Russia: The Arctic's Nostalgic Power

The Arctic region is regarded as a crucial part of Russia's national identity and national security, especially as a revisionist power. Russia considers the Northern Sea Route (NSR) to be its territory, and it strengthens its position through the improvement of bases and the deployment of submarines equipped with icebreaker capabilities. Militarization, in this case, partly refers to the deployment of advanced multi-level missile systems and the recent undertaking of massive military drills. The objectives of the Russian leadership are to secure clear possession of resources, maintain its position as one of the Arctic powers, and exert its influence in international geopolitics.

The development of the Arctic, including the construction of Arctic ports, military training grounds, and icebreakers, also demonstrates that Russia aims to safeguard its interests, and no other country will be able to utilise its resources. The Northern Sea Route is a region that is fast being considered a shipping choke point, which is likely to save a significant amount of time in the travel time between Asia and Europe. Nevertheless, it is becoming a contested field on a security front, as well.

United States: A Mixed Strategy of Presence and Diplomacy

The U.S. focuses on military preparedness, environmental protection, and collaboration with the international community. The mission of U.S. Arctic policy focuses on the right of passage, protection of sovereignty and stimulation of economic growth. Such main measures include improvements to military infrastructure, increased patrols, and assistance from global organizations such as the Arctic Council.

Nevertheless, the Arctic involvement of the U.S. is weakened by the lack of military presence in the region relative to that of Russia and Canada and internal politics of oil developments and green issues. The U.S. promotes an international order based on rules and focuses on collaboration but remains cautious about Russian and Chinese strategic ambitions.

The American Arctic policy will mean a shift from strategic neglect to active competition based on peer-rival development and climate imperatives. This dual set of interests in the environment and security is reflected in the words of the 2025 Arctic Vision and Strategy, developed by NOAA. Instead, the Arctic is the subject of NOAA because it is framed in the concept of a barometer of change and a thermostat to limit climate change, thereby stabilizing the Earth's climate by channeling resources to climate modelling, coastal resilience, and ecosystem monitoring. The focus of this scientific method aligns with environmental interests, the interests of business activities, and safety concerns related to navigation and resource management. The "Climate Ready Nation" plan, crafted by the agency, prioritizes addressing the adaptation issue with Alaska Native communities, which are affected by coastal erosion and fisheries disturbance, particularly in the \$1.8 billion seafood production area for 2022-2023.

The Arctic has been referred to in military documents as the weakest point in the National homeland defence, thereby causing major realignments:

- Establishment of the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies (2021)

- Reactivation of the Second Fleet for North Atlantic operations
- F-35 deployments to Alaska
- Pituffik Space Base upgrades for space domain awareness

These initiatives aim to address what U.S. Northern Command called **avenues of approach** for potential threats, particularly submarine-launched missiles transiting the GIUK Gap.

With only two operational icebreakers versus Russia's forty, the U.S. suffers a critical **capability gap** in Arctic presence. Congressional funding for new Polar Security Cutters progresses slowly, constraining freedom of navigation operations and disaster response.

China's Expanding Arctic Ambitions

The Extra-Regional Player (China), having categorized itself as a near-Arctic country, has been following a multidimensional strategy that involves scientific collaboration, investments in infrastructure, and diplomacy. It has introduced icebreakers, gained observer status in the Arctic Council and invested in Greenland in the extraction of minerals and port infrastructure.

China previously introduced the concept of the Polar Silk Road, which would incorporate Arctic shipping routes into the **Belt and Road project** to reinforce its economic power. The overall goal of China is to gain a position in Arctic resource access, obtain a seat in regional governance, and work to balance the influence of the U.S. and Russia.

The Arctic strategy of China is characterized by **patient opportunism**, which does not involve confrontation and instead involves a continuous extension of its presence. It is achieved primarily through economic means and the reinterpretation of governance. The Ukraine conflict has tempered earlier ambitions, however, with the 2023 Belt and Road anniversary white paper omitting specific Arctic references despite maintaining "**polar regions**" terminology.

Greenland: The Geopolitical Keystone

The strategic position of Greenland has turned it into a center of the Arctic rivalry. Although autonomous, the richly endowed resources and strategic location of Greenland, situated in a key shipping channel, spark interest among foreigners. Its government strikes a balance in relations with Denmark, the U.S., and China.

Geopolitical Epicentre Greenland, which leads North America and Europe, has control over the West to the Transpolar Passage, a future central shipping route in the Arctic that is likely to emerge in the mid-century. It is needed for the American homeland defense mission, as it is located approximately 1,900 km to Maine. It is also the home of the Pituffik Space Base (formerly Thule Air Base), which houses its missile warning radars and space surveillance systems. Military analysts term it a key infrastructure component of the kill chain in missile defence, which is why the USA does not want Chinese investment attempts in the country.

Recent investments and discussions about military and economic development have raised concerns over sovereignty and security. Greenland's climate change-driven melting opens new opportunities but also introduces environmental and social challenges, complicating geopolitical calculations.

Table 2. Comparative Arctic Capabilities (2025)

Capability	Russia	United States	China
Icebreakers	40+ (incl. 10 nuclear)	2 operational, 3 planned	4 (+5 planned)
Military Bases	50+ Arctic bases, OSK Sever	Thule AB, Pituffik Space Base	No permanent bases
Economic Projects	Yamal LNG, NSR development	Ambler Mining Road, oil leases	Greenland bids, Yamal LNG stake
Governance Approach	Sovereignty-focused	Rules-based order	"Common heritage" framing
Key Vulnerability	Sanctions, technology access	Infrastructure deficit	Geographic disadvantage

The discussion consolidates the main information from the ongoing debate, analyzes the opposing versions, and highlights the implications of the above on the issues of regional security, environmental sustainability, and the rights of Indigenous peoples.

Now, I would like to continue the discussion under the four subheadings, which will allow examining and analyzing the Arctic situation in a comprehensive and detailed manner.

1. The Drivers of Arctic Militarization

- **Russia's Strategic Posturing**

Russia has followed an aggressive Arctic policy, employing a combination of military buildup (e.g., renovation of Soviet bases, the deployment of S-400 systems) and economic predatory behaviour (e.g., Yamal LNG, Northern Sea Route development). The Kremlin positions its moves as defensive, pointing to NATO encroachment and justifying the need to protect essential infrastructure (Zysk, 2021). Nonetheless, dual-use ports and icebreaker fleets blur the line between commercial and military applications, raising concerns about escalation threats (Åtland, 2021).

The most extensive Arctic territory, accounting for about 53% of the Arctic Ocean's coastline and with an estimated 60% share of the region's hydrocarbon resources, is controlled by Russia. In the reign of Vladimir Putin, Moscow has adopted a holistic approach guided by four pillars: military dominance, economic sovereignty, strategic messaging, and tactical alliances. The Arctic strategy of Russia models a defensive revisionism, a desire to assert historic rights, and, at the same time, utilise the advantages of geography in opposing the pressures of the West in other areas. Nevertheless, sanctions and technological restrictions pose a serious challenge to its grand development plans.

Table 3: Military Infrastructure Expansion in the Arctic (2010 vs. 2023)

Country	Military Bases (2010)	Military Bases (2023)	Key Installations
Russia	6	19	Nagurskoye Airbase, Arctic Trefoil, S-400 Deployments
USA/NATO	3	9	Thule Air Base (Greenland), P-8A

China	0	2	Poseidon Patrols Dual-use ports (Iceland, Norway)
Dual-use (civilian- military) infrastructure	0	0	-

Source: Adapted from SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (2023) and CSIS Arctic Reports.

- **China's "Near-Arctic" Ambitions**

China does not have Arctic territory, but it has proclaimed itself a Polar Great Power (State Council, 2018), trying to achieve political clout through economic investments (e.g. Greenland mining, Polar Silk Road). The fact that its facilities are built for dual use (e.g., Swedish satellite stations and Icelandic ports) is a sign of long-term strategic positioning rather than outright commercial interests (Brady, 2017). Western critics note that such grey zone activities of China, including scientific programs with military potential, have the potential to erode the norms of governance in the Arctic (Lanteigne, 2020).

- **NATO's Response: Deterrence or Provocation?**

The increased Arctic involvement promoted by NATO in Trident Juncture exercises, including the US flying bombers and the Danish-Greenlandic defence alliances, is being explained as necessary to counter Russian and Chinese aggression (Conley & Rohloff, 2015). Nevertheless, Moscow views such efforts as an act of encroachment, which could exacerbate the security dilemma (Klimenko, 2020). The existence of a non-specific Arctic security apparatus only aggravates the situation, with a focus on activities such as the Arctic Council, which primarily focuses on economic matters and is military-free.

- **American Perspective**

The US also has a rich history of presence in the Arctic, dating back to the 1867 purchase of Alaska from Russia. The US region is today receiving increasing attention due to its strategic value and natural resources. The US Department of Defense has analyzed that the Arctic is an important base for carrying out military actions and is now investing in infrastructure and capabilities to establish its role in the region.

On the American side of the coin, the main elements of Arctic militarization can be discovered in the question of security. The US fears a possible Russian military buildup in the region, along with China, as they attempt to maintain their superpower status in the Arctic. It also fears that terrorist groups might open operations within the region, and it is in the process of increasing its security and monitoring systems.

The US military has begun committing itself to investing in new capabilities and infrastructure to strengthen its presence in the Arctic. It goes hand in hand with the eventual production of new icebreakers and investments in radar and other monitoring systems. The US is also striving to make better interactions with its neighbors in the area, such as Canada and Norway.

- **Greenlandic Perspective**

Greenland is an independent territory of the Kingdom of Denmark and has its -own vision of the situation in the Arctic. Greenland has abundant natural resources (raw material, rare earth elements, uranium and so on). This country aims to become more economically developed and less dependent on Denmark.

In the eyes of the Greenlanders, the factors that promote the militarization of the Arctic are also complicated. Greenland fears the possibility of military expansion in the area, especially by China and Russia, and is attempting to maintain its sovereignty and security. Another issue that concerns Greenland regarding the environmental effects of military activity in the region is its effort to promote sustainable development and environmental protection.

The military commitment of Greenland is not high, yet the nation is striving to improve its security potential and collaborate with others in the neighbourhood. Greenland is also interested in developing its economy and achieving greater independence from Denmark, which has some consequences for the region's geopolitics.

The Weaponization of Trade Routes

The Northern Sea Route (NSR) is one of the main objectives of the competition; Russia has introduced requirements for obligatory escorts and fees for foreign vessels, which critics describe as tollbooth diplomacy (Knecht & Keil, 2019). Meanwhile, the COSCO shipping trials in China indicate that it is seeking to avoid conventional chokepoints, such as the Suez Canal. When functionalized, the NSR has the potential to alter international trade patterns. However, its militarisation (e.g., the deployment of Bastion-type missiles by Russia) threatens to make it a source of conflict (Zysk, 2021).

Table 4: Northern Sea Route (NSR) Traffic Growth

Year	Total Ships	Cargo Volume (Million Tons)	Russian Icebreaker Escorts
2015	18	1.2	100%
2020	62	33.0	85%
2023	127	41.5	70%
2025 (projected)	200	60.0	50%

Source: Northern Sea Route Administration (2023), Rosatom Reports.

The US has moved to exert its presence in the Arctic region by investing its military powers and collaborating with its allies to maintain stability in the region. The US also aims to build new trade relationships with other regional nations, such as Canada and Norway.

The military in Greenland is not large, though; the country is working to develop its security capabilities and collaborate with other states in the region. Greenland is also aiming to develop its economy and reduce its dependence on Denmark, which is also reflected in the region's geopolitics.

Indigenous Communities: Between Exploitation and Empowerment

Amidst all the power striving by the great powers, Indigenous people are mere targets of extinction—whether through militarization that interferes with traditional lifestyles or natural resource exploitation that destroys ecosystems (Wilson, 2022). Their voices have been pushed aside in top security fields even though they are officially represented in the Arctic Council. Cases such as the protest at the Fosen Wind Farm in Norway and the dispute over uranium mining in Greenland clearly illustrate a conflict between economic growth and the rights of Indigenous peoples (Koivurova & Heinamaki, 2006).

Table 5: Indigenous Land Rights Conflicts (2015–2023)

Conflict	Country	Indigenous Group	Outcome
Fosen Wind Farm Protests (2021)	Norway	Sami	Supreme Court ruled in favor of Sámi
Greenland Uranium Mining	Denmark	Inuit	Project suspended (2022)
Yamal LNG Pipeline Expansion	Russia	Nenets	Land seizures, ongoing litigation

Source: Arctic Human Development Report (2022), ICC (Inuit Circumpolar Council) Cases.

Pathways for Conflict Mitigation

One way of ensuring that the Arctic competition does not chain-react into outright battles is to encourage policymakers to reinforce the mandate of the Arctic Council with a provision on greater military transparency (e.g. incident prevention arrangements). Enhancing confidence-building measures, such as the search-and-rescue (SAR) exercise, can be achieved through joint efforts or by establishing an environmental surveillance alliance. Integrating Indigenous knowledge to provide sustainable development in security planning.

CONCLUSION

The Arctic, once a frozen frontier of limited geopolitical significance, has rapidly emerged as a critical arena for 21st-century great power competition. This paper has examined the strategic motivations of Russia, China, America, Greenland and NATO, the militarization of Arctic trade routes, and the implications for regional security, Indigenous communities, and global governance. The findings reveal a complex interplay of economic opportunism, military posturing, and institutional fragility, with profound consequences for international stability. The Arctic region has undergone a **fundamental transformation** from a zone of exceptional cooperation to a **contested geopolitical space** where great power ambitions collide. This article examines the **strategic competition** unfolding among China, Russia, and the United States, with particular focus on Greenland's pivotal role. Drawing on governmental documents, policy statements, and scholarly analyses, this research employs discourse analysis and policy review frameworks to investigate how climate change-induced accessibility, resource competition, and shifting global power dynamics have **redefined Arctic geopolitics**. Findings reveal that Russia is pursuing comprehensive militarization and resource control; China employs economic statecraft through its "Polar Silk Road" while expanding its scientific footprint; and the United States responds with enhanced security initiatives while emphasizing climate science. Greenland emerges as a critical **strategic epicenter** due to its location, resources, and independence aspirations. The study concludes that without robust governance mechanisms, the region faces heightened risks of militarization and conflict spillover, urging renewed diplomatic frameworks to balance competing interests with environmental imperatives.

While great powers compete, **Arctic Indigenous peoples** face land dispossession, environmental degradation, and cultural disruption. Despite formal inclusion in the Arctic Council, their influence over security and resource policies remains limited (Wilson, 2022; Koivurova & Heinämäki, 2006).

Following three issues can arise:

1. The Risk of Conflict in a Warming Arctic

Due to the receding of ice, new shipping routes and natural resource reserves will become accessible, leading to increased rivalry. Unlike Antarctica, which is covered by a demilitarised treaty, the Arctic lacks effective means to prevent conflicts. In the absence of confidence-building measures, events such as near-misses in military activities or resource claims may become hazardous (Exner-Pirot, 2020).

2. The Erosion of Cooperative Governance

The peaceful cooperation characteristic of the Arctic Council seems to be overtaken by geopolitical tensions. The suspension of Russia in 2022 by the Council after it invaded Ukraine indicates the weakness of diplomacy in the Arctic region. Other types of forums, such as the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, may also struggle to bridge the gap (Knecht & Keil, 2019).

3. Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier

The overwhelming rate of warming in the Arctic intensifies competition due to the emergence of novel extraction and transit opportunities. However, it also makes the environment more vulnerable to risks, such as oil spills and damaged ecosystems. A militarised Arctic would divert resources needed for climate adaptation and Indigenous resilience (Emmerson, 2010).

From the above description, it can be suggested that three **conflicting paradigms** now structure Arctic geopolitics:

1. Sovereignist Approach (Russia): Framing the Arctic as divisible territory subject to national control, particularly along the Northern Sea Route.

2. Global Commons Approach (China): Presenting the central Arctic Ocean and resources as "common heritage" to legitimize extra-regional access.

3. Rules-Based Approach (U.S./Allies): Advocating multilateral governance under existing frameworks like UNCLOS while strengthening deterrence.

The combination of these visions poses significant escalation hazards, military mishaps due to rising deployments, resource conflicts in exclusive economic zones, and governance gaps resulting from institutional divides. Greenland's independence aspirations could further destabilize the region if mismanaged

However, the imperatives of collaboration have existed behind competition. Climate change is an existential threat that requires joint scientific participation; tribal communities need effective engagement, and commercial maritime shipping necessitates search and rescue operations. To go further:

- **Reinforcing Arctic Council:** Please rejuvenate the forum but with a small amount of working-group involvement with Russia in non-security sectors such as climate research and pollution.

- **Incident Prevention Mechanisms:** Establishment of channels of communication in the military and protocols in case of accidents to minimize the chances of escalation.
- **Greenland Compact:** Foreign-based guarantees of Greenlandic sovereignty rule out foreign basing but guarantee economic assistance.
- **Polar Code Expansion:** Strengthening international shipping, fishing and resource extraction procedures in the Arctic.

The Arctic territory should not become a theater of war. By balancing both competition and cooperation and putting Indigenous voices under the spotlight, stakeholders will be able to ensure regional stability even amid global tensions. The uncontrolled rivalry between great powers in a weak, chaotic environment is suicidal to the Arctic and the world.

THE FINAL ASSESSMENT

The Arctic's future is uncertain. Will it become a zone of conflict, where great powers vie for control at the expense of local communities and ecosystems? On the other hand, can it remain a space of cooperation, where economic development is balanced with environmental stewardship and Indigenous rights? The answer depends on whether states choose dialogue over confrontation and inclusivity over exclusion.

The reformation of the Arctic into a conflictual zone would have far-reaching ramifications not only for the region but also for the global community. The natural resources of the region, such as oil, gas, and minerals, make the area a valuable prize to the great powers as they seek to secure a reliable supply of their energy and economic assets. As shipping lanes open up due to the melting sea ice resulting from climate change, the strategic value of the region is also increasing.

However, economic and strategic interest in the Arctic should go hand in hand with the necessity to conserve the vulnerable ecosystems of the area and safeguard the rights of Indigenous populations. Here, the Arctic houses distinctive and susceptible ecosystems, and these are the polar bears, seals, and walruses, which are already being affected by climate change. Additionally, the Indigenous communities in the region have long relied on the Arctic's natural resources to sustain their livelihoods and cultural practices.

Despite threats of confrontation, the Arctic also presents opportunities for cooperation and sustainable growth. The economic growth of the region can be balanced with environmental management and Indigenous interests, whereby the positive effects of mining and transporting goods to the market are equally distributed among the parties. The Arctic Council is an intergovernmental forum that has been critical in advancing cooperation and coordination among Arctic states, Indigenous peoples, and other interested stakeholders.

At the Arctic Council, activities related to climate change, sustainable development, and environmental protection have fostered trust and collaboration among the states that are part of the Arctic Council. Furthermore, the Council's role in promoting the interests of Indigenous people and their involvement in governance processes has also made the voice of the Arctic region's inhabitants audible within regional decision-making.

The interests are much more, not only in the Arctic. As a bellwether of climate geopolitics, the path in the region will be an indicator of whether global society can operate in an age of scarcity and ecological

emergency without competition. Unless diplomacy is taken to the offensive, the Arctic will very likely become the first victim of a new Cold War.

The states should prioritize pre-emptive diplomacy and cooperation to avoid conflict and achieve sustainable governance in the Arctic. I will dedicate myself to dialogue and inclusion, with a readiness to balance economic growth with environmental protection and Indigenous rights. Arctic states are advised to maintain cooperative interactions with each other through the Arctic Council and other regional platforms, which will enhance cooperation and coordination on matters such as climate change, sustainable development, and environmental protection. States should recognise and respect the rights and interests of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic, and they should be included in decision-making processes in the region. Their traditional activities and cultural practices should also be preserved. The Arctic should strive for economic development that is balanced with environmental stewardship and exclusively stakeholders should not enjoy social responsibility, as the benefits of resource extraction and shipping. There should be desperate action by the states to cover the climate change that is severely affecting the ecosystems and communities within the Arctic. It demands a reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases and a switch to renewable energy sources.

The future of the Arctic is uncertain, but the region stands at a crossroads between cooperation and confrontation. The decisions adopted by states will define whether the Arctic will develop as an area of conflict or one of cooperation. The interests are as high as the Arctic is a proving ground both in terms of climate geopolitics and the capacity of the international community to deal with rivalry in the age of scarcity and environmental crisis.

Future Research Directions

- Quantifying the economic-military nexus: How much of Arctic investment is truly commercial vs. strategic?
- Climate-security linkages: Will faster ice melt accelerate militarization?
- Alternative governance models: Could a new Arctic security forum complement the Arctic Council?

The Arctic is no longer a closed, distant frontier and has emerged as a microcosm of the 21st-century great power competition. While the competition is unavoidable, cooperation is feasible, if states can adopt a rule-based mindset rather than a zero-sum approach. The second option, a militarized, fragmented Arctic, would negatively affect not only regional stability but also international security.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To eliminate the conflict and encourage stability, policymakers must:

1. Establish an Arctic Military Transparency Agreement

Based on the Vienna Document of the OSCE, this would require the announcement of large-scale maneuvers and restrictions on missile posting closer to disputed regions.

2. Expand the Arctic Council's Mandate

A working group on confidence building could help minimize the misperceptions about security issues.

3. Strengthen Indigenous Participation in Decision-Making

Land co-management arrangements and the vetoing of devastating developments could safeguard the Indigenous rights (e.g. uranium mining in Greenland).

4. Develop a Multilateral Arctic Resource Code

A set of rules supported by the UN on oil, gas, and seabed mining should help avoid conflict over new reserves.

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