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CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE ARCTIC



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THE KEY ROLE OF THE ARCTIC

The desire to access the Arctic's vast mineral reserves has always been a major driver of international attention towards the region. The Arctic is believed to contain 1,699 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and various other fuels, equal to the entirety of Russia's oil reserves and three times those of the US (U.S Geological Survey, 2008). On top of this, by 2050, it is believed that the region above the Polar Circle may be completely ice-free, considering the rate at which the ice sheet is shrinking and the multiplier effect of warming seas and surface temperatures (La Rocca, 2022). This potential development could further increase the international race for Arctic raw materials.

Over the years, Arctic States have developed extensive regulatory frameworks, created extractive service sectors and accumulated good knowledge and human capital to regulate mineral exploration and extraction (Coninx, van Loon, 2022). Furthermore, the Arctic waters have also a significant meaning for the countries' hegemonic projection, since some governments, such as the Chinese one, are looking at Arctic passages as a valid alternative to traditional trade routes as they allow to avoid the US-controlled choke-points in the Pacific, the Strait of Malacca for example.

In the last years, the significant effects of climate change on the region has increased international interest in Arctic lands and waters as well as the risk of tension and conflicts in the area. This has meant that even geographically distant states, such as China, are currently developing Arctic Strategies which involve the ground presence of both scientific and military units. The geographically critical position between North America and Eurasia also makes the Arctic a strategic territory for the Eastern World (Gross, 2022). As the ice keeps melting, the passage through the two main Arctic routes - the Northwest Passage and the North Sea Route (NSR)- will be possible for increasingly longer periods of the year, therefore connecting the continents even further.

Since the late 1990s, the North Pole has been considered an international site and is administered by the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum that enhances cooperation in the region. Their board consists of all states bordering the Arctic region: the United States of America, Russia, Canada, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. However, according to international law, if a country can prove that its underwater shelf is an extension of its continental border, then it can also claim an economic zone in the Arctic. Beyond the permanent members, there are also thirteen observer countries affiliated with the Arctic Council, such as China, Germany, and India (Buchanan, 2022).

Therefore, the region is increasingly at the centre of geopolitical interests, becoming a field of competition on an economic and military level, but at the same time posing several urgent challenges relating to the speed with which climate change is taking place.

THE EFFECTS OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

Last February, the Russian invasion of Ukraine put the regional cooperative system in crisis. The Arctic Council stopped its proceedings and Russia, which was supposed to chair the council's two-year term, was excluded from its activities. Although the joint statement outlined the intention to only engage in a temporary pause, it is likely that the Arctic Council will not resume work until early 2023, when the chairmanship will be passed to Norway (Buchanan, 2022). Consequently, bilateral and multilateral Arctic frameworks and organizations have paused or altered their work.

Moreover, with the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO, seven out of the eight Arctic states are now part of the Atlantic Alliance, as remarked by Admiral Bauer, the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, last October during his attendance at the Arctic Circle Assembly. Admiral Bauer also stated that "with this level of integration, we will be able to better determine NATO's role in the High North as well as benefit from more assets in the region" (Admiral Bauer, 2022). Finland and Sweden are particularly attentive to defence policies and traditionally focus on preparing their armed forces for hostile environments such as the Arctic. A great example of the increasing Finnish military engagement in Arctic waters is the training course attended by the Swedish Special Operation Group joint terminal attack controllers with Fifteen Airmen from the Kentucky Air National Guard to build on existing relationships in the region with their partners (Speck, 2022).

During a meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Madrid last June, the Heads of State and Government included the "High North" in NATO's Strategic Concept, as Russian capabilities are deemed to be clear strategic challenges to the Alliance, particularly with regards to freedom of navigation (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 2022). According to analysts, Moscow is using the same rhetoric that it resorted to as a justification for the invasion of Ukraine (Wilson Center's Polar Institute, 2022); Moscow is claiming to be only acting in self-defence in the Arctic as a result of the threat of NATO's Eastern expansion.

In line with this, Russia has developed new infrastructure in its Arctic territory over the years, seeking to control NSR maritime traffic passing through Russian waters. Since 2008, the Kremlin has enhanced its military capability in all areas in the Arctic by investing in mobile systems, special forces, new military bases, and long-range precision weapons. More recently, in 2019, the Chief of Defence Gerasimov launched the new defence concept "active defence", in order to emphasise high readiness, mobility, strong coordination and massive firepower (Folland, 2021). Maritime forces play a significant role in securing Russia's Arctic domain as well, with the Northern Fleet ensuring a robust presence in its Western Arctic territory. Established in 2014 as an Arctic Strategic Command, the Northern Fleet is composed of nuclear-powered missile and torpedo submarines; missile-carrying and anti-submarine aircraft; surface ships with missiles, aircraft-carrying, and anti-submarine capabilities; coastal troops; combined independent forces; the Russian Air Force and Air Defence Force and the Army Corps of the Ground Forces (Melino, Conley, 2007). Another significant threat to NATO Members comes from the decision of the Kremlin to place different variants of the land and sea-launched KALIBR cruise missile, the air-launched hypersonic intermediate-range missile KHINZAL together with the land-based mobile SSC-8 Screwdriver in the Kola Peninsula (Folland, 2021).

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As a response to this militarization strategy by Russia and the new interest in the Arctic region by China, the Biden administration has recently undertaken increased efforts to strengthen the US military presence in the Arctic by building a new fleet of icebreakers and by dispatching surveillance planes to monitor new threats (Vindevogel, 2022). Additionally, for the first time the US nominated a special ambassador for the Arctic region to promote US interests and cooperation with allies and partners in the region (Audiello, 2022). Consequently, Russia, China and NATO are currently conducting unprecedented military exercises within the Arctic, which increase political tensions even further.

The presence of armies heightens the already contentious dynamic in the region by allowing for the possibility of unintended events, as the possibility of accidental conflict escalation in the region remains a looming threat. Given these circumstances, the Arctic Council may have a crucial role as a mediator in preventing military conflict and attempting to bring peace to the region.

THE EU'S AND NATO'S STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, there has been growing pressure on NATO to rethink its strategic approach to the region, as evidenced by NATO's major winter exercise Cold Response last March. On this occasion, 30,000 troops, 200 aircraft and 50 ships from 27 nations took part in the exercise (Szumski, 2022). Over the past years, both the EU and NATO have increasingly recognised the geopolitical importance of the Arctic. Accordingly, the Atlantic Council established a Joint Force Command in Norfolk in 2019 (Katarina Kertysova, 2022). However, the recent outbreak of war in Ukraine by Russia has further increased the focus of both the major powers and public discourse within NATO Member States concerning the Arctic region, specifically around the risk that Russia might succeed in creating buffer zones within the Arctic (Melino, 2022). This could increase the risk of armed conflict and significantly affect trade on the Northern Sea Route.

To address the current challenging situation, NATO will unite and adapt to make sure the Arctic remains free and open (Admiral Bauer, 2022). Among the Member Countries, Norway has a major role, considering its historical and economical ties with the Kremlin. Consequently, Helsinki has emphasized military presence in the High North, even though the number of Norwegian high-end capabilities available for credible deterrence is limited compared to Russia's military capability. Canada is also very interested in strengthening situational awareness and operational capabilities in the Arctic. In order to do that, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) participate in several regular joint Arctic exercises alongside the US and Alaska. Thus, CAF maintains a year-round presence in the Arctic through a host of Canadian navy, army and air force joint domestic and international operations, exercises and training activities (Canadian Armed Forces, 2022).

Concerning the EU's interests, the Arctic represents a great opportunity to satisfy its climate ambitions and accelerate the growth of renewable energy capabilities. With its available resources, expertise, and technological innovations, the Arctic, which is often considered a high-tech knowledge hub, can be seen as instrumental for the EU to realize its Green Deal objectives, to end its dependence on fossil fuels, to strengthen its autonomy, and to ensure its prosperity (Coninx, van Loon, 2022).

The European Arctic region should be specifically taken into account when considering the role it can play as a provider of renewable energy, sustainable development, and a reliable supplier of critical raw materials. According to the Minerals Working group of the Northern Sparsely Populated Area Network (NSPA), because of existing capabilities throughout the whole value chain, the European Arctic has the most advanced and valuable ecosystem for the development of sustainable mining in Europe (Coninx, van Loon, 2022).

All states present in the Arctic have a high interest in avoiding any form of conflict. However, the large-scale military build-up and the possible risks associated with these developments cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine only adds fuel to the Arctic fire (Vindevogel, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The race for raw materials, the domination of new trade routes and the war in Ukraine with its consequential geopolitical changes mark the main reasons for increased military deployment in Arctic lands and waters. In the near future, a bolstered NATO role is therefore inevitable to ensure the stability of the area and maintain its status quo as an international territory. At the same time, the EU should implement its Arctic Strategy in order to flank the troops of non-EU allies and take advantage of natural resources in a safe and sustainable manner to accelerate the energy transition. Although the Arctic Council's mediation efforts are currently hampered, a high level of both military and civilian cooperation in the High North is crucial to prevent it from becoming the next theatre of war.

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