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Exploring The Arctic: New Geopolitical Dimensions

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Arctic as an emerging geopolitical expanse sculptured by climate change, technological advancement, and evolving patterns of global power. It reconnoiters why the region has remained, most of the time, peaceful despite a surge in military activity and strategic competition. This study posits that contemporary Arctic geopolitics is swayed more by control over the access, sea routes, and governance apparatuses than by territorial sovereignty, Specific attention is given to China's role as a non-Arctic polity expanding influence through scientific research, institutional participation, and infrastructure development. By analyzing the significance of new maritime routes such as Transpolar Sea Route, the study highlights how cooperation and competition coexist, producing a distinctive and evolving Arctic geopolitical order.

Keywords: Arctic geopolitics, Energy security, Military Buildup, Emerging Maritime Trade Routes, China in Arctic, International Governance bodies in Arctic, Impact of climate change, Scientific cooperation.

Introduction

The Arctic has shifted from being viewed as a remote and strategically marginal region to one of the most relevant in contemporary geopolitics. The receding thick ice, that once functioned as a natural barrier, has opened access for the region even more. This is all due to climate change. Consequently, advancement in technology and increased requirement of energy resources and minerals has brought significant attention to the Arctic. Such developments have evolved the integration of the region into global economic and strategic networks. This has changed it from a mere isolated ice cluster into geopolitically relevant region. Increased presence of force in the past few decades is mostly by Russia and U.S.A. Major developments in the region comes through the construction of ISR systems, naval ports, mobility assets, which would help in securing the access and maintain operational readiness. With the lens of geopolitics, one would suggest that such developments would work as a force multiplier to confrontation in the region. However, despite the visible militarization, Arctic has not yet experienced any direct military engagement. Instead, diplomatic engagement has remained regulated, characterized by signaling, deterrence and adherence to established norms.

Present explanations of the Arctic geopolitics do not explain the region's continued stability completely. Many studies assume that the presence of valuable resources will eventually lead to conflict, yet this overlooks the legal, economic, and environmental limits that shape Arctic resource use. Similarly, traditional security thinking often treats increased military activity as a direct cause of instability.

Literature review

Relative stability in the Arctic is described through cooperation, legal frameworks, and rule-based governance. Arctic geopolitics have been shaped by strategic and calculated moves that have indicated regulated interaction instead of direct conflict. The relevance of region is quite evident and first instances of this was visible when U.S.A. purchased Alaska from the Russian empire. Alaska is well located within the Arctic circle and is an icy landmass in the northern American territory. Alaska was perceived as a landmass which could be useful in future for better accessibility, connectivity, and security purposes. (Greenwood, 2023)

International institutions, regimes, and agreements have played a crucial role in governing the region. UNCLOS, also known as United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and customary international law have investigated matters related to continental shelf entitlements, maritime rights etc... A military state like Russia has benefitted from what the proceedings of these frameworks have revealed. (Greenwood, 2023) It has granted Russia recognized rights and legal influence over a large chunk of the region. In this way it is evident that rule-based systems are viewed as a mechanism for stabilization and not extensive competition. (Østerud & Hønneland, 2017)

Institutions like the Arctic Council are another mechanism that is truly relevant and important in sustaining stability in the Arctic. It is considered a central forum through which the Arctic states coordinate with each other on matters concerning scientific research, environmental protection, and cooperation. Even after long term of political and diplomatic strain, which involved suspension of meetings, Arctic states have expressed interest in keeping the council in existence and have continued to realize its importance even for the future. This shows that states still consider deliberation and discussions to communicate and cooperate in matters of rescue, research, regional governance.

Several scholars argue that the ice in Central Arctic Ocean is going to recede significantly over the coming years. This huge mass of ocean, which is mostly ice, covers excessive amounts of natural resources underneath and sustains abundance of fisheries. The publication from the U.S. Geological Survey revealed the estimated number of resources, oil and gas, in the Arctic region, which accounts for 30% of oil and 13% of natural gas that is the world's undiscovered one. Access to these resources will bring high economic gains for the countries and strengthen their position in global markets. It will help in increasing the national influence and negotiation power in the global markets while trading with others. The abundance of resources and minerals in the circle ensures that some countries will have reduced dependence on other countries. It will diversify energy sources. (Pezard et al., 2025) Lately, the flow of oil tankers has been disrupted due to maritime routes passing through some conflict-prone areas. High extraction costs, appropriate technology unavailability, harsh climate, and regulatory constraints limit the pace of resource development. The literature explains Arctic interests rather than continued absence of direct conflict.

At present, access to and transit through the Arctic region are primarily possible only through two major maritime corridors: the Northwest Passage (NWP) and the Northeast Passage (NEP). Northern Sea Route, a portion of NEP, has so far attracted most of the Arctic maritime traffic which runs along the Russian coastline for most of the extent. It connects the Pacific Ocean and Atlantic Ocean from the Bering Strait (east) to Novaya Zemlya (west). Although the Northwest Passage provide a strategic maritime link between the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, its operational viability remains constrained by extensive and persistent ice cover, making it the most treacherous Arctic route. (Drewniak et al., 2018)

Militarization in the Arctic

- **Russia in the Arctic**

Russia is one such nation that has a different level of presence and development going on in the Arctic. It holds largest territory withing the circle, has been most active since the 16th century, and the conquest of Siberia. Russian currently operates thirty dual use bases in the Arctic, it involves air bases, naval ports, radio/communication facilities, nuclear facilities (Oualaalou et al., 2021). Russia intends to utilize the melting ice as an opportunity for better access to its northern fleet. After the termination of the INF treaty, Russia is now even better positioned to deploy its ballistic missiles that will bring North America and the Europe in the site. (Greenwood, 2023)

"From satellite secrets to silent airfields - Russia is quietly transforming Murmansk into a strategic fortress on NATO's doorstep." (Techjournalist, 2025)

Murmansk is a major port city that lies in the Kola peninsula, north of the Arctic circle, on the kola bay that opens up in the Barents Sea. It occupies a key stance in Russian Arctic strategy, serving as a critical hub for sustaining military presence while simultaneously supporting large-scale energy development and infrastructure expansion. The port of Murmansk became especially important for the allied forces in World War II, when soviets required men and material to fight the war against the Nazi forces. Nazis would use the territory near the northern Europe to block the inflow and outflow of ships and airplanes. It is also important to not disregard the fact that this area is heavily guarded by military radar systems and other installations. Several small and big Cold War era bases have seen modernization and expansion, indicating a sustained buildup of personnel and infrastructure along the Russia's western Arctic frontier. Severomorsk is one of the crucial bases in the peninsula that is critical for Russia as it serves as the headquarters of the Northern fleet, coordinating surface and submarine operations across the Barents Sea.

- **US-led NATO in Arctic**

Last decisive move, by U.S.A., was purchasing Alaska from Alexander II of the Russian Empire. It was viewed as an alternate short access for the goods and service in and out of Asian continent. Since the U.S.S.R. possessed ICBMs, US produced the NORAD, i.e., North American Aerospace Defence Command. Completion of a new port namely Nome, Alaska will serve a great purpose for U.S.A. which is part of the U.S. national strategy for the Arctic. (Roucek & American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Inc., 1983) Construction of such new ports or bases will help U.S.A. assert some dominance in the region and also give access to the planned future ice breaker fleet that is under development. U.S.A. Recent research suggests that NATO's increased focus on the Arctic is more about continuity than a rise in tensions. The existing literature highlights that the U.S. strategy in the Arctic is centred on ensuring freedom of movement, enhancing early-warning capabilities, and promoting interoperability among allies, rather than seeking to acquire additional territory. NATO's military exercises, rotational troop deployments, and agreements on infrastructure with Arctic nations, especially military presence rather than efforts to shift the regional power dynamic.

But "America is also oft described as the reluctant Arctic nation; in spite of its geopolitical potential to become a circumpolar superpower, that potential remains unrealized." (Weber & Institute for Security Policy Kiel University, 2020, p. 23).

The Congress under President Ronald Reagan, in 1982, refused to ratify the UNCLOS treaty as it would harm the sovereignty of the state. They believed that signing it would subject the U.S. maritime activities to the oversight of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. Despite the meetings like White House Arctic Science Ministerial (2016, under President Obama),

first of its kind, the congress failed to fund the Coast guard to acquire newer and better class of icebreaker fleet. The number dwindle only around two, over that they are not in their best conditions. (Drewniak et al., 2018, p. 10) Until the next administration took over under President Donald Trump, which provided the long-waited funds to USCG. The UNCLOS, under his administration still remained unaddressed. U.S.A. decided to opt out of the position for the Special Representative to the Arctic and Special Envoy for the Climate Change. (Weber & Institute for Security Policy Kiel University, 2020, pp. 24–25)

Some scholars recognise increasing military presence in the Arctic but through the perspective of deterrence, preparedness, and strategic signalling. As described the scholars, states in the Arctic circle maintain military setups for early warning and defensive capabilities. As no one is capable of realising others' intentions fully, they deploy military assets to reduce uncertainty. So, absence of war or any conflict is attribute to mutual deterrence, high operational costs, and the stabilising effect of nuclear and conventional balance. States want to avoid escalation that is why peace still prevails. U.S.A., at present, demands the acquisition Greenland and make Canada the 51st state. These claims have been interpreted as part of a 21st century Monroe Doctrine so that it can keep Russian and Chinese out of influencing the northern Atlantic and Arctic ocean.

Scholars note that the Chinese have framed themselves as a legitimate Actor by claiming the status of "Near Arctic State." Beijing argues that the climate change in the Arctic directly affects China, giving it a rightful stake in the regional governance. China obtained the observer status in 2013 in the Arctic Council. This status enables engagements in the projects of the Arctic Council working groups. Resources are not only meant to meet present requirements but also to ensure long-term supply security. China seeks access to Arctic resources to sustain its economic expansion, which it views as essential for maintaining political stability amid a rising population and increasing domestic needs. Beyond oil and natural gas, Beijing has strong interest in minerals such as rare earth elements, uranium, zinc, and iron ore. (Greenwood, 2023) With the depleting reserves worldwide China and other states may seek to mine deep seabed mineral nodules in the Arctic Ocean floor.

Driven by the growing protein consumption of its middle class, China is pursuing access to Arctic fisheries in response to the depletion of fish resources in the South China Sea and the broader Pacific region. Analysts point to a growing network of Chinese research facilities across the Arctic, including satellite and space-observation stations in Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, as well as the Yellow River research station on Svalbard. Many scholars note that although these installations are officially civilian and research-oriented, they may have dual-use potential in areas such as communications, surveillance, logistics, and data collection. This has led some studies to interpret China's scientific engagement as a means of sustaining long-term access and influence in the region without formal sovereignty.

While recent scholarship has usefully documented China's growing scientific, economic, and institutional presence in the Arctic, it remains descriptive rather than theoretical. Studies also focus on Chinese activities related to scientific research, investments, and shipping initiatives but they also provide limited exposition of how influence is actually exerted without territorial control. Existing scholarship tends to portray China either as a cooperative collaborator or a strategic risk, yet it doesn't clearly conceptualise the apparatuses through which non-territorial power operates in the region. As a result, the literature lacks a reasonable framework for interpretation of how access, infrastructure, and authority can function as origins of power in the Arctic. Access-based power remains under-theorised. Contemporary scholarship effectively registers China's presence in Arctic region without sovereignty, but it doesn't completely theorise how non-territorial presence converts into structured geopolitical power.

The literature broadly interprets Arctic stability through two corresponding arguments. One section of it emphasises on cooperation, the role of legal framework bodies, and rules in managing relations and decrease uncertainty among Arctic states. The other section emphasises on the security dynamics, arguing that despite burgeoning militarisation, escalation is circumvented due to mutual deterrence, harsh conditions posed by the environment, and high operational costs. Together, these expositions account for the continued peace and stability in the Arctic, even amid increasing strategic competition.

Research Gap

The contemporary scholarship on Arctic is explained as mangled and uneven, with most of the studies concentrating on territorial claims, resource extraction, or visible military buildup as primary lenses of analysis. Hence, literature tends to elucidate Arctic geopolitics through a dual conflict-cooperation outlook that overemphasizes sovereignty and hard power while managing strategic access, governance bodies, and controlled competition. This focus conceals how influence in Arctic increasingly operates through sea routes, scientific infrastructure, data networks, and institutional participation rather than conventional territorial possessions. Furthermore, contemporary research lacks a coherent cognizance of how countries, particularly non-Arctic actors like China, practice power through access and governance apparatuses while preserving a surface-level setting of stability.

Regardless of the growing strategic pertinence of the region, there is little analytical clarification on how power and competition are being exercised in the region beyond conventional territorial and military frameworks. While the Arctic has remained mostly peaceful, the growing military hustle, expanding infrastructure, and the involvement of non-Arctic nations suggests underlying strategic contestations. China's rising domination in the Arctic without official territorial claims raises questions about how states can shape regional outcomes though access, infrastructure, and governance rather than sovereignty. This creates central research problems -

- How can geopolitical competition in the Arctic intensify through militarisation, infrastructure, and strategic positioning while the region continues to exhibit overall stability and absence of open conflict?
- To what extent is contemporary Arctic competition driven by control over access to sea routes, resources, and infrastructure than by territorial sovereignty?
- How is China expanding its influence in the Arctic through scientific, institutional, and infrastructural existence without territorial ownership, and what does this indicate about its long-term strategic objective ?

Methodology

This study mainly uses qualitative research method, with some limited use of quantitative data for support. It is based on secondary sources such as academic journals, books, policy papers, strategic reports, and official statements related to Arctic governance, security, and geopolitics. The research follows a thematic approach, focusing on the key issues like militarisation, competition over access, institutional cooperation, and the role of non-Arctic countries like China.

To support the analysis, a bar chart is included to present some comparative data in a clear visual form, without changing the overall qualitative nature of the study. The methodology is both descriptive and analytical, as it explains existing ideas and combines different sources to build a clearer understanding of emerging geopolitical trends in the Arctic.

Analysis

The Arctic circle states has remained stable. While the events unfolded pre- and post-World War I & II Arctic was considered only a piece of icy mass of land and ocean which circumferences eight different countries namely Russia, United States of America, Canada, Greenland (Under the Danish Empire), Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland. It was less known for any kind of any kind of traversing. It remained untouched till the end of Cold war. (*Arctic States*, n.d.)

The original actors in the Arctic region were the countries that either had a coastline in or were near the Arctic circle. Among these countries Russia emerged as the dominant Arctic power in terms of geography, coastline, resources, and military reach. U.S.A., via Alaska, has quite a non-ignorable control over the air and missile routes. Canada operates assert control through the Canadian archipelago and the Northwestern passage. Norway has it's one face towards the Barents Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Denmark has its own offshore land, Greenland, through which it has a huge territory under control that contains abundance of minerals. Other countries such Iceland, Sweden, and Finland play little role in the Arctic geopolitics though scientific research, strategic checkpoints etc. The consensus on the Arctic was more of pragmatic instead of normative. It came in the Cold War and solidified after it. Sovereignty was managed through law and not force. The Arctic states initially adopted an implicit understanding, which later evolved into a more explicit agreement, that maritime boundaries and continental shelf claims would be addressed through international legal mechanisms rather that unilateral or coercive measures, a practice that was subsequently consolidated under the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS). (Weber & Institute for Security Policy Kiel University, 2020) Environment, science, search and rescue, and indigenous issue were separated from the hard security politics which led to cooperation on non-security issues. Scientific research was considered a non-threatening activity that would either help research of one individual country or all the countries. It was a considered a legitimate and non-disruptive activity. It enabled data sharing and presence without escalation. Arctic states broadly recognised that resource development in the region is highly capital-intensive and dependent on advanced technology, making it viable only under stable conditions. Any form of conflict or prolonged instability was therefore seen as economically counterproductive, as it would sharply increase costs, disrupt operations, and undermine long-term investments.

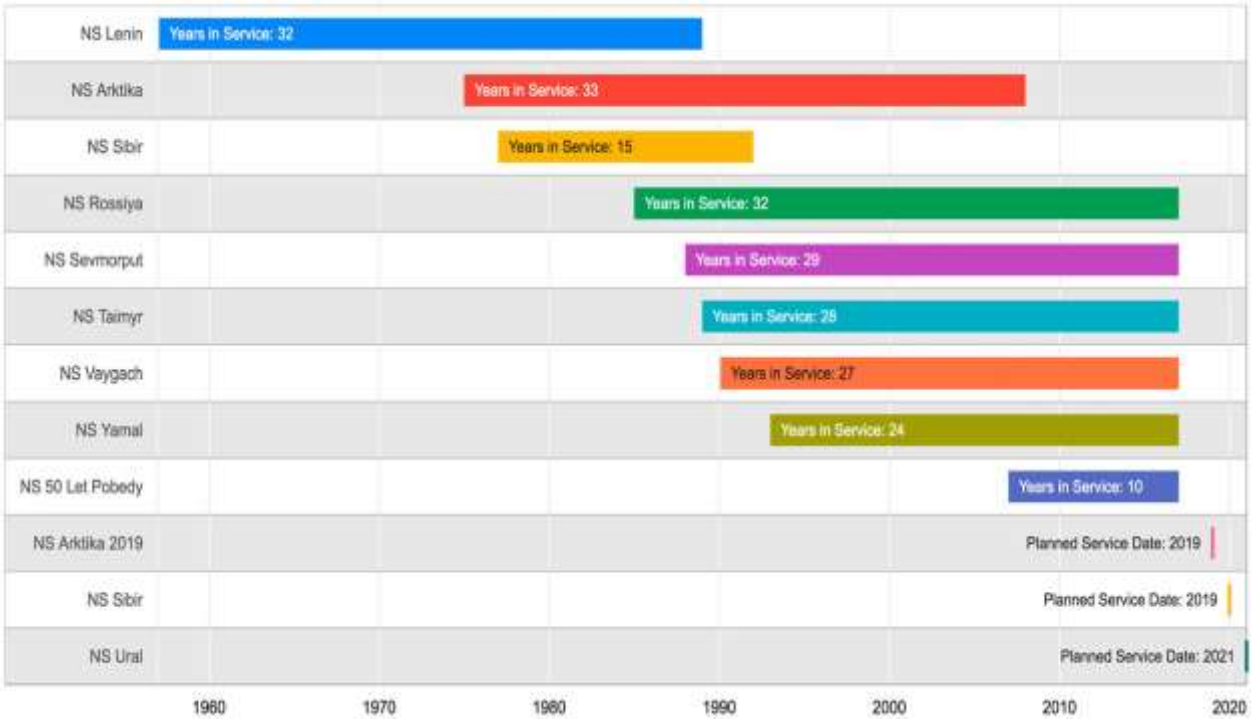
Military presence in the Arctic functioned less as an instrument of dominance and more as a stabilising mechanism to secure access, deter intrusion, and preserve a predictable strategic environment. Putting ones' military too much into the stressful environment would bring high economic costs, technological lacking, and mean unnecessary. The Arctic states' motivation was not to control whole region or challenge the sovereignty other state. Instead of that they wanted to ensure stability, uncontested authority over the specific areas that legally to them. This involved territorial waters, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and continental shelf claims. Military assets were primarily deployed in order to safeguard the sea lines, airspace, and emerging resource zones rather than to challenge others' territorial claims. Everyone wanted to avoid any direct escalation due to the probable involvements of nuclear weapons or any broader conflict.

Infrastructure development in the Arctic is led by national governments, backed by state-owned companies, defence establishments, and only a limited number of private entities. The key participants in the Arctic are the eight of the Arctic states. Russia has extensive state-led investment. Russia maintains the best class of ice breakers in the Arctic ocean, better than anyone else. Oil, gas, and coal extraction infrastructure is predominant in Russian Arctic. (*Taymyr Coal Project to Boost Economic Development in the Arctic*, 2024) U.S.A. has focused on ports, icebreaker, and dual use facilities in Alaska. Other important

infrastructure in the high north involves deep water ports, science and research facilities, surveillance systems etc. A non-Arctic state like China has positioned it well in the Arctic, through scientific, technological, and logistical infrastructure without any territorial ownership. India has also showed keen interest in the region. India and China both maintain an observer status in the Arctic council. Its presence is through research stations and observatories. The nature of the Arctic infrastructure is, predominantly, dual use in nature, serving both the civilian and military.

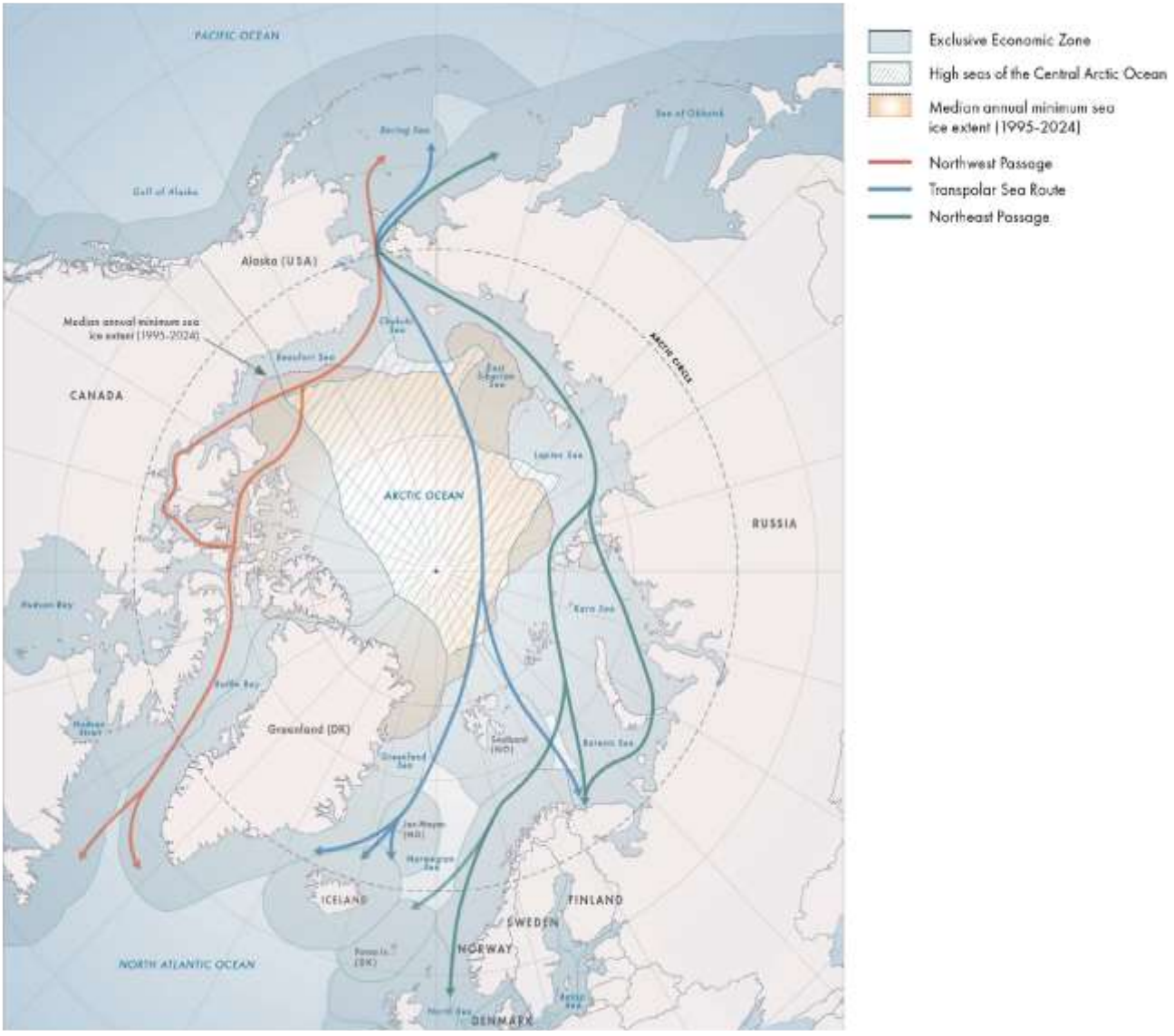
The contemporary Arctic competition is driven by control over the access to sea routes, resources, and infrastructure rather than by attempts at territorial expansion, because sovereignty in the Arctic is settled while access remains fluid. Maritime claims are managed through the UNCLOS, not force. States pursue legal clarification, not conquest. Here access is defined as multidimensional. Physical access is about navigability, conditions of ice in the ocean, whether it will be traversable, ports and icebreakers for halt and clearing path, respectively. One of the most important dimensions is economic access. It tells about how economies of Arctic states can impact the global energy and trade world, which countries have the suitable technology and capital to mine and drill, transport and sell it. Information plays a crucial role in the Arctic circle. Data related to climate, probable changes in geography, animal life, sea ice thickness, seasonal patterns, temperature trends is quite important. Mapping of the seabed, coastline so that there is clear interpretation of shallow and deep waters. Satellite coverage is central in the Arctic geopolitics because of navigation, military surveillance, Earth observation, remote sensing etc. Participation in the Arctic governance, with the Arctic States, is looked upon by countries like China, India, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom, Japan, etc. All these nations have an observer status in the Arctic Council.

Control over the ice breaker fleets would be a great advantage. And in this aspect Russia would again take a lead as it operates the biggest fleet of about 40-47 icebreakers which involves seven to eight to be nuclear powered and thirty plus to diesel electric. This provides Russia the ability to explore the plethora of untapped resources. In comparison to Russia U.S.A. and Canada operate an exceedingly small number of icebreakers that does not really position them as a dominant actor.



https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937x.2018.1455756

The Transpolar Sea Route (TPR) is going to be the future way for the ships in maritime trade. This route shifts leverage away from the territorial checkpoints. Currently the NSR is the most utilized route where, one section of it, northeastern sea route covers almost whole long freezing Russian coastline. (Pezard et al., 2025) In future most of the countries will use the TPR as it will be out the Russian authority. There is a huge section of the Central Arctic Ocean which will form the TPR that will remain out of anyone's control and will be more economical to travel for a specific timeline i.e., during the summers. But the fact that trade will depend a lot on the icebreakers to clear the path keeps and will keep Russia relevant for coming several decades. U.S.A. is trying the expand its influence through troop deployment infrastructures in Port Nome, Alaska. (*Reuters*, 2026) Canada also has deployed troops in the Arctic.



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China has no Arctic territory, no sovereign rights in the region, no historical Arctic identity. Yet it is present and has an influential role. If China can gain influence without territory, then Arctic power cannot be explained by sovereignty alone. China operates several research stations, satellite ground stations, and polar expeditions. With this China is also involved in extensive research on climate change and how it is going to impact environment, agricultural practices, plant life etc. It also studies sea ice movement, does

seabed mapping. Scientific activity creates legitimised, continuous presence. Knowledge production has become a form of strategic capital. China presents itself as a rule-abiding actor that follows the Arctic legal order and avoids being perceived as a revisionist power. UNCLOS entitles China to operate beyond its national jurisdiction, particularly in the Central Arctic Ocean.

Adherence to international scientific norms such as open data sharing, joint research projects, and environment monitoring provides China with a legitimate and continuous entry point into the region. Scientific cooperation in the Arctic is widely accepted as non-threatening. It intends not to challenge the existing governance structures rather embed itself in it.

China is preparing for future Arctic centrality, not immediate dominance. China aims to secure the future sea routes like the Transpolar Sea Route. China became the only country from where a ship has led official expeditions and completed it successfully through the 3 Arctic shipping passages. (Pti, 2021) As soon as resources availability becomes the focus China will be one of the extensive buyers and even extractor. It will aim to satisfy the energy requirements and benefit economically by extracting raw energy material and transporting goods though the new maritime trade route. As the present maritime trade routes face problems due to war and internal conflict, that chokes critical points like the Bab el Mandeb in the Gulf of Aden, Strait of Hormuz in Persian gulf, Malacca strait between Indian Ocean and South China sea etc, China with the help of Russia will be much more capable of utilising potential of the emerging trade routes in the region even when it will have no sovereign rights. This way China will continue to present itself as a legitimate player in the governance of the Arctic region.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates new geopolitical dimensions of the Arctic region. The emerging dynamics cannot be explained through the lenses of territorial control and overt conflict. Despite the growing militarisation and strategic interest, Arctic has remained largely stable due to cooperative institutions, legal frameworks, and the high economic and operational costs of escalation. At the same time, competition has not disappeared but has shifted toward control over access, infrastructure, and governance mechanisms. China's growing influence, exercised through scientific research, institutional participation, and strategic infrastructure rather than sovereignty, exemplifies this transformation. Overall, the Arctic represents a distinct geopolitical space where stability and competition coexist, reshaping how power is exercised in the twenty-first century.

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