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The New Geopolitics of the Arctic: Russia, China and the EU

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Policy Brief

April 2019

The Arctic is changing. Facing challenges driven by resource demands, changing power relations and climate change, the top of the world demands the attention of European states and EU officials. This paper examines the main geopolitical issues in the Arctic, such as the development of the region's energy resources, the underlying potential for conflict and the increasing presence of China in the region. It argues that to unpack the region's complexities, we need to recognise the diversity *within* the Arctic across a range of issues and to differentiate different levels of analysis: the international and the regional. Furthermore, this paper argues that the EU's approach to the north suffers as a result of a general deficiency in EU external policies, namely incoherence and a multitude of voices and opinions. To have a more effective Arctic policy, the EU needs to distinguish between the different levels outlined here, raise awareness of the issues facing the Arctic among its member states and politicians, and better communicate the relevance of the Union to Arctic states. The EU must view the Arctic primarily as a long-term strategic priority and as an area of growing geopolitical importance.

Keywords Arctic – Geopolitics – Security – EU foreign policy – China – Russia



Introduction

In 2006–7, researchers, policymakers and the media alike began making a range of claims about the future of the Arctic. Climate change is accelerating the melting of the ice in the north. Coupled with high oil prices and positive estimates of the region’s hydrocarbon resources,¹ this led to the Arctic being portrayed as both the world’s new energy frontier and the northern ‘shortcut’ to Asia.² As the Arctic littoral states—Denmark (Greenland), the US, Russia, Norway and Canada—placed the north on their domestic and foreign policy agendas, and non-Arctic states such as Japan, France, Germany and China expressed interest in the region, predictions were made that the Arctic would become the next arena for geopolitical conflict.³

Since then world events have taken a turn. The fall in the price of oil and gas transformed hopeful Arctic resource projects into unprofitable ventures.⁴ Russian ice-breaker levies and high operating costs turned trans-Arctic shipping into a long-term prospect.⁵ The focus shifted to northern industries that were already profitable, such as mining, tourism and fisheries.⁶ Simplistic predictions about an Arctic ‘boom’ turned into equally simplistic forecasts of an Arctic ‘bust’.⁷

¹ USGS World Energy Assessment Team, *Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle* (Washington, DC, 2008).

² J. H. Ho, ‘The Arctic Meltdown and Its Implication for Ports and Shipping in Asia’, in J. Kraska (ed.), *Arctic Security in an Age of Climate Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); M. Humpert, *The Future of Arctic Shipping: A New Silk Road for China?*, The Arctic Institute (Washington, DC, 2013).

³ For scholarly work, see S. Borgerson, ‘Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming’, *Foreign Affairs* 87/2 (2008), 63–77; A. Grindheim, *The Scramble for the Arctic? A Discourse Analysis of Norway and the EU’s Strategies Towards the European Arctic*, Fridtjof Nansen Institute (Oslo, 2009); R. Sale and E. Potapov, *The Scramble for the Arctic: Ownership, Exploitation and Conflict in the Far North* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2010); S. R. Dadwal, ‘Arctic: The Next Great Game in Energy Geopolitics?’, *Strategic Analysis* 38/6 (2014), 812–24. For news coverage, see, for example, O. Burkeman, ‘A Very Cold War Indeed’, *The Guardian*, 5 April 2008; T. Reilly, ‘China’s Ambitions Make Arctic a Global Hotspot’, *Financial Times*, 24 May 2013; J. E. Barnes, ‘Cold War Echoes Under the Arctic Ice’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 March 2015; I. Mandraud, ‘Russia Prepares for Ice-Cold War with Show of Military Force in the Arctic’, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2014.

⁴ M. Holter, ‘Where the Arctic Oil Industry Is Booming’, *Bloomberg*, 3 May 2017; K. Stephen, ‘The Arctic: Hot or Not?’, *The Arctic Institute*, January 2017.

⁵ M. Humpert, *Arctic Shipping: An Analysis of the 2013 Northern Sea Route Season*, The Arctic Institute (Washington, DC, 2014).

⁶ J. N. Larsen, ‘Polar Economics: Expectations and Real Economic Futures’, *The Polar Journal* 2 (2016), 1–10; O. S. Stokke, ‘Geopolitics, Governance, and Arctic Fisheries Politics’, in E. Conde and S. S. Iglesias (eds.), *Global Challenges in the Arctic Region: Sovereignty, Environment and Geopolitical Balance* (London: Routledge, 2017), 170–95.

⁷ *The Economist*, ‘Not So Cool’, 29 January 2015.



However, as Russia's relationship with the 'West' deteriorated in 2014 over Ukraine and later Syria, headlines warning of an imminent confrontation in the Arctic reappeared. This time it was not the region's resources that were fuelling a scramble: it was the region's growing strategic importance for NATO, Russia and even China. The result of these predictions, however, tuned out to be the same: Arctic states have been, and still are, placing pieces on the chessboard in advance of an imminent geopolitical conflict in the north.

However, studies were quick to point out that many of the Arctic predictions were largely inaccurate, whether they had been made before or after Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014. Over the past decade scholars have produced more balanced depictions of the dynamics both within the region as a whole and among the various actors with a stake in the Arctic.⁸ Moreover, foreign ministries in Arctic states have been particularly active in emphasising the 'peaceful' and 'cooperative' traits of the region.⁹ Even China—an actor prompting a sense of scepticism and uncertainty in northern countries¹⁰—has played according to the Arctic 'rule book'. It has reiterated the primacy of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); and in its White Paper on the Arctic, it emphasises the importance of cooperation.¹¹ Finally, those inhabiting the Arctic region—indigenous as well as non-indigenous peoples—have been demanding the right to partake in decision-making forums concerned with Arctic development and have been insisting that there should be less talk about geopolitics and quick business opportunities.¹²

There thus seems to be a multitude of actors, layers and levels at play—the situation warrants further unpacking. The main question this paper asks is, What are the geopolitical characteristics of the Arctic region? By extension, how accurate are the predictions of conflict in and over the Arctic? What is the role of China in all this? And what do these developments entail for the EU and for its ambitions to be an Arctic actor? To answer these relatively large questions in a limited amount of space, a few key points will be made. First, we need to divide

⁸ See, for example, W. Greaves and W. P. Lackenbauer, 'Re-Thinking Sovereignty and Security in the Arctic', *OpenCanada*, 23 March 2016; R. Tamnes and K. Offerdal, 'Conclusion', in R. Tamnes and K. Offerdal (eds.), *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 166–77; K. Dodds and M. Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles: The Geopolitics of the Arctic and Antarctic* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

⁹ L. Heininen, *Arctic Strategies and Policies: Inventory and Comparative Study*, Northern Research Forum (April 2012).

¹⁰ E. Wilson Rowe, 'Codeword China', *High North News*, 28 June 2018.

¹¹ For the full text, see China, The State Council Information Office, *China's Arctic Policy* (2018).

¹² See, for example, T. Penikett, *Hunting the Northern Character* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017).



the analysis into different levels. This means that, instead of treating all issues as interrelated and part of one picture, we have to differentiate the systemic (international) level from its regional (Arctic) counterpart. In this way we will be able to disentangle some of the arguments already mentioned. Second, when examining issues within each level, we need to recognise the inherent diversity of the region. The paper will show that when we think of Arctic security, it makes more sense to divide the area into subregions: the North American Arctic, on the one hand, and the Eurasian Arctic, on the other. Finally, it is not possible to boil down the dynamics of the Arctic to an antithesis between conflict and non-conflict.

Cooperation or conflict in the Arctic region?

To perform a (traditional) geopolitical analysis is to examine the connections between geographic space and power politics, being sensitive to expansionist inclinations and interstate rivalry over finite territories and resources.¹³

The main reason given for why a conflict could occur over the Arctic has been the region's abundant resources, predominantly oil and gas. In 2008 the US Geological Survey assessed that the area north of the Arctic Circle holds approximately 30% of the world's undiscovered gas and 13% of its undiscovered oil, most of it offshore.¹⁴ The Arctic is also rich in other natural resources, such as minerals, as well as living marine resources such as fish and crab. In 2008 the oil price peaked at \$147 a barrel. In 2018 the price hovered around \$60–\$80. There has therefore been less interest in offshore resource development. Furthermore, there has been a tendency to overgeneralise and discuss 'Arctic resources' as if they were the same across the region. The truth is that resource potential and accessibility vary considerably across the Arctic.¹⁵ Oil and gas are already being extracted and produced in the Norwegian and Russian parts of the Barents Sea, an offshore area where more than 100 exploratory wells have been drilled in recent decades.

¹³ For a discussion set in the Arctic context, see Stokke, 'Geopolitics, Governance, and Arctic Fisheries Politics'.

¹⁴ USGS World Energy Assessment Team, *Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal*.

¹⁵ Ø. Harsem, A. Eide and K. Heen, 'Factors Influencing Future Oil and Gas Prospects in the Arctic', *Energy Policy* 39/12 (2011), 8,044.



Climatic conditions (i.e. ice cover and temperature) are different in the waters around Greenland and Alaska, as is the infrastructural architecture. This means that companies operating in them face a different economic reality. Even if we were to see a new spike in worldwide commodity prices in the next decade, Arctic resource extraction there would remain a specialised, localised and extremely costly affair. The lack of infrastructure, the geographic distances and the harsh climate all make it questionable whether the Arctic littoral states would be in a position to exploit even their own natural resource potential in their respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). Thus, one must be wary of generalisation when it comes to Arctic resource development.

This correlates with another point: the location and accessibility of these resources, and the ‘territorial grabs’ they inspire. These factors, however, do not bolster conflict predictions. Oil and gas resources—both onshore and offshore—are in what are the EEZs or territories of the Arctic states themselves. Estimates vary since the totality of the resources is still somewhat uncertain. Nevertheless, approximately 90% of the oil and gas resources of the circumpolar North are under the control of the littoral states. This situation is not fuelling a dash northward to grab unclaimed resources. Instead, there is a desire to ensure stable operating environments to extract costly resources far away from their prospective markets.¹⁶

Moreover, the Arctic riches have already been divided amongst the Arctic states, since their EEZs cover almost all of the Arctic Ocean. The largest maritime boundary dispute—between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea—was settled in 2010. Boundary disputes exist between the US and Canada in the Beaufort Sea and between Canada and Greenland (Denmark) in the Lincoln Strait and over the miniscule Hans Island/Ø. However, these disagreements are unlikely to unleash conflicts of any scale given the limited importance they have for the relevant actors in terms of economic and political value.¹⁷ The disputes between Canada, Denmark/Greenland and Russia over who can claim the North Pole seabed by means of extended continental shelf claims is also unlikely to become anything but a diplomatic point of contention. This is because of the high costs involved and the limited benefits any state would derive from ‘claim-

¹⁶ D. H. Claes and M. Arild, ‘Arctic Petroleum Resources in a Regional and Global Perspective’, in R. Tamnes and K. Offerdal (eds.), *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World* (London: Routledge, 2014), 97–120; K. Keil, ‘The Arctic: A New Region of Conflict? The Case of Oil and Gas’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 49/2 (2014), 162–90.

¹⁷ A. H. Hoel, ‘The Legal–Political Regime in the Arctic’, in R. Tamnes and K. Offerdal (eds.), *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 70–2.



ing' the seabed.¹⁸ The Arctic states have neither the economic nor the strategic incentive to undertake any significant operation to assert and establish further claims over the seabed of the North Pole. Symbolism is undoubtedly of great value, but the cost of North Pole operations does not match the perceived gains.¹⁹

As was widely reported at the time, Russia planted its flag on the seabed below the North Pole in 2007. It was done largely to showcase Russian technical competence, while also highlighting the country's claims to the continental shelf stretching from the Russian mainland to beneath the North Pole.²⁰ It played into the Arctic states' growing concern about their northern territories and the resource potential thought to be found there. However, the following year, in response to the outcry and to concerns about the 'lack of governance' in the Arctic caused by the flag-planting episode and a generally growing Arctic awareness internationally,²¹ the five Arctic coastal states came together in Ilulissat, Greenland, where they declared the Arctic to be a region of cooperation. They also affirmed their intention to work within established international arrangements and agreements, particularly UNCLOS.²² Since the Ilulissat meeting, the Arctic states have all repeated the mantra of cooperation, articulating the same sentiment in relatively streamlined Arctic policy and strategy documents.²³ The deterioration in relations between Russia and the other Arctic states that started in 2014 has not changed this.²⁴

The Arctic Council's emergence as the primary forum for regional affairs in the Arctic plays into this backdrop. The Council serves as a platform from which the states can portray themselves as working harmoniously towards common goals.²⁵ The Arctic Council was established in 1996, primarily to deal with environmental and soft-policy issues in the Arctic. It includes the eight Arctic countries, as well as six 'Permanent Participants' representing indigenous organisations in the Arctic. The Council has since grown in importance and relevance. This has led to increased work for its working groups, ranging from

¹⁸ M. Byers, 'The North Pole Is a Distraction', *The Globe and Mail*, 20 August 2014.

¹⁹ M. Byers, *International Law and the Arctic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 281–3.

²⁰ *BBC News*, 'Russia Plants Flag under N Pole', 2 August 2007.

²¹ See the sections describing the need for a new Arctic governance structure in European Parliament, Resolution on Arctic Governance, 2008/2633(RSP) (9 October 2008).

²² The document can be found here: http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat_Declaration.pdf.

²³ For an overview, see Heininen, *Arctic Strategies and Policies*.

²⁴ See M. Byers, 'Crises and International Cooperation: An Arctic Case Study', *International Relations* 31/4 (2017), 375–402.

²⁵ H. Exner-Pirot, 'Arctic Council: The Evolving Role of Regions in Arctic Governance', *Alaska Dispatch*, 6 January 2015.



how to best achieve ‘sustainable development’ to organising Arctic search and rescue more efficiently. An increasing number of actors have applied to the Council for observer status. These include China, India, Germany and the EU, although the EU’s bid is still pending approval due to, first, a diplomatic row with Canada over the EU’s ban on seal products, and then the ongoing conflict with Russia over Crimea and Ukraine.

Related to this is the convergence of state interests in the region. One could look into whether this is a result of collaborative efforts such as the Arctic Council²⁶ or a coincidental alignment of interests due to each state’s desire to maximise its power relative to that of its neighbours. Regardless, the Arctic states have shown a preference for a stable political environment in which they maintain dominance in the region. This is supported by the importance attributed to UNCLOS and issue-specific agreements signed under the auspices of the Arctic Council. These developments benefit the northern countries more than anyone else, while they also ensure that Arctic issues are generally dealt with by the Arctic states.

In sum, geographically based conflicts—geopolitics—where Arctic or non-Arctic states claim a limited number of out-of-bounds offshore resources, many of which look likely to remain unexplored for the next couple of decades at least, are neither economically nor politically viable. The resource-based argument for an outright conflict in the Arctic is not sustainable. Academics and experts who have examined the possibility of conflict in the region have by and large found each other in recent years: a direct conflict over the Arctic in itself is very unlikely. As Tamnes and Offerdal remark, ‘Discord does exist, but the main characteristics of the region are cooperation, stability and peace’.²⁷ Consequently, Arctic states are mutually dependent for creating a favourable political environment for investments and economic development. Notions of an impending scramble were thus founded on thin ice. Instead, Arctic relations in the twenty-first century have turned out to be surprisingly peaceful, guided by the growing primacy of the Arctic Council and the Arctic states’ desire to shelter Arctic relations from the repercussions of conflict elsewhere.²⁸ What is perhaps more surprising is just how consensual the emphasis on cooperation across the region appears to be.

²⁶ One could also consider other arenas for dialogue, such as the Barents Euro Arctic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the various bilateral forums.

²⁷ Tamnes and Offerdal, ‘Conclusion’, 167.

²⁸ Byers, ‘Crises and International Cooperation’, 381, 393–4.



This does not mean that Arctic states themselves are *exempt* from conflict and instability. Despite the emphasis on governance and regime-building within the Arctic foreign ministries, an amicable regional order is neither an inherent nor an unchallenged feature of the region. The Arctic states are pursuing a multitude of interests at the same time, and it is unavoidable that some of them are going to create a stir in spite of the idea of a peaceful region. Incompatible goals, or at least diverging interests, are just as characteristic of Arctic relations as of any others. This is particularly the case in connection with management of the ocean, marine resources and maritime space, given recent technological advances and developments in international law.²⁹ Although the Arctic states have dedicated themselves to ensuring peace and friendly relations in the region for now, security arrangements can still be infringed.

Furthermore, although a struggle for the Arctic is not a cause for immediate concern, there is no guarantee that relationships between the Kremlin and some of the other Arctic states will always remain on an even keel. This brings us to the second level of analysis, the international system, and its relevance for understanding Arctic geopolitics.

The international system: what role for the Arctic?

Moving beyond relations within the Arctic region to those between the Arctic and the world at large, it must be asked, What role does the Arctic play in the international system? To what extent are systemic interactions between states of relevance to the region, and what is the region's purpose in great power (or superpower) politics?³⁰

The Arctic's importance in global affairs has fluctuated historically but has always been relatively minor. In the Second World War, the region—mainly the European Arctic—served as an arena of confrontation both on land and

²⁹ A. Østhagen, 'High North, Low Politics, Maritime Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic', *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 7/1 (2016), 95.

³⁰ See K. N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1979); and J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001) for the traditional neo-realist–realist account of the international system and state behaviour.



at sea.³¹ During the Cold War, the two superpowers became locked in political as well as military stand-offs. Norway is one of only two NATO countries (the other being Turkey) that shares a land border with the Soviet Union. And Alaska—albeit separated by the Bering Strait—is in close proximity to the far-eastern region of Russia. Greenland and Iceland hold strategic positions in the North Atlantic, and the Kola Peninsula was, and still is, key in Russian military planning given its unrestricted access to the Atlantic.³² During the Cold War, military investment in the Arctic varied significantly, from long-range weaponry (missiles and strategic bombers) to local forces focused on potential conflict *in the Arctic*.

As the Cold War ended, the Arctic was transformed from a region of geopolitical rivalry to one where Russia would be included in various cooperative arrangements with its former adversaries. Several regional organisations (the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro Arctic Council and the Northern Forum) emerged in the 1990s to tackle issues such as environmental degradation, regional and local development, and cross-border cooperation. Subsequently, although *interaction* between Arctic states and Arctic peoples increased in this period, the region nevertheless disappeared from the geopolitical radar and lost its systemic importance, beyond its significance to the neighbouring northern countries.

When the region changed again after the turn of the millennium, so did both the dynamics within the Arctic and the region's role in the international system more generally. The role the Arctic plays in national defence considerations is still a key element. This, however, varies across the Arctic, as there is vast variation in what each country chooses to prioritise and target in its northern areas in terms of national security and defence, and how these policies are linked to systemic security developments.

Russia holds centre stage in the Arctic. It has been increasing its investments in military infrastructure in the region: it has constructed new military bases in the north, manufactured dozens of new icebreakers and established two 'Arctic brigades'.³³ Since 2007 there has been an increase in the number of flights by Russian bombers, which fly along the north Norwegian coast or across the

³¹ For more about this, see R. Tamnes and S. G. Holtsmark, 'The Geopolitics of the Arctic in Historical Perspective', in R. Tamnes and K. Offerdal (eds.), *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 23–5.

³² Ibid.

³³ H. A. Conley and C. Rohloff, *The New Ice Curtain*, Center for Strategic & International Studies (Washington, DC, 2015), 9.



North Pole from the Kola Peninsula.³⁴ As Zysk argues, Russian activity and rhetoric with regards to the Arctic may seem contradictory.³⁵ Russia continues to emphasise cooperation and the maintenance of low-tension relations, while proceeding with military investments and actions aimed at protecting its Arctic interests.³⁶ Much of this military activity is not linked to Arctic developments per se but is related to systems issues insofar as Russia is an Arctic country with essential military bases located in the region. Russia needs these bases to gain access to the North Atlantic. And Russia's strategic submarines contribute to the country's status as a nuclear power on the world stage.³⁷

For the Nordic countries, the Arctic is integral to national defence policy. In a Norwegian context, the 'High North' constitutes the primary security concern for any government in Oslo. Through a two-track relationship with Russia, Norway aims to cultivate a neighbourly relationship while displaying defence and sovereignty-enforcing capabilities along its northern border.³⁸ The relationship with Russia in the north is not, however, generally framed as an 'Arctic security' issue. Instead, it is placed in the wider context of Norwegian national security and defence policies. Similarly, Sweden and Finland highlight their proximity to Russia, albeit as non-aligned states with ties to NATO through 'partnerships' and the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO). In recent years NORDEFECO's aspirations have grown. However, it is plagued by the same challenges faced by the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, namely diverging approaches to security and defence, and a preference by some members to operate within the NATO framework.³⁹ Iceland, as the midway point between North America and Europe, occupies a highly strategic position in what was termed the 'G-I-UK-gap' during the Cold War.⁴⁰ Since the US left the Keflavik air base in 2006, NATO and the Nordic countries have taken on responsibility for mounting air policing exercises two to three times a year. Beyond that,

³⁴ P. S. Hilde, 'Armed Forces and Security Challenges in the Arctic', in R. Tamnes and K. Offerdal (eds.), *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World* (London: Routledge, 2014), 153.

³⁵ K. Zysk, 'Russia's Arctic Strategy: Ambitions and Restraints', in B. S. Zellen (ed.), *The Fast-Changing Arctic: Rethinking Arctic Security for a Warmer World* (Calgary: Calgary University Press, 2013), 281–96.

³⁶ A. Sergunin and V. Konyshov, 'Russia in Search of Its Arctic Strategy: Between Hard and Soft Power?', *Polar Journal* 4/1 (2014), 85–6.

³⁷ Hilde, 'Armed Forces and Security Challenges', 153–5.

³⁸ L. C. Jensen, 'An Arctic "Marriage of Inconvenience": Norway and the Othering of Russia', *Polar Geography* 40/2 (2017), 139–40. See also Norway, Norwegian Government, *Norway's Arctic Strategy: Between Geopolitics and Social Development* (2017).

³⁹ For more on this issue, see H. L. Saxi, 'Nordic Defence Cooperation After the Cold War,' *Oslo Files on Defence and Security* 1 (2011).

⁴⁰ Greenland, Iceland and the UK.



Iceland lacks a dedicated defence of its own and is subsequently dependent on its allies for assistance.

In North America⁴¹ the Arctic arguably does not have the same seminal role in national security considerations. Although the rhetoric might suggest otherwise, the Arctic has primarily been the location for missile defence capabilities, surveillance infrastructure and a limited number of strategic forces. Greenland is protected by the Danish Armed Forces (the Arctic Command is headquartered in Nuuk and a liaison office is based at the Faroese capital Tórshavn) and by the presence of the US Thule Air Base. However, protecting Greenland has not been integral to Danish defence policy in modern times.⁴² Canada's vast Arctic territories are important from a strategic point of view and as a backdrop against which politicians in Ottawa can issue statements concerning sovereignty and national identity. Beyond this, however, recent Canadian governments have given little priority to Arctic military investments since the threat coming from the north is perceived as being relatively low.⁴³ Commentators tend to argue that the most immediate concerns facing the Canadian Arctic are not defence capabilities, but the social and health conditions in northern communities, including poor rates of economic development.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it should be noted that civilian and military capabilities tend to go hand in hand in the Arctic, not least because the military performs a whole range of duties crucial to Arctic inhabitants. Finally, Alaska has a somewhat more seminal role in US defence policy, bordering as it does on the Russian region of Chukotka across the Bering Strait. Both traditional forces and missile defence systems are located in the northern state. The region is also important to the US Navy and Coast Guard, although the US has yet to invest significantly in capabilities and infrastructure in the Arctic.⁴⁵

In sum, the Arctic's importance to national security and defence policies differs considerably from region to region. The geographical dividing line appears to fall between the European Arctic and the North American Arctic, in tandem with variations in climatic conditions. Whereas the north Norwegian

⁴¹ Including Greenland as geographically part of North America although politically part of the Realm of Denmark.

⁴² M. V. Rasmussen and L. B. Struwe, *Megatrends i Dansk Sikkerheds- Og Forsvarspolitik*, Center for Militære Studier (Copenhagen, 2013), 25.

⁴³ A. Østhagen, G. L. Sharp, and P. S. Hilde, 'At Opposite Poles: Canada's and Norway's Approaches to Security in the Arctic', *Polar Journal* 8/1 (2018), 167–9.

⁴⁴ Greaves and Lackenbauer, 'Re-Thinking Sovereignty and Security in the Arctic'.

⁴⁵ Hilde, 'Armed Forces and Security Challenges', 149; H. Conley et al., *A New Security Architecture for the Arctic: An American Perspective*, Center for Strategic & International Studies (Washington, DC, 2012).



and the north-west Russian coastlines are ice-free during winter, ice—even though it is receding—is an ever-constant factor in the Alaskan, Canadian and Greenlandic Arctic. Due to the sheer size and inaccessibility of the region, the impact of security issues on either side of the dividing line is in turn relatively limited. Despite the flow of rhetoric suggesting otherwise, Russian investments in Arctic troops and infrastructure have had very little impact on the Canadian security outlook. Indeed, fly-pasts by Russian bombers and fighter planes may cause alarm, but the real threat to the North American states in the Arctic is very limited.⁴⁶

Perceptions of the Arctic as the creator of its own hostile security environment clash with the realities of the region: the Arctic Ocean is simply too vast and remote. Had the Arctic Ocean been as frequently traversed (and as ice-free) as, say, the Indian Ocean, these dynamics would have been quite different. Since it is not, security dynamics in the Arctic remain anchored to the subregional level: the Barents area, the Bering Sea/Strait area and even the Baltic Sea region. Thus, it is futile to generalise about security interests and challenges across the whole northern circumpolar region. It makes more sense to discuss security in the different parts of the Arctic rather than in the Arctic as a whole. And of these different parts, the European Arctic is undoubtedly the most active and most challenging. Moreover, it is rapidly changing.

Additionally, the key determinants of Arctic security concerns are not primarily found *in* the Arctic. In 2014 tension between Russia and the West reached new heights with Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region and the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Sanctions were introduced by the US, the EU and other countries such as Canada and Norway.⁴⁷ The crisis had an impact in the Arctic. Joint military exercises between NATO countries and Russia in the north—such as Northern Eagle and Pomor—were cancelled or postponed indefinitely.⁴⁸ At the same time, both Russia and NATO countries continued to conduct military exercises in the Arctic, and the scale of the exercises was increased on both sides. The Ukraine crisis thus served to draw attention to the military security dimension in Arctic affairs.⁴⁹

The strategic importance of the Arctic for the European countries, especially Norway and Russia, should not be underestimated in discussions of Arctic security. The situation in the north is more complex than what the conflict/non-conflict scenarios might suggest. It is the relationship between Russia and the other Arctic states that determines the pa-

⁴⁶ Østhagen, Sharp and Hilde, 'At Opposite Poles', 176.

⁴⁷ *European Union Newsroom*, 'EU Sanctions Against Russia over Ukraine Crisis', 2014; Council Regulation (EU) no. 833/2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine, OJ L229 (31 July 2014), 1.

⁴⁸ Østhagen, 'High North, Low Politics', 90.

⁴⁹ J. E. Barnes, 'U.S. Navy Begins Arctic Exercise amid Stepped-Up Criticism of Russia', *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 March 2016.



rameters of the security environment. It is not the internal dynamics *within* the Arctic region that cause these relationships to fluctuate, at least not to a great extent. It is the Arctic's role in the general relations between the US, Russia and increasingly China that determines the security environment in the north.⁵⁰

What about China?

There have been a great many reactions from Arctic states and Arctic actors to China's involvement in the top of the world since 2007–8.⁵¹ How can we explain China's involvement in the north, and what are its interests in the Arctic?

These questions have three dimensions: two are region-specific and one is connected to the systemic level described in the previous section. First, China has a considerable research presence in the Arctic, particularly on Svalbard; moreover, it is investing in research equipment and infrastructure destined for the Arctic. This research is mainly focused on natural science and utilising the Arctic—as many scientists are—as a testing ground for climate predictions and for examining the effects of human activities further south. In a country with ambitious research agendas,⁵² a wide range of scholars and researchers are pushing for China to become involved in the Arctic for such purposes.

Second, China has stated economic interests in the north. These range from ensuring it has an advantageous position in the development of the Northern Sea Route, to investing in infrastructure projects and extractive industries. China's One Belt One Road initiative has an Arctic dimension known as the 'Ice Silk Road'. It entails exploring how northern sea-lanes, in tandem with rail capacity, can add to the country's world trade links.⁵³ The Chinese 'Silk Road Fund' and the China National Petroleum Corporation have 9.9% and 20% stakes, respectively, in the large-scale Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas project in Arctic Russia. This ties Russia and China closer together in the development of Arc-

⁵⁰ Tamnes and Offerdal, 'Conclusion'.

⁵¹ For an overview, see E. W. Rowe and W. Y. Lindgren, 'Coming into the Cold: Asia's Arctic Interests', *Polar Geography* 36/4 (2013), 253–70; and Rowe, 'Codeword China'.

⁵² Y. Zhou, 'The Rapid Rise of a Research Nation', *Nature* 528 (2015), 170–3.

⁵³ Humpert, *The Future of Arctic Shipping: A New Silk Road for China?*



tic gas resources.⁵⁴ As well as long-term prospects and strategic investments, immediate economic prospects are undoubtedly of relevance to China's Arctic endeavour.

Finally, China's involvement in the Arctic also concerns its position as an emerging superpower. As China continues to assert its influence on the world stage, the Arctic will be only one of many regions where presence and interaction are components of an expansion of power in both soft and hard terms. Ensuring Chinese interests, ranging from businesses to opinions on developments related to the Law of the Sea, is a natural part of this expansion,⁵⁵ just as it has been for the US over the last half-century. Limited tension between Arctic actors and China might arise, but the Arctic is still predominantly a harsh and challenging domain where the Arctic states will retain their primacy. What is more likely is that the impact of conflicts elsewhere, including those involving China, would spill over into the Arctic.⁵⁶ This would be due, not to the Arctic's resources or to internal power struggles, but to the strategic importance of the Arctic and the importance it holds for some NATO countries and for Russia (as described above).

However, Chinese officials have made few comments on the importance of the Arctic to China. References have been made to China as a 'near Arctic state', a situation which demands involvement.⁵⁷ At the same time, China is not accepted as an Arctic state and has largely been excluded from regional politics. It has pursued a low-profile approach to the region focused on cooperation—often bilateral—with the Arctic states. In tune with policy documents in all circumpolar states, Beijing has emphasised principles such as cooperation, win–win results and sustainability. In late 2016, Norway and China resumed normal diplomatic relations, which had been in limbo since the Nobel Peace Prize Committee awarded the prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010. China has also taken steps to strengthen relations with all Nordic countries over the last decade.⁵⁸ The Arctic has similarly been a component in Beijing's efforts to expand relations with both Russia and Canada in recent years.⁵⁹

With the White Paper launched in the spring of 2018, China signalled its desire to be taken seriously as an Arctic actor, even though it is not an Arctic state in geographical terms. China is now entering a new phase of its northern endeavour, emboldened by its interna-

⁵⁴ T. Røseth, 'Russia's China Policy in the Arctic', *Strategic Analysis* 38/6 (2014), 841–59.

⁵⁵ M. Willis and D. Depledge, 'How We Learned to Stop Worrying about China's Arctic Ambitions: Understanding China's Admission to the Arctic Council, 2004–2013', *The Arctic Institute* (22 September 2014). See also Y. Jiang, 'China's Role in Arctic Affairs in the Context of Global Governance', *Strategic Analysis* 38/6 (2014), 913–16.

⁵⁶ Ø. Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 2–5.

⁵⁷ S. Kopra, 'China's Arctic Interests', *The Arctic Yearbook* (2013), 2.

⁵⁸ See B. Sverdrup-Thygeson, W. Y. Lindgren and M. Lanteigne (eds.), *China and Nordic Diplomacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

⁵⁹ F. Lasserre, *China and the Arctic: Threat or Cooperation Potential for Canada?*, Canada International Council (Ottawa, 2010).



tional stature and relationship with Russia.⁶⁰ It remains to be seen exactly how this will translate into concrete policies or actions, such as those connected to One Belt One Road. Relations between Arctic countries and those non-Arctic countries that are present in the region are thus likely to be significantly affected by the broader ongoing power shift in the international system, that is, the rise of China. In the short-to-medium term, relations between the two sets of countries are likely to be shaped more by developments outside the region than by those within it. And in the Arctic, Russia and—increasingly—China hold central positions.

Especially relevant are the questions of China's adherence to UNCLOS and how it views the role of this international regime in relation to its own Arctic interests. So far UNCLOS has been the strongest guarantee of mutual interests in a cooperative region, supporting the interests of the Arctic states themselves. Challenges to this regime could arise from developments in high-seas fisheries and/or protected marine areas, overlapping continental seabed claims or the increasingly common discussions on the status of Arctic sea-lanes. Such challenges could spur questions about the flexibility and adaptability of UNCLOS in a context characterised by changing power dynamics and climatic change. Here China plays a key role.

The EU in the Arctic

In this new Arctic environment, what role is there for the EU? The EU's involvement in the Arctic is characterised by ambivalence. On the one hand, the Union has an obvious presence in the north in terms of market access and regulation: its member states Finland, Sweden and Denmark are located in the region; and the EU has relationships with the other Arctic states. On the other hand, three factors have made the EU's efforts to become involved constructively in the Arctic both controversial and complex. These factors are its lack of direct access to the Arctic Ocean,⁶¹ its slightly paternalistic Arctic policy statements portraying the EU as the 'solution' to the region's real or perceived challenges,⁶² and its fluctuating engagement—often dominated by

⁶⁰ Rowe, 'Codeword China'.

⁶¹ Finland and Sweden are EU members and Arctic states, albeit without access to the Arctic Ocean. Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark, but left the EU in 1985.

⁶² See A. Raspotnik, *The European Union and the Geopolitics of the Arctic* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018) for an excellent overview of these statements and trends in the EU.



special interest groups concerned with climate change, animal protection or economic ventures.⁶³ Debates in Brussels seem caught in a struggle between those who want to use the Arctic as a symbol of climate change and human inaction, and those advocating a moderate approach that is sensitive to the Arctic states and their indigenous populations.⁶⁴ These debates have not always been well received in Norway, Iceland, Canada, Russia and the US, and some Arctic states have been outspoken in their criticism of the EU's involvement in the Arctic.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, on account of its geography and its policy links to the Arctic, the EU has an overriding interest in participating in the international debate on the region. Additionally, internal systemic interests and foreign-policy aspirations are driving the EU towards developing its own Arctic policy. The Union's Global Strategy for its foreign and security policy refers to the Arctic as an area of interest, especially in its relations with Russia.⁶⁶ In 2016 the Commission and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy published the third version of the EU's Arctic policy, following the two earlier Communications issued by the Commission on the Arctic. Since 2008, EU policymaking has 'progressed' towards a more nuanced, moderate approach that takes into account the existing regional regimes and the complexities of the region.⁶⁷

The EU's direct security role in the Arctic, however, is restricted. It can assist and encourage dialogue through forums such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, which currently excludes Russia but includes all the other Arctic states and the EU members France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK.⁶⁸ It can assist with military intelligence sharing alongside what is already done in NATO, and its member states can contribute to maritime security operations if needed. However, for four of the five coastal Arctic states, the primary security guarantee comes through NATO. Moreover, as the region is relatively peaceful and amicable, the actual need for security operations and a clear EU presence is limited. Beyond this still, it must be asked whether the EU is unified and consistent enough on questions involving security and Russia to be able to assist in the event of a crisis. As it

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ A. Raspotnik and A. Østhagen, 'To Svalbard and Beyond: The European Parliament Is Back on Its Arctic Track', *The Arctic Institute*, 17 March 2014.

⁶⁵ K. Offerdal, 'The EU in the Arctic: In Pursuit of Legitimacy and Influence', *International Journal* 66/4 (2011), 863–5; A. Østhagen and A. Raspotnik, 'The EU's Arctic Policy: Eventually Getting Somewhere?', *The Arctic Institute*, 22 April 2015.

⁶⁶ EU, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (June 2016), 40.

⁶⁷ For a more in-depth analysis of developments in the EU's Arctic policy, see A. Raspotnik, *The European Union and the Geopolitics of the Arctic*; A. Stępień and A. Raspotnik, *The EU's New Arctic Communication: Not-So-Integrated, Not-So-Disappointing?*, Arctic Centre, ArCticles (University of Lapland, 2016); A. Østhagen, 'The European Union: An Arctic Actor?', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 15/2 (2013), 71–92.

⁶⁸ L. Ellis, 'Partners in the North: Canada Hosts the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable in Halifax', Government of Canada, *The Maple Leaf*, 11 May 2018.



is, the Arctic states (Norway predominantly) rely on their bilateral relationships with EU members in northern Europe as well as on the US to provide reassurance at a time when Russia is increasing its activity along the Norwegian border. For example, when Russia launched its military exercise Zapad in 2017—which had a considerable Arctic component—Norway’s immediate response was to increase its military presence in the north through collaboration with NATO and in particular the US.

The EU does have other roles to play in the Arctic beyond security. They centre around two related concepts: engage and comprehend. In terms of engagement, the EU should continue to participate in relevant meetings in the north, such as those organised by the Arctic Council, the Barents Regional Council and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum. Knowing what is taking place in the region, while also establishing working relations with the main players (states, indigenous groups, companies, and local and regional governments) will be crucial when, or if, the EU needs to become more involved in the Arctic.

This form of engagement only speaks to the regional level, however. Simultaneously, the EU and its member states should not discount the larger systemic role the Union plays in determining the trajectory of the Arctic. EU–Russia, EU–China and EU–US relations all have an Arctic component, even if this does not play a prominent role. As showcased previously, using the Arctic as an arena for good relations might have positive spillover effects.⁶⁹ By separating the regional and the systemic components, the EU can move towards having goals and ambitions for its involvement in the Arctic that are as clear as, and ambitious as, the goals and ambitions of non-Arctic states outside the Union—although this might give rise to negative responses from other Arctic actors.

In terms of comprehension, it would make sense to give higher priority to keeping Members of the European Parliament, as well as relevant EU and member-state officials, up to date on both events taking place in the north and the long-term strategic outlook for the region. As Arctic actors are not always aware of the EU’s potential contribution to the region, EU-based decision-makers seem at times surprisingly uninformed about the Arctic region itself and its challenges. Given that the north constitutes *one* of three essential regional neighbourhoods of direct geopolitical relevance to the EU—the other two being the southern and eastern neighbourhoods—grasping its dynamics and complexities should obviously be a priority.

⁶⁹ See, for example, O. R. Young, *Arctic Politics: Conflict and Cooperation in the Circumpolar North* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992).



Policy recommendations

On the basis of what has been discussed, five policy recommendations on the EU and its role in the Arctic can be made:

- Continue to be involved in Arctic affairs through ‘Arctic Stakeholder Forums’, support the Arctic Futures Symposium, and develop these venues further to ensure that they have a wide impact and are relevant for a Brussels-based audience. Linking the (European) Arctic region to Brussels also helps keep the EU from becoming trapped in a climate-or-development debate—a discussion which, in the very nature of the case, is not under the control of the EU.
- Recognise the *strategic importance* of the Arctic region and the need to address issues important to it (including military security) in Brussels and in Arctic policy documents. Issues of importance to the Arctic go beyond those that are related to the environment or sustainable development. The EU (and especially its member states and Members of the European Parliament) should be aware of the importance that Russia places on its Arctic territories, and of the ways in which China is increasingly becoming entangled in the region.
- Emphasise the need for EU-wide involvement in and sharing of information on Arctic strategic issues.⁷⁰ Ensure that key themes and questions can be addressed. What are the EU’s strategic interests in the European Arctic? Which European or EU companies are involved in northern development? (Total, ENI and Maersk are examples.) What are Norway’s concerns about Svalbard, and how can European states cooperate on this issue instead of engaging in minor disputes (e.g. the snow crab dispute⁷¹)?
- Invest in research that asks timely questions What role, if any, does the Common Security and Defence Policy have in the Arctic? What burden-sharing arrangements does the EU have with NATO for the Arctic? What is the role of NORDEFECO in these matters? What role, if any, can the EU and the Common Security and Defence Policy play?
- Consider how the Delegation of the EU to Norway could play a larger role as a hub for the Union’s involvement in the Arctic and the sharing of information on the region.

⁷⁰ This recommendation is related to the point made below about establishing an official Arctic centre that actively creates venues for the sharing of information, as well as giving briefings, talks and announcements of relevance to the EU’s Arctic endeavour.

⁷¹ See A. Østhagen and A. Raspotnik, ‘Crab! How a Dispute over Snow Crab Became a Diplomatic Headache between Norway and the EU’, *Marine Policy* 98 (December 2018), 58–64.



This should be done, however, without discounting the role of the Arctic Centre at the University of Lapland. There is a need for both an internally oriented dimension/hub and an externally oriented one, comparable to the Canadian International Arctic Centre in Oslo. By creating platforms or venues *outside* the EU to discuss the Union's involvement in the Arctic, mishaps and misunderstandings could perhaps be avoided.

Conclusion

The Arctic will keep growing in importance to northern states *and* the international community for two intertwined reasons: (1) the unremitting disappearance of the Arctic sea ice will allow for more activity, and (2) some of the world's greatest powers are investing in, and focusing on, the region. However, the dynamics of this region cannot be boiled down to the mutually exclusive options of conflict or no conflict. A race for Arctic resources or territory is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future, despite the territorial land grabs that have been occurring in other parts of the world. Thus, it is not the influence of geography on politics that has the potential to cause conflict in the Arctic.

At the same time, the region's growing importance within the international system is becoming increasingly apparent. In this regard the Arctic stands as an arena where the US, Russia and China interact with the EU. Here the EU has several roles to play. It can ensure that its member states and institutions are aware of the complexities of the region, whether these relate to the livelihoods of indigenous peoples or to Russia's (and other Arctic states') military investments. The EU should only involve itself in the Arctic in a regional (and non-threatening) manner. Beyond this, the EU needs to recognise the increasing importance of the Arctic within the international system and the role the Union plays in shaping the region. This it can do by setting clear visionary goals in line with its own interests as the world's second largest economy, after China.



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External editing: Communicative English bvba

Typesetting: Victoria Agency
Printed in Belgium by Drukkerij Jo Vandenbulcke

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.
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