

# Arctic as a New Geopolitical Hotspot

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## Abstract

The Arctic is rapidly emerging as a new geopolitical hotspot due to climate change, resource competition, and strategic military interests. As ice continues to melt, previously inaccessible shipping routes, such as the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage, are becoming viable, attracting global economic and military attention. Major powers, including Russia, the United States, and China, are intensifying their presence in the region, each pursuing distinct strategic and economic goals. The Arctic's vast reserves of oil, gas, and minerals further fuel territorial disputes and security concerns. While international frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Arctic Council attempt to regulate governance, rising tensions suggest the potential for both cooperation and conflict. This paper explores the geopolitical dynamics of the Arctic, examining the interests of key players, the legal landscape, and the implications for global security and environmental stability.

**Keywords:** Arctic geopolitics, climate change, Northern Sea Route, resource competition, Russia, United States, China, Arctic Council, UNCLOS, military strategy.

## 1. Introduction

The Arctic, once considered a frozen and desolate expanse, has rapidly become a focal point of global geopolitical competition. Historically perceived as a remote and inhospitable region, the Arctic is now at the center of international strategic interests due to climate change, economic opportunities, and military concerns. As rising temperatures cause Arctic ice to melt at an unprecedented rate, vast new shipping routes such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Northwest Passage (NWP) are emerging, significantly reducing transit times between major global markets. This transformation has intensified interest among world powers, as control over these routes could reshape international trade patterns. Additionally, the Arctic is believed to hold approximately 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30% of its natural gas resources, making it an economic prize for countries seeking energy security and economic growth.

The geopolitical significance of the Arctic is driven by the strategic ambitions of key global players, including Russia, the United States, China, Canada, and various Nordic nations. Russia, which possesses the longest Arctic coastline, has been aggressively expanding its military infrastructure in the region, reactivating Soviet-era bases and deploying new nuclear-powered icebreakers to solidify its dominance. The United States, on the other hand, views the Arctic as a critical component of its national security strategy, particularly in countering Russian expansion and maintaining free navigation rights. Meanwhile, China, despite having no direct Arctic territory, has declared itself a "near-Arctic state" and is seeking to expand its influence through economic investments and infrastructure development as part of its broader "Polar Silk Road" strategy. Canada and Nordic nations, particularly Norway, Denmark (via Greenland), and Sweden, are also asserting their interests, balancing economic development with concerns over envi-

ronmental protection and indigenous rights.

Governance of the Arctic remains a complex and contested issue. The Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum composed of Arctic nations and indigenous groups, has played a key role in fostering cooperation. However, it lacks enforcement mechanisms, leaving critical disputes unresolved. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides a legal framework for territorial claims, but overlapping sovereignty claims and resource disputes have created tensions, particularly between Russia and Western nations. As geopolitical competition intensifies, there is growing concern over the militarization of the region and the possibility of conflict over access to strategic resources and navigation rights.

This paper explores the Arctic's transformation into a geopolitical hotspot by examining the interests and strategies of major powers, the legal and diplomatic frameworks governing the region, and the implications of Arctic geopolitics for global security and environmental stability. As nations position themselves to capitalize on the Arctic's vast resources and strategic potential, the question remains: will the region become a zone of international cooperation or a battleground for great power rivalry?

## **2. The Arctic's Changing Landscape: Climate Change and Economic Opportunities**

The Arctic is experiencing some of the fastest rates of climate change in the world. Rising global temperatures have led to significant ice melt, with the Arctic Ocean losing approximately 13% of its sea ice per decade. This environmental transformation is not only altering local ecosystems but also opening up new economic and strategic opportunities that were previously inaccessible.

One of the most significant changes is the emergence of new shipping routes. The Northern Sea Route (NSR), which runs along Russia's Arctic coast, is expected to become a viable alternative to the Suez and Panama Canals, cutting travel time between Europe and Asia by up to 40%. Similarly, the Northwest Passage (NWP), which passes through Canadian Arctic waters, offers another potential shortcut for global trade. These routes could dramatically alter global shipping patterns, benefiting Arctic nations economically while also creating new geopolitical rivalries over their control and regulation.

In addition to trade routes, the Arctic is believed to contain vast reserves of natural resources. According to estimates by the U.S. Geological Survey, the region holds approximately 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30% of its natural gas. As ice recedes, these resources are becoming more accessible, attracting interest from major energy companies and Arctic states. Countries such as Russia, Canada, and Norway are investing heavily in Arctic oil and gas exploration, while non-Arctic powers like China are seeking partnerships to gain access to these valuable reserves. The presence of these resources further escalates competition among nations, as controlling them could provide economic and strategic advantages in the global energy market.

## **3. Key Players and Their Interests in the Arctic**

The growing economic potential and strategic importance of the Arctic have led to increased involvement from both Arctic and non-Arctic nations. The main players in this geopolitical struggle include Russia, the United States, China, and Arctic nations such as Canada and the Nordic countries.

### **3.1 Russia: Militarization and Resource Domination**

Russia is the most dominant power in the Arctic, possessing nearly 50% of the Arctic coastline and the largest Arctic population. The country has been aggressively expanding its military presence, reactivating Soviet-era bases, deploying advanced weapons systems, and constructing nuclear-powered icebreakers to

maintain control over Arctic waters.

Economically, Russia views the Arctic as a critical source of energy wealth. The Yamal LNG project and other large-scale oil and gas developments highlight Russia's commitment to exploiting Arctic resources. Russia also seeks to establish control over the Northern Sea Route (NSR) by requiring foreign vessels to obtain permission before navigating its waters. This has caused tensions with other nations, particularly the U.S., which sees the NSR as an international waterway.

### **3.2 The United States: Security and Strategic Concerns**

The U.S. has traditionally lagged behind Russia in Arctic engagement, but recent geopolitical shifts have prompted greater focus on the region. The U.S. Department of Defense has classified the Arctic as a critical area for national security, particularly in countering Russian and Chinese influence. The U.S. has also strengthened its Arctic military presence through partnerships with NATO allies, particularly Norway and Canada.

From an economic perspective, the U.S. has significant Arctic oil and gas reserves, particularly in Alaska. However, environmental concerns and regulatory challenges have slowed Arctic drilling projects. Despite this, the U.S. remains committed to ensuring freedom of navigation in Arctic waters, opposing Russian and Canadian claims that certain Arctic routes fall under national jurisdiction.

### **3.3 China: The “Near-Arctic” Power**

Although China has no direct Arctic territory, it has declared itself a “near-Arctic state” and is pursuing an ambitious strategy to expand its influence in the region. China's Polar Silk Road initiative aims to integrate the Arctic into its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), increasing economic partnerships with Arctic nations, particularly Russia and Greenland.

China has invested heavily in Arctic research, infrastructure, and energy projects. For example, Chinese companies have secured stakes in Russian LNG projects and are exploring potential mining opportunities in Greenland. However, China's growing presence has raised concerns among Western nations, particularly regarding security risks and potential military ambitions in the Arctic.

### **3.4. Canada and the Nordic Countries: Sovereignty and Environmental Concerns**

Canada and Nordic nations such as Norway, Denmark (via Greenland), and Sweden play a key role in Arctic geopolitics. Canada, which claims sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, has been increasing its military presence and investing in Arctic infrastructure to assert control over its Arctic waters.

Nordic countries, particularly Norway, have focused on balancing economic opportunities with environmental protection and indigenous rights. Norway is a leading player in Arctic energy production but also promotes sustainable development policies through the Arctic Council. Denmark, through its control over Greenland, has strategic leverage in Arctic affairs, while Sweden and Finland have taken a more neutral stance, emphasizing environmental and scientific cooperation.

## **4. Legal Frameworks and Rising Geopolitical Tensions**

Despite the growing competition, several international agreements attempt to regulate Arctic affairs. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides guidelines for territorial claims, but disputes remain unresolved. Russia, for example, has submitted claims to extend its continental shelf in the Arctic, which conflicts with claims by Canada and Denmark.

The Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum consisting of Arctic states and indigenous groups, promotes cooperation on environmental and scientific issues. However, it lacks enforcement power and does not address military concerns, limiting its ability to resolve conflicts.

As geopolitical tensions rise, there is concern that the Arctic could become a zone of conflict. Military activity in the region has increased, with Russia conducting Arctic war games, NATO expanding its Arctic defense presence, and China strengthening economic and strategic ties. The risk of accidental confrontations or disputes over resources could escalate into broader conflicts unless diplomatic efforts are strengthened.

### 5. Future Outlook: Cooperation or Conflict?

The future of the Arctic remains uncertain. On one hand, economic cooperation and diplomatic agreements could promote peaceful development and environmental sustainability. Multilateral institutions such as the Arctic Council and UNCLOS could play a key role in preventing disputes and fostering collaboration. On the other hand, if current trends continue, the Arctic could become a major flashpoint for geopolitical tensions, particularly between Russia and NATO, as well as between the U.S. and China. The militarization of the region, competition over resources, and unresolved territorial disputes could lead to further instability.

Ultimately, the Arctic's future depends on whether major powers choose cooperation over confrontation. While the region offers immense economic potential, its fragile ecosystem and geopolitical complexity require careful governance. A balanced approach—one that considers economic interests, environmental protection, indigenous rights, and security concerns—will be essential in shaping the Arctic's role in global geopolitics.

### 6. Conclusion

The Arctic has rapidly transformed from a remote and frozen frontier into a key geopolitical battleground, driven by climate change, economic opportunities, and strategic military considerations. As melting ice opens new trade routes and grants access to vast reserves of oil, gas, and minerals, global powers are racing to secure their interests in the region. Russia, with its dominant Arctic presence, continues to assert control through military expansion and economic projects, while the United States and its NATO allies seek to counterbalance Moscow's influence. Meanwhile, China, despite lacking Arctic territory, is increasingly positioning itself as a major player through economic investments and strategic partnerships. Canada and the Nordic countries, while focused on sovereignty and sustainable development, find themselves navigating a complex geopolitical landscape shaped by competing interests.

Although international agreements such as UNCLOS and the Arctic Council provide frameworks for cooperation, they lack enforcement mechanisms, leaving critical disputes unresolved. The militarization of the region, overlapping territorial claims, and growing tensions between major powers raise concerns about the Arctic's future as a zone of competition or potential conflict. However, diplomatic efforts and multilateral cooperation still offer pathways to peaceful development and resource management.

The Arctic stands at a crossroads: it can either become an arena for escalating geopolitical rivalry or a model for international collaboration in managing shared global challenges. The choices made by Arctic nations and global powers in the coming years will determine whether this rapidly changing region remains a source of stability or emerges as the next major flashpoint in international relations.

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