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POLAR AMBITIONS OF GREAT POWERS AND THE SECURITY DILEMMA

Abstract

The dispute over Arctic resources is not something that is happening new; the talk about it began in the mid-2000s. However, the Arctic strategies of Russia and the West differed in their speed. The United States has been alarmed by significant delays in the development of the military and industrial infrastructure in the Arctic zone, therefore, to pursue Arctic ambitions, Greenland gains principal importance for the United States. Global warming having its impact on Greenland increases its strategic meaning compared to the „Cold War“ period. Perhaps the recent gaze of the United States towards Greenland and talks about bringing it under the US umbrella, or even President Trump’s first executive order – resuming drilling in the Arctic region, which was suspended under the Biden administration, should be viewed in this context.

The article examines the Arctic ambitions of great powers and the competition for geopolitical dominance in the north of the Arctic Circle, which is increasing gradually becoming ever more relevant. The article also focused on China’s interests in the Arctic and the “bear” versus “dragon” rivalry for influence in the region. Particular attention is paid to Russia’s ambitions and demonstration of power, existing threats, and the balance of power in the region, as well as the North Atlantic Alliance’s response to increased threats.

Keywords: Arctic, geopolitical dominance, continental shelf, balance of power, security architecture.

Introduction

The Arctic, one of the most puzzling region of our planet is located at the northernmost part of Earth, with its unique climate, flora and fauna, consists of parts northern Eurasia and North America, covers almost the entire Arctic Ocean with its islands, as well as adjacent parts of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans¹, has recently become the focus of the world’s leading states.

Due to the economic and military-strategic factors, the struggle for the distribution of the sphere of influence in the Arctic region is intensifying day by day. Among economic factors are the energy resources and deposits of the precious metals found on the Arctic floor and its seas, also, communications, specifically, the Northern Sea Route, the shortest maritime route from Europe to Asia, control over which bears enormous economic benefits and geopolitical advantages.

According to the statements of US Navy Secretary Richard Spencer, America must employ all means focused on countering the increasingly provocative steps of the Russian Navy in the struggle to gain control over the last, largest unexplored region in the world. It’s not just about the Northern Sea Route, but also about part of the Russian shelf. According to US Navy Secretary, the United States Marine Forces are working on a strategy that will ultimately facilitate free navigation through the Russian Arctic. Thus, the geopolitical struggle for dominance in this region is growing with the melting of Arctic ice in the Arctic Ocean.

¹ Vardzelashvili, Dimitri., Maritime Dictionary, Tbilisi, Publishing House “Alaverdi”, 2009;

Notably, this is the first time that a high-ranking military official has so openly outlined America's claims regarding the Northern Sea Route, which means that the United States is taking its problems in the Russian Arctic seriously and does not rule out the option of the militarily solution.

Why did this puzzling, cold, inaccessible and unpredictable region, claimed by eight countries, suddenly become so interesting and attractive to everyone?

For example, Russia has been officially trying for over 20 years to scientifically prove through the UN that the said territory is a direct continuation of its continental shelf, and therefore the country's borders are much larger and even reach the North Pole. Denmark, on the contrary, believes that this is a submerged part of their Greenland, which means that the border will be different. Canada and the United States also have their own appetites and claims. The Americans openly declare that they are unilaterally expanding the boundaries of their own continental shelf in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, in the Gulf of Mexico, and occupying vast territories in the Bering Sea and the Arctic.

All of this is about a million square kilometers. Think about it – twice the size of California and several times larger than Germany or the whole of Egypt. Add to that Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland, which also have claims to the Arctic. All of this is about a million square kilometers. Think about it – twice as much as California and several larger than Germany or the whole of Egypt. They are joined by Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland, which also lay claim to the Arctic.

Who actually owns this territory? Why now and where have these countries been before? What interests them in investing huge sums of money in the Arctic, rebuilding Arctic infrastructure, retraining personnel, paying them colossal salaries, adapting existing equipment to harsh climatic conditions, and will we see a new confrontation against the backdrop of the increasingly conflicting interests of the players in the region?

Who really owns this territory? Why now and where have these countries been before? What are their interests in investing huge amounts of money in the Arctic, rebuilding Arctic infrastructure, retraining personnel, paying them colossal salaries, adapting existing equipment to harsh climate conditions, and will we see a new confrontation against the backdrop of growing conflicting interests of players in the region?

Research methodology:

The work is based on the qualitative method of social research. In particular, for data collection and analysis, the research was carried out based on process tracing, case study, and qualitative content analysis methods. Also, during the study, secondary scientific-literary sources were analyzed to create a basis for continuing the research related to the subject under study.

Main part

1. Global changes and the unpredictable Arctic against the backdrop of growing interests of players in the region

Climate change – global warming, which is most pronounced in the Arctic – is causing global changes. According to the World Wildlife Fund, the rate of melting of Arctic ice is 13% of the total area per year¹. According to current projections, by 2040-2045 the Arctic Ocean could completely melt in the summer, contributing to two vital factors that have empires ready to confront each other to the death. First – the possibility of extracting natural resources, as scientists estimate that 22% of the Earth's natural gas and oil comes from the Arctic. Unconfirmed reports suggest that this means that there is more oil in the Arctic

¹ Lindsey, Rebecca., Scott Michon., Climate Change: Arctic Sea Ice Summer minimum, 2022, rb.gy/td4ygt [15.02.2025];



than in Qatar and twice as much natural gas reserves, as well as uranium, gold and diamonds.

The second reason is the sea route. In particular, the shortest route from Europe to Asia. Considering that the largest port in Europe is the port of Rotterdam, and in Asia – Shanghai, from Rotterdam to Shanghai through the Suez Canal, which is currently the shortest route, the distance is approximately 21,000 km, which is an average of 28-35 days for a ship. With the ice melting and the appropriate infrastructure in place, the distance along the same route (from Rotterdam to Shanghai) via the Arctic Sea Route will be reduced by almost 40%, allowing a ship to cover the distance in a maximum of two weeks to 20 days. This circumstance provides a huge advantage in the field of trade and logistics. In particular, it reduces the distance, and therefore the amount of fuel consumed. At the same time, cargo transportation is faster and, surprisingly, it calls into question the traditional routes that we have known until now.

If we look at all this from a more distant perspective, it turns out that the once ice-covered Arctic is now one of the richest regions of the world, which, together with this wealth, can also become a new, most flexible and shortest route. In other words, this is an area where military reinforcement for countries is not only necessary, but also mandatory.

However, first of all, it is necessary to clarify how these numerous natural resources should be distributed between countries from a legal point of view, since before anything can be protected, everything must be separated from their legal perspective.

1.1. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the appropriation of territories by major players through the continental shelf

According to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a state has the right to claim an exclusive economic zone within a radius of 200 nautical miles or 370 km from its baselines, in which the state has the right to exploit and use all living and non-living natural resources of its coastline¹. In addition, it establishes rules for conducting scientific research and protecting the environment during the construction of artificial islands and structures in these zones. But there is a better solution that allows more than the UNCLOS. However, this is only a privilege for the big players who appropriate territories through the continental shelf. That is, a country located in some coastal zone claims that this is my land, because it is a continuation of my land under water. For example, the United States, not being a party to the UN Convention on Boundaries, i.e. not having signed this document, unilaterally expands its territory at its own discretion².

It is noteworthy that not long ago, in 2023, an unexpected announcement appeared on the US State Department website – “The US Continental Shelf Extension Project”, where the title itself indicates that the extension exceeded 200 nautical miles. According to this project, America expanded through the Pacific Ocean, the Mariana Islands, the Gulf of Mexico, the Bering Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, and the greatest expansion occurred in the Arctic. To be more precise, it is about a million square kilometers. That is, roughly speaking, twice as big as California and several times bigger than Germany or all of Egypt. The text of the project says that this marine area is rich in corals and crabs³. But, as they say, “the devil is in the details.”

The fact is that there are 50 solid minerals on the American shelf that the economy of the future

¹ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea., Decision 98/392/EC on the conclusion by the European Community of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Agreement relating to its implementation of Part XI, 1994, last update 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legisum:4337127>, [15.02.2025];

² The Outer Limits of the U.S. Extended Continental Shelf: Background and Issues for Congress, 2024, Pdf, Congressional Research Service;

³ The Outer Limits of the Extended. Continental Shelf of The United States of America, U.S. Extended Continental Shelf Project, Published by the U.S. Department of State, Washington, 2023, Pdf

depends on: lithium for batteries or tellurium for solar panels¹. The American military needs cobalt, titanium, or gallium. It is used in radars and electronic warfare systems. For example, we can say that the role and importance of these complexes were well demonstrated in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. In addition, among the 16 rare earth metals on the American shelf there is germanium, from which chips are made, and of course, we must not forget about the estimated reserves of 6.5 trillion cubic meters of gas and 50 billion barrels of oil in the new territories of the USA. As we can see, the scale of the new acquisition is colossal.

1.2. Why the Arctic?

The fact is that the United States is one of the largest consumers of these resources in the world. Most of them will be extracted in the Middle East, where, on the one hand, the Americans always hold strong positions, and on the other, China's influence is growing. Iran has been an official enemy for decades, but it does not give up and, on the contrary, increases its military power. There are also the Houthis in Yemen, unstable Iraq, and Syria. Thus, as we see, despite the fact that the region is rich in oil products, it is quite unstable. Moreover, those countries that in the middle of the 20th century were ready to do everything so that the British and Americans would help them with technology to extract "black gold" are now earning so much from the latter that they themselves make decisions about whom to establish relations with, how to befriend whom, how much to sell to whom, etc. What is the United States doing? For years, it has been strategically reducing its dependence on oil from the Persian Gulf countries in favor of more peaceful neighbors like Canada, Mexico, or its own production.

Moreover, protecting Saudi Arabia's oil, conditionally – in a war with Iraq, is associated with much greater energy costs than deploying a navy somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico or the Arctic and simply saying – "it's ours", which is actually happening now. Have you heard any significant outrage or protest over the United States' appropriation of millions of square kilometers of cold Ocean over the centuries? Perhaps few, if any, have thought about the strategic value of the Arctic territories.

Currently, only 4 million people live above the Arctic Circle, which is a rather modest percentage of the entire planet's population. The largest cities here are Murmansk and Norilsk. Elsewhere – such as Harstad or Tomsjo in northern Norway – there are fewer than 100,000 inhabitants left. The famous Vorkuta has long since become a ghost town. All this is true, but according to preliminary calculations, between 13% and 30% of the world's undiscovered oil and gas reserves may be hidden under the Arctic² ice, and if at this stage it seems that extracting them from the permafrost will be impossible or unreasonably expensive, then in the future everything may change.

1.3. Alaska – a new profitable acquisition of the United States

If we look back in history, we will see that Russia spent \$7.2 million in 1867 when it sold the cold, remote, and by then useless Alaska to the United States³. You might be surprised, but the Russians even bribed American senators to make this deal happen. The thing is, Russia was losing the Crimean War at the time (1853-1856) and the government needed money to plug the budget holes. As for Alaska, it was

¹ Alvarez, Jose., Strategic Implication of the U.S. Extended Continental Shelf, International Law Studies – Volume 61, Role of International Law and an Evolving Ocean, 2024, Law; Pdf;

² Brimmer, Esther., Changing Geopolitics in the Arctic, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/report/changing-geopolitics-arctic-0>, [15.02.2025];

³ Todorov, Valentin., How did Russians use the US \$7.2 million check used to pay for Russian Alaska in 1867? How did they get the actual money from the US?, <https://www.quora.com/How-did-Russians-use-the-US-7-2-million-check-used-to-pay-for-Russian-Alaska-in-1867-How-did-they-get-the-actual-money-from-the-US>, [15.02.2025];



a distant but somehow profitable land for the empire thanks to a joint Russian-American company. The company's former office was in St. Petersburg, and its branch was in California – in Fort Ross. What did this enterprise do? They collected sea beaver fur, exported it and sold it in the States. However, from the middle of the 10th century, the profitable enterprise turned into a subsidized one. In other words, the Russian government did not spend money on it, but spent money from the treasury to keep it going. More and more Native Americans came to Alaska to look for gold. The Russia, had practically one village – Novo Arkhangelsk – with hundreds of wooden houses and about the same number of soldiers in the military garrison. There was a danger that this territory would eventually be taken over by the Americans. They were increasingly actively developing their continent. They bought Louisiana and half of the country from the French. Russia would either have to spend a lot of money on Alaska – on settlements and a big army – or sell it. So with Alaska, they decided it was better to at least get something from it than to ultimately lose it for nothing.

What do you think, they were happy with this acquisition in the United States? Let me remind you – some took bribes, while others criticized them in the newspapers and called these lands "Steward's Refrigerator" – in honor of the local Secretary of State – Steward, who negotiated and congratulated the American President on buying a wonderful park for polar bears and 50,000 Eskimos.

But 30 years later, in 1896, the situation changed and gold was discovered in the Klondike Valley, in the middle of the 20th century (1968) – oil, and later – gas. The state is currently one of the top 10 in the United States for gold and oil production. They also produce 10% of the world's zinc. But most importantly, it was the acquisition of Alaska that made the United States one of the powerful Arctic states, which gives the country the opportunity to make such territorial claims.

2. Lessons from the past and Russia's expansion into the Arctic

Now let's see what the lessons of history's past have taught Russia and what conclusions they were able to draw. The Kremlin began expanding into the region long before speculation on these issues began, which has its reason. It failed to win and didn't even come close to one of the world's largest reserves – the Middle East, and it fell into the hands of America and its partners. That's why he bet on the Arctic early on. Back in 2001, he first sent his viewpoint to the UN Commission that the Arctic shelf was Russian territory, but the UN then rejected it. Then, in 2007, it conducted an expedition to the Arctic, supposedly based on scientific evidence that its continental shelf extended to the North Pole, allowing it to exploit natural resources more than any other state, including the United States, which was also extracting and trying to increase oil production in the Arctic region.

It is noteworthy that Russia at that time also benefited from the support of Norway, which allowed it to exploit natural resources in this Russian special economic zone, as it itself lacked technology. Which was put to an end by Russia's aggressive policy and invasion of Ukraine. Both Norway and other countries in the region, such as Sweden and Finland, which are also Arctic countries, sharply opposed Russia's position, which was also reflected in its relationship with the Arctic. It was precisely in 2007, after the famous Munich Conference, where Putin declared his ambitions, saying that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical catastrophe for the world, that Russia made its first foray into the Arctic and even symbolically planted the Russian flag¹ on the continental shelf just under the North Pole to confirm and reinforce its claim to the Arctic. It is noteworthy that in 2019, a UN commission followed an expedition and came to an interim conclusion that a large part of the Arctic does indeed belong to Russia. But since then, this topic has not been raised again.

¹ Parfitt, Tom., Russia plants flag on North Pole seabed, World news, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/02/russia.arctic>, [15.02.2025];

If we look at the northernmost city of the country, Pevek, we find that there was a record outflow of population in the 1990s. Currently, only 4,200 people live in the city, but despite this, since 2019 a unique ship has been permanently docked here, the cost of which, with all its infrastructure, is 30 billion rubles. What is it? This is the floating nuclear power plant "Akademik Lomonosov"¹, inside which there is a reactor, approximately the same as on all modern icebreakers, and it is it that generates electricity and heat, which is enough for the residents of a city with a population of 100 thousand people. The logical question is – why is it there, in the western part of Russia? First of all, it should be noted that this will not be just one such floating power plant of this kind. Company „Rosatom“ promises to build seven more, and another state corporation is developing other low-power land-based nuclear power plants. For what? Because they want to find and extract resources in the Far North. Therefore, people are needed to extract, store, transport, and sell new resources. Accordingly, they need both housing and electricity. It is precisely for such specific purposes that low-power power plants are being built on land and water, since no one is going to spend colossal amounts of money on building capital infrastructure, as was the case during the Soviet Union, because there are already many such abandoned islands of Soviet civilization here.

2.1. Yamal Peninsula, Western Sanctions and Russian Natural Gas in Europe

If we look at Russia's Yamal Peninsula, home to Novatek's natural gas field, you'll see that even in the coldest, harshest months of winter, when local waters are covered in thick layers of Arctic ice, ships still continue to move. Yes, it is from here that liquefied gas is actively exported to Europe in huge ice-cruising tankers, on accompanied by nuclear icebreakers or without them.

The fact is that the West has imposed sanctions against Russia, but this does not mean that it has refused Russian resources. Moreover, the parties will even obtain these resources together. No one will give up resources because of Ukraine or anyone else in the near future. It is noteworthy that as soon as the Novatek field work has begun, the French oil company Total Energy bought almost 20% of the field for \$4 billion and made appropriate investments². After the start of the Russia-Ukraine war and the imposition of high-profile sanctions, what do you think, Does Total Energy sold its 20% stake?³ Of course not. Because Interests are supreme!

Sanctions cannot be imposed if the owners of the sanctioned businesses themselves are European companies. Therefore, in 2024, Europe purchased a record amount of natural gas from Russia⁴. If we look at the Yamal Peninsula on a nautical map, we will see that almost every second tanker belonging to the Russian Northern Fleet and flying under the flags of different countries is loaded with natural gas and then sails to Europe.

Who is leading in this field? So who can trade across these still-icy borders? According to the magazine "Politico", America has 2 icebreakers and plans to build six. Canada – 18, and Russia – 51 (more than fifty). These ships are needed to clear the way for tankers or other maritime transport from ice in any climatic conditions⁵.

¹ NTI, Akademik Lomonosov Floating Nuclear Power Plant-Russia, <https://www.nti.org/education-center/facilities/akademik-lomonosov/>, [15.02.2025];

² Shiryaevskaya, Anna., and Bierman, Stephen., Total to Buy 4\$ Billion Novatek Stake. Enter Yamal Project, Bloomberg, Business/Deals, 2011; <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-03-02/total-agrees-to-buy-12-of-novatek-enter-yamal-Ing-project>, [15.02.2025];

³ The Total Energy Stays in Russian's Yamal LNG – Source, Reuters, 2022; <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/totalenergies-stays-russias-yamal-Ing-source-2022-12-09/>, [Last seen.15.02.2025];

⁴ Niranjan, Ajit., European imports of liquefied natural gas from Russia at 'record levels', Russian Energy releases data days after Ukraine stopped flows of Russian gas through its pipelines, Guardian, 2025; <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jan/09/european-imports-of-liquefied-natural-gas-from-russia-at-record-levels>, [15.02.2025];

⁵ Rosen Kenneth., A Battle for the Arctic Is Underway. And the U.S. Is Already Behind, Magazine „Politico“2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/12/17/climate-change-arctic-00071169>, [15.02.2025];

Greenland holds great importance for the United States in the race for the Arctic. Global warming and climate change are also affecting Greenland, which increases its strategic importance compared to the Cold War period

Military planners assume that Greenland, with its coastline, will be fully open to maritime transit. It is worth noting that the Americans already have one military base in Thule (Greenland), but this base needs in-depth modernization, after which it will again be able to receive strategic bombers and various fighters, as well as provide air and missile defense in the region. Beyond the Arctic Circle, this base could become the main coordination point.

Perhaps the recent gaze of the United States towards Greenland and talks about bringing it under the US umbrella, or even Trump's first executive order – resuming drilling in the Arctic region, which was suspended under the Biden administration, should be viewed in this context.

3. The Architecture of Arctic Security

As for the Arctic security architecture, it is the result of developments in the global security sphere from the far north to the south. Of course, the war in Ukraine plays a huge role and is of great importance. From Moscow's point of view, over the past two years, their positions has worsened both in the Arctic Council and in the Arctic itself. Previously, five of the eight members of the Arctic Council were members of the North Atlantic Alliance, but since the start of Russian aggression, all members of the Arctic Council, except for Russia itself, are now members of NATO.

If we look at the map of potential resources in the Arctic, it is clear that the American part of the Arctic, i.e. Alaska, is almost completely exploited. The same picture is on the Canadian side. Instead, in Europe, huge deposits are visible on the Swedish and Finnish side (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of potential Arctic resources

According to the statement of the United States Secretary of State's Advisor – Derek Scholey, if we recall that in the recent past Finland (2023) and Sweden (2024) became members of NATO, it turns out that on the eastern flank, where the Russian threat was generally felt, with Finland's accession to NATO, it received a fairly significant part of the Arctic territories, which now directly fall under Article 5 of the Charter, which implies collective defense.

In addition, the accession to NATO of Finland and Sweden, which have great military potential and whose armies have the ability and means to operate effectively in the difficult polar zone, weakens Russia's positions in this theater of military operations, especially in the European part of the Arctic Circle¹.

3.1. China's interests in the Arctic and the confrontation between the "bear" and the "dragon"

Such a resource-rich region, which also has the potential to become one of the most optimal sea routes, naturally could not remain unnoticed by China. Therefore, China – through economic expansion, a monopoly on semiconductors, the issuance of various uncontrolled credit emissions or investments, which are accompanied by political obligations – is trying to seize its share of the world, despite the fact that it is not an Arctic state. China's northernmost point is 1,440 km from the Arctic Circle, but geography doesn't matter when your potential and ambitions allow you to extract resources. Therefore, they claim in Pakistan that China is a state bordering the Arctic, and while the world is engaged in neutralizing Russia's aggressive policy, China is trying to penetrate the region through its usual methods and means, that is, through investments and loans, just like in African countries. But the point is that the countries of the North are neither African countries nor do they lack foresight. Accordingly, they make decisions with a rather cold mind. Therefore, it is difficult to lure them with money and credit. Canada, for example, blocked a \$150 million offer from China that would have given the latter a share of a gold mine. The reason was that along with economic interests, military interests might also arise. Greenland refused to sell its old American infrastructure. Therefore, they are again trying to penetrate the Arctic through Russia. It should also be noted that the Arctic, unlike the rest of the world's oceans, has another fundamental advantage for China – the absence of US naval forces, which almost never appear there.

It is noteworthy that China has its own stake in the Yamal field. The combined total share of China National Natural Gas Corporation and the Silk Road Fund is 30%. China National Offshore Oil Corporation and China National Natural Gas and Oil Exploration/Exploration Company own 20% of the second largest project on the Yamal Peninsula – Arctic LNG. The huge advantage of this project is that it is planned to lay a pipeline "Power of Siberia-2" directly from this field to China². Thus, China views the Arctic race from a long-term perspective³ and, although it is not an Arctic state, one of the important projects – the "Arctic Silk Road"⁴ – is being implemented through the Arctic, which has resulted in the development of its Arctic technologies – necessary for shipping and natural resource extraction in the Arctic. This includes ice-resistant vessels, icebreakers and polar deep-sea research vessels, which also include surveillance and navigation technologies, polar unmanned amphibians, floating oil platforms, etc⁵. However, Russia is also not impressed by Beijing's such interests⁶. Cooperation and friendship are all well, but when it comes to

¹ Wieslander, A., How Sweden and Finland's membership in NATO affects the High North, Atlantic Council, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/how-sweden-and-finlands-membership-in-nato-affects-the-high-north/>, [15.02.2025];

² Papachristou, Lucy., Russia and China to sign Power of Siberia-2 gas Pipeline contract in near future, says Novak, Reuters, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-china-sign-power-siberia-2-gas-pipeline-contract-in-near-future-says-2024-05-17/>, [15.02.2025];

³ Lamazhapov, R., Stensdal, I., and Heggelund, G., China's Polar Silk Road: Long Game or Failed Strategy? The Arctic Institute, 2023, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-polar-silk-road-long-game-failed-strategy/>, [15.02.2025];

⁴ Narkano, Jane., and Li, William., China Launches Polar Silk Road, Energy Fact & Opinion, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-launches-polar-silk-road>, [15.02.2025];

⁵ See footnote 11;

⁶ Paton, Nick Walsh., Satellite images show huge Russian military buildup in the Arctic, CNN, 2021; <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/05/europe/russia-arctic-nato-military-intl-cmd/index.html>, [15.02.2025];

natural resources, interests become supreme. To the extent that Russia is the most Arctic state in the world, its Arctic territories account for 20% of its gross domestic product, 20% of its exports, 20% of its oil production, and 80% of its natural gas production¹. It is obvious that the Russians give this area a special priority. Therefore, despite the alliance of the “Bear” and the “Dragon”, it is the Arctic that is the main arena of confrontation between them. Therefore, when they see China’s increasingly ambitious plans for the Far North, they have every reason to think that they may be implemented at their expense. Accordingly, Russia does not grant China any privileges in the Arctic. Including not even in relation to the 6 Russian Arctic ports. Therefore, they either denied to enter the port at all, or they must comply with Russian transit laws, which means that they must submit a detailed route and traffic plan, hire a Russian pilot, and pay taxes in Russian ports.

The Russians are also trying to ensure that no controlling stake in any strategic energy project ends up in the hands of foreign entities, and above all, the Chinese. It seems that the Arctic, its resources, and the Northern Route are one of the last important levers for Russia in relation to China, and the Kremlin is trying to use it to somehow protect itself from Beijing’s dominant position in bilateral relations.

3.2. Russia’s ambitions and Demonstration of force

So, Moscow has been building and restoring its military potential in the Arctic for many years now, and it doesn’t hide its ambitions. First, since 2005, it has restored about 50 closed Soviet military facilities, including airfields, military bases, and has filled two or three of the largest military bases with military equipment and new hypersonic missiles have been unveiled². Then they made their claims as loud as possible. For example, they took Western journalists to the far north – Franz Josef Land – first CNN, then BBC – and showed them the bases – with missile launchers and a full complement of submarines. The question logically arises: what was the point of such openness in secret military matters? It was a deliberate show of force. Because the Arctic is a direct illustration of the phrase – “Russia against NATO.” After all, seven out of eight Arctic countries are members of the alliance. So Russia is fighting here not only for the Arctic, but also for strategic interests.

It is noteworthy that during the Cold War, the Americans developed the SOSUS hydroacoustic system for these areas to detect Soviet submarines operating in the Atlantic Ocean. Although, as they say, this system is no longer relevant for modern submarines, but, in other words, given the geography, these waters between Greenland, Iceland and Great Britain represent the only route into the Atlantic for Russian ships based in the north (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2.

³ See footnote 10;

⁴ Paton, Nick Walsh., Satellite images show huge Russian military buildup in the Arctic, CNN, 2021; <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/05/europe/russia-arctic-nato-military-intl-cmd/index.html>, [15.02.2025];

In addition, the Arctic represents the shortest route for intercontinental ballistic missiles to reach their targets (see Figure 3).



Figure 2.

4. Increased threat and balance of power in the region

There is a danger that the Russians or the Chinese, relying on their superior equipment and technology, will begin to lay claims and rights to the Arctic Ocean or parts of it that do not belong to anyone under international law. According to Admiral Dale Coulton of the United States Navy, "The Arctic basin is full of competition, in addition to control of sea communications, the mineral resources in this region are estimated at about \$ 1 trillion. The United States cannot sit idly by while Russia creates a nine-dash line of territorial claims in the Arctic region, just as China is trying to do in the Pacific Ocean.¹"

This is exactly what democratic countries are trying to exploit, because everyone knows that these natural resources are mainly concentrated in the hands of Russia and are used as weapons, as one of the prerequisites for hybrid war. Therefore, the world is trying to find a certain algorithm to counter all this, so that the balance of power is not disturbed there. Therefore, in response to the increased threats from Russia, the North Atlantic Alliance has planned to increase military strength in the Arctic region. It is important to note that military exercises in the region have recently become more frequent. In March 2024, the Alliance held a large-scale military exercise called „Northern Response 2024"², involving 20,000 troops from 13 countries, including 4,000 Finnish soldiers, who took part for the first time in a large-scale NATO exercise held on the territories of the Arctic Council member states of Norway, Sweden and Finland.

The activation of Arctic issue from West, is also related to the fact that in addition to Russia, such a major player as China has recently expressed interest in the Arctic, trying to occupy the space vacated as a result of Russia's economic difficulties and replace the European and American countries that have invested in the Russian economy and modernized it. Now the North is trying to fill this gap, and therefore countries are no longer relying on diplomacy, and the Arctic region is a place for demonstrating this growing military power. The active militarization of the Arctic, which continues even now, including with the involvement of China, which has launched its own project – the "Arctic Silk Road", poses a threat to almost all states located in the region. China has already built icebreakers and developed certain techniques to explore this region, which naturally causes growing concern for the American administration, and given Trump's current policy, it is trying to take serious steps in the Arctic region to contain it there as well.

¹ Article: Marine Corps Joint Tactical Vehicles with Combat Logistics Battalion 6, Combat Logistics Regiment 2, 2nd Marine logistics Group, staged at a pier offload in preparation for exercise Nordic Response 24 in Talvik, Norway, 2024, rb.gy/s176nc, [15.02.2025];

² Nanner, Jari., Newly enlarged NATO starts drill in Finland, Norway and Sweden in defense of its Nordic turf, World News, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/nato-military-drill-nordics-finland-norway-sweden-87ff05e1bb24f77dc9d5b5bf09c709b0>, [15.02.2025];

Russia is also trying to respond by holding military exercises and demonstrating its own combat capabilities. However, there is already being open talk that the Kremlin is forced to mobilize equipment from all parts of the federation, as the war in Ukraine is absorbing its military equipment and potential, which Russia now needs in full to deploy in Ukraine. The Kremlin's border has never been more vulnerable in decades, and the Arctic is one of the theaters of military action that the world is now closely watching¹. It is noteworthy that, along with Russia, China is also participating in these exercises, which also recognizes Russia's strategic problems. In the Chinese academic journal "Russian Studies", two Chinese scholars Yue Peng and Guo Zhenshen note that "the initial balance in the Arctic has been disturbed and the scales in the Arctic region have tilted in favor of Western countries."² Russia is conducting exercises mainly in the Barents Sea and in Siberian waters. While the West – in this case NATO – borders Norway. These military exercises are very intensive and involve both land and naval components, as well as the air force.

Perhaps before the Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia was indeed leading the race for the Arctic, with a fairly large advantage, but it is unknown to what extent this difference is maintained now. Russia is now forced and appears to be trying to soften its Arctic policy, as it lacks the ability to confront the West on all fronts. However, it must be said that this is the only theatre of naval military operations where Russia, with the world's largest icebreaker fleet – 51 ships against the rest of the world's 48, to its already developed military infrastructure, personnel accustomed to the climate, proximity to its own territory and the technology for building nuclear icebreakers – which only Russia has in the world, most likely still remains the most powerful player in the Arctic, and this is one of the rare regions where it retains its primacy, at least at this stage.

Of course, this circumstance is causing growing concern in the US administration, and Trump's current policy is aimed at taking serious steps in the Arctic region to contain Russia there as well, so as not to upset the balance of power and not give Russia an opportunity to take advantage of the Arctic while the world is focused on preventing Russian expansion in Europe and containing this certain economic expansion by China.

Conclusion

The history of the Arctic once again emphasizes that humanity has a need and desire to conquer foreign, distant, and most importantly, neutral lands. The ambitions of imperialist countries have no boundaries. This is a predatory state policy that is ready to extract resources where it was previously unthinkable.

If we take the same Russia, despite numerous problems and challenges, the country is willing to invest billions of dollars in the development of Arctic infrastructure, as it hopes that the Arctic will provide the Kremlin's autocratic regime with financial revenues and oligarchic rule for decades to come.

Yet despite the slow pace of change, this does not mean that the current status quo will be maintained forever. The Chinese are developing their own polar research sector, the Americans are gradually recognizing the importance of the North, and the consequences of the war in Ukraine could have serious implications for the Arctic. And if they lead to a reorganization of the Russian governance structure, interest in the Northern Route could grow rapidly. It should also be noted that in addition to the Northern Route, there is a Northwest Approach around the northern tip of North America and a Transpolar Route that goes directly from Alaska to Europe via the North Pole. But their potential for use is even more complex than that of the Northern Sea Route. Thus, although the pace of change is not so great, processes in the region are

1 Article: China and Russia Have Chilling plans for the Arctic, The two autocracies dream of creating a "polar silk road" The Economist, 2024, [rb.gy/jd4ksq](https://www.economist.com/international/2024/02/15/china-and-russia-have-chilling-plans-for-the-arctic), [15.02.2025];

2 See footnote 18;

developing simultaneously with the melting of ice, and the parties are already preparing for increasing competition for Arctic resources, trade routes, and geopolitical dominance in the Arctic.

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