

Topic 2: Militarizing the Arctic: Competitions for Resources and New Frontlines for Global Security

United Nations Security Council

I. Introduction

As the Arctic transforms from a remote wilderness into a strategic geopolitical frontier, intensifying military activity and resource competition present urgent challenges to global security, the environment, and regional stability.

The melting of Arctic ice has opened new navigable sea routes and unveiled vast reserves of untapped natural resources, including an estimated 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of its natural gas. Traditionally perceived as a zone of peace, today the Arctic is rapidly becoming a high-stakes arena for military posturing, with world powers racing to secure economic and strategic interests in the region.

II. Key Terms

Militarization of the Arctic: The enhancement and expansion of military infrastructure, activities, and operations by states in the Arctic region, often to secure territorial claims or safeguard economic interests.

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ): The area extending up to 200 nautical miles from a coastal state's baseline, within which a country has rights over marine resources, as defined by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Arctic Council: An intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation among Arctic states, primarily on environmental and developmental issues, with limited authority over security matters.

Frontline States: Countries with direct access or exposure to new or potential areas of conflict—in this context, Arctic littoral states and those with direct military presence in the region.

III. Past International Actions

UNCLOS (1982): Codifies maritime rights and the legal framework for claims in the Arctic Ocean’s continental shelves, forming the basis for territorial claims by Russia, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the United States (which has not ratified UNCLOS).

Arctic Council (1996): Promotes non-military cooperation but lacks enforcement mechanisms for security or military disputes.

Recent Summits: Persistent calls for peaceful dialogue amid growing tension, but binding agreements on militarization remain elusive.

IV. Timeline of Key Events

1982	UNCLOS adopted, setting maritime law baseline
2007	Russian submarine plants flag at North Pole seabed, sparking global debate
2014	Russia expands and modernizes Arctic military bases
2014	Intensified U.S., NATO Arctic exercises, e.g., Trident Juncture
2023	NATO creates Bodø CAOC (Combined Air Operations Centre) in Norway, raising operational capacity in the High North

V. Current Situation

The Arctic today stands as a critical flashpoint where environmental transformation intertwines with geopolitical rivalry and economic opportunity. Melting ice continues to open navigable sea routes like the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Northwest Passage (NWP), attracting global interest due to reduced transit times and enhanced access to oil, gas, and rare-earth minerals. However, these developments have precipitated intensified military deployments and infrastructure build-ups, particularly by Russia, which has refurbished Soviet-era bases, constructed new military facilities, and expanded its icebreaker fleet to control maritime approaches and assert sovereignty.

The U.S. and NATO allies are responding with increased focus on Arctic defense readiness, despite infrastructural gaps such as limited icebreaker capacity and underdeveloped bases. The U.S. Department of Defense's 2024 Arctic Strategy prioritizes domain awareness, surveillance capabilities, joint training, and alliance cohesion with Arctic partners to counterbalance Russia's military advantages. NATO's integration of Finland and Sweden bolsters collective defense, while exercises such as Cold Response and Trident Juncture signal deterrence.

China's expanding presence introduces a trans-regional dimension to the Arctic security environment, seeking influence through economic investments and dual-use scientific ventures, thereby complicating traditional Arctic state dynamics.

Diplomatic cooperation mechanisms like the Arctic Council have largely stalled since 2022 due to Russia's war in Ukraine, resulting in reduced multilateral engagement. Security cooperation specifically is nearly absent, heightening risks of miscalculation and conflict escalation. Despite this, the Western Arctic states maintain coordination through forums like the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (excluding Russia) and emphasize deterrence over confrontation.

The security environment is fragile, balancing on a fine line where increased militarization and resource competition could ignite incidents. At the same time, the harsh Arctic environment and complex geopolitical context require nuanced governance that respects indigenous rights, environmental protections, and international law. The global community faces a pivotal challenge in managing these competing interests to prevent the Arctic from becoming a zone of conflict or exploitation.

VI. Major Parties Involved

Russia: Russia is the largest Arctic state by area, controlling about half of the Arctic coastline and population. The region holds tremendous economic and strategic importance for Russia, significantly contributing to its national identity and economic budget, particularly through energy exports derived from Arctic oil and gas reserves. Since the Cold War, Russia has aggressively expanded and modernized its Arctic military infrastructure, reopening Soviet-era bases, establishing new airfields, and expanding its Northern Fleet with icebreakers and submarines. Russia claims sovereignty over the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and has invested heavily in maintaining control over sea lanes and regional infrastructure. Despite framing its military presence as defensive, Russia's Arctic strategy reflects broader great-power ambitions, including rapid military escalation capacity. Russia also permits China to build commercial docks in key Arctic ports, demonstrating cooperation between the two powers in the region. The ongoing war in Ukraine has hardened Russia's confrontational stance and isolated it diplomatically from Western Arctic states, increasing rivalry and mistrust.

United States: The U.S. emerged relatively late as an Arctic power but increasingly recognizes the strategic significance of the region for national security, energy resources, and global shipping routes. U.S. Arctic policy has evolved from limited focus to comprehensive strategies that include military readiness, environmental protection, and international cooperation, particularly with NATO allies.

However, the U.S. currently faces challenges due to limited Arctic infrastructure, having only a handful of icebreakers and few bases relative to Russia's expansive presence. U.S. Arctic strategy emphasizes strengthening domain awareness, investing in icebreakers, and conducting joint military exercises with NATO and Arctic partners to deter Russian aggression. The Biden administration sought a balance between sustainable development and security, while congressional and defense officials underscore the urgency for a coherent defense posture and Arctic command structure. The U.S. views Russia as its key competitor in the short term and China in the longer term due to growing Chinese.

China: Although not an Arctic state geographically, China claims the status of a “near-Arctic state” and actively pursues strategic and economic ambitions in the region. China's interests focus on the Polar Silk Road initiative, resource mining, shipping route access, and scientific research with potential dual-use military applications. The Chinese navy increasingly operates in Arctic waters, signaling strategic growth beyond economic investments. China has cooperated with Russia on infrastructure projects and natural gas developments and seeks to influence international Arctic governance. Its engagement raises concerns among Arctic states about the implications of a non-Arctic power projecting influence in the region, fueling rivalry and complicating diplomatic frameworks.

Other Arctic States (Canada, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Iceland): These countries have traditionally focused on sovereignty, environmental protection, and Indigenous rights in the Arctic, but evolving geopolitics have pushed them to increase military readiness and alliance cooperation. Canada emphasizes maintaining sovereignty over its vast Arctic territories, particularly contentious areas like the Northwest Passage. Norway balances NATO commitments and regional diplomacy with Russia, hosting strategic U.S. assets. Denmark, through Greenland, asserts Arctic influence with a U.S. military presence and increased defense expenditure. Finland and Sweden, despite lacking direct Arctic coastline, align closely with NATO's deterrence posture post-membership. Iceland hosts NATO assets and emphasizes soft security. These states engage multilaterally to balance cooperation and deterrence amid rising tensions

VII. Key topics to Debate

- Should the Arctic be declared a demilitarized zone, or does deterrence require forward military presence?
- How can UNCLOS and other legal agreements be enforced amidst rising great-power tensions?
- What mechanisms should the Security Council establish to prevent dangerous escalation and guarantee indigenous and environmental protections in militarized zones?
- How should Arctic resource exploitation be regulated to avoid conflict and environmental catastrophe?
- What is the role of non-Arctic states (e.g., China, EU) and how can their ambitions be responsibly integrated into Arctic governance?

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