
BTTN Journal

p-ISSN 2958-1214

e-ISSN 2958-1222



RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Frozen Geopolitical Concern: Arctic Ocean and the Emerging Great Power Competition

Nageen Ashraf ¹

<i>Article Info</i>	<i>Abstract</i>
<p>Keywords: <i>Arctic Ocean</i> <i>Geopolitics,</i> <i>Climate Change,</i> <i>Great Power</i> <i>Competition,</i> <i>Sea Power,</i> <i>Maritime Trade</i></p>	<p><i>The Arctic is on the cusp of a major shift. Defrosting of permafrost, thawing of ice sheet, and degradation of thick sea ice are the results of devastating climate change implications on the region. Arctic ice is melting faster than ever before and therefore, states are rushing to make claims and assert their influence in this region of geo-strategic significance. Climate change has made the Arctic a new geopolitical battlefield. Therefore, the paper poses three major questions: first, what is the strategic significance of the Arctic in contemporary times? Second, what are the domestic and international interests of the US, Russia, and China that are likely to compete in the Arctic? Third, how is the involvement of China- a non-Arctic state- impacting the strategic calculus of the Arctic? The paper argues that climate-induced melting of ice caps in the Arctic have encouraged the great powers- US, Russia, and China to view for influence. This influence is derived from the region's untapped resources and its significance for the maritime trade routes. The paper concludes that even though the Arctic competition can have serious implications on the ongoing great power rivalry, the changing dynamics will also unravel opportunities with regards to maritime trade.</i></p>

¹ Nageen Ashraf holds an MPhil Degree in International Relations, from the School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR) Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. The author can be reached at nageenashraf13@gmail.com

Introduction

The Arctic Ocean has often been cited as an example of a region where great powers, notably the US and Russia, cooperated, despite stark difference. However, in the last few years, the Arctic has come into the spotlight again, but this time- for bleaker reasons. The major reason behind its growing importance is climate change- which has resulted in the thinning of Arctic ice, leading to ice erosion, and making the Arctic a new battlefield. The changing dynamics have raised serious questions regarding the political, economic, and strategic future of the region. The region has a significant amount of undiscovered natural resources, and also holds a geo-strategic importance because of its location. Due to melting ice and emerging opportunities with it, states are jumping in to assert their claims in the region. The eight Arctic states include Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the US. Out of these eight states, five states- Russia, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the US- are littoral. These states are also referred to as the “Arctic rim” or A5. The rim has already started to rethink its relationship with the Arctic, owing to the changing security and strategic dynamics of the region. The central argument of this study is that climate-induced melting of ice caps in the Arctic have made it a crucial geopolitical arena where the great powers- US, Russia, and China are vying for influence. This influence is derived from the region’s untapped resources and its significance for the maritime trade routes, which pose significant risks and opportunities for the stakeholders as well as for the rest of the world.

Research Methodology

This paper aims to highlight the impact of climate change on the Arctic and the emerging great power competition because of this drastic climate change. In doing so, the paper aims at exploring the interests of the great powers- China, Russia, and the US. Even though China is not an Arctic state, this paper highlights how China

is trying to become one of the key players in the region through its investments. The Sino-Russia cooperation in the region is also an important aspect of the Arctic politics. In addition, the activities of three great powers are examined to better understand the motivations and objectives of these states in the Arctic. In the last section of the paper, implications of normalization of the Arctic-once a frozen wasteland- are also discussed. It is argued that where on the one hand, Arctic normalization and its opening will benefit the maritime trade, on the other hand, it will have serious security, strategic, and political consequences.

The study applies a mixed method approach- with qualitative content analysis and interviews (responses) used as major research instruments. Interviews provided the researcher with better insights as there was lack of secondary data available on the Arctic which highlights the intertwining of great power competition in the region. The interviews had both open ended and close ended questions, and the responses from experts were collected via email using the Google forms. The experts were chosen from different think tanks and international universities of Canada, Finland, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the US, through purposive sampling which intended to gather data only from the Arctic scholars and authors. The experts included Pavel Devyatkin (Senior Associate at the Arctic Institute), Troy Bouffard (Director - Center for Arctic Security and Resiliency- University of Alaska Fairbanks), John Moore (Professor at the University of Lapland), Rob Huebert (Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary and a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute), Mark C. Serreze (Director, National Snow and Ice Data Center and Professor of Geography, University of Colorado Boulder), Andrew Chater (Assistant Professor, Brescia University College), Robert English (Professor, School of International Relations), Markku Heikkilä (Arctic Centre, University of Lapland), Michaela Mattes (Author, and Professor in the Department of

Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley), Romain Chuffart (President and Managing Director, The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies), Arild Moe (Research professor, Fridtjof Nansen Institute), (Research Associate, The Arctic Institute; Research Fellow North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network -NAADSN), and Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen (Professor, UiT The Arctic University of Norway).

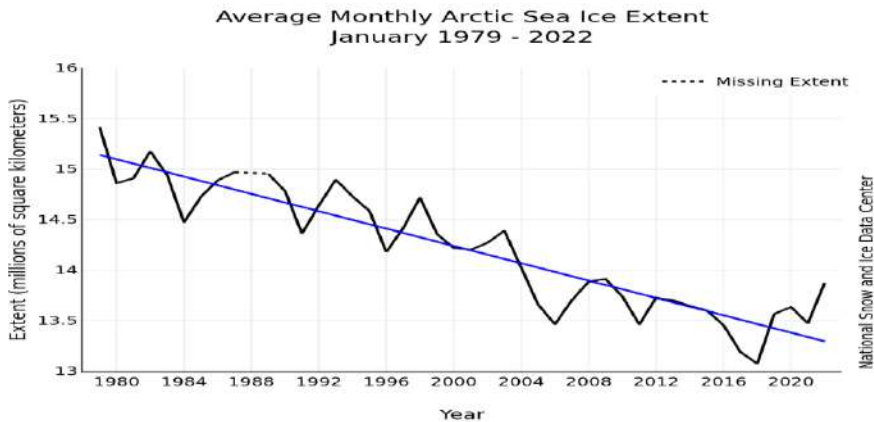
Securitization of the Arctic

The Copenhagen School of security studies enriches our perspective by shedding light on the securitization and de-securitization of the Arctic over time. Previously, environmental security was the major concern for the states. It was also one of the reasons why the institutions were successful in peacefully managing the region. Even though climate change had been taking place for a long time, and the ice sheets had been slowly melting, the region remained peaceful despite this change. However, with time, the dynamics have changed as the states realized the centrality of the Arctic Ocean. For Russia, the Arctic Ocean had always been of significant importance. It was one of the areas where Russia could demonstrate its military might, especially after the disintegration of the USSR that manifested its military weakness. Not only Russia, other Arctic states have also securitized the region with time. The US and China, both have made efforts to increase their influence in the Arctic. Where China is pouring in its investments, the US has made significant efforts to increase its presence. Likewise, other Arctic states that constitute the Arctic Rim are also increasing their militarization in the Arctic. The changing dynamics depict the second major shift in the Arctic's security politics. The first major shift occurred when the Arctic moved from being a geo-strategically important region for the US and Russia during the Cold War to a region of interstate cooperation and a zone of peace. The current dynamics demonstrate how the Arctic is again changing from a

peaceful zone to a zone of competition between the competing super powers.¹

The Changing Arctic

The Arctic Ocean has always remained an exception in the international arena and has been treated differently as compared to other Oceans because of its severe climate conditions. During the Cold War, Arctic held immense geo-strategic significance for both the US and the USSR. After the Cold War ended, so did the competition in the Arctic, and the Arctic was regarded as a remote area and a frozen wasteland.



Source: National Snow and Ice Data Center²

However, as the sea ice kept on melting due to climate change, the dynamics have changed in the Arctic. The rise of temperature in the Arctic accelerated in the 1990s when the impacts of global warming exacerbated.³ The drastic impact of climate change on the Arctic as

¹ Wilfrid Greaves, "Arctic break up: Climate change, geopolitics, and the fragmenting Arctic security region," *Arctic Yearbook 2019*.

² National Snow and Ice Data Center, "Arctic Sea ice this January: so last decade", February 3, 2022, <http://nsidc.org/arcticseaicenews/2022/02/arctic-sea-ice-this-january-so-last-decade/>

³ Alekseev G. V., N. I. Glok, A. E. Vyazilova, and N. E. Kharlanenkova, "Climate change in the Arctic: causes and mechanisms," In *IOP Conference Series*:

compared to the rest of the world is attributed to the sharp angle at which the sunlight strikes the region in summers. In addition, because sun rays are turning ice into water, water absorbs greater number of radiations from the sun as compared to ice, making it faster for the remaining ice to melt.⁴ Global warming has thus paved a way for the great power rivalry and Arctic is no longer an exceptional place or a remote region. Rather, the existing geopolitical tensions are expected to lead to higher militarization of the region⁵ where some scholars have predicted a “new Cold War” in the region,⁶ and others have argued that the region could be the “new South China Sea” if left unattended.⁷ This is because earlier, the states paid less attention to their frozen borders. However, as the Arctic is normalizing, so are the maritime borders which were once frozen and trivial, giving rise to territorial disputes and geopolitical tensions.

Significance of the Arctic

The Arctic is significant for the Earth’s survival and sustenance in four ways.

- First, the impact of the Arctic ice and this region on the global climate system remains significant despite the fact

Earth and Environmental Science, vol. 606, no. 1, p. 012002. IOP Publishing, 2020, <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/606/1/012002/pdf>

⁴ Scott G. Borgerson, Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Mar. - Apr., 2008, Vol. 87, No. 2, pp. 63-77, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20032581>

⁵ Robin Marc Allers, András RÁCZ, and Tobias Sæther, "Dealing with Russia in the Arctic: between Exceptionalism and Militarization," (2021): 19, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/75746>

⁶ Rob Huebert, "A new Cold War in the Arctic? The Old One Never Ended." *Arctic Yearbook* (2019): 1-4, https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2019/Briefing-Notes/2_AY2019_COM_Huebert.pdf

⁷ David Krumm, and Matthew Nicholson, "The Arctic in an Age of Strategic Competition," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4 (2021): 18-27, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Oct/24/2002879325>

that the region makes up only around 3 percent of the whole planet.

- Second, the region incorporates almost twenty of the longest rivers of the world.
- Third, around one third of the world's coastline is composed of Arctic's marine domain.
- Finally, one fourth of the world's continental shelf is comprised of the Arctic Ocean.

In addition to these factors, the global hydrological cycle-responsible for determining the water distribution throughout the world and thus, also for determining the food and water security- is also being affected by the changes in the Arctic Ocean.⁸ Furthermore, other than the significance of the Arctic for the planet, it also holds significance for states surrounding it and for the major powers in the world. Its significance can be understood by the fact that even the states that are not closer to the region (especially China and India) have also shown interest in the region.

There are primarily two major motivations behind the quest for the Arctic. The region not only has an abundance of unexplored natural resources, but also has a military and strategic significance. The latter is somehow connected to the former. Data collected by the US Geological Survey (USGS), shows that up to 90 billion barrels of oil, 44 billion barrels of liquefied natural gas, and almost 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, may be present in the Arctic, which makes up around 22 percent of the unexplored global fossil fuel resources.⁹ In fact, it is estimated that Arctic could have the

⁸ Eddy Carmack, Gail Whiteman, Jeremy Wilkinson, and Jan-Gunnar Winther, "4 reasons why the Arctic is key to our planet's survival, *World Economic Forum*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/4-reasons-why-the-arctic-is-key-to-our-planets-survival/>

⁹ Mark Rowe, "Arctic Nations Are Squaring Up To Exploit The Region's Rich Natural Resources", *Geographical*, August 12, 2022, <https://geographical.co.uk/geopolitics/the-world-is-gearing-up-to-mine-the-arctic>.

greatest undiscovered reserves of hydrocarbons on Earth.¹⁰ Additionally, the region also has large deposits of metals including copper, nickel, gold, lead, platinum, tungsten, and uranium etc.,¹¹ and exploitation of oil in Alaska also demonstrates rich reserves the region holds. Strategically, the circumpolar North is important because of its location between the US and Russia. The northern route provides the shorter distance for a ballistic missile or any military aircraft to travel from US to Russia or vice versa.¹² Moreover, the US and Russia operate their military complexes, naval bases, and nuclear weapon test sites in the region, thus retaining their military presence.

However, even though the researcher maintains that climate change is the major reason behind the growing significance of the Arctic, Pavel Devyatkin, a senior associate at the Arctic Institute, pointed out other major reasons to be global competition between the US-Russia and the US and China.¹³ Another interviewee maintained that the importance of the Arctic is not growing, since the region has been a theatre for great power competition in the previous centuries as well. The interviewee stated “The Arctic has been an integrated part of international politics, economics, and security for centuries. There was very heavy fighting in the Arctic during World War II on land and at sea (Kola Peninsula in the USSR, North Atlantic). The Arctic was central to the nuclear mutual deterrence between the US and the USSR during the Cold War. For centuries, people have explored Arctic natural resources, including

¹⁰ Scott G. Borgerson, *Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming*: 67.

¹¹ *Warfare in a fragile world: Military Impact on the Human Environment*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute: Taylor and Francis: London, 1980.

¹² *Warfare in a fragile world: Military Impact on the Human Environment*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

¹³ Pavel Devyatkin, (Senior Associate, The Arctic Institute- USA), Interview via questionnaire, April 18, 2023.

whale oil from Svalbard in the 1500-1600s. .”¹⁴ Therefore, it can be argued that the importance of the Arctic is not growing, rather changing with international political dynamics.

Intertwining of the Great Power’s Ambitions

Russia

Russia is the most significant state in the Arctic region. Moscow has a geographical edge because along with having more than 50% of coastline with the Arctic, it also occupies almost 40% of the land beyond the Arctic Circle.¹⁵ Therefore, for Russia, Arctic remains an important region from strategic point of view. The importance of Arctic has not increased after the impact of climate change, rather, Arctic has long been in the geostrategic interests of Russia, and Russia ensured to maintain a strong military presence in the region.¹⁶ It was demonstrated in as early as 2001 when Russia became the first state to assert its claims in the region. The 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) allows the states to claim sovereignty beyond the limit of 200 nautical miles. States can request to exercise their claims over 200 nautical miles conditional on the fact that the claimed extension is a natural landmass prolongation of 200 nautical miles area. The claim can be extended till 350 nautical miles in total.

In 2001, Russia submitted a claim for 460,000 square miles of the Arctic region (rich in resources) to the United Nations. The claimed area was almost the size of states of Texas, Indiana, and

¹⁴ Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen, (Professor, UiT- The Arctic University of Norway), Interview via questionnaire, July 3, 2023.

¹⁵ Speech of then Russian president Dmitri Medvedev at a meeting of the Russian Security Council on Protecting Russia’s National Interests in the Arctic, September 17, 2008, http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/speeches/2008/09/17/1945_type82912type82913_206564.shtml (accessed April 16, 2023).

¹⁶ Andreas Østhagen, The Nuances of Geopolitics in the Arctic, *The Arctic Institute*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nuancesgeopolitics-arctic/>

California combined. The commission was quick to reject Russian claims. Afterwards, Moscow intensified its activities in the region.¹⁷ Despite rejection, Moscow nevertheless dispatched two submarines and a nuclear-powered icebreaker to plant its flag on the sea floor of the northern pole in 2007. This move was criticized by other Arctic stakeholders and Canada termed Russian act as a “colonial land grab” practice of the 15th century.¹⁸ A few days after planting of the Russian flag, Moscow also sent its strategic bombers to the Arctic Ocean that patrolled over the region. It was first ever such instance since the end of the Cold War.¹⁹ In fact, the dynamics have changed a lot in contemporary times. In February 2023, the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf declared Russian claims for extended continental shelf to be “valid” after years of Moscow’s legal efforts.²⁰ The current situation has thus placed Russia in an advantageous position in the Arctic politics.

The Arctic Council

Russia remains an integral member of the Arctic governance. In the past, Arctic Ocean was often cited as an example of a region where great powers, notably the US and Russia cooperated, despite stark differences in their perceptions of the international world order. Arctic states established the Arctic Council in 1996. It is an intergovernmental platform aimed at promoting interaction and cooperation among the Arctic states. The major goal of the Council was to ensure cooperation, peace, and security in the Arctic and the Council also addresses matters related to environmental protection

¹⁷ Geir Hønneland, *Russia And The Arctic Environment, Identity And Foreign Policy*, (I.B.Tauris: New York: 2016).

¹⁸ Tom Parfitt, “Russia plants flag on North Pole seabed,” *The Guardian*, August 2, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/02/russia.arctic>

¹⁹ Scott G. Borgerson, *Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming*: 63.

²⁰ Elizabeth Buchanan, “Russia’s Gains In The Great Arctic Race”, *War on the Rocks*, May 4 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/russias-gains-in-the-great-arctic-race/>

and sustainable development. The council is a strong emblem of cooperation since all the decisions made by the council are based on consensus by all Arctic states.²¹ In addition, it is important to note that its mandate explicitly precludes traditional security (military security).²² However, Russian invasion of Ukraine has further exacerbated the security concerns in the Arctic.²³ Because of Russia's growing aggression towards its neighbors, all other Arctic states could soon be the NATO members, leaving Russia the only non-NATO member in the Arctic council.²⁴ It will highly impact the Arctic politics in the coming years. Invasion of Ukraine also encouraged other states to pause their functioning under the chairmanship of Moscow. Arctic Council along with other Arctic organizations through majority consensus- decided to resume their operations after Russian chairmanship of the Arctic Council which ended in May 2023.²⁵

Russia's Arctic Interests

Changes in the Arctic are drastically impacting the geostrategic identity of Russia. Moscow has long viewed the Arctic as a protective shield that played a role in containing Russian adversaries. At the same time, the Arctic provided Russia with a domestic maritime route for navy, shipping, and trade. Even though

²¹ Arctic Council, *About the Arctic Council*, Accessed April 14, 2023, <https://arctic-council.org/about/>

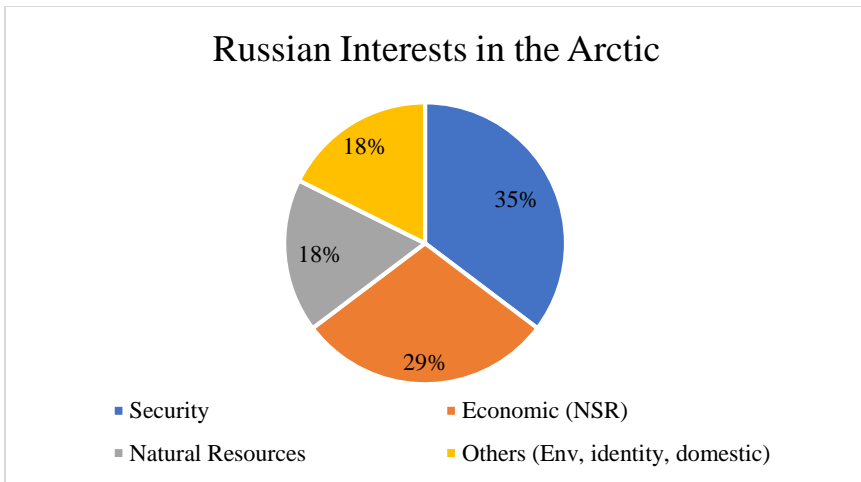
²² US Department of State, *Arctic Region*, Accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-office-of-ocean-and-polar-affairs/arctic/>

²³ Elizabeth Wishnick & Cameron Carlson, The Russian Invasion of Ukraine Freezes Moscow's Arctic Ambitions, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3172713/the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-freezes-moscows-arctic-ambitions/>

²⁴ Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "Putin Is Pushing Finland and Sweden into NATO's Arms," *New York Times*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/25/opinion/finland-sweden-join-nato.html>

²⁵ Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine" (statement, Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, 3 March 2022), <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

Russia had to encounter the US submarines and the Norwegian navy in the Arctic, Moscow mostly regarded the Arctic as a safe zone which did not require a lot of security. Therefore, Russia maintained its focus on the eastern, western, and southern borders. Where on the one hand Russia can now claim to be a maritime state, on the other hand, it now has to shift its focus on its northern border which has exacerbated security concerns for Russia.²⁶ The following chart shows responses of the interviewees to the question of possible Russian interests in the Arctic. As evident from the chart, the experts maintained that Russia's interests in the region are primarily based on security concerns originating from the expansion of West and NATO, on the development of NSR as primary economic interest, and on the control of natural resources. A few of the interviewees maintained that Russian interests in the region are also driven by identity, environmental concerns, and the failure of its domestic policies.



Source: Author's compilation from Responses

²⁶ Caitlyn L. Antrim, "The Next Geographical Pivot: The Russian Arctic In The Twenty-First Century," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 3 (2010): 14–38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26397122>.

So far, Russian strategy in the region has been a mix of cooperation and competition. This cooperation has benefitted Russia due to three major reasons. First, because of climatic conditions, cooperation is more beneficial as compared to competition. Second, issues in the Arctic are mostly transnational. Therefore, they cannot be resolved at national level and require interstate cooperation. Third, Russia aims to boost its economic security through the Arctic and economic security can be best addressed through cooperation rather than competition.²⁷ Due to these reasons, where on the one hand, Russia's Arctic policy depicts Kremlin's focus on sovereignty and national interest, on the other hand it lays emphasis on international collaboration to maintain Arctic a peaceful zone.²⁸ Moreover, the Arctic contains 70 percent of Russian natural gas, 95 percent of Russian oil and reserves, and 50-90 percent of Moscow's mineral deposits. Acknowledging this, Russia realizes that any serious and large-scale conflict in the region will only hurt its economic security.²⁹

One of the significant interests of Russia in the region is to develop the Northern Sea Route (NSR) which can be a useful shorter link between Europe and Asia. Moscow has been ambitious to transform the Arctic into a primary strategic asset in terms of natural resources and to sustain itself as the leading power in the Arctic governance.³⁰ Kremlin regards Arctic as a domestic concern because of the Arctic resource potential. The state no longer treats

²⁷ Stephanie Pezard, Abbie Tingstad, Kristin Van Abel, Scott Stephenson, "Maintaining Arctic cooperation with Russia: planning for regional change in the far North," *RAND Corporation*, 2017, <http://www.rand.org/t/RR1731>

²⁸ Nikita Lipunov & Pavel Devyatkin, "The Arctic in the 2023 Russian Foreign Policy Concept," *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies*. May 30, 2023, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-2023-russian-foreign-policy-concept/>.

²⁹ Wilfrid Greaves, "Arctic break up: Climate change, geopolitics, and the fragmenting Arctic security region,"

³⁰ Denis JB. Shaw, "Russia and the Arctic: Environment, Identity and Foreign Policy," (2016): 785-787.

the region as a back door, rather considers it a potential front-door which can bring enormous economic opportunities to the state.³¹ Fridtjof Nansen- a Norwegian polar explorer referred to the northern part of Russia as “the land of the future”³² and after a century, it is manifested in the way the Arctic is changing Kremlin’s future. However, despite cooperation, Russia has shown ambitions to militarize the Arctic. Therefore, some scholars regard Russian role in the Arctic as confusing.

Russia’s military and strategic presence in the Arctic is a source for strengthening its deterrence in the region. From planting its flag on the sea bed to maintaining the tactical and strategic nuclear capabilities of the Northern fleet in the region, Russia has made an attempt to protect its national interests on the northern front. The 2015 military doctrine of Russia highlighted its ambitions to defend the northern flank with a combined land, naval, air, and nuclear command structure. Russia’s military is also present in the Kola Peninsula to defend its northern flank from NATO forces.³³ Moreover, Moscow updated the 2020 Arctic policy in 2023 and has now placed emphasis on pursuing national interest and self-reliance, removing cooperation through the Arctic Council from official policy.³⁴ But considering that Russia has mostly maintained a balance between competition and cooperation as far as the Arctic is

³¹ Laruelle, Marlene, *Russia's Arctic strategies and the future of the Far North* (London & Newyork: Routledge, 2015).

³² Fridtjof Nansen, *Through Siberia, The Land Of The Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³³ Stacy R. Closson, “Russian Foreign Policy in the Arctic: Balancing Cooperation and Competition”, *Wilson Center* June 2017, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan_cable_24_-_closson.pdf

³⁴ Malte Humpert, “Russia Amends Arctic Policy Prioritizing ‘National Interest’ and Removing Cooperation Within Arctic Council,” *High North News*, March 15 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-amends-arctic-policy-prioritizing-national-interest-and-removing-cooperation-within-arctic>

concerned, it is hard to predict if Russia will show aggression in the region.

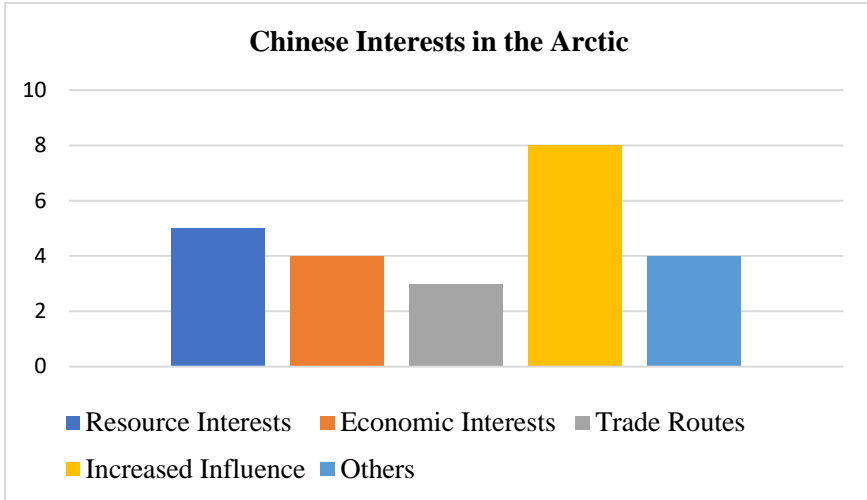
China in the Arctic

China being a stakeholder in the Arctic competition is surprising because it is not among the states bordering the Arctic. However, China has long been preparing for the ice-free Arctic. In the initial years of declining ice, scholars did not focus much on the role of China in the region. It was in 2010, when a report published entitled “China Prepares for An Ice-free Arctic” drew attention of scholars towards China’s ambitions in the Arctic. The report made a comprehensive attempt at highlighting how China perceived the changes in the Arctic. It explored the thinking of Chinese scholars and policy makers to discuss China’s ambitions regarding the Arctic. China is comparatively a weaker party in the Arctic because neither is China a coastal state to the Arctic, nor a member of the Arctic council, a major platform where matters related to Arctic are discussed. Nonetheless, Beijing has been ambitious for the development of a shorter alternative sea route to the Suez Canal and the Panama Canal.³⁵ Beijing’s presence in the Arctic, as of now, is primarily research based. In fact, China has long pursued a policy of conducting research programs in the Arctic. There were concerns regarding melting of ice and prospects of Arctic becoming a new battlefield. China initiated its first five-year research program along with the German universities in 1990.³⁶ China has maintained that its role in the region is more related to environmental concerns and changing climatic conditions. However, in the recent years, its role has clearly shifted where the national scholars have also started to

³⁵ Linda Jakobson, "China prepares for an ice-free Arctic," *SIPRI insights on peace and security* 2010, no. 2 (2010), <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/insight/SIPRIInsight1002.pdf>

³⁶ Olga Alexeeva, and Frédéric Lasserre, "The Snow Dragon: China’s Strategies In The Arctic," *China Perspectives* 2012, no. 2012/3 (2012): 61-68, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.5958>

assess the security, political, and economic implications of the normalization of Arctic due to ice melting. The bar graph below shows different responses that the interviewer got from different Arctic experts regarding the interests of China in the Arctic.



Source: Author’s Compilation from Responses

It is beyond doubt that since China is one of the largest economies of the world, and most of its trade takes place through maritime bodies. Therefore, any changes in the world’s marine trade routes will have direct impact on China and its policies. China knows water bodies, more notably the crucial straits have often been used as a tool for geostrategic competition. For Beijing, the Strait of Malacca is of immense significance because it is the shortest route between the Indian Ocean/Middle East and the South China Sea. More than 60 percent of China’s trade takes place through this route. However, because of the “Malacca dilemma” and the fear of a naval blockade, Beijing was encouraged to look for better alternatives.³⁷ China’s

³⁷Paweł Paszak, “China and the “Malacca Dilemma”, *Warsaw Institute*, 28 February 2021, <https://warsawinstitute.org/china-malacca-dilemma/>

BRI was also an effort to reduce its dependency on maritime routes owing to the geostrategic rivalry with the US and India.

Considering this, the NSR provides an opportunity to China to reduce its dependency on these straits. Moreover, Russia is collaborating with China not only on the development of NSR, but China is also supplying turbines to Russia for the development of Arctic LNG 2 gas pipeline.³⁸ In the wake of Russia-Ukraine war, other Arctic states halted their cooperation with Russia. However, in April 2023, Russian and Chinese coast guards signed an agreement aimed to “combat terrorism, illegal migration, fighting smuggling of drugs and weapons, as well as stopping illegal fishing” in the Arctic.³⁹ Scholars refer it to as “White hull diplomacy” and argue that use of Coast Guard is likely to strengthen China’s role in the region by increasing its say in the Arctic management. China has already initiated the use of this passage in 2013. In 2013, China’s *Yong Sheng* became the first ever commercial ship to use NSR as a passage for trade.⁴⁰ China’s ambitions in the Arctic did not arise out of the blue. As mentioned earlier, even the research programs in the region were started in the 1990, by China. Additionally, in 2014, China ostensibly showed ambitions of playing a major role in the region. Later, in 2018 Arctic Policy, China claimed to be a “Near Arctic” state, despite the fact that even the northernmost part of China is hundreds of miles away from the Arctic region. Likewise,

³⁸ Malte Humpert, “China to Supply Key Turbines to Novatek’s Arctic LNG 2”, *High North News*, May 22 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-supply-key-turbines-novateks-arctic-lng-2>

³⁹ Elisabeth Braw, “Arctic Harmony Is Falling Apart”, *Foreign Policy*, May 15, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/15/russia-china-arctic-cooperation-svalbard/>

⁴⁰ Swee Lean Collin Koh, “China’s Strategic Interest In The Arctic Goes Beyond Economics”, *Defense News*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/05/11/chinas-strategic-interest-in-the-arctic-goes-beyond-economics/>

China aims to become a “Polar great power.”⁴¹ China’s 2018 Arctic policy also extended the idea of a “polar silk road” connecting Europe and Asia through the Arctic.⁴² Mike Pompeo, in 2019, asserted that the Arctic had become a new arena for geopolitical competition. He also asserted that China’s intentions in the region are of serious concern.⁴³ However, like other parts of the world, China has largely been peaceful in the region and has tried to compete US through diplomatic means. Beijing has engaged various Scandinavian states in the matters pertaining to natural resource extraction, Arctic navigation, joint research, and academic exchanges. However, interviews conducted presented a contrasting image of the Chinese presence in the Arctic. Where on the one hand, different experts jotted down various Chinese ambitions in the region, a few of them maintained that Chinese presence in the region is minimal. One of the interviewees opined that “The Arctic is naturally a peripheral foreign policy interest for China compared to Asia and most other parts of the world.”⁴⁴ In a similar manner, another interviewee stated that “China does not have to be the dominant player in this region and it is unlikely that it could be, even if it wanted to. But its near presence means that the United States has to take China serious in the region and has to respond.”⁴⁵ One of the interviewees who preferred to stay anonymous, opined that

⁴¹ Rush Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang, and Gaoqi Zhang, "Northern expedition: China's Arctic ambition and activism," *Foreign Policy at Brookings* (2021), https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2021/04/FP_20210412_china_arctic.pdf

⁴² Anu Sharma, “China’s Polar Silk Road: Implications for the Arctic Region”, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Air University Press, October 25, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2820750/chinas-polar-silk-road-implications-for-the-arctic-region/>

⁴³ David Auerswald, China’s Multifaceted Arctic Strategy, *War On the Rocks*, May 24, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/chinas-multifaceted-arctic-strategy/> (Accessed April 14, 2023).

⁴⁴ Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen, (Professor, UiT The Arctic University of Norway), Interview via questionnaire, July 3, 2023.

⁴⁵ Rob Huebert, (Professor of Political Science, University of Calgary), Interview via questionnaire, May 17, 2023.

“Chinese role in the Arctic is still quite marginal.” Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that even though China has not been aggressive in the region, its long-term strategy regarding the Arctic is raising concerns for the US as well as Russia.

United States of America

US became an Arctic state after purchasing Alaska in 1867 from the Russian Empire.⁴⁶ For a longer period, the US paid negligible attention to the maritime security; it was Alfred Thayer Mahan who changed the way the Americans looked at maritime security and maritime power. His contributions put naval security at the core of national strategy.⁴⁷ Despite that, for US, the importance of Arctic has been meagre as compared to other parts of the world. Even though Arctic had its geostrategic importance for the US during the Cold War, the region mostly remained out of the US focus. It was not until 2009 that the Bush administration officially tried to release the US Arctic strategy. Through the policy, the US claimed to be an Arctic state that has “fundamental interests” in the region.⁴⁸ The onus was on the Obama administration to maintain its focus on the region and pursue the regional policy. However, the administration failed to do so and Arctic remained sidelined for several years even under the Trump administration. Successive administrations in US kept their focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2022, Biden administration released the National Strategy for the Arctic region, again bringing the Arctic into national security’s limelight.

The US National Security Strategy of 2022 clearly asserts that Russia and China remain its major rivals as far as global

⁴⁶ Gary Lawson, and Guy Seidman, *The Constitution Of Empire: Territorial Expansion And American Legal History*, (Yale University Press, 2008).

⁴⁷ George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years Of Sea Power: The US Navy, 1890-1990*, (Stanford University Press, 1994).

⁴⁸ The White House, *Directive on Arctic Region Policy, January 9, 2009*, January 12, 2009, pg. 1546, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-2008-book2/pdf/PPP-2008-book2-doc-pg1545.pdf>.

competition and security dynamics are concerned. In a similar fashion, the National Strategy for the Arctic Region released by the US in October 2022 also highlights how the Arctic Ocean has become a new arena for geopolitical and geostrategic competition. The strategy asserts that the US believes that it is its primary responsibility to ensure peace in the Arctic. While acknowledging the geostrategic competition in the Arctic, the strategy takes into account the role of China as well as Russia in the region. The policy states that: “Our vision for the Arctic protects and advances US interests in the region, including providing for homeland security and defense; mitigating and building resilience to climate change and ecosystem degradation; expanding US economic opportunities; protecting and improving livelihoods, including for Alaska Native communities; and upholding international law, rules, norms, and standards across Arctic countries.”⁴⁹

Even though the US accuses Russia of its Arctic ambitions and expansion, US itself is now considering shifting its focus towards the region owing to the huge amounts of hydrocarbons and fossil fuels beneath the Arctic. The Arctic strategy of 2022 also clearly highlights that Washington aims to manage risks in the Arctic, “including those resulting from geopolitical tensions with Russia.” The strategy also mentions the activities and ambitions of China in the Arctic. However, where the document does not clearly assert that China’s ambitions can be challenging, it maintains to deter any aggression in the region.⁵⁰ In addition, in a document released by the US Army entitled “*Regaining Arctic Dominance: The US Army in the Arctic*,” the US clearly maintains that Russia is

⁴⁹ The White House, *National Strategy For The Arctic Region*, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/National-Strategy-for-the-Arctic-Region.pdf> (Accessed April 12, 2023).

⁵⁰ Bryant Harris, “White House Arctic strategy calls for enhanced military presence”, *Defense News*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2022/10/07/white-house-arctic-strategy-calls-for-enhanced-military-presence/>

trying to assert its dominance in the region through various military and resource-based activities. On the other hand, China is trying to become a normal member of the Arctic governance. The document also claimed that China and Russia are more interested in the energy potential of the Arctic; therefore, US should make attempts to expedite its presence in the Arctic to effectively counter Beijing and Moscow.

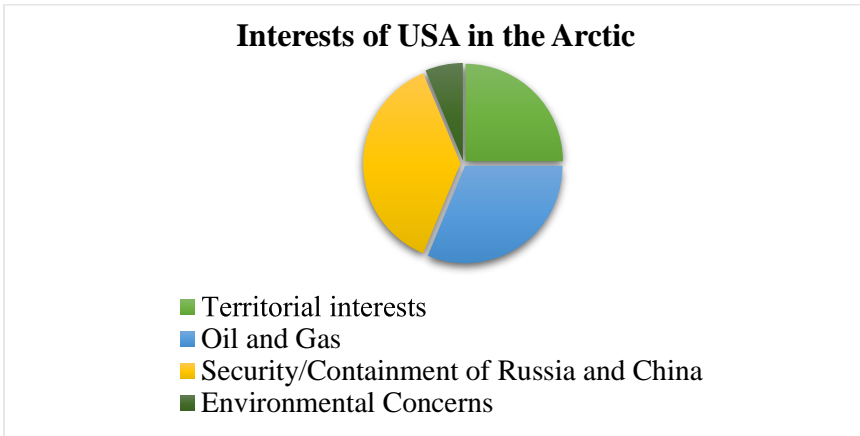
The US army also referred to the Arctic as a “line of attack” in times of conflict.⁵¹ This signifies the strategic importance of the latter to the former. The region is crucial for maintaining strategic deterrence against Russia because it offers a perfect location for ballistic missile defense systems. Moreover, since the Arctic is located among the continents of Europe, Asia, and North America, and offers access to the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, it is an important area as far as submarine patrols are concerned. The submarines can be invulnerable to attacks in this area, and can remain undetected for longer period of time which can affect nuclear deterrence. Additionally, because of climate conditions, anti-submarine systems are also inefficient in the region.⁵² Therefore, for US, one major problem regarding expediting the Russian and the Chinese presence in the region can also be attributed to fears of failure of nuclear deterrence.

As far as resource interests are concerned, the US is highly dependent on oil from the rest of the world and Arctic is a relatively peaceful region compared to the Middle East and Africa. Therefore, US is aware of the fact that developing its northern oil fields in the Arctic will help it to reduce its dependency on conflict prone regions

⁵¹ James C. McConville, “Regaining Arctic Dominance: The US Army in the Arctic,” Department of the Army, 2021, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/about/2021_army_arctic_strategy.pdf.

⁵² James Kraska. "The new Arctic geography and US strategy." In *Arctic security in an age of climate change* (2011): 244-66. Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511994784.015>

like the Middle East and Africa.⁵³ During interviews, six out of thirteen international experts maintained that the US interests in the region are resource based, and US acknowledges oil and gas potential of the region. The results of the interviews are explicated below in the form of a pie chart.



Source: Author's Compilation from Responses

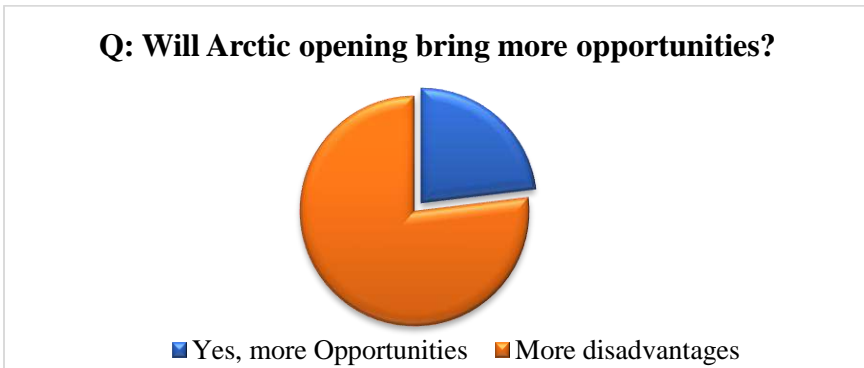
The Arctic holds immense resources which makes it a zone of competition between the great powers. China sees Arctic as a great opportunity to get hold of resources for its massively growing population. On the other hand, for the US, containing China's influence all over the world is crucial because the US sees China not only as an emerging power, but also as a strategic rival. At the same time, the US upsurge in the military activities in the Arctic are a result of Russia's militarization and its expediting military activities in the northern pole. It is also noteworthy that albeit Russian claims of building an alliance with Beijing in terms of Arctic, the former seems a little uncomfortable with the expediting activities of the latter in the Arctic. This is because an increased presence of the rising super power is expected to undermine the geopolitical interests of Moscow. At the same time, Russia is also earful of the

⁵³ Stephen J. Blank, ed. *Russia in the Arctic* Strategic Studies Institute, 2011: 18.

West expansion towards its periphery. Therefore, in the light of these developments, the central argument of the paper remains that there exists a tripartite geo-strategic and geo-political competition in the Arctic.

Aftermath of the Arctic Opening

Opening of the Arctic will both be a boon and a bane for the world. Where on the one hand, normalization of Arctic will open new maritime trade routes, on the other hand it will also open up the shortest route between two major powers US and Russia. Distance has always played a significant role between the two. Even during the Cold War, physical distance between the two powers was one of the reasons nuclear deterrence succeeded. When international experts were asked if they believe that opening of the Arctic will bring more disadvantages or more benefits to the world, the interviewees gave a mixed response. A few of them believe that Arctic opening will bring more opportunities to the world. Whereas some believe that it will prove to be disadvantageous for the globe. As highlighted in the pie chart, ten out of 13 respondents maintained that Arctic opening will bring more disadvantages to the globe. This makes up 77 percent of the responses. On the other hand, three out of 13 interviewees opined that Arctic opening can be advantageous, making 23 percent of the total responses.



Source: Author's Compilation from Responses

Normalization of the Arctic will pose serious environmental, security, and economic challenges to the Arctic governance. Even though the five rim states agreed to settle territorial disputes peacefully in the region, the role of non-coastal Arctic states and non-Arctic states like China and India are likely to shape the geopolitics of the region.⁵⁴ In a similar manner, normalization of trade from the Northern Sea Route is also likely to cause oil spills and other environmental problems, further exacerbating climate conditions on the planet. Due to harsh climate of the region, waste disposal is difficult to be carried out in the region owing to slow decomposition process.⁵⁵ Also, as climate change impacts become more visible in the region, the weather become more unpredictable, with intensification of storms making Arctic more dangerous. However, trade through NSR is likely to be 40% faster than the trade taking place through the Suez Canal.⁵⁶ A shorter route will not only save time but will also cut off fuel usage in the marine trade.

Conclusion

The thawing of ice due to climate change has diverted the attention of states to a once frozen waste land- the Arctic. Great powers are rushing in to expedite their influence in the region as the melting of ice has given them a chance to access a new locality. The Arctic will mostly be ice-free in the 2040s and 2050s, which will allow states to use it as a shorter maritime trade route, reducing the cost of shipping and saving them time. Russia, having the largest coastline with the Arctic is on an advantageous position. Its claims to extend its Continental Shelf have also been legitimized by the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in February

⁵⁴ Linda Jakobson, "China Prepares for An Ice-Free Arctic," *SIPRI insights on peace and security* 2010.

⁵⁵ "Warfare In A Fragile World: Military Impact On The Human Environment" *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*.

⁵⁶ Swee Lean Collin Koh, "China's Strategic Interest In The Arctic Goes Beyond Economics" *Defense News*, 12 May2020.

2023. Likewise, Beijing and Moscow are cooperating with each other as far as the scientific technology and R&D is concerned. China also declared itself as the “Near-Arctic” state in 2018 raising concerns among the west. On the other hand, the US had not paid much attention to the region for years. The Arctic policy released by the Biden Administration highlights the US interests in the Arctic. However, the effective implementation of the policy remains uncertain. The Beijing-Moscow alliance in the Arctic against the West will draw the US and its allies to the competition, making the Arctic another region witnessing the geopolitical and geostrategic competition between the great powers. The opening of the Arctic will have various security, political, economic, and geostrategic implications for the Arctic as well as the South Asian region.