The Arctic in the International System: A Shift from a Low-Tension Area to a Region of Global Rivalry

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Introduction

At a time of growing geopolitical fragmentation and conflict, the Arctic is becoming another arena of competition among states in the international system. Will the Arctic remain a low-tension zone in international relations?

International Order – An Ever-Changing Structure

The international order, founded on the primacy of the United States as the sole superpower in a unipolar world after 1991, until recently allowed for the benefit of the peace dividend and, in the Arctic region, the construction of mechanisms of cooperation and relatively low tension between actors in the international system. With the transformation of the system towards a multipolar order of regional powers and the relatively weakening position of the U.S., the widespread use of force as a tool for policy-making is returning to international relations. For the Arctic, this marks the end of the low-tension era and the beginning of intense competition among powers for influence in the region.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought a change in the world order, and from the bipolar clash of superpowers emerged an international system based on U.S. hegemony, the neoliberal paradigm in the global economy, and the promotion of cooperation mechanisms in international relations. In both academic and public discourse, Francis Fukuyama's theory, expressed in his publication 'The End of History', became popular, providing a coherent vision of the world in which Western-style liberal democracy represents the final form of human government and societal organisation.[1] For the Arctic, the post-Cold War era signalled a reduction in tension, which during the Cold War had been influenced by the risk of nuclear annihilation involving the High North.

The institutionalisation of regional state cooperation in the Arctic provided a framework for new initiatives ...

The prospect of creating a nuclear-free zone and regional cooperation for

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[1] Fukuyama, F. *The End of History and the Last Man*. The Free Press. 1992 r.

peace in the Arctic, as signalled by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s, ceased to be a mere political concept and began to turn into reality.[2] The Rovaniemi Process, culminating in the creation of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), as well as the establishment of the Euro-Arctic Barents Sea Council, and later the Arctic Council, placed the Arctic on the global map as a significant region. The institutionalisation of regional state cooperation in the Arctic provided a framework for new initiatives, protecting the area from the harmful effects of environmental pollution and climate change, while at the same time signifying that states have their vital interests in the region and are determined to pursue them. While 30 years ago, in an era of peace and cooperation, the outlook seemed optimistic, today, in an age of division and conflicts, the situation is becoming more problematic. Although the Arctic was on the periphery of the world for centuries, once it emerged from isolation and ceased to be terra incognita, it entered the grand chessboard of competition among states. This marks the end of the low-tension Arctic era.

The strengthening and institutionalisation of cooperation among Arctic states in the late 20th century was a key process in regional politics. Meanwhile, within the international system, globalisation processes were accelerating, NATO expanded to include countries from the former Warsaw Pact, and the EU expanded to include Austria, Sweden, and Finland. Moreover, additional countries, mainly from the former Soviet bloc, were lining up to join the European community, which culminated successfully with their accession in 2004.

This was, therefore, a period when optimism and cooperation prevailed not only in the Arctic region but also as a dominant trend among developed and developing countries worldwide. Reality thus provided empirical evidence supporting Fukuyama's theory. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, events have increasingly taken a different turn. The involvement of the United States – a superpower and also an Arctic state – in two conflicts in the Middle East under the banner of the war on terror undermined trust in its leadership in global politics and, in the long term, weakened the power of the hegemon. At the same time, Russia, after the period of turmoil in the 1990s, marked by a deep

[2] Gorbachev, M. *The Speech in Murmansk at the ceremonial meeting on the occasion of the presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star Medal to the city of Murmansk*. Barents Info. 01.10.1987 r., https://www.barentsinfo.fi/docs/gorbachev_speech.pdf.

economic and political crisis, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin began to assert its interests more and more aggressively, influencing the politics of its neighbourhood through military force.

The increasingly clear dividing line also affected the Arctic region, as in 2001 Moscow submitted information to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf claiming that the Lomonosov Ridge belongs to Russia.[3] Following the legal arguments based on scientific research, a political demonstration soon followed. In 2007, the Russians placed a titanium flag on the seabed beneath the North Pole.[4] Although this event had no legal consequences, the mission prompted negative reactions from other Arctic states, with the USA calling it 'legally meaningless', and Canada dismissing as 'just a show'.[5] The seriousness of Russia's claims in the Arctic was underscored by the fact that at the time, Russia was engaged in an armed conflict with Chechnya, and a year later carried out a military intervention in Georgia.

Thus, Moscow had already become a state that used force in international politics as one of the main tools to pursue its national interests. The hybrid warfare waged against Ukraine, which resulted in the rebellion in the Donbas and Luhansk regions and the annexation of Crimea, was merely confirmation that Russia had become an aggressive state, seeking to revise the existing international system. This tendency was sealed by the open aggression against Ukraine in 2022, which also had significant consequences for international relations in the Arctic.

Factors Influencing the Intensification of Competition Between States in the High North

Several theoretically distinct processes, which nonetheless operate like a system of interconnected vessels, influence the changing perception of the Arctic within the international system and the risk of conflicts in the region. The Arctic is currently undergoing accelerated globalization, making up for the lost time when it was on the periphery of the world. On one hand, the Arctic has become a

[3] United Nations. *Receipt of the submission made by the Russian Federation to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf*. 20.12.2001 r. URL: https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/rus01/RUS_CLCS_01_2001_LOS_English.pdf.

[4] Chivers, C. J. *Russians Plant Flag on the Arctic Seabed*. The New York Times. 03.08.2007 r. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/03/world/europe/03arctic.html.

[5] NBC News. *Russia defends North Pole flag-planting*. 08.08.2007 r. URL: https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna20169307.

reservoir of various resources for many states, including fossil fuels, minerals, and fish stocks. On the other hand, it offers an attractive alternative for global trade and maritime transport due to the potential commercialisation of shipping routes. However, the Arctic can provide states not only with economic development benefits but also with significant strategic advantages in the context of security. As a result, its impact on the regional situation is perceived by states as a component of their national security. Let us briefly explore these issues and examine their influence on the region's significance in international politics.

The significance of resources is crucial for understanding the competition among states for influence in the Arctic, a development we are witnessing today. The region holds both fossil fuels, essential to modern global economies, and mineral resources, which are currently utilized in various industrial sectors and will play a decisive role in the success or failure of the energy transition in the future. Adding to this the abundance of water, timber, and especially fish, the Arctic can be considered one of the most important reservoirs of natural resources on Earth.

One of the most significant events in the modern history of the Arctic was the publication of data by the US Geological Survey in 2008 regarding the region's abundance of fossil fuels, such as oil and natural gas.[6] The previously overlooked region was revealed, according to estimates by the American research institution, to contain more than 20% of the world's oil and gas reserves, specifically 13% of global oil and 30% of natural gas. It is worth noting that at the time of this data's release, the price of a barrel of oil on the market was at its peak, reaching approximately 140 USD.[7]

From the perspective of the world's largest economies, which have been powered by resources such as oil and natural gas since the Industrial Revolution, the data from the US Geological Survey could not be overlooked. In optimistic forecasts, the Arctic had the potential to become a region somewhat resembling the Persian Gulf, which has become synonymous with a global fossil fuel hub. However, the Arctic presented a significant challenge in this context – the temperature. Harsh weather conditions, pervasive ice, a lack of infrastructure and workforce, as well as the international status of its territories, made the potential

[6] U.S. Geological Survey. (2008). *Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle*, USGS Fact Sheet 2008-3049. https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/fs2008-3049.pdf.
[7] Trading Economics. *Brent Crude Oil*. https://tradingeconomics.com/commodity/brent-crude-oil.

exploitation of resources located on the ocean floor far from easy to achieve.

Nearly two decades have passed since then, during which time the Arctic climate has warmed several times faster than the rest of the Earth. In August 2022, researchers from the Finnish Meteorological Institute published the results of their study, indicating that between 1979 and 2021, the Arctic warmed four times faster than the global average. In certain areas, such as the Barents Sea region – an area rich in oil deposits – the average temperature increase was as much as seven times higher.[8]

Moreover, the Arctic's appeal is not limited to fossil fuels, whose role in the global economy is beginning to diminish. Peak extraction is already behind us, and the energy transition taking place across all continents – driven by global climate commitments under the Paris Agreement – is shifting the energy paradigm. Technologies related to energy storage and harnessing it from natural sources such as solar and hydro power are gaining increasing importance, while circular economy solutions continue on an upward trend. However, these advancements require mineral resources such as cobalt, lithium, silicon, and rare earth metals, which are also found in significant volumes in the Arctic.

Given the above, it is therefore not possible to conclude that the resource attractiveness of the Arctic diminishes with the global shift away from coal, oil, and gas. The region's significance in this regard will remain constant or even increase, as the minerals it holds – critical for the green economy – will remain an attractive option for those seeking to extract them. The harsh weather conditions and lack of infrastructure will no longer pose as significant barrier as they did two decades ago in the case of fossil fuels.

The second process strongly correlated with the increasing significance of the Arctic in the international system is the commercialization of maritime routes. In the Arctic, at least two major shipping routes can be identified – the Northwest Passage along the coasts of Canada and the USA and the Northeast Passage along the coast of Russia, with its key section known as the Northern Sea Route. There are also concepts for establishing a Central Arctic Route, running almost directly near the North Pole; however, it is currently covered by ice, making navigation impossible. The other routes, though, have been traversed multiple times and are used

[8] Rantanen, M., Karpechko, A.Y., Lipponen, A. *et al*. (2022). The Arctic has warmed nearly four times faster than the globe since 1979. *Commun Earth Environ* 3, 168. https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-022-00498-3.

in international trade, albeit on a limited scale.

The primary barrier to the development of Arctic maritime routes, as with the exploitation of raw materials, is the harsh climate of the High North. Currently, these maritime routes are navigable for approximately 8-10 weeks per year, while in the remaining months, they are either covered by ice or obstructed by floating ice. This significantly limits the type of vessels that can use the route and prevents year-round operations, thus making Arctic routes an unstable alternative to the Suez or Panama Canals for the transport of goods and commodities between continents. American and Canadian researchers estimate that by 2030, approximately 2% of global maritime trade could be transported via Arctic sea routes.[9] According to the same calculations, by 2025, approximately 5% of global trade volume could be transported via the Northwest Passage and Northeast Passage.[10]

Navigational activity within the Arctic Ocean has been increasing for years. According to data from the PAME working group, 1,298 vessels transited the region in 2013, compared to 1,628 in 2019, marking a 25% increase.[11] Nearly half of these vessels, as much as 41%, were dedicated to fishing activity.[12] The remaining ships included transport vessels (cargo ships, tankers, and bulk carriers) as well as icebreakers and research vessels.[13] Notably, the most significant increase in navigational activity, by 160%, was observed in cargo-type vessels, specifically bulk carriers and tankers.[14] The main reason for this growth is the increased mining activity in the region, as the energy resources and minerals exploited in the Arctic are transported not only via pipelines, but also by cargo ships.

The increasing navigational activity is mainly enabled by the gradual retreat of the Arctic ice cap, which in September 1999 covered 6.1 million square kilometres, while in the same month of 2019, it had

[9] Humpert, M. *The Future of the Northern Sea Route - A "Golden Waterway" or a Niche Trade Route*. The Arctic Institute. 15.09.2011 r. https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/future-northern-sea-route-golden-waterway-niche/.
[10] Ibid.
[11] PAME. (2020). The Increase in Arctic Shipping. Arctic Shipping Status Report (ASSR) #1. https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/ee2b07df-b87b-4f6f-8899-60d35c36072a/content. p. 10.
[12] Ibid. p. 11.
[13] Ibid. p. 12.
[14] Ibid. p. 23.

decreased to just 4.3 million square kilometres.[15]

Given this, the issue of maritime routes and their potential commercialisation could become of critical importance for the region, suggesting that the Arctic's significance within the international system will only grow in the coming years. This is because current developments have rendered the Arctic no longer a peripheral region. It has become an area of competition among states, including global powers. Moreover, this allows for the hypothesis that, if current trends in the global economy, energy, and trade persist, the Arctic's importance will increase in the future.

The aforementioned points lead to the conclusion that the prospects for cooperation in the region, which have existed at least since the 1990's, are shrinking in favour of great power rivalry and increasing tensions among partners. One of the drivers of this shift is the ongoing militarization of the region, which, apart from during the Cold War, has generally been free from aggressive weaponry and tensions in the international security environment.

This is evidenced, on the one hand, by Russian military plans and security strategies placing the Arctic as the second highest priority in Moscow's foreign and security policy, just behind its 'Near Abroad' countries.[16] Although these strategies were formulated before the war in Ukraine, there is no doubt that in the 21st century, Russia has made significant efforts to enhance its military capabilities in the High North. These include the development of the Northern Fleet, which operates Russia's most advanced nuclear-powered vessels, the deployment of radar stations along the entire Russian Arctic coastline, and the expansion or restoration of a dense network of military bases and outposts in the region, many of which date back to Soviet times. Given both the completed military contracts and the strategic plans prepared by the military, the Russian Federation is today the best-prepared among all Arctic states to conduct operations in the polar region.

The other Arctic states, observing the development of Russia's military capabilities, decided to take action on this issue several years ago. The Nordic countries have taken the lead in securing contracts for weapons capable of operating

[15] Ibid. p. 18.

[16] Президент Российской Федерации, *Указ об утверждении Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации*, 31.03.2023 г., URL: http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/udpjZePcMAycLXOGGAgmVHQDIoFCN2Ae.pdf. pp. 29-31.

in the polar theatre, while changes in the U.S. defence doctrine indicate that the importance of the Arctic vector is growing. However, this is not a new concept in American strategic thinking, as in the postwar era there were numerous voices within the U.S. military emphasizing the importance of the Arctic (Alaska in particular) for national security, with competition with the USSR in this area being a clear sign of this.

Nowadays, NATO sees the northern flank as one of the three most critical areas to secure, and the increasing number of manoeuvres, exercises, and organisational-logistical changes in recent years suggests that polar warfare is being taken seriously as a potential scenario. The growing tension between Western states and Russia negatively affects the prospects for cooperation in the Arctic. Russia has viewed Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO as a hostile act tightening the noose around its neck, prompting changes in military districts, including troop deployments in the Arctic. Meanwhile, enhanced cooperation in security and defence among the Nordic countries signals that these states are preparing for a scenario in which defending their security against Russia may become necessary.

Conclusion

Given the above, the Arctic is becoming a field of growing tension within the international security environment. Even a cursory analysis of armaments and military doctrine development indicates that the region is undergoing a gradual but permanent militarization. This, in turn, affects the political climate, as previous cooperation in forums such as the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council currently stands at a crossroads.

Russia's war on Ukraine and its subsequent isolation from Western states, as well as Russia's perception of NATO as a threat to its security, place the Arctic states in opposing political camps. The suspension of the Arctic Council's activities illustrates that the broader context of international relations – characterized by growing divisions and intensifying rivalries – negatively impacts regional relations in the High North. Cooperation now appears possible only within divided camps. Allied states are consolidating mutual support, downplaying or silencing internal disputes, as exemplified by the resolution of the territorial dispute over Hans Island between Denmark and Canada, to focus on contesting the strength of their adversaries. At the same time, the ongoing rivalry between these two nations and Russia over the ownership of the Lomonosov Ridge shows no signs of abating, and given the lack of trust between the parties, a peaceful diplomatic resolution, as in the case of Hans Island, has slim chances of materializing.

Recent Norwegian attempts to involve Russia in regional matters, initiated after Oslo took over the

chairmanship of the Arctic Council, seem insufficient to restore trust between the Arctic states. The Council has ceased to function as a forum for dialogue and resolving differences, and has instead become an expression of those differences, further confirming the initial assertion that the international system influences regional relations in the Arctic more than the reverse. There is a clear correlation between the state of international relations and the prospects facing the nations of the High North. In the 1990s, when dialogue and cooperation prevailed, the Arctic was a region where the paradigm of liberal cooperation in international relations was most fully realized. However, as the world has once again become a stage for tensions and conflicts, regional relations in the Arctic have mirrored these changes with even greater intensity. Rather than becoming a stronghold for diplomacy and the building of trust between conflicting parties, the Arctic is itself becoming an arena of rivalry.