

The Arctic: Climate Change as a Driver for a Geopolitical Shift



WRITTEN BY EUGENIO MONTALTI

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Abstract

The issue of climate change is renowned for its global implications, not only on the environment but also on humans. Nevertheless, one of the shifts least touched upon is how the melting of the Arctic ice is changing the geopolitical theatre. All the major international actors are aware of this and have already developed policies to exploit or adapt to this shift. In this context, we witness bids from countries' representatives and military exercises in the region.

Introduction

The Arctic is a region often setting for scientific research but also looked at and controlled military. The region represents a crucial border between the United States (US) and Russia. This made it essential to be defended in the past too, when the cold war made a confrontation between the two countries probable. While Europe was likely to be the terrain for a land invasion, the Arctic represented one of the shortest routes for a nuclear strike, either carried on by plane or by intercontinental ballistic missiles. This reality of enmity remains true to this day. However, new tensions may arise as global warming is changing the landscape of the region. The ice cap that was once blocking the Arctic Ocean is now melting. This allows for a new commercial, and consequently, the strategic route there, from the Barents and Bering Seas for Russia called the Northern Sea Route.

Climate Change - an Emerging Issue

Climate change is the cause of several problems worldwide. It involves almost every sector, from economy to agriculture, from poverty to employment, affecting these grand schemes but also smaller ecologic systems such as the prey-predator interactions (Laws, 2017; Ting, 2021; UNEP, 2021). The Arctic is no exception to this trend. Instead, the situation is even more accentuated due to its increased sensitivity to temperature increases (Johannessen et al., 2004). Given the situation, the United Nations (UN) started framing climate change as a "climate emergency" (UNEP, 2021). In addition, some of the member states, such as the United Kingdom (UK) and Japan declared a climate emergency (Brown, 2019; Sheldrick, 2020).

This climate emergency goes beyond having global systemic implications at the environmental, economic, sociologic, and ecologic levels. The scholarship and the defence apparatuses have been reasoning about its geopolitical consequences. Following the current policy trends, it is becoming a certainty that the end of the arctic as we know it might be coming soon (Rudolph, 1991). Currently, the Arctic Ocean is not completely navigable, if not for a short time frame in summer. However, this window is widening more and more every year, allowing for the constant growth of ships passing through Arctic waters in the last 20 years (Arctic Council, 2021).

The Importance of the Arctic in Geopolitics

The Arctic did not always have the attention it is beginning to receive nowadays. The pivotal role of the region was, for the first time, predicted in the 1970s by the former Alaska Governor Walter Hickel (Zellen, 2009). Indeed, as well depicted in this comparison, in the Cold War era, the north polar region had “the two superpowers standing face-to-face [...]: the logic of geopolitics placed the North Pole at the very centre of the world, making the Arctic Ocean a modern-day equivalent of the Mediterranean of ancient times” (Zellen, 2009).

The predicted importance of the Arctic is now becoming a reality given that it “has attracted various interests by multiple stakeholders from within the circumpolar North, as well as from without” (Knecht & Keil, 2013). Currently, the melting of the Nordic ice is a reality in acceleration and not “no longer the phantasmagoria of futuristic movies” both on the North American Arctic and the Northern Sea Route along Russia’s Northern coast (Ebinger & Zambetakis, 2009). This shift has obvious implications on the national, local, and international levels. For example, Russia has now “greater access to its vast Siberian resources and leading to bold assertions of its sovereignty over vast swathes of the polar sea” while at the same time, the opening of the “Arctic Ocean continues to animate discussion of security threats ranging from drug trafficking to the importation of contraband goods, and even international terrorists utilising Arctic waterways” (Ebinger & Zambetakis, 2009; Knecht & Keil, 2013).

For these and other reasons, the centrality of the Arctic has been growing, with American, Canadian, and Arctic scholars speaking of the region as a new Wild West that America should impose sovereignty over because of its ‘Manifest Destiny’ (Zellen, 2009). This vision that frames the north pole region as a necessity geopolitically speaking is academically called the “Arctic Imperative” (Grant, 2010; Regehr, 1989). In parallel, in 1996, the Arctic countries of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the US established the Arctic Council, intending to have an “intergovernmental forum” that promotes “cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic Indigenous peoples and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues” (Arctic Council, n.d.).

The Plans of the Great Powers in the Region

However, notable changes happened from the Cold War to today. While in the last decades, the region was mostly a theatre of military attrition as any borderland, today, it has opened to commercial exploitation of the route as “two German commercial ships unaccompanied by ice-breakers were traversing the Northern Sea Route on a voyage from Vladivostok to the Netherlands” (Ebinger & Zambetakis, 2009). The opening of the sea trait for longer periods attracted the interest and investments of several global actors, including the European Union, China, India and, of course, Russia and the US.

Russia

Unsurprisingly, given its long coastline on the Arctic Ocean, Russia developed a quite comprehensive Arctic strategy. Their main priorities are “the managing of resources and the urgency to address threats as priority interests in the region” (Jordan, 2021). The Russian Federation has decided to invest decisive attention to the region, as several documents published indicate (Government of Russia, 2019). Their plans consist primarily of creating or fostering infrastructure in the “Extreme North” (Krainy Sever), so the provinces are comprised within the Arctic polar circle and some areas near the Arctic Circle but with similar climates and conditions. Furthermore, the Federation has set out its plan for 2035, which concerns “the development of port, railway and airport infrastructure in the Russian Arctic Zone to 2035” (Nato Defence College, 2021). It can be said that the amount of attention Russia is giving to its Arctic policy, with direct reference to national security, is an indication of how strategic the region is for them (Nato Defence College, 2021).

Since the late 1980s, climate change with a special focus on the “thawing permafrost, which could endanger its northern population and infrastructure” and the migration of population to urban areas south of the arctic has made Moscow preoccupied with the future of the region (Jordan, 2021). These are issues the Russian Government has tried to tackle in several ways, among which by engaging directly with the US government in coercive as well as constructive ways to maintain the Arctic liveable for its populations and to mitigate climate change’s consequences (Jordan, 2021). The Russian aim of repopulating the region and fostering its economic potential is although subject to an issue. The incentivisation of tourism and political efforts to increase human presence in the Arctic is not enough without infrastructure for the economic exploitation of the region. The Kremlin is aware of that and therefore allocated substantial funds to build this infrastructure. However, their plan goes beyond the simple environmental and societal protection of the Arctic. The pillars indicated in their plan for 2035 consist of “resource extraction and export via the Northern Sea Route (NSR); the build-up of NSR infrastructure, including dual-use facilities; and the strengthening of the Arctic’s military defences.” (Nato Defence College, 2021).

All in all, the Russian priorities seem to be economical and military-centred. In their official papers, it is evident a trend to securitise all the issues that concern the region, as it is assessed as a weak spot of the country. In fact, all of these issues are indicated as threats in their national policy documents (Gustafsson, 2021). Even considering the high priority that Russia gives to the Arctic, as they appointed a ministry to projects in the region, there are generalised delays on the projects they seek to implement (Nato Defence College, 2021). Some examples of steps ahead are already done and have significant implications for the geopolitics of the region and for the willingness of other actors to respond to them either to exploit or counter them.

First, the high presence of rare-earth, minerals and hydrocarbons in the region makes it the richest in terms of natural resources within the Russian Federation (Nato Defence College, 2021). Therefore, Russia is trying to develop extraction capabilities and infrastructure to move the resources closer to the main trading routes, foster the transportation, energy, and social projects already in place, and give the resources access to the Arctic Ocean. However, since the temperatures are not warm enough and icebreakers are still needed to be used for some months a year, the exploitation is still too costly, and Russia perceives these “as a “strategic reserve” to be claimed, explored and kept untouched until economic conditions change and prices increase sufficiently to support the development of the expensive Arctic offshore” (Nato Defence College, 2021).

In conclusion, the behaviour of the Russian government can be described as dualistic. Promoting an image of Russia deeply concerned and present in the Arctic to the point of strengthening their military capabilities in the region while struggling to finance and maintain their infrastructural projects, weakening their exports capabilities in the short-medium term.

China

China's Arctic policy is an important pillar in the Polar Silk Road, notably framed within the more extensive One Belt, One Road (OBOR) program (Havnes & Seland, 2019). The Chinese government has just recently affirmed its interest in the Arctic region. In fact, in 2015, the Arctic began to be mentioned as a frontier for peaceful cooperation and scientific research, comparable with outer space, while Chinese Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo stated that “the Arctic belongs to all the people around the world as no nation has sovereignty over it” (Chang, 2010). A few years earlier, indeed, China's policy in the polar region was described by scholars as “wait and see”, afraid of alarming the other global actors (Chang, 2010).

Although this waiting position saw a change when China became an observer member of the Arctic Council in 2013 (Arctic Council, n.d.). in 2018, the country published its Arctic Policy. There, China recognises the lawful sovereignty of Arctic countries “within their jurisdiction internal waters, territorial seas, contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelves in the Arctic Ocean”, however it reminds us that non-Arctic countries that do not have sovereignty “in the Arctic, but they do have rights in respect of scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables and pipelines in the high seas and other relevant sea areas in the Arctic Ocean, and rights to resource exploration and exploitation in the Area” (Government of China, 2018). This claim set the ground for the abovementioned Polar Silk Road initiative. This plan mainly consists of the development of “shipping lanes opened up by global warming”, hoping to work with all parties involved (Reuters, 2018).

This project would grant China access to Russian liquified natural gas (LNG) from the Yamal east route, which is around 20 days of navigation shorter than the previously used route through the Suez Canal (Reuters, 2018). Notably, China did not follow the militarised path of its partner, Russia but seems to prefer “accumulating knowledge and capacities for navigating and monitoring the Arctic” and building up its diplomatic presence (Havnes & Seland, 2019).

While the public statements testify the diplomatic stance, their official documents and their presence in the Arctic Council sits, there is more than the Yamal project as evidence of their capacity building in the region. The China National Space Administration (CNSA) is fostering its Space programme with satellites devoted to observing the Arctic (Zhou, 2020). Their BeiDou satellite mission recently allowed them to perform scientific observations of the Arctic and offer navigation support in the polar circle (China National Administration of GNSS and Applications, 2016).

All in all, China’s focus in the arctic could then be, at least for now, economic and scientific driven, but not abstained from enormous geopolitical implications. The opening of the Yamal route will offer the maritime superpower the option to avoid the Malacca strait and the Hormuz strait to receive the gas provisions its needs (Havnes & Seland, 2019).

The US

The US Arctic policy is unexpectedly not securitised. In their Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, the US presidency under Joe Biden did not mention the Arctic directly, the North or the Polar circle even once (The White House, 2021a). While the Biden administration expressed the “desire to work more closely with US allies and partners and to tackle climate change and environmental issues head-on”, the Arctic remains merely an environmental and resource exploitation issue for the US (Kier & Stronski, 2021). The US are indeed a member of the Arctic Council but does not seem proactive in the region, behind the exploitation of natural resources and the protection of the local environment, with particular attention to responsible management of the fishery in the Arctic Ocean as its “commercial harvest of groundfish, shellfish, salmon, and other resources in Alaska constitute more than 60 per cent of marine fish landings in the United States [and] the Alaska pollock fishery is the largest and one of the most valuable, generating more than \$1.9 billion annually” (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022).

However, there are plans for the future of this administration to “advance U.S. national security and economic security interests in the Arctic to keep the region secure and stable and to address emerging issues relating to Arctic shipping, communications, and other economic drivers in the Arctic”, while keeping in mind the culture, tradition, and knowledge of the indigenous peoples (The White House, 2021b).

India

While it might have come as a surprise for some, India has an Arctic policy as well. Even if it is the southernmost of these actors in the region, they are indirectly involved in the melting of the arctic ice. Certainly, the possibility of traversing the Arctic Ocean is a cheaper option for European ships that want to reach east Asia and vice versa.

As evidence of the subcontinental country's interest in the region, it joined the Arctic Council as an observer in 2013 (Arctic Council, n.d.; Pronina et al., 2020). In addition, as recently as 2022, India published its detailed "Building Partnership for Sustainable Development", as they called their Arctic policy (Government of India, 2022). This document consists of over twenty pages to further prove their attention to the area. The main pillars of India's policy in the Arctic consist of "Science and Research, Climate and Environmental Protection, Economic and Human Development, Transportation and Connectivity, Governance and International Cooperation, and National capacity building" (Middleton & School, 2022). These pillars can indicate trends for Indian interest that is mostly economic and of international status as a global power.

Regarding the economic side of the matter, the Arctic is a great basin, not only for the fishery but also for natural resources such as rare earth metals and minerals. India seeks to build expertise and ties with arctic countries to project influence and, most importantly, diversify its economic connections. The region offers excellent possibilities in this direction because of "its extremely bountiful natural resources but also grave environmental problems, particularly in the Russian part of the region" (Hønneland, 2017). The ability of the country in dual use of scientific missions has another example in its space programme, which also offers connections to their Arctic ambitions. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is already able to cover the polar area through a series of satellites for regional observation (Department of Space, Indian Space Research Organisation, n.d.). Another mission is planned to take place in 2023 in collaboration with NASA to "measure Earth's changing ecosystems, dynamic surfaces, and ice masses providing information about biomass, natural hazards, sea-level rise, and groundwater, and will support a host of other applications" (Jet Propulsion Laboratory, n.d.).

The development of this expertise today will allow India to be a reliable provider of satellite services in the polar circle in the future and therefore foster both their economic and geopolitical presence in the region, in particular as a partner of Russia, in opposition to China (Middleton & School, 2022).

European Union

The EU involvement in the Arctic has faced an increase just in the recent years. It can be argued that EU member states mostly see the Arctic as a defence issue since “in terms of EU norms and/or neoliberal incentives, the EU actually started with a relatively weak interest in the Arctic and only changed its tune in 2014 even though both environmental and economic opportunities were known well before 2014” (Riddervold & Cross, 2019).

The heart of the EU’s Arctic policy is composed of “The European Green Deal (EGD) and the new approach for a sustainable blue economy” (Groupe d’études géopolitiques (GEG), 2021). Northern Member States are trying to bring more EU to the Arctic, so the agenda was given its foundation on general and less controversial issues such as safety, stability, resilience to climate change, inclusivity and sustainability of the regions to the benefit of its inhabitants, with a particular focus on indigenous people, women and the young (European Commission, 2021). In the latest security strategy of the EU, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the Arctic was mentioned just three times in around forty pages. After recognising the changing nature of the area “in particular due to the impact of global warming, geopolitical rivalries and increased commercial interest including on natural resources”, the EU is mainly concerned about maritime security and the preservation of the polar environment (Council of the European Union, 2022).

Recent Developments and Military Exercises

Just recently, the United Kingdom (UK) has stressed its commitment to fostering security in the Arctic. This commitment is made tangible by the publication of their “Defence Contribution in the High North”, which reminds us that several of their allies have territories in the area and therefore calls for an increased NATO presence in the region (UK Ministry of Defence, 2022). The UK wants to enhance its presence in the north through NATO cooperation and bilateral agreements with Arctic countries, as stated by British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace (Chuter, 2022).

The renewed attention that Russia and China are putting to the Arctic is a consequence of climate change, as recognised by the United Kingdom. Indeed, Wallace noted that the “melting sea ice in the Arctic brings threats as well as opportunities: Russia is taking an increasingly militarized approach to the region; and China is supporting its proposed Polar Silk Road with a range of infrastructure and capabilities that have dual-use potential” (Chuter, 2022). To answer this threat, the Royal Navy pledged to periodically operate in the High North thanks to the dedicated Littoral Response Group and Allies and partners, specifically the US, the Netherlands, and Norway. The latter, alongside Canada, Finland, and the US, has offered the possibility to train the UK Army and the Royal Air Force (RAF) in the difficult and challenging weather of the North regularly (UK Ministry of Defence, 2022).

The preoccupation of the UK is shared by its allies. Notably, this revived attention to the arctic brought NATO to conduct a military drill called Exercise Cold Response 2022, led by Norway (Chuter, 2022). The exercise was designed to help “Allies and partners practise working together so that they are prepared for any situation” but in particular to train “together in cold weather exercises – on land, in the air and at sea” (NATO, 2022). The British were, in reality, the main contributors to this drill, providing among the rest “the deployment of HMS Prince of Wales, one of the Royal Navy’s two new aircraft carriers” (Chuter, 2022). This has been one of the significant NATO exercises as it involved around 30.000 troops from 27 countries. (NATO, 2022). This is aimed at maintaining the alliance ready for any scenario. As effectively noted by the British Defence Secretary, the region becoming increasingly accessible granted “threats from elsewhere around the globe to spill over into the Arctic” (Chuter, 2022).

Conclusions

Through the analysis of these various Arctic policies, it can be seen how the polar region is accepted globally as a shifting and strategic theatre. The recognition of climate change issues and the challenge of protecting the indigenous way of life and local environment does not entail consensus over solutions. It is evident how the melting of the polar ice benefits some countries more than others. In addition, it brings about several problems such as the displacement of people, food scarcity, damage to the permafrost and the infrastructure on it constructed but also some opportunities related to access to new sea routes and natural resources as it has been seen.

In conclusion, all countries are preparing for the new pivotal role the Arctic will have in the following decades due to climate change. The opening of this new frontier is bound to modify certain geopolitical dynamics. All the Arctic countries, their allies and the global powers must be ready to respond effectively to the shift the region is witnessing because of the receding ice cap.

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