Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts

The Coldest Hot Zone
Europe's Role in Arctic Geopolitics

Tamás Fehér

BACHELOR THESIS

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this Bachelor Thesis is my own work and has not been published in part or in whole elsewhere. All academic and other sources of literature used are referenced and listed in the Bibliography. Artificial intelligence, namely Grammarly and Le Chat, was used to create this bachelor's thesis, but solely for grammar and punctuation corrections, not for generating new content or providing content ideas. See the Origin Writing Report (Appendix 1).

Bratislava, February, 25 2025 Tamás Fehér

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Abstrakt:
Táto práca s dôrazom na dôsledky klimatických zmien a rastúcu dostupnosť prírodných zdrojov skúma geopolitickú dynamiku a strategický význam arktického regiónu. Vzhľadom na Malthusovu populačnú teóriu, podľa ktorej nárast populácie prevýši dostupnosť zdrojov, čo povedie k ich nedostatku a konfliktom, sa navrhuje, aby medzinárodné spoločenstvo čelilo meniacej sa geopolitickej súťaži a súťaži o zdroje v Arktíde. V celej práci uvádzam argumenty, že musíme rozšíriť náš pohľad na bezpečnosť a zohľadniť, ako dostupnosť zdrojov a zmena klímy ovplyvňujú populačnú dynamiku a globálnu stabilitu.

Kľúčové slová: Arktída, geopolitika, zmena klímy, regionálna stabilita, prírodné zdroje, EÚ, NATO, Rusko

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Abstract:

With an emphasis on the effects of climate change and the growing availability of natural resources, this thesis examines the geopolitical dynamics and strategic significance of the Arctic region. Given Malthus's theory of population, which holds that population increase will surpass resource availability, resulting in scarcity and conflict, it is suggested that the international community needs to confront the changing geopolitical and resource competition in the Arctic. I make the case throughout the thesis that Europe needs to broaden our perspective on security and take into account how resource availability and climate change affect population dynamics and global stability.

Keywords: Arctic, geopolitics, climate change, regional stability, natural resources, EU, NATO, Russia

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I. Introduction

It is undeniable that the Arctic is changing. Humanity's dependence on exploitation of fossil fuels, has led to the sad reality that the Arctic is melting away. There is a sense of irony lurking around this topic, particularly that humanity has burned such amounts of fossil fuels, to the point that its impact on global temperatures has enabled humanity to find and exploit even more fossil fuels, in the Arctic. The radically changing landscape of the far north, has implications that can and already are greatly changing the geopolitical realities of the Arctic. Melting ice is opening new shipping routes, such as Northwestern Passage. Vast untapped resources of oil, gas, and minerals are also unveiled because of melting ice (Yumashev et al., 2017). Thus, development in the region brought it more into focus globally as many countries scrambled for influence over its economic and strategic potentiality.

Russia has aggressively been expanding its territorial claims in the Arctic with massive militarization and positioning (Zhuravel, 2021a). Although European countries are far from the Arctic, they have become increasingly engaged in establishing and protecting their interests and sense of stability within the region (Zhuravel, 2021b). The lack of a cohesive and unified policy among European states regarding the Arctic complicates their ability to effectively challenge Russia's growing influence. While the European Union (EU) and NATO have limited direct jurisdiction over Arctic affairs, individual European countries are beginning to implement national strategies aimed at balancing Russia's expansion and securing their own economic, geopolitical, and environmental interests in the region (Habro & Shevchuk, 2023). However, this fragmentation has left Europe vulnerable to being sidelined as other global powers, particularly China, have also intensified their interest in the Arctic mostly in collaboration with Russia, driven

by the potential for new shipping routes and access to valuable resources (Habro & Shevchuk, 2023).

This thesis aims to explore how the lack of coordinated defense and geopolitical policies among European nations impacts their standing in the Arctic, particularly about defense, climate change, and resource competition. By comparing the fragmented policy approach of European countries with Russia's assertive strategy, the study seeks to understand how the geopolitical dynamics of the Arctic are evolving and what this means for European nations. The research will focus on key case studies, examining the historical and contemporary context of Arctic resource competition, the militarization of the region, and the role of external actors, including China. By delving into the complexities of Arctic geopolitics, this thesis will analyze how European nations might respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by a changing Arctic environment. It will examine the broader implications of the ongoing transformation in the region, shaped by both environmental forces and political agendas and provide insight into the potential risks and rewards of Arctic involvement in an era of climate change and geopolitical rivalry. An increasing amount of attention is required on the Arctic, as its changes create the terrain for future potential conflict and competition. It is visible in the current Russo-Ukrainian conflict, that even in this case, the conflict spills worldwide, to Sudan, Syria, and so forth. The same spillover can be anticipated in the Arctic, as a potential conflict in the Arctic would likely influence European stability, economically and politically. The Arctic and near Arctic European states, like Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, are all experienced in Arctic warfare and are extensively working with NATO to create cohesive battle doctrines, while the rest of Europe still sees the Arctic as a distant, desolate area, devoid of importance. With the latest European Commission and the creation of a Defense Commissioner, it is likely that the EU as a supranational

entity, will focus on the strengthening of European defense, one which includes the Arctic, as one of its peripheries (Posaner & Barigazzi, 2024). The Arctic is becoming ever more important since the undisputable reality of climate change is already wrecking the health of the Arctic, evident in its melting ice caps, and deteriorating wildlife. Ironically, so much fossil fuels have been exploited, that it will inevitably lead to more fossil fuels being exploitable in the Arctic. Many states are deeply interested in the Arctic largely due to its economic value and its strategic potential. The disappearing ice caps reveal both improved shipping routes with lower rates and newfound natural resource deposits. The geographical area plays an essential role for industrialized nations to fulfill their advancing energy needs while developing sustainable economic systems in a world of global trade. The Arctic control grants military forces a strategic advantage through which they can exercise sea power and affect worldwide shipping operations.

II. What and Where is the Arctic

Primarily, it is important to note that the Arctic Circle is not a singular geographical entity, especially in terms of geopolitics. The geography and its strategic importance are varied[1]. The Russian coastline of the Arctic holds different geopolitical implications compared to the North European one and is vastly different from the Canadian or North American part of the Arctic (Heininen, 2018). For this reason, when discussing the different parts of the Arctic, its specific geographic location will be highlighted. Furthermore, the paper aims to focus mostly on the European and Russian parts of the Arctic. However, the role of the United States, and Canada, will be crucial in the creation of European policy. For instance, the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap, (GIUK Gap), is a geographic gap between the mentioned nations that highlights a NATO 'wall' that encapsulates the European Arctic, blocking entry or exit from the Arctic to the North Atlantic. The gap posits a geopolitical and strategic tool for the transatlantic alliance (Pincus, 2020). Whereas, Russia does not have such a multinational geostrategic tool, for better or worse, however, due to its coastline, can assert legal and military authority, for much larger parts of the Arctic circle. In its essence, Russia holds the advantage of being able to apply its policy, without the necessity to use allies in the Arctic to exert military and economic power (Pincus, 2020). On the other hand, the Bering Strait highlights how other entry points to the Russian Arctic are often overlooked and are collectively shared by the United States and Russia. Further highlighting, that the Arctic is not one entity, but several unique spheres with various interests and variables.

Greenland in particular highlights how European and North American defense interests are intertwined. Despite being an autonomous territory, with

[1] For a map of the Arctic, see page 1

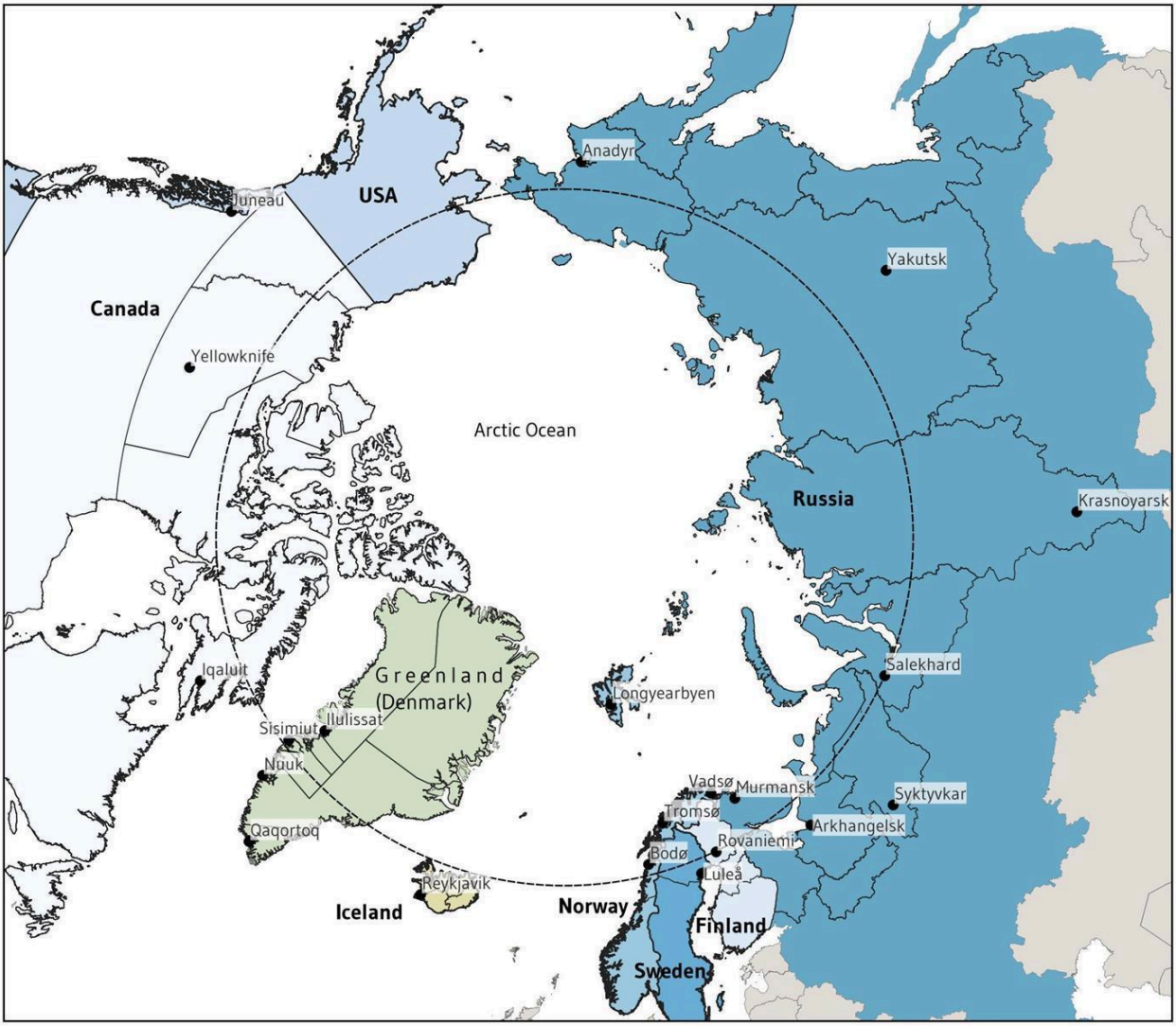
home rule, it is under the Kingdom of Denmark, while being geographically located in North America (Pincus, 2020). The importance of the island was most pertinent for Washington during the Cold War, especially due to the everlasting threat of nuclear war. In the event of a cold war gone hot scenario, the vast majority of missiles fired between the United States and the Soviet Union would fly over the Arctic. Greenland's location specifically offered strategic opportunities for spotting and intercepting missiles (Takahashi, 2016). Thus, the US established several military installations, to monitor and track the skies over the Arctic. Such came at great logistical challenges, mostly due to the limited infrastructure for military use on the island (Bruun, 2018). Due to recent events, over the diplomatic clashes and threats from Donald Trump, Greenlandic importance was brought to the forefront (Harmsen, 2025). Without focusing on the nationalistic rhetoric surrounding the situation, there is an important geostrategic line of thought behind Trump's aims at Greenland. The United States has enjoyed relative safety from outside powers due to its geographic isolation, and Greenland's location particularly aids in the defence of the nation (Bruun, 2018). While it can be argued that Trump's approach to Greenland may be hypocritical, the added strategic value of the island allows for higher surveillance and early warning capabilities, which are critical in an era of renewed great power competition. The Arctic, as a region, is becoming increasingly militarized, with Russia investing heavily in modernizing its Northern Fleet and reopening Soviet-era military bases, ports and airfields alongside new constructions. (Pincus, 2020). This has prompted NATO members, particularly the United States and Canada, to reassess their own Arctic defense strategies.

Climate change melting the polar ice caps has also exacerbated these tensions through the opening up of new sea routes and the unveiling of previously untouched natural resources such as oil, natural gas, and rare earth minerals (Ma et

al., 2023). All of this has contributed to the possibility of the Arctic becoming a source of conflict as well as an arena of cooperation. As a consequence, many European states have been focusing on their Arctic defense capabilities, and posturing. Sweden and Finland, while traditionally neutral, have boosted cooperation with NATO because of Russia's aggressive conduct in the region (Wither, 2020). Norway, one of the founding members of NATO, has been a central player in Arctic security for decades, hosting allied exercises and boasting a robust military presence in the High North (Wither, 2020). The Nordic region's response to Arctic security confirms the transatlantic character of European and North American defense interests and the need for a united transatlantic response to new challenges. On the other hand, Russian Arctic policy is driven by the state's interest to ensure its northern border and coastline as well as taking advantage of the Arctic's economic potential (Zhuravel, 2021a). The Northern Sea Route, bordering Russia's Arctic coastline, is one of the focal points of Moscow's ambitions. Establishing this route, Moscow aims to have a stable shipping route that can rival traditional shipping lanes like the Suez Canal, and solidify its dominance over the region (Zhuravel, 2021a). But Russia's military buildup in the Arctic has raised concerns among its neighbors and NATO allies, who view these actions as destabilizing to the region, and the world order (Kjellén, 2022). The construction of new military bases, the installation of advanced missile systems, and the increasing number of Russian submarines in the Arctic waters have all led to a feeling of insecurity (Kjellén, 2022). These tensions are offset by prospects of cooperation in the Arctic. The Arctic Council, which is an intergovernmental forum bringing all eight Arctic states, has been the historical platform through which these countries could dialogue and collaborate on issues such as environmental protection, scientific research, and indigenous rights (Habro & Shevchuk, 2023). The consensus-based decision-making process within the council

has encountered dislocation from such strains of geopolitical rivalries, particularly those between Russia and Western members (Habro & Shevchuk, 2023). The challenge for Arctic states is to balance competing interests with the stability and unique environment they seek to preserve and maintain.

The Arctic is not one entity or region, but rather a collection of macroregions, with their own separate interests, variables and factors. The combined forces of Russia's extended coastal areas and its powerful unilateral moves create high-level strategic influence which NATO members along with Nordic nations use to build collaborative defense systems against Russian assertiveness. The critical geostrategic value of Greenland along with the GIUK Gap and Bering Strait demonstrates how European and North American defense are engraved into one another in the Arctic. Climate change has deepened regional competition due to the excessive melting of polar ice, provides fresh maritime pathways and resource opportunities that are turning the Arctic into a probable conflict area and a hopeful collaboration zone. Militarization and geopolitical rivalries create major barriers for the Arctic Council to maintain proper dialogue but their institutions work to align interests with environmental protection goals for the Arctic. The Arctic's long-term trajectory hinges on Arctic states successfully addressing these conflicting interests in order to establish peace through collaborative frameworks within this security and economic central territory.



Arto Vitikka, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland. **Credit for the border data**: Runfola, D. et al. (2020) **geoBoundaries**: A global database of political administrative boundaries. PLoS ONE 15(4): e0231866. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0231866e

III. The Impact of Climate Change on Arctic Geopolitics

While the differing macroregional focuses of the Arctic create different geopolitical issues, climate change does not care about boundaries and all of the Arctic is under threat. Increasing global temperatures are rapidly melting the polar ice caps, which have opened up economic opportunities and new geopolitical tensions (Habro & Shevchuk, 2023). In this chapter, the environmental changes discussed will be explored to understand their irreversible reshaping of the geopolitical picture in the Arctic, especially in three aspects: increased geopolitical competition, new trade routes, and the environmental and moral questions arising from these developments. The argument put forward is that climate change has triggered an increase in geopolitical competition in the Arctic. The melting ice has exposed vast reserves of natural resources, estimated to be 30% of the world's unexploited or inaccessible natural gas and 13% of its undiscovered oil (O'Garra, 2017). These resources have become the object of contention among Arctic states and global powers, turning the Arctic into a potential area of conflict over resources. For instance, Russia has been particularly strong in asserting its claims, using its long Arctic coastline to establish dominance over resource-rich areas (Sharapov, 2023). This has included massive investment in infrastructure and the militarization of the region to safeguard its interests[2]. Unsurprisingly, so are the USA, Canada, and Nordic countries seeking to assert themselves in the Arctic, often in cooperation through NATO. The strategic importance of the region has resulted in competition from non-Arctic states, including China. China has no territorial claims in the Arctic but proclaims itself a "near-Arctic state", seeking partnerships with Arctic countries to access resources and shipping routes (Kuang & Ou, 2019).

[2] For more information on specific infrastructure projects, see Brutschin and Schubert (2016)

With the continuing of ice, the Arctic increasingly becomes a contested arena characterized by overlapping territorial claims and conflicting interests that might threaten its stability. Conflict potential is more plausible in the absence of any comprehensive legal regime to deal with resource extraction and territorial claims (Tulaeva et al., 2019). Even where the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides guidelines, its enforcement mechanisms remain weak and are thus open to manipulation by other powerful states (Tulaeva et al., 2019). Of the more serious climate change impacts in the Arctic is that this has opened numerous shipping routes, such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR) of the Russian coastline and the Northwest Passage through Canada's Arctic archipelago. These routes present a remarkable shortening of travel time between major markets in Asia, Europe, and North America (Melia et al., 2016). For instance, the NSR can potentially shorten the time taken between Shanghai and Rotterdam by almost 40% compared with the conventional route of the Suez Canal (Melia et al., 2016). Although, it is important to note that the decrease in travel time is greatly dependent on weather, and the frequency of icebreaker trips in the area. This, therefore, has the power to change the dynamics of global trade, reducing dependency on existing chokepoints and altering the economic power balance. The Northern Sea Route, in particular, is a focus of Russia's Arctic strategy (Sevastyanov & Kravchuk, 2020). Russia has poured huge investments into infrastructure for commercial shipping, including icebreakers, ports, and navigation systems (Sevastyanov & Kravchuk, 2020). However, the very viability of NSR is dependent on varying seasonal ice conditions, which remain rather uncertain even as the ice continues to melt in general (Melia et al., 2016). This uncertainty is met with cautious optimism on the part of shipping companies that need to make trade-offs between potential cost savings and risks associated with operating in the harsh, remote Arctic environment (Melia et al., 2016).

The Northwest Passage is far less developed than the NSR, but it also holds a lot of promise. Canada considers it as its internal waters, whereas the United States and other countries argue that it is an international strait. It is quite clear that these routes can affect existing chokepoints like the Suez and Panama Canals directly (Lasserre & Pelletier, 2011). If Arctic routes become reliable and economic, they would highly likely divert a notable proportion of global trade, thus threatening the strategic importance of conventional maritime corridors (Schach & Madlener, 2018). This would have ramifications for global supply chains, energy markets, and geopolitical alliances (Schach & Madlener, 2018). The exploitation of resources in a warming Arctic presents an undeniable economic opportunity. It also brings forth major environmental and ethical challenges.

The Arctic is amongst the most fragile ecosystems in the world, and the prospect of increased human activity poses grave threats to its biodiversity (Lemieux et al., 2024). Oil and gas extraction, as one instance, carries the high risk of a catastrophic spill that would be almost impossible to clean up in the harsh and remote climate of the Arctic (Lemieux et al., 2024; Svavarsson et al., 2021). Furthermore, increased shipping traffic raises pollution, noise, and the possibility of introducing invasive species, which can react badly in fragile ecosystems (Lemieux et al., 2024; Svavarsson et al., 2021). The other considerations are the moral implications of development in the Arctic, which are convoluted. Indigenous communities living in the region for thousands of years are amongst those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and resource exploitation (Tulaeva et al., 2019). They have been in tune with the natural environment and therefore have developed a way of life; however, new developments are threatening directly their livelihood due to melting ice, wildlife changing routes, and industrial activities (Tulaeva et al., 2019). The tension between economic gain and environmental preservation is a central theme in Arctic geopolitics. On one hand, the exploitation

of Arctic resources and the development of new trade routes offer significant economic benefits, particularly for resource-dependent economies. On the other hand, the environmental costs of these activities could have global consequences, contributing to further climate change and biodiversity loss. Balancing these competing priorities will require a nuanced and collaborative approach, involving not only Arctic states but also the international community.

The world has consumed such quantities of fossil fuels, that humanity has elevated global temperatures to a point, where even more fossil fuels can be extracted. It is important to not lose sight of the environmental costs of geopolitics, especially with the looming global climate crisis in the background. Yet through the actions of Arctic actors, it is apparent that economic and military expansion outweighs the importance of the climate and the environment, to world leaders. Alas, the world economy is greatly affected by international shipping and commerce, and it is evident that the Arctic is a key part of the 21st century globalized economy.

IV. Russian Strategy and Dominance in the Arctic

In the Russian Federation, the Arctic strategy pursues its wider geopolitical aspirations of aggressive territorial claims, militarization, and economic exploitation (Pincus, 2020). Russia, as an Arctic giant, and the largest power in the Arctic, sees this area as inseparable from national security, economic prosperity, global ambitions, and to some extent, national identity. This chapter will examine Russia's approach to spanning the Arctic through territorial and military expansion and economic ambitions and the indirect ramifications that the war in Ukraine has exerted upon its Arctic strategy. Such developments are consequential to Europe and indeed the rest of the world.

The Arctic territorial claims advanced by Russia have arguably been the most assertive of any Arctic state. Central to these claims is the extension of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), a process Russia has pursued through submissions to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (Gomelauri, 2023). In 2007, with acquiescent symbols, Russia added a titanium flag planted on the seabed at North Pole territories as a statement of intent to rule the region (Parfitt, 2007). These actions are part of its larger strategy to consolidate powers over vast subterranean territories suspected of containing rich reserves of oil, gas, and minerals. Militarization has been a central facet of Russia's Arctic strategy. Considerable resources have been invested to modernize military infrastructure in this region through the reopening of Soviet-era bases and the building of new facilities (Kjellén, 2022)[3]. The Russian Northern Fleet, based in Severomorsk, also received priority for modernization, with new submarines,

[3] For more detailed information on Russian military installations, see Kjellén (2022). Notable installations are the Nagurskoye air base on Franz Josef Land and the Trefoil base on Alexandra Land.

icebreakers, and missile systems designed for Arctic conditions (Kjellén, 2022). The icebreaker fleet is one of Russia's strongest tools in exercising Arctic dominance. Russia has more than 40 icebreakers, including nuclear-powered ones such as Arktika, arguably outclassing all vessels operated by other Arctic states [4]. Russia's 40 icebreakers provide a major strategic tool that grants it absolute authority and navigational capabilities throughout the Arctic region. The vessels enable Russia to keep ships moving throughout the entire year along the Northern Sea Route where shipping traffic is becoming more practicable because of the shrinking polar ice. Through its icebreakers Russia achieves both economic and strategic goals because these vessels enable the country to extract resources and build infrastructure and conduct military activities in the High North (Moe & Brigham, 2016). Besides ensuring navigation under the NSR for almost every month of the year, these icebreakers also allow Russia to project its power throughout the region. The Arctic militarization serves to consolidate Russia's territorial assertions while providing deterrence to NATO and other competitors. Russia's Arctic economic strategy is mainly driven by the natural resources which are abundant in the area. Thirty percent of the world's undiscovered natural gas and thirteen percent of its oil is allocated in the Arctic, making it a cornerstone of the Russian energy sector (O'Garra, 2017). Significantly, major economic projects can be seen as a demonstration of Russia's intention to develop these resources, meanwhile, technical and environmental difficulties are still a big challenge[5]. Russia has been, in particular, looking for partnerships with other actors to finance these ambitious projects, among them, China. For instance, the Yamal LNG project received a good part of the investment from Chinese state-owned enterprises, an indication of the growing convergence in interests of Moscow and Beijing

[4] For a more detailed explanation of Russian icebreaker strategy, management and doctrine, see Moe and Brigham (2016).
[5] For a more detailed explanation of Russian energy projects, see Pitukhina et al. (2024)

(Pitukhina et al., 2024). China joining the Arctic energy projects is one of the major parts of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which includes the "Polar Silk Road" as a main component (Türker, 2024). That cooperation allows Russia to bypass Western sanctions and gain the financial support and the technology it needs to exploit the Arctic resources (Türker, 2024). Furthermore, the construction of the infrastructure is another leg of the Russian Economic Strategy. The main focus of this part is the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), involving during Russia the ports, navigational systems, and fleets of icebreakers for commercial shipping (Kjellén, 2022). The NSR not only saves time for trade between Asia and Europe but also is a tool for Russia to extend Arctic control. However, the solution to the question of the profit or loss of these projects remains unresolved. The two factors making things unclear are the water and food global energy prices and climate change causing damages.

Russia's Arctic strategy faces important although not directly related consequences due to the continuing Russo-Ukrainian war. Western reaction to the conflict has led multiple countries to target important parts of the Russian economy such as energy and defense sectors as outlined by Borozna (2023). The financial restrictions place Russia into a challenging position for Arctic capital investment leading Moscow to build closer economic alliances with China and other non-Western countries (Borozna, 2023). The conflict has intensified geostrategic stress in the Arctic region because NATO countries are reviewing their Arctic defense strategies. Traditional neutral states Finland and Sweden now pursue NATO membership because of Russia’s aggressive actions creating greater isolation for Moscow (Chekov et al., 2023). Militarization in the Arctic region by Russia and NATO has magnified the chances of unintentional military encounters in zones of mutual interests like the Barents Sea (Chekov et al., 2023). Russia maintains its dedication to Arctic governance because the northern areas of the

country serve as both an essential strategic frontier and provide lasting economic stability. Moscow acknowledges the Arctic as its vital front against Western expansion because of the war experience (Chekov et al., 2023). The present economic and military demands on Russia may impede its ability to achieve complete Arctic objectives over the coming period. Russia depends on the Arctic region to establish its national identity and global status because the Arctic provides vital natural resources and defense advantages and displays Russia's rise as an international power (Chekov et al., 2023). The aggressive foreign policy of Russia leads to heightened tensions between Russia and NATO along with other Arctic countries during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Russia together with its competing powers will determine through their actions the fate of this essential strategic region known as the Arctic thus influencing global political dynamics.

The Arctic resource competition echoes with familiarity to historical territorial conflicts due to the principles described in Thomas Robert Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Malthus demonstrated that increasing population numbers exceed the availability of resources which generates resource scarcity and competitive behavior followed by disputes. Russia holds aggressive territorial positions and conducts military buildups along with economic development in the Arctic to access large untapped mineral resources needed to fuel its expanding society and economic developments. Russia implements this imperialist viewpoint to secure long-term access to vital resources which will be essential as global demands steadily increase. Competition in the Arctic defines itself through a resource-oriented and strategic contest for power rather than resulting in direct armed conflict as in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Within the Russo-Ukrainian War, Russia implements military force to achieve its interests yet the Arctic shows a complex competition between powers vying for political and geostrategic supremacy while seeking control over scarce resources. Territorial

growth for expanding populations in accordance with Malthusian ideas results in resource competition that may cause military confrontations. The strategic area of the Arctic holds major importance due to its natural resources and valuable position in modern global power dynamics between military forces and economic and environmental actors. Expansionist foreign policy, or arguably, imperial expansion is at the forefront of Russian aims in the Arctic. As the factors of grandiose power projection, economic gain and NATO deterrence, meet in a trifecta.

V. The Role of External and Great Powers in Arctic Geopolitics

While the Arctic starts to appear as an arena where the interests of eight circumpolar states prevail, there are other external nations such as China and the United States affecting the geopolitical setup. Their involvement plays a role in bringing new governance dynamics to the Arctic, thereby complicating the situation for others and putting into question the future of the region. This interjection will explore the interests, strategies, and implications of the external actors, focusing on China in the Arctic, security in the Arctic from a U.S. perspective, and finally, the Arctic as a global commons.

China's growing foray into the Arctic remains an unmistakable hallmark of transformation in its geopolitics. Even while having no claims in the Arctic, China has ever since continued to profess itself as a "near-Arctic state" with its relentless bid to establish a foothold in the region (Kuang & Ou, 2019). In this, professedly, lay China's far-reaching policy of expanding its political space and access to critical resources and trading routes. China's Arctic aspirations are of an economic, scientific, and strategic nature. It has invested in Arctic infrastructure by building icebreakers[6] and actively developing the Polar Silk Road as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Pitukhina et al., 2024)[7]. Arguably, by working with Arctic states such as Russia, China has gained entry and access to major energy projects and is trying to apply its economic power to influence regional governance. The Arctic activities of China pose important implications for European and Arctic states. On the one hand, Chinese investments have provided sorely needed capital for resource development and infrastructure projects. Debt dependency, environmental hazards, and infringement of Arctic states' sovereignty are

[6] For further information on Chinese shipping and icebreaking, see Chen et al. (2021)
[7] For more information on Chinese investments in the Arctic, see Pitukhina et al. (2024)

additional concerns raised by this initiative (Türker, 2024). China expresses its strategic interest in Arctic military and scientific capabilities. They run research expeditions into the Arctic Ocean disguised for apparent scientific aims but with potential dual-use applications (Petrovskiy, 2024). Also, increased icebreaker construction capabilities and satellites allow giant strides for China in observing the area and showing force (Petrovskiy, 2024). This has led Arctic states to reconsider their relationships with China, balancing the goodwill of economic cooperation against the downside of strategic competition (Ivanova et al., 2025). As Deng Xiaoping once said to Jacques Chirac, "Don't forget that Siberia is empty" (Védrine, 2021, pp. 432-433). Védrine, who served as the French Foreign Minister and previously as the Secretary-General of the Élysée under Mitterrand, underscores the strategic importance of this sparsely populated region. This interest in Siberia reflects China's broader ambitions in the Arctic, where it seeks to secure access to resources and influence regional governance.

The U.S. approach to the Arctic has been heavily dictated by efforts to counter Russia and China, especially historically. (Borisov & Rovinskaya, 2021). As an original member of the Arctic Council and a key NATO member, the United States, which includes Alaska as part of its territory making the U.S. an Arctic state, significantly influences the region's security and governance. However, its Arctic policy has regularly been criticized for being reactionary in nature, lacking initiative, especially concerning Russia's more concrete and assertive approach (Conley & Melino, 2024). In recent years, the U.S. has sought to enhance its influence in the Arctic, recognizing that the region is becoming strategically more important (Conley & Melino, 2024). The Arctic Strategy from the Department of Defense, from the year 2019, emphasized advancing Arctic military capabilities, including icebreakers, surveillance systems, and infrastructure ("Report to Congress - Department of Defense Arctic Strategy," 2019). The U.S. Coast Guard

has been instrumental in the assertion of American interests in the Arctic, particularly in the Bering Strait and Northwest Passage (Boulègue et al., 2024). The U.S. approach to Arctic security is well-balanced with NATO and European concerns. The Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap is a traditionally significant maritime choke point, a constant subject of transatlantic defense cooperation (Boulègue et al., 2024). The U.S. also supported the NATO integration of Finland and Sweden, consolidating the alliance's Arctic presence and enhancing its ability to counter Russian and Chinese influence (Boulègue et al., 2024). Challenges to continued U.S. leadership in the Arctic, however, are momentous. Political fracturing, budget bickering, and competing global priorities have severely limited the ability of the U.S. to invest in the region (Raspotnik, 2025). Additionally, the U.S. has yet to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), undermining its credibility in Arctic governance and territorial disputes (Raspotnik, 2025).

More and more powers are becoming involved in the Arctic, raising wider issues as to whether this might, in the end, be counted as a global commons. To some extent there are examples how the island of Svalbard is and was seen to some extent, as either an international territory or a global commons[8]. While the Arctic is governed by a variety of international agreements and organizations such as the Arctic Council and UNCLOS, China's increasing interest, as just one example of a non-Arctic state, challenges the traditional dominance of the eight Arctic states in how the Arctic has been defined. As such, global commons becomes something of an interesting notion when considering climate change as well as resource exploitation. The polar ice melts, with the modern rising sea levels that shift weather patterns, making the Arctic an international matter with global significance. With the possibility of abundant resources on the horizon, and new

[8] For a more detailed explanation of Svalbard's history, see Martins and Räisänen (2025).

shipping lanes appearing has made the giant powers turn their eyes toward rising tension temperature and possible conflicts. The potential of cooperative governance frameworks to address these challenges hinges on the relevance of much of the above. The Arctic Council, with all its limits, serves as a space for dialogue between Arctic states and indigenous communities. Even augmenting it by including non-Arctic states would help make it effective by grappling with resource management and environmental coordination. However, that would come through the navigation of the competing interests of the Arctic and non-Arctic states as well as the wider dynamics of great power competition. The alternative is increased geopolitical tensions, with the Arctic becoming a new arena for rivalry between the U.S., Russia, and China. This also includes the idea that militarization might be coupled and not be compensated by any comprehensive legal framework. Thus, the polar region has a better chance of becoming a zone of peace and cooperation when these interests are balanced by an appropriate understanding of the multilateral framework and sustainable development.

The role of external powers in Arctic geopolitics is reshaping the region's dynamics, and introducing new opportunities and challenges for Arctic governance. China's economic and strategic ambitions, the United States' security priorities, and the broader concept of the Arctic as a global commons highlight the complex interplay of interests in the region. As the Arctic continues to evolve, the actions of these external actors will have far-reaching implications for the region's future, from resource exploitation and environmental preservation to security and governance. For Arctic states and the international community, the challenge will be to navigate these competing interests while preserving the Arctic's unique environment and promoting sustainable development. By fostering cooperation and addressing the root causes of geopolitical tensions, the Arctic can remain a region of peace and collaboration, rather than a flashpoint for conflict.

VI. European Engagement in the Arctic

While Arctic strategic imperatives have inexorably assumed a higher profile among European states, Arctic engagement remains agonizingly fractured and poorly coordinated (Raspotnik, 2018). In contrast to Russia, which is pursuing a unified and assertive Arctic strategy, European involvement is characterized by a patchwork of national strategies and limited EU-wide coordination (Raspotnik, 2018). This chapter examines challenges and opportunities for European Arctic engagement, with a focus on disparate national strategies and EU policy, NATO's role in Arctic defense, and economic versus environmental priorities. Rather, European engagement is based on the distinct Arctic strategies of states, especially those with immediate territorial interests in the region. Norway, Denmark (via Greenland), and Iceland have all produced extensive Arctic policies reflecting their individual geographic, economic, and security interests. Norway tended to prioritize resource extraction and scientific research, while Denmark emphasized issues of sovereignty concerning Greenland and sustainable development (Raspotnik, 2018). Despite being a relatively small country, Iceland has established itself as a center for Arctic diplomacy and innovation in renewable sources of power. This, however, has been achievable as the country would not be an EU member state.

The European Union, on the other hand, has its hands tied in the Arctic by its limited jurisdiction and the self-interests of its member states (Raspotnik, 2018). While the European Union has continued to propel itself into strategic stakeholder status in the region, limitations were observed in the internal divisions of the European Union and external threats. The seal products ban, which was part of an EU effort for animal welfare, ignited flames of tensions with the indigenous people

and other Arctic states such as Canada and Norway (Raspotnik, 2018; Habro & Shevchuk, 2023). To make matters worse, EU interests in the Arctic face criticism from Russia, which believes that the grouping is an external actor with no territorial claims on the continent. However, the incomplete cohesion of an EU Arctic policy debars much of Europe from having a voice in the region. Norway and Denmark might have the advanced experience and resources to execute Arctic policy. However, their efforts are quite siloed, therefore limiting the impact (Raspotnik, 2018). This fragmentation stands in stark contrast to Russia's centralized and coordinated approach, which allows it to pursue its Arctic ambitions with greater efficiency and resolve. For Europe to effectively counterbalance Russia's dominance, it will need to bridge the gap between national strategies and EU-level coordination, fostering a more unified and strategic approach to Arctic engagement.

The steady militarization of the Arctic region has increased NATO's security presence in the region, according to Pincus (2020). Hence, the Arctic and near-Arctic states have stepped up their cooperation with NATO: Norway, Finland, Sweden, and so on have become more involved with NATO, realizing that it is going to be the best way to counter Russia's military buildup and get their own security needs taken care of (Chekov et al., 2023). A founding member of NATO, Norway has been at the forefront of Arctic defense for many years, organizing joint exercises for the allies and maintaining a strong military presence in the High North (Wither, 2020). Joining NATO recently opened changes in the security balance in the region due to Finland and Sweden's increasing presence in the Arctic as an alliance defense and enhanced alliance capabilities to respond to possible threats (Wither, 2020). NATO's Arctic strategy is about deterrence and defense while also promoting freedom of navigation and critical infrastructure security. Furthermore, the alliance frequently hosts combined military exercises in the

Arctic, to enhance interoperability and to elevate combat capability[9]. No doubt, NATO's experience in the Arctic has been considerable, but its activities also have their constraints: it's a harsh and often unforgiving environment with the supremacy of logistics, and the accidental confrontation with Russia is an additional danger (Depledge, 2020; Heininen, 2018). The strategy of NATO in the Arctic should also balance the security needs of member states with de-escalating tensions across the region (Depledge, 2020). It is also very important to note the Northern NATO members like the US and UK. These states bring in important capabilities such as submarines, surveillance aircraft, and icebreakers that enhance the operational capability of the alliance in the Arctic (Depledge, 2020). However, the localized involvement only highlights the geopolitical implications of Arctic security and the intercession of global power rivalry.

Many European states have set climate change mitigation and sustainable development as central spheres of their Arctic involvement. The EU Arctic policy, for example, focuses on protecting the environment, scientific studies, and the rights of indigenous communities (Habro & Shevchuk, 2023). Such policy depicts Europe's commitment to global climate problem-solving and the preservation of the Arctic's special nature. However, it also presents a contrast with the economic and strategic interests that other global powers seek to achieve. Russia's exploitation of resources and development of infrastructure in the Arctic directly oppose Europe's rhetoric of sustainability. Even though European countries have tried to promote renewable energy and green technologies in the region, these initiatives are easily eclipsed by Russia's energy projects and China's growing interest in the Arctic's resources (Habro & Shevchuk, 2023; Kuang & Ou, 2019). This gap reflects the difficulties of attaining economic growth and at the same time protection of the environment especially in such a vulnerable and strategically

[9] For more details on Arctic training exercises and military capabilities, see Depledge (2020).

important region as the Arctic. The overly utopian and divorced from the harsh realities of great power competition, the European understanding of the Arctic, has come under fire. All these have had their struggles to make a real difference, such as the EU's Green Deal and environmental programs within the Arctic Council, but they fall short in most aspects of resources and enforcement (Gricius & Raspotnik, 2023). If Europe is to make it a reality, it should be more pragmatic, proactive, and able to mobilize its economic and technological resources and military assets toward environmental and security issues in the Arctic.

These differences characterize European engagement in the Arctic: between national strategies and EU-level coordination, between interests in sustainability, and in areas of growing militarization and resource competition (Raspotnik, 2018). While great countries such as Norway and Denmark also substantially contribute to the Arctic governance, the lack of a cohesive European strategy weakens the existing numerous political channels for opposing the super-ego of Russia as the dominating region. The role of NATO is further important in the guarantee of security but must strive through the complexities of Arctic geopolitics to avoid creating tension. It will depend on its reconciling between the environmental and economic priorities with the realities of great power competition. By fostering greater unity and working to build stronger partnerships with other like-minded nations, Europe can ensure a more significant role in offering an influence in the future of the Arctic as a region whose future will be one of peace, cooperation, and sustainable development.

VII. Conclusion

The Arctic is slowly melting away, revealing previously untouched natural resources, and opening possible trade routes. Ironically, humanity has fueled climate change through its consumption of fossil fuels to a point, where climate change has revealed even more fossil fuels to be exploited. While the irony highlights a sad reality, it highlights the changing nature of Arctic geopolitics. With NATO and the EU on one side, and Russia and China on the other, the Arctic may be frozen, for now, it is likely an area for potential military and economic tensions and conflict. The Russian Arctic strategy is one that focuses on the advancement of its Arctic economy, while militarizing the region, and maintaining a military prestige in the Arctic. Yet, Russia's economic issues have had to be counteracted by cooperation with China, fueling many of the state's projects. At the same time, NATO, as a strictly military alliance, focuses on the transatlantic alliance's defensive posture in the Arctic, particularly by coordinating multinational exercises, and streamlining defensive cooperation. While the EU, and many of its member states, focus on the environmental, indigenous rights, and some economic development in the region. Such developments however are often lacking due to the lack of coordinated and centralized policy between the member states. The current evolution of Arctic geopolitical dynamics creates major political problems and prospects which affect all global powers involved. A successful approach to managing economic expansion and environmental conservation together with security demands requires detailed coordination and mutual support among all stakeholders. Europe needs to bring its nations together more strongly to develop a purposeful approach toward Arctic engagement. One question that lingers near this, is the possibility of the EU becoming a geopolitical player. In wake of the Russo-Ukrainian War, and the shaky nature of transatlanticism, one could argue

that external factors may be pushing the European Union towards a path of forming its own geopolitical power. The current, Von der Leyen run European Commission, has laid out a new portfolio and agendas, especially through its new Defence Commissioner, that the EU is aiming to become an actor in world affairs, even in certain cases, militarily. One could further argue that the circumstances with the changing affairs in the Arctic, the geopolitical positioning of the Arctic might provide ample possibilities for the EU to exercise future military policy. Regardless, the Arctic will likely continue developing as a peaceful space for cooperation and sustainable growth through improved partnerships between nations sharing similar values and by resolving geopolitical issues at their source. Global powers must effectively handle Arctic challenges and seize opportunities to determine how the Arctic region will develop in the future, while understanding the environmental catastrophe that climate change is bringing upon the world.

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Résumé

Arktída sa stáva čoraz geopoliticky významnejšou, a to predovšetkým vďaka kombinácii klimatických zmien, ktoré menia krajinu, a narastajúcej súťaži veľmocí o zdroje, ktoré sa v dôsledku topenia polárneho ľadu stávajú čoraz prístupnejšími. Európska únia, jej členské štáty, NATO, Rusko a Čína sú všetky silne zapojené do strategického súperenia v Arktíde, ktoré je motivované obrovskými nevyužitými prírodnými zdrojmi, strategickou geopolitickou polohou a novými obchodnými trasami. Rusko na svojej strane presadzuje svoju arktickú politiku kombináciou agresívnych územných nárokov, vojenských nasadení v oblasti a ekonomického vykorisťovania a expanzie. Tieto snahy sú zamerané na zabezpečenie jeho severného pobrežia a získavanie ekonomických výnosov z oblasti. Ruská stratégia zahŕňa modernizáciu vojenských základní, výstavbu infraštruktúry na arktickom pobreží a zriadenie bezpečného systému námornej dopravy na posilnenie svojej prítomnosti v regióne. Arktické politiky európskych štátov sú rôznorodé a fragmentované, ako aj situácia v členských štátoch EÚ, a to predovšetkým v dôsledku rozdielnych priorít, politík a záujmov, ktoré môžu navzájom súperiť. Európska únia je síce silná v ochrane životného prostredia a práv domorodých obyvateľov, ale jej schopnosť konania včas a efektívne v Arktíde obmedzujú právne obmedzenia a vnútorné napätie. Táto fragmentácia sťažuje jednotnú arktickú stratégiu EÚ. Povaha EÚ navyše bráni nadnárodnej organizácii byť protiváhou ruskému militarizovaniu. Medzitým vojenská prítomnosť NATO v Arktíde slúži ako protiváha narastajúcej ruskej vojenskej prítomnosti v regióne. Záujem NATO spočíva v nebránenej námornej doprave, podpore obranných kooperácií medzi spojencami a zabezpečení regionálnej bezpečnosti proti ruským ambíciám, predovšetkým koordináciou arktických cvičení, posilňovaním arktických vojenských doktrín a schopností a zabezpečením slobody plavby v

medzinárodných vodách Arktídy. Čína, hoci nie je arktickým štátom, sa stala kľúčovým hráčom prostredníctvom masívnych investícií do prístupu k arktickým zdrojom a tranzitným trásam, najmä v Rusku. Narastajúca angažovanosť Číny zdôrazňuje globálny charakter súperenia v Arktíde a zvyšuje strategickú hodnotu oblasti ďaleko za hranice jej priamej blízkosti. Vpád týchto globálnych veľmocí do Arktídy urýchľuje nestabilné štrukturálne zmeny v systéme riadenia oblasti. Nové námorné cesty a možnosti ťažby zdrojov zvyšujú vojenský význam Arktídy, ale zároveň zvyšujú environmentálne a morálne prekážky. Meniaca sa povaha Arktídy prináša sľuby aj problémy. Na jednej strane oblasť disponuje obrovským ekonomickým potenciálom v podobe nevyužitých zdrojov a novo prístupných obchodných ciest. Na druhej strane environmentálne dôsledky zvýšenej ľudskej aktivity, ako je znečistenie a strata biotopov, predstavujú vážne problémy. Etické ohľady, ako sú práva a spôsob života domorodých obyvateľov, prispievajú k zložitosti. Keď globálne veľmoci presadzujú ekonomické záujmy Arktídy, musia prisudiť rovnakú dôležitosť ochrane životného prostredia a udržateľnému rozvoju, aby bola oblasť dlhodobo udržateľná. Osud Arktídy bude veľmi závisieť od toho, ako globálne veľmoci riadia svoje protichodné záujmy a zároveň riešia problémy typické pre túto oblasť. Efektívna spolupráca a koordinácia zainteresovaných strán bude kľúčom k tomu, aby Arktída zostala oblasťou mierového a udržateľného rozvoja. Ak takáto spolupráca nebude prítomná, oblasť sa môže zmeniť na ohnisko konfliktov a zónu ekologickej katastrofy. Nakoniec to, čo tieto krajiny urobia, rozhodne o smerovaní Arktídy, či bude medzinárodným modelom spolupráce alebo spornou oblasťou geopolitiky.

Appendix 1: Origin Writing Report by GPTZero