

From Climate Diplomacy to Strategic Rivalry: The Reshaping of Arctic Governance amidst Great-Power Competition (2023–2026)

Belay Sitotaw Goshu¹, Muhammad Ridwan²

¹Department of Physics, Dire Dawa University, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

²Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

Email : belaysitotaw@gmail.com, bukharyahmedal@gmail.com

Abstract:

The period 2023–2026 represents a critical juncture in Arctic governance, marking the transformation from a regime characterized by "exceptionalism", the insulation of regional cooperation from broader geopolitical tensions, to one shaped by strategic competition, yet retaining sufficient institutional resilience to address functional challenges through adaptive mechanisms. This study examines how the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO's northern expansion with the accession of Finland and Sweden, and the recalibration of great-power strategies by the United States, Russia, and China have fundamentally altered the Arctic's institutional architecture and security dynamics. Drawing on regime theory, geopolitical realism, and the concept of Arctic exceptionalism, the analysis reveals three interlocking transformations: the Arctic Council's survival in a diminished capacity, the emergence of a governance gap created by Russia's exclusion, and the fragmentation of governance through sub-regional, bilateral, and middle-power initiatives. While functional cooperation on climate change, scientific research, and Indigenous issues persists, the space for such cooperation has narrowed considerably as re-securitization reshapes the region's strategic landscape. The study advances a reconceptualization of Arctic exceptionalism, arguing that the region remains empirically distinct but no longer insulated from geopolitical volatility. Policy implications for Arctic states, non-Arctic actors, and international institutions are examined, alongside three future scenarios: continued fragmentation, institutional adaptation, or escalation and crisis. The Arctic's capacity to avoid a new Cold War depends on whether strategic rivalry can be managed without destroying the cooperative frameworks painstakingly built over three decades.

Keywords: Arctic Governance; Geopolitical Competition; NATO Expansion; Arctic Exceptionalism; Critical Juncture

I. Introduction

1.1 The Puzzle: From "High North, Low Tension" to Geopolitical Flashpoint

For nearly three decades following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Arctic region was consistently heralded as a distinct geopolitical anomaly, a domain where the logic of cooperation decisively overrode the impulses of strategic rivalry. The Norwegian-originated mantra of "High North, Low Tension" became the region's de facto normative compass, encapsulating a collective consensus among the eight Arctic states that the harsh climatic realities and shared environmental vulnerabilities of the circumpolar north necessitated joint problem-solving rather than territorial confrontation (NATO Allied Command Transformation [ACT], 2023). This exceptionalist ethos was formally codified through the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996, an intergovernmental forum uniquely mandated to prioritize sustainable development and environmental protection through consensus-based decision-making, while granting Permanent Participant status to six Indigenous organizations (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). For over two decades, this institutional architecture proved remarkably resilient, surviving even the post-2008 geopolitical frictions following the Georgia conflict and the 2014 Crimea

annexation, largely because states explicitly compartmentalized Arctic affairs from broader international disputes (Zellen, 2024).

However, the same environmental transformations that amplified the region's global relevance also planted the seeds of its geopolitical reawakening. Accelerating anthropogenic climate change has precipitated an unprecedented retreat of summer sea ice, progressively unveiling vast untapped hydrocarbon reserves, rare earth mineral deposits, and commercially viable trans-Arctic shipping corridors, such as the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage, which promise to drastically reduce transit times between Asia and Europe (Strelnikova & Agafonov, 2026). Consequently, a region once relegated to the geostrategic periphery has become a focal point for resource competition, military repositioning, and infrastructural investment, thereby exerting immense structural strain on the cooperative frameworks built to contain such zero-sum pressures.

The definitive rupture of the post-Cold War Arctic order occurred on February 24, 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine served as a critical exogenous shock that shattered the foundational premise of Arctic exceptionalism. In an unprecedented move, seven of the eight Arctic states (collectively termed the A7; Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States) immediately announced a collective halt to their participation in all Arctic Council activities, effectively paralyzing the organization's primary decision-making, scientific monitoring, and project-implementation mechanisms (RAND Corporation, 2023). This institutional paralysis was further compounded in May 2023 when Norway assumed the Council's rotating chairship from Russia, a transfer characterized not by the traditional handover of cooperative continuity, but by a profound diplomatic rupture that rendered the forum largely dysfunctional regarding substantive deliverables (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024).

The empirical puzzle that anchors this study lies precisely in the astonishing speed and depth of this transformation. Why did a governance regime that successfully insulated itself from Cold War bipolarity and even weathered the post-2014 sanctions era, collapse so rapidly under the weight of the 2022 invasion? As Staun (2023) astutely observes, the erosion of this cooperative veneer renders the conventional "low-tension" narrative increasingly obsolete, arguing that Russia's revised Foreign Policy Concept explicitly reframes the region as a militarized defensive bastion against perceived NATO encroachment. Compounding this security dilemma, Finland's formal accession to NATO in April 2023, swiftly followed by Sweden's accession in March 2024, fundamentally rewrote the regional balance of power. For the first time in history, seven of the eight Arctic coastal states are now unified within a single defensive alliance, effectively transforming the High North into a near-exclusive NATO lake, leaving Russia strategically isolated and encircled along its entire northern flank (NATO ACT, 2023).

This dramatic realignment has prompted a vigorous scholarly reassessment of Arctic exceptionalism. Zellen (2024) posits that while the structural realities of geography, shared ecosystems, and mutual climatic vulnerability continue to render the Arctic empirically distinct, the region can no longer be analytically treated as a sanitized geopolitical sanctuary insulated from great-power rivalry. Similarly, Strelnikova and Agafonov (2026) contend that the region is inexorably transitioning toward a "new normal," wherein functional cooperation is rendered increasingly conditional and highly susceptible to the volatility of external great-power dynamics. The persistence of the Arctic Council itself in this fractious environment represents a profound theoretical puzzle; Andreeva and Rottem (2024) identify the Council's residual resilience as emerging from its dual function as a scientific knowledge producer and its strategic utility as a

multilateral convening platform, yet they simultaneously acknowledge that its substantive output has been critically diminished by Russia's exclusion.

The resultant governance gap is profound. Without Russian participation, crucial cross-border initiatives related to biodiversity monitoring, maritime search-and-rescue coordination, and the socio-economic wellbeing of Indigenous populations, many of which traverse or depend upon Russian territories, face existential stagnation and operational paralysis (The Arctic Institute, 2023). This fragmentation raises a fundamental, overarching question for international relations scholarship: can functional, climate-driven cooperation survive the resurgence of structural great-power rivalry in the absence of trust? The period from 2023 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture, a bounded interval wherein the strategic choices made by regional stakeholders will decisively determine whether the Arctic descends into a new Cold War theater or evolves a novel, adaptive governance architecture capable of weathering strategic mistrust. This study contends that only by systematically integrating neoliberal institutionalism with geopolitical realism can we accurately diagnose the causal forces currently reshaping the High North and predict the trajectory of its governance.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 The Unraveling of Arctic Institutional Order: The Arctic Council in Crisis

a. The Arctic Council as the Cornerstone of Post-Cold War Arctic Governance

The Arctic Council, established through the Ottawa Declaration of 1996, represented the most ambitious institutional expression of post-Cold War Arctic cooperation. Conceived as a "high-level intergovernmental forum" rather than a formal international organization, the Council was deliberately designed to address environmental protection and sustainable development while explicitly excluding military security from its mandate (Marine Policy, 2024). This institutional design was not accidental but reflected a conscious strategy of desecuritization; the deliberate removal of the Arctic from the logic of geopolitical competition that had characterized the Cold War era.

The Council's governance architecture embodied several distinctive features that would prove both its strength and its vulnerability. First, decision-making operated on the principle of consensus among the eight Arctic states; Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States, ensuring that no member could be outvoted on matters of regional importance (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). Second, the Council pioneered an innovative model of inclusive governance by granting Permanent Participant status to six Indigenous organizations, providing Arctic peoples a direct voice in decision-shaping processes, a feature that scholars have identified as crucial to the Council's legitimacy and resilience (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). Third, the Council functioned primarily as a knowledge producer and facilitator, coordinating over eighty scientific projects ranging from biodiversity monitoring to climate impact assessment, with recommendations that were explicitly non-binding (Fridtjof Nansens Institutt, 2025).

For nearly three decades, this institutional framework delivered remarkable results. The Council facilitated the negotiation of three legally binding agreements among Arctic states, on search and rescue (2011), marine oil pollution preparedness and response (2013), and scientific cooperation (2017), while maintaining functional cooperation even during periods of broader East-West tension, including the 2008 Georgia conflict and the 2014 Crimea annexation (Marine Policy, 2024). As one analysis observed, the Council's "consensus-based structure, set apart from high politics, created the conditions for continued peaceful relations even as tensions flared far

from the Arctic Circle" (Marine Policy, 2024, p. 2). The Council's success was such that it received multiple nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize, most recently in February 2022 (Marine Policy, 2024). This record of institutional achievement established the Arctic Council as the undisputed cornerstone of Arctic governance, a position that would be fundamentally challenged by the geopolitical earthquake of 2022.

2.2 The Ukraine Shock: Suspension of Cooperation with Russia (March 2022)

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, constituted an exogenous shock of such magnitude that it shattered the foundational assumptions upon which Arctic exceptionalism rested. At the time of the invasion, Russia was in the middle of its two-year chairship of the Arctic Council (2021–2023), a period during which it had articulated a program centered on "responsible governance for a sustainable Arctic" (RAND Corporation, 2022). The irony was not lost on observers: the state chairing the premier forum for Arctic cooperation had simultaneously launched the most significant military aggression in Europe since 1945.

The response from the seven other Arctic Council members was swift and unprecedented. On March 3, 2022, just eight days after the invasion, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States issued a joint statement condemning Russia's "unprovoked invasion of Ukraine" and announcing the immediate suspension of their participation in all Arctic Council activities and subsidiary bodies (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024; RAND Corporation, 2022). This was not a formal expulsion of Russia, the Council's legal framework provided no mechanism for such action, but rather a collective pause that effectively paralyzed the institution.

The suspension carried profound implications. As Andreeva and Rottem (2024) documented in their chronological analysis, the pause "halted all official Council meetings at the diplomatic level, suspended project-level cooperation involving Russian participation, and froze the implementation of the Council's strategic plan for 2021–2030" (p. 4). The RAND Corporation (2022) characterized the rupture as "by far the most severe and consequential break in cooperation the region has ever seen," warning that "Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing breakdown of Arctic diplomacy could be the moment when the Arctic ends its existence largely shielded from broader geopolitics" (para. 6–7). The suspension removed "the safety net that has kept conflict out of the Arctic for so long," eliminating the formal and informal mechanisms that had previously enabled tactical operators to avoid surprise and prevent unintended escalation (RAND Corporation, 2022, para. 16).

Critically, the suspension was not merely symbolic. It disrupted ongoing scientific collaborations essential for monitoring climate change in the world's fastest-warming region, halted joint projects on biodiversity conservation that depended on Russian territorial access, and paralyzed humanitarian initiatives affecting Indigenous communities across Russian Arctic territories (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). The governance gap created by this rupture would prove extraordinarily difficult to bridge.

2.3 The Council's Partial Resumption and the "Arctic Seven" Dynamic

Recognizing the devastating consequences of complete institutional paralysis, the seven Western Arctic states (subsequently termed the "Arctic Seven") took a carefully calibrated step toward partial restoration on June 8, 2022. On this date, they authorized the resumption of project-level work within the Council's working groups, but strictly on projects that did not involve Russian participation or require Russian territorial access (Belfer Center, 2023). This partial resumption represented a pragmatic compromise: it acknowledged the functional

necessity of continued scientific cooperation while maintaining political solidarity with Ukraine by excluding Russia from decision-making processes.

The emergence of the "Arctic Seven" as a distinct governance configuration fundamentally altered the institutional dynamics of the region. As one analysis observed, "The Arctic Seven unanimously condemned its invasion of Ukraine and suspended cooperation with Russia, later partially resuming the Council's work on projects not involving Russia". The boycott of Russian representatives persisted even after Norway assumed the chairship in May 2023, creating a bifurcated governance structure in which Russia remained a nominal member but was effectively excluded from meaningful participation.

This configuration, however, generated significant tensions. China, an observer state with growing Arctic ambitions, "could not recognize an Arctic Council composed solely of the Arctic Seven, effectively rejecting the isolation of Russia" (The Diplomat, 2025, para. 3). The exclusion of Russia, which controls over 50% of the Arctic coastline, raised fundamental questions about the legitimacy and representativeness of any governance outcomes produced by the truncated forum. As one parliamentary inquiry noted, "The Arctic Seven have suspended virtually all high-level diplomatic contacts with Russia, with specific consequences for the Arctic Council and the future of circumpolar co-operation is uncertain" (UK Parliament, n.d., para. 264).

The partial resumption, while preventing complete institutional collapse, created what scholars have termed a "governance gap", a space between the functional requirements of Arctic cooperation and the political constraints imposed by geopolitical rupture (Marine Policy, 2024). This gap would become increasingly evident as the crisis deepened.

III. Research Methods

3.1 The New Great Game: Great-Power Strategies and Arctic Ambitions

a. The United States: The Pentagon's 2024 Arctic Strategy and the Militarization of the High North

On July 22, 2024, the United States Department of Defense released its updated Arctic Strategy, the first revision since 2019, marking a decisive shift in American posture toward the region. The 18-page document explicitly framed the Arctic as a region of "strategic importance" comprising "the northern approaches to the homeland" and "significant US defense infrastructure". This framing reflected what the Pentagon itself acknowledged as the region's transformation into a scene of "strategic power competition".

The 2024 strategy articulated three primary themes: enhancing domain awareness and Arctic capabilities; engaging with allies, partners, and key stakeholders; and exercising tailored presence. Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks emphasized that the strategy would "guide the Department's efforts to ensure that the Arctic remains a secure and stable region". However, the strategy's end state, "to preserve the Arctic as a stable region where U.S. homeland security and vital national interests are safeguarded", presented a markedly more assertive objective than its 2019 predecessor.

The strategic recalibration was driven by two interconnected concerns. First, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent military modernization in the Arctic, including the reopening of Cold War bases and development of advanced naval and missile capabilities, prompted heightened alarm. Second, China's growing Arctic presence and military collaboration with Russia, including joint naval patrols near Alaska in 2022 and 2023, elevated Beijing to "the

top of the Pentagon's new strategic map of the Arctic". As one analysis observed, these concerns reflected "China's rise as a world power more generally, more so than its Arctic policy".

The strategy emphasized alliance-centric cooperation, leveraging NATO to bolster bilateral and multilateral engagement. The United States and its Arctic allies planned to operate over 250 advanced multi-role military aircraft deployable for Arctic operations by the 2030s. The ICE Pact, an icebreaker collaboration effort with Canada and Finland launched in July 2024, exemplified this approach to pooling resources for polar capability development. The strategy also prioritized technological improvements, particularly space-based systems, to "monitor and respond" to Arctic threats (Table 1).

Critics, however, charged that the strategy represented a continuation of America's "pivot away from humanity's collective climate change challenge to containing adversaries", risking what some described as "a new and unnecessary Cold War". The confrontational tone was evident in official pronouncements; Pentagon officials openly claimed that "Russia poses a serious threat to the security and stability of the Arctic region". Russian diplomats responded by characterizing the strategy as an attempt to "decide the region's future by force".

Table 1. Key Elements of the 2024 U.S. Department of Defense Arctic Strategy

Dimension	Strategic Priority	Implementation Mechanism
Enhance	Domain awareness and Arctic capabilities	Space-based systems; ground-based sensors; long-range radar
Engage	Allies, partners, and stakeholders	NATO framework; ICE Pact; bilateral agreements
Exercise	Tailored presence	Regular training; routine operations; joint exercises
Capability	War-fighting readiness	250+ advanced aircraft by 2030s
Deterrence	Integrated deterrence	Homeland defense; risk management

3.2 Russia: From "Neutralizing Militarization" to Assertive Military Posture: The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept

On March 31, 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a new Foreign Policy Concept, replacing the previous version from 2016 (Table 2). The document represented a fundamental recalibration of Russia's Arctic posture, formally codifying the shift from cooperative engagement to strategic assertiveness. The Concept declared that Russia would devote "special attention" to "neutralizing the course of unfriendly nations toward militarizing the region and restricting Russia's abilities to exercise its sovereign rights in the Russian Arctic Zone".

This language was deliberately ambiguous, framing Russia's military buildup as a *response* to Western militarization rather than an independent driver of regional tension. Russian officials simultaneously asserted that the country "aims for a peaceful resolution of international issues in the Arctic" and would "counteract the policy of unfriendly countries of militarizing the region". The Concept articulated multiple objectives: maintaining peace and stability, increasing ecological sustainability, decreasing threats to national security, and ensuring favorable conditions for socio-economic development of Russia's Arctic zone.

The Northern Sea Route (NSR) featured prominently in the Concept as "a competitive national transport corridor with the possibility of its international use for freight traffic between Europe and Asia". This reflected Russia's long-standing ambition to transform the NSR into a

globally significant shipping artery, a goal that had been repeatedly revised downward as infrastructure challenges and geopolitical obstacles mounted.

The diplomatic context of the Concept's adoption was significant. Russian Ambassador-at-Large Nikolay Korchunov acknowledged that "Russia's neighbors [in the Arctic region] are only unfriendly Western countries, most likely all of which will become NATO member states". He warned that "NATO's 'invasion' of the Arctic will lead to escalated military and political tensions and impaired security, and will complicate the prospects for multilateral cooperation because many countries ... will have to follow directives from Brussels".

The Concept's adoption accompanied other policy shifts. Russia lowered environmental standards in the Arctic, downplaying climate change and environmental protection in favor of "national interests" and "efficient development of natural resources". This recalibration reflected a broader pattern: the prioritization of resource extraction, military presence, and strategic control over cooperative environmental stewardship.

Russia's military posture in the Arctic had been steadily expanding. The country reopened Soviet-era military bases, developed advanced missile systems, and modernized its Northern Fleet, investments that, by 2024, gave Russia the most extensive military infrastructure in the region. However, Russia's relative isolation; seven of eight Arctic coastal states now in NATO, presented a significant strategic vulnerability. As one analysis noted, engagement with allies "stands in stark contrast to Russia's relative isolation in the region".

Table 2. Evolution of Russian Arctic Policy Frameworks

Policy Document	Year	Key Emphasis
Foreign Policy Concept	2016	Cooperative engagement; multilateralism
"Basics of State Policy ... up to 2035"	2020	Sovereignty; military superiority
Foreign Policy Concept	2023	"Neutralizing militarization"; NSR development

3.3 China: The "Near-Arctic State" Discourse, the Polar Silk Road, and Strategic Expansion

China's Arctic engagement rests on a foundational document: the 2018 White Paper on Arctic Policy, in which Beijing famously defined itself as a "near-Arctic state" and articulated the ambition to launch a "Polar Silk Road", a maritime extension of the Belt and Road Initiative. This self-designation was strategically significant; it positioned China as a legitimate stakeholder in Arctic affairs despite lacking Arctic territory, while simultaneously acknowledging the region's impact on Chinese climate and economic interests.

China's Arctic interests are multifaceted. First, the Arctic is home to an estimated 13% of undiscovered oil and 30% of undiscovered natural gas globally, alongside substantial mineral resources. China's dependence on imported oil exceeds 70%, with natural gas imports accounting for over 40% of total supply. Second, melting sea ice opens Arctic shipping routes that could reduce transit times between Asia and Europe from approximately 40 days via Suez to around 20 days via the NSR. Third, climate changes in the Arctic have significant domestic impacts on China, including extreme weather events.

The White Paper laid out principles centered on "respect, cooperation, win-win result, and sustainability," but implementation has revealed more strategic ambitions. China's Arctic

engagement has been described as adopting a "developmental stance to expand its influence". This approach has manifested through multiple channels: scientific research (including the Yellow River Research Station established in Svalbard in 2004), economic investment (Chinese companies among the most frequent users of the NSR), and diplomatic positioning (observer status at the Arctic Council since 2013).

China-Russia Arctic cooperation has deepened significantly. In June 2024, Russia's state atomic energy corporation Rosatom signed an agreement with Chinese shipping giant COSCO to jointly develop and utilize the NSR. Chinese companies have signed 20-year contracts with Russian energy firms. More significantly, China and Russia have expanded security cooperation: they signed a coast guard cooperation agreement in Murmansk in April 2023, conducted joint naval patrols near Alaska in 2022 and 2023, and Chinese and Russian bombers flew together within the Alaskan Air Defense Identification Zone in July 2024. In October 2024, the U.S. Coast Guard spotted Chinese maritime enforcement vessels operating alongside Russian border patrol boats in the Bering Sea.

However, China's Arctic scorecard remains mixed. The Polar Silk Road concept has gained "both form and limited practical use". Even COSCO, China's state shipping giant, has not sailed the NSR since 2022. As a RAND analysis concluded, "China's scorecard in the Arctic is mixed, suggesting that while U.S. policymakers must continue to recognize the importance of China's actions and interests ... they should do so with the right priority and focus".

3.4 Comparative Analysis: Overlapping Claims, Divergent Visions

The Arctic strategies of the United States, Russia, and China reflect fundamentally different visions of regional order, each shaped by distinctive geopolitical circumstances and strategic cultures shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Great-Power Arctic Strategies

Dimension	United States	Russia	China
Strategic Framing	Security; deterrence	Sovereignty; "neutralizing militarization"	Development; "near-Arctic state"
Primary Objective	Preserve stability; counter rivals	Secure sovereign rights; develop NSR	Economic access; global power projection
Military Posture	Enhanced capabilities; alliances	Assertive; modernization	Limited; growing cooperation with Russia
Institutional Approach	Alliance-centric (NATO)	Bilateral; conditional multilateral	Observer status; bilateral deals
Key Vulnerability	Icebreaker gap; domain awareness	Diplomatic isolation	Non-Arctic state status

The United States approaches the Arctic primarily through a security lens, framing the region as a domain of strategic competition requiring enhanced military capabilities and alliance coordination. The 2024 DoD strategy explicitly references "preserving" the existing order, a defensive posture aimed at maintaining the status quo against perceived Russian and Chinese encroachment.

Russia adopts a sovereignty lens, emphasizing its Arctic territory, sovereign rights, and the development of the NSR as a national transport corridor. Moscow's rhetoric of "neutralizing"

Western militarization serves to justify its own military buildup while positioning Russia as a defender of regional stability.

China employs a developmental lens, emphasizing economic opportunity, scientific research, and infrastructure investment. Beijing's self-designation as a "near-Arctic state" legitimizes its engagement while downplaying military dimensions. This framing enables China to pursue strategic objectives while maintaining plausible deniability about its geopolitical ambitions.

Despite these differences, overlapping claims and divergent visions create significant friction. Climate-induced melting has encouraged all three powers to "view for influence". Competition is "not the inevitable outgrowth of 'great power competition,' but an extension of ongoing conflicts rooted in Europe's security architecture and China's ambitions to fashion itself as a global power".

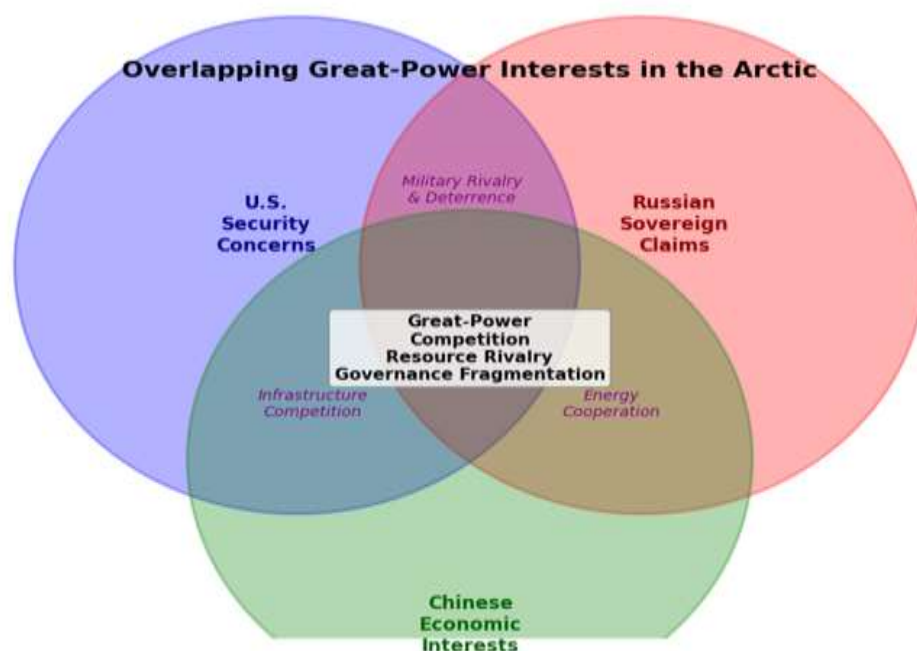


Figure 1. Conceptual Venn diagram of overlapping U.S. security, Russian sovereign, and Chinese economic interests in the Arctic.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual Venn diagram illustrating the overlapping and competing interests of the three principal great powers in the Arctic; the United States, Russia, and China. The visual representation captures the central insight of this study: Arctic governance has become a theater of strategic competition where security, sovereignty, and economic ambitions converge and collide.

The U.S.-Russia overlap (military rivalry and deterrence) reflects the security dilemma exacerbated by NATO's northern expansion and Russia's military modernization on the Kola Peninsula (Åtland et al., 2024). The U.S.-China intersection (infrastructure competition) highlights the strategic implications of Beijing's Polar Silk Road initiative and the ICE Pact response (RAND Corporation, 2025). The Russia-China overlap (energy cooperation) underscores deepening bilateral collaboration, including joint NSR development and naval patrols (The Diplomat, 2025). At the center, the triple intersection—great-power competition, resource rivalry, and governance fragmentation, represents the erosion of Arctic exceptionalism

and the emergence of a contested, multi-actor governance space (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2025; Hansen-Magnusson & Gehrke, 2025).

This figure demonstrates that Arctic governance can no longer be understood through the lens of cooperative exceptionalism alone; strategic competition now permeates every dimension of regional engagement.

3.5 The Role of Non-Arctic Actors: India, South Korea, and the EU's Growing Footprint

The Arctic's transformation has attracted growing interest from non-Arctic states, each pursuing distinctive engagement strategies.

India published its Arctic Policy on March 17, 2022, articulating a comprehensive approach to scientific research, environmental protection, and economic engagement. As a permanent observer at the Arctic Council since 2013, India has sought to translate "scientific engagement into geopolitical influence, while maintaining strategic autonomy". India's engagement has been facilitated by its historical links to the Arctic and its position as an emerging global power. However, analysts have noted that India's policy "missed the opportunity to elucidate India's geo-economic, geostrategic" position more clearly (Table 4).

South Korea has emerged as one of the most active Asian Arctic states. Korea obtained permanent observer status at the Arctic Council in 2013 alongside China, Japan, India, Italy, and Singapore. Seoul has committed over \$400 million to Arctic maritime infrastructure and plans to send a trial container vessel from Busan to Rotterdam via the NSR, aiming to cut journey time from approximately 40 days via Suez to around 20 days. South Korea has pursued a strategy combining scientific research, economic engagement, and naval preparation; the Republic of Korea Navy is "preparing to advance into the Arctic Ocean".

The European Union has underscored its will to heighten engagement in the Arctic region, focusing on sustainable development, security concerns, and climate change. Since 2014, the EU has provided over €370 million for Arctic research and innovation under the Horizon programme. The EU is currently updating its Arctic policy for the 2024-2029 periods, with a declared aim "to help preserve the Arctic as a region of peaceful cooperation". However, the EU faces significant challenges: it lacks Arctic territory, its observer status at the Arctic Council has been delayed, and its capacity to influence regional governance remains constrained.

Table 4. Non-Arctic State Engagement in the Arctic

Actor	Arctic Council Status	Key Initiatives	Strategic Focus
India	Permanent Observer (2013)	Arctic Policy (2022)	Science; strategic autonomy
South Korea	Permanent Observer (2013)	\$400M maritime infrastructure	Shipping; naval presence
EU	Observer (pending)	€370M research funding	Sustainability; peaceful cooperation

These non-Arctic actors contribute to what scholars have termed the "globalization" of Arctic governance, the expansion of stakeholder interests beyond the eight Arctic states (Table 4). However, their influence remains constrained by their observer status, limited military capabilities, and the geopolitical dynamics that increasingly dominate regional affairs.

3.6 Conclusion: The Triad of Rivalry and the Erosion of Arctic Exceptionalism

The period 2023–2026 has witnessed the consolidation of a triad of rivalry in the Arctic, fundamentally challenging the long-held notion of "Arctic exceptionalism"—the idea that the region could be insulated from broader geopolitical tensions. The United States, Russia, and China have each recalibrated their Arctic strategies in response to changing environmental conditions, shifting power dynamics, and the rupture of Russia's relations with the West.

The United States has embraced a more assertive posture, emphasizing military capabilities, alliance coordination, and strategic competition. Russia has formalized its shift from cooperative engagement to strategic assertiveness, framing its military buildup as a necessary response to Western militarization while prioritizing the development of the NSR. China has deepened its engagement through economic investment, scientific research, and growing security cooperation with Russia, all while maintaining its "near-Arctic state" discourse.

The erosion of Arctic exceptionalism has profound implications. As the Belfer Center's analysis concluded, "the long-held notion of 'Arctic exceptionalism' ... has come under increasing strain". Competition within the Arctic is "not the inevitable outgrowth of 'great power competition,' but an extension of ongoing conflicts rooted in Europe's security architecture and China's ambitions to fashion itself as a global power". The region has become "a mirror of global security developments: great power rivalry, the erosion of multilateral norms, and the shifting balance between security, economy, and climate imperatives".

Yet the Arctic remains empirically distinct. The functional logic of Arctic exceptionalism—the recognition that shared environmental challenges and geographic realities necessitate cooperation—persists even as geopolitical tensions mount. Whether this residual functional logic can sustain governance in an era of strategic rivalry remains the central question for the period ahead. What is clear is that the Arctic has irrevocably entered a new phase—one in which great-power competition, rather than cooperative exceptionalism, defines the region's strategic landscape.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Reconfiguration of Arctic Security Architecture – NATO's Northern Expansion

a. Finland's Accession to NATO (2023) and Sweden's Accession (2024): A Strategic Earthquake

The accession of Finland to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on April 4, 2023, followed by Sweden's accession on March 7, 2024, constituted what scholars have characterized as a "strategic earthquake" in Northern European security architecture. These accessions marked the most dramatic Arctic security realignment since the inception of NATO nearly 75 years earlier, fundamentally altering the geostrategic landscape of Europe's North. At the political-strategic level, the duo's admission into the transatlantic alliance brought unprecedented clarity to the Northern European security environment: Helsinki's and Stockholm's close alignment with NATO formally shifted to unambiguous alliance membership.

The speed of this transformation was remarkable. Sweden had maintained official neutrality or military non-alignment since the early nineteenth century, while Finland had adopted a posture of neutrality since the late 1940s under the constraints of the Paris Peace Treaties and its subsequent policy of "Finlandization". Both countries had become active NATO partners, but Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 crystalized the perceived benefit of full collective defense. Public opinion in both nations swung dramatically, from as

little as one-quarter to as much as four-fifths in favor of accession, and the two governments' submitted formal applications in May 2022 (Table 5). Finland completed its accession process within fourteen months, though reservations from Turkey and Hungary delayed Sweden's finalization until March 2024.

The strategic implications were immediate and profound. Finland's accession extended NATO's border with Russia by approximately 1,340 kilometers, effectively doubling the Alliance's direct frontier with the Russian Federation. Sweden's accession consolidated NATO presence across the Baltic and High North, bringing advanced military capabilities, including sophisticated fighter jets, submarines, and substantial numbers of cold-weather-trained troops under the Alliance's collective defense umbrella. As one analysis observed, "the security environment of the High North and Northern Europe more broadly is today marked by a clear dichotomy between NATO and Russia," a situation historically absent given the fluctuating non-alignment policies that had given Northern Europe its distinctive security character.

The Nordic states subsequently intensified defense integration, discussing the formation of a joint Nordic air force with the signing of a joint declaration of intent in March 2023, alongside increased information sharing and synchronized defense planning. This momentum toward deeper Nordic integration in security domains exemplified the broader realignment of regional security dynamics.

Table 5. NATO Accession Timeline and Strategic Implications

Country	Accession Date	Key Strategic Implication
Finland	April 4, 2023	Extended NATO-Russia border by 1,340 km; secured Baltic Sea flank
Sweden	March 7, 2024	Consolidated High North presence; brought advanced naval/air capabilities
Combined Effect	2023–2024	Seven of eight Arctic states now in NATO; fundamental security realignment

4.2 Seven of Eight Arctic Coastal States Now in NATO: Russia as the Isolated Outsider

With the accession of Finland and Sweden, the Arctic is once again effectively bifurcated into two camps, echoing a bipolar balance of power reminiscent of the Cold War. As of March 2024, seven out of eight Arctic states are now NATO members, indicating a marked shift in regional politics. Russia stands as the only non-aligned Arctic coastal state, a position of strategic isolation unprecedented in the post-Cold War era.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized the strategic significance of this transformation, noting that "the high north is strategically important for Euro-Atlantic security" and that with Finland and Sweden joining, "seven of eight Arctic states will be NATO members". The full accession of both countries "brings all Arctic states minus Russia into the Alliance and boost deterrence and defense across NATO's Northern Flank". All seven Arctic NATO members now fall under Article 5's collective security guarantee, creating an integrated defense perimeter that effectively encircles Russia's northern approaches.

The geopolitical consequences of this isolation are profound. Russia's relative isolation stands in stark contrast to the alliance cohesion among NATO's Arctic members. As one analysis observed, "the Arctic is once again effectively bifurcated into two camps". This bifurcation has exacerbated tensions within existing governance forums; the Arctic Council now comprises

seven NATO member states and Russia, fundamentally altering the diplomatic dynamics of the region.

Russian officials have responded with a combination of dismissive rhetoric and explicit threats. President Vladimir Putin dismissed the accessions as "meaningless" in the days following Sweden's entry, yet elsewhere he and other Russian officials have threatened "military-technical" counter-measures. As part of failed efforts to dissuade accession, in spring 2023 Russia's ambassador in Stockholm warned that NATO membership would make Sweden a "legitimate target". Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov subsequently articulated that Moscow would take "adequate countermeasures, including military-technical measures" if NATO expanded its military infrastructure in Arctic territories. These threats have been accompanied by hybrid actions, including Finland's attribution to Russia of damage to the undersea Balticconnector gas pipeline in October 2023 and orchestrated waves of would-be migrants across the Russian-Finnish border.

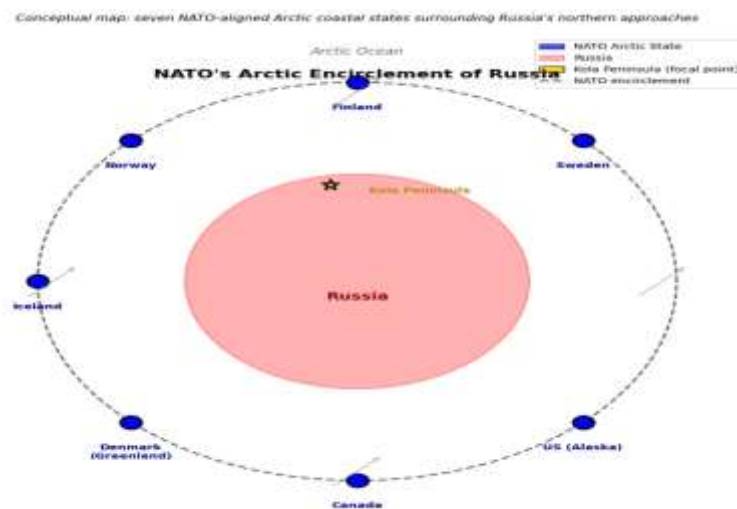


Figure 2. Conceptual map of seven NATO Arctic states encircling Russia, with Kola Peninsula as the focal strategic concern.

Figure 2 presents a conceptual map illustrating NATO's strategic encirclement of Russia in the High North following Finland's accession in April 2023 and Sweden's accession in March 2024. The figure depicts seven NATO-aligned Arctic coastal states—the United States (Alaska), Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Sweden—positioned around Russia's northern maritime approaches, connected by a dashed encirclement ring.

The Kola Peninsula, highlighted as the focal point, represents Russia's most concentrated military infrastructure, housing the Northern Fleet's main base at Severomorsk, the bulk of Russia's sea-based strategic nuclear forces, and critical air defense systems (Åtland et al., 2024). This encirclement has fundamentally altered the regional security architecture, with Russia now facing strategic isolation unprecedented in the post-Cold War era. As one analysis observed, the Arctic is "once again effectively bifurcated into two camps," creating new dynamics of deterrence and containment (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2025).

The figure underscores the central argument of this chapter: the Arctic's security environment has shifted from cooperation-based stability to deterrence-based competition, with the Kola Peninsula emerging as the epicenter of Russian strategic vulnerability and NATO's northern defense calculations.

4.3 The United States–Canada–Finland ICE Pact: Icebreaker Collaboration as Strategic Infrastructure

On the margins of the July 2024 NATO Summit in Washington, D.C., the leaders of the United States, Canada, and Finland announced the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort (ICE) Pact, a trilateral initiative framed as a transformative partnership to strengthen allied capabilities in the Arctic and Antarctic regions. The pact was formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding signed on November 13, 2024, establishing cooperation to "develop world-class Arctic and polar icebreakers through the exchange of knowledge, information, and resources in each of our countries".

The strategic significance of the ICE Pact extends far beyond shipbuilding. As the Joint Statement of Intent articulated, the pact aims to "advance long-term industrial cooperation on building icebreakers, developing workforce skills and utilizing production chains that are sustainable, efficient, secure and reduce critical dependencies". The initiative includes four components: enhanced information exchange between the three countries; workforce development collaboration; engagement with allies and partners; and research and development. By jointly developing and producing icebreakers, the partners are "laying the foundation for a resilient and competitive shipbuilding industry, capable of meeting both national and global demand for these critical assets".

The ICE Pact addresses a critical capability gap. As analysts have noted, "no NATO member state has ice-strengthened ships for Arctic" operations at sufficient scale, leaving "big gaps in NATO's defense posture". The United States currently possesses only two operational polar icebreakers, far less than Russia's fleet of over forty icebreakers, including nuclear-powered vessels (Table 6). The ICE Pact seeks to address this disparity by pooling resources, expertise, and production capacity among three allied nations with complementary capabilities: Finland's world-leading icebreaker design and construction expertise, Canada's extensive Arctic operational experience, and the United States' defense industrial base and strategic requirements.

The pact's framing as a response to "growing cooperation between the People's Republic of China and Russia" underscores its geopolitical dimensions. As the Joint Statement emphasized, "the ICE Pact partner countries are also preparing common research and development projects to strengthen their technological expertise and security of supply". Building projects "form the basis for practical cooperation and demonstrate the shared intent of the countries to strengthen their Arctic expertise". Finnish Minister of Economic Affairs Sakari Puisto explicitly linked the initiative to Arctic security, stating that "Icebreaker cooperation will drive economic growth for all three countries and improve Arctic security".

Table 6. ICE Pact Components and Strategic Objectives

Component	Description	Strategic Purpose
Information Exchange	Enhanced sharing of knowledge and resources	Accelerate development timelines
Workforce Development	Collaborative skills training	Build resilient maritime workforce
Allied Engagement	Involvement of additional partners	Expand coalition capabilities
Research & Development	Joint technology projects	Strengthen security of supply

4.4 NATO's Arctic Collective Defense: New Operational Realities and Force Posture

The expansion of NATO's Arctic membership has necessitated a fundamental recalibration of the Alliance's collective defense posture in the High North. As one strategic analysis observed, "the historic accession of Sweden and Finland makes NATO stronger, also in the High North ... and ensures that NATO's force posture supports Arctic operations". This recalibration has manifested through enhanced defense planning, major exercises, and institutional adaptation.

Nordic Response 2024 exemplified NATO's renewed commitment to Arctic collective defense. The exercise, conducted March 3-14, 2024, gathered 20,000 troops from 13 NATO Allies in northern Norway to train together in the harsh Arctic environment. Formerly known as Cold Response, Nordic Response is a biennial training event designed to "enhance military capabilities and allied cooperation in a high-intensity, arctic environment". The exercise was part of Steadfast Defender 2024, NATO's largest military drills in decades, and featured Finnish and Swedish marines launching amphibious operations from U.S. Navy warships in the Norwegian Arctic. NATO AWACS aircraft participated, operating out of Rygge, Norway, from February 26 to March 15.

The exercise demonstrated several key operational realities. First, it showcased the integration of Finland and Sweden into NATO's operational framework, with their forces exercising alongside long-standing Allies. Second, it signaled NATO's capacity to project power and conduct sustained operations in extreme Arctic conditions. Third, it served as a deterrent signal to Russia, demonstrating Allied cohesion and readiness in the High North.

NATO's institutional adaptation has included the strengthening of Joint Force Command Norfolk, established to ensure "NATO's deterrence and defence for the whole of the North Atlantic" (Table 7). The Alliance's "Regional Plan North" reportedly focuses on "cohesive transatlantic defense, strategic deterrence, and conserving freedom of navigation". However, analysts have cautioned that "NATO should not let Arctic deterrence fall by the wayside by concentrating its force posture along its eastern flank".

Despite these efforts, significant capability gaps persist. As the Hudson Institute observed, "it is clear that the alliance remains ill-prepared against Russia's military capabilities in the Arctic". The concentration of Russian military infrastructure on the Kola Peninsula, including nuclear submarines, strategic bombers, and advanced missile systems, presents a formidable challenge that NATO's current Arctic posture may be insufficient to address. The coming years will reveal whether the United States and its Arctic allies "manage to close the gaps in NATO defenses and establish credible deterrence of Russia and China".

Table 7. NATO Arctic Force Posture Indicators (2024)

Dimension	Current Status	Capability Gap
Exercise Participation	20,000 troops, 13 nations (Nordic Response 2024)	Limited high-intensity Arctic warfare experience
Command Structure	Joint Force Command Norfolk strengthened	Incomplete integration of new members
Icebreaker Capacity	ICE Pact initiated	Significant shortfall vs. Russia
Air Power	250+ advanced aircraft planned by 2030s	Current deployment limited
Domain Awareness	Enhanced space-based monitoring	Arctic surveillance gaps persist

4.5 Russia's Military Modernization in the Arctic: The Kola Peninsula, Icebreakers, and Northern Fleet

Russia's military posture in the Arctic has undergone sustained modernization for more than a decade, with the Northern Fleet emerging as the most powerful component of Russia's Navy. The Kola Peninsula serves as the epicenter of Russian Arctic military power, hosting the Northern Fleet's main base at Severomorsk, the bulk of Russia's sea-based strategic nuclear forces, and critical air defense and early-warning infrastructure.

The Northern Fleet's Strategic Role

The Northern Fleet constitutes a distinct and powerful force, equipped with Borey-class ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) gradually replacing older Delta-class vessels, and Yasen-M class multi-purpose submarines designed to be difficult to detect once submerged. These submarines "not only protect the bastion; they represent a potential threat to both NATO maritime operations in the North Atlantic and, given they are equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles, which can carry nuclear warheads, European and North American countries". The Northern Fleet has "gradually tak[en] receipt of new vessels," with several submarines, frigates, and corvettes under construction or planned. Although Western sanctions may have slowed some production lines, "they have yet to significantly hamper Russia's overall naval modernization".

The Kola Peninsula also hosts strategic bombers "potentially capable of reaching targets in America and Europe," ground-launched cruise missile systems, and serves as a testing ground for new weapons systems, "including various hypersonic missiles, such as the Sarmat and Kinzhal missiles, and the autonomous underwater torpedo Poseidon". Russia's military activity in the Arctic "is much greater compared to the other Arctic countries," and "for almost two decades this has been reflected in the steady upgrading of Russia's military infrastructure".

Third, NATO's expansion has been interpreted by Russian officials as an encircling threat. Russian officials have warned that "NATO's 'invasion' of the Arctic will lead to escalated military and political tensions and impaired security". The perception of encirclement, seven of eight Arctic states now in NATO; reinforces Russia's commitment to maintaining and modernizing its Arctic military capabilities. Fourth, hybrid threats have emerged as a new dimension of competition, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and orchestrated migration pressures.

The risks of miscalculation are significant. The Arctic's unique operational environment; extreme cold, limited infrastructure, communication challenges, and the presence of nuclear assets, creates conditions where incidents could escalate rapidly. As one Russian official noted, the Arctic is "where the confrontation of the world's leading states is unfolding". Russian officials have explicitly linked increased tensions to Moscow's suspension from the Arctic Council, suggesting that the breakdown of diplomatic channels compounds military risks.

Table 8. Indicators of Arctic Militarization and Security Dilemma

Indicator	NATO Perspective	Russian Perspective
Military Exercises	Defensive; alliance cohesion	Encircling; provocative
Infrastructure Development	Closing capability gaps	Protecting sovereign territory
Nuclear Posture	Deterrence	Essential for strategic parity
Alliance Expansion	Sovereign choice of members	Threat to national security
Hybrid Activities	Russian aggression	Response to NATO encroachment

4.6 Conclusion: From Cooperative Security to Deterrence and Containment

The period 2023–2024 witnessed a fundamental transformation of Arctic security architecture, a shift from cooperation-based to deterrence-based stability. As scholars have conceptualized, "the nature of the regional security milieu has shifted from cooperation-based to deterrence-based stability," in which "the principal aim of regional actors is no longer the pursuit of common security but, rather, war avoidance through deterrence measures".

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has been the primary driver of this transformation. With seven of eight Arctic states now within the Alliance, Russia faces strategic isolation along its northern flank—a situation that has prompted military modernization, rhetorical escalation, and hybrid countermeasures. The ICE Pact represents an allied response to capability gaps, while NATO exercises signal collective resolve. Russia's bastion defense strategy reflects a defensive posture that nevertheless generates offensive capabilities capable of threatening NATO operations.

The erosion of Arctic exceptionalism is now complete. As one analysis concluded, "the era of Arctic exceptionalism has ended, bringing uncertainty to a region with tremendous strategic and economic potential". The Arctic faces "an unprecedented division: around half of the Arctic aligns under the NATO flag, while the other half remains Russian". This division—and the security dilemma it generates—constitutes the central challenge for Arctic stability in the period ahead.

Yet the situation is not without nuance. Despite the military buildup, "none of the participants described a desire to be at conflict in the Arctic," and countries with more experience engaging with Russia viewed NATO expansion as potentially attenuating rather than exacerbating the security dilemma. The challenge for policymakers is to manage deterrence without triggering escalation, to maintain credible defense capabilities while preserving channels for communication and, eventually, cooperation. As one analysis concluded, "NATO should highlight the defensive nature of this expansion by avoiding deployments within Swedish and Finnish territories to assuage Russian concerns over threats to its nuclear second-strike capabilities located in the Kola Peninsula".

The Arctic has entered a new strategic era; one defined not by the cooperative exceptionalism of the post-Cold War decades but by the competitive dynamics of great-power rivalry. Whether this era proves stable or volatile will depend on the wisdom with which both NATO and Russia manage the militarization trap they have jointly constructed.

4.7 Alternative Pathways – Adaptive Governance Amidst Fragmentation

a. The Search for "Stability through a New Governance Model"

As the Arctic Council's paralysis extends into its fourth year, scholars and policymakers have increasingly turned their attention to alternative governance models capable of restoring stability in a fractured geopolitical landscape. The fundamental challenge confronting Arctic governance is that the Council's institutional design, deliberately constructed to exclude defense and security matters has become a critical vulnerability in an era defined by precisely such concerns. The Council operates by consensus, lacks a permanent budget, possesses no international legal status, and produces only non-binding recommendations (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2025). These features, once assets in a cooperative environment, now represent liabilities in a context of strategic rivalry.

The search for a new governance model has generated several innovative proposals. As the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (2025) observed, "a viable option would be to form a new organization or reform the Arctic Council based on a multi-veto structure similar, yet by no means identical, to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)". Such a structure would balance great-power influence with regional inclusivity while addressing the growing role of non-Arctic actors. Proponents argue that a multi-veto model could provide "credible, functional alternatives to fragmented Arctic governance" by ensuring that no single power can dominate decision-making while preventing the paralysis that currently afflicts the Council.

However, the viability of institutional reform depends fundamentally on the trajectory of US-Russia relations. As the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (2025) concluded, "regardless of whether US-Russia relations stabilize, improve, or deteriorate, the Arctic Council risks being sidelined". If Washington and Moscow pursue greater cooperation, "bilateral arrangements could eclipse multilateral mechanisms, marginalizing other Arctic actors and diminishing the Council's authority". Conversely, if relations remain adversarial or worsen, "neither power will likely see the Council as a meaningful platform". In either scenario, "multilateralism risks being displaced by transactional undertakings formulated bilaterally, thereby accelerating the Council's marginalization".

b. Maintaining Multilateralism: Preventing Great-Power Politics from Dominating Regional Deliberations

Despite the profound challenges facing the Arctic Council, maintaining multilateralism remains a strategic imperative. The Arctic Council, despite its limitations, remains the most important institutional platform for peaceful and knowledge-based governance in the region. The Council's unique architecture, particularly its inclusion of Indigenous Peoples as Permanent Participants, provides a governance model that cannot be easily replicated through alternative arrangements.

The case for "inclusive regionalism" has gained traction among scholars. Carol Dyck (2024) argued that the Arctic Council must rethink how it engages with observers and the wider global community to ensure that pressing ecological, economic, and social issues are addressed judiciously. A shift to "inclusive regionalism" could secure the Arctic Council's position "as the pre-eminent forum to address Arctic issues and to re-establish the spirit of collaboration that reigned for a quarter century". This approach recognizes that climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable development transcend the geopolitical divisions that currently paralyze the Council.

The Belfer Center's October 2025 workshop on Arctic security reinforced the importance of multilateral frameworks. Participants noted that "efforts to sustain cooperation on discrete policy issues, such as science, fisheries, and maritime management, have continued in some cases". However, they also observed that "U.S.-Russian maritime and scientific collaboration is struggling, while Russo-Norwegian fisheries cooperation is also at risk". The erosion of these functional collaborations underscores the fragility of multilateralism in the current geopolitical environment.

The challenge for Arctic states is to prevent great-power politics from dominating regional deliberations entirely. As Liu and Zhang (2025) concluded, "all Arctic stakeholders should actively fulfill their responsibilities, enhance dialogue and consultation, and fully respect the legitimate interests of all parties, and work collectively toward a more stable and cooperative Arctic governance framework". This requires a deliberate effort to compartmentalize functional cooperation from strategic competition, a task that has become increasingly difficult as geopolitical tensions have intensified.

V. Conclusion

The period 2023–2026 has fundamentally transformed Arctic governance from a regime of "exceptionalism", insulated from broader geopolitical tensions, to one shaped by strategic competition, yet retaining sufficient institutional resilience to address functional challenges through adaptive mechanisms. Three interlocking transformations define this critical juncture. First, the Arctic Council has survived Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but its effectiveness is severely diminished; Russia's exclusion has created a governance gap that alternative mechanisms cannot fully fill (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). Second, the security realignment of the region, with seven of eight Arctic states now in NATO has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape, creating new dynamics of deterrence and containment that echo Cold War patterns (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2025). Third, the United States, Russia, and China have each recalibrated their Arctic strategies in response to changing environmental conditions and shifting power dynamics (Belfer Center, 2026).

The study advances three theoretical contributions. Neoliberal institutionalism's emphasis on resilience must be balanced with geopolitical realism's attention to power dynamics; the Council's survival reflects both institutional factors and strategic calculations (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024; Liu & Zhang, 2025). Arctic exceptionalism requires reconceptualization: while the region's empirical distinctiveness persists, its insulation from geopolitics has ended, transitioning toward a "new normal" of conditional cooperation (Strelnikova & Agafonov, 2026). Finally, governance fragmentation, through sub-regional, bilateral, and middle-power initiatives, creates coordination problems that may prove as challenging as the original institutional crisis (Hansen-Magnusson & Gehrke, 2025).

Policy implications are significant. NATO should highlight the defensive nature of northern expansion by avoiding provocative deployments threatening Russia's nuclear second-strike capabilities (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2025). Middle powers such as India, South Korea, and Singapore can bridge governance gaps through science and functional cooperation (ORF Online, 2026). The Arctic Council should reform observer guidelines and strengthen Indigenous engagement (Dyck, 2024).

The future presents three scenarios: continued fragmentation, institutional adaptation, or escalation and crisis. The most likely trajectory combines fragmentation with adaptive

governance. Limitations include the temporal scope (2023–2026), state-centric focus, and reliance on secondary sources. Future research should examine non-state actors, emerging technologies, and comparative regional governance.

References

- Abdin, Z. U. (2024). Power competition in the Arctic region: A comparative analysis. *The Beacon Journal*, 4(1). <https://beacon.mcepk.org/index.php/ojs/article/view/17>
- Andreeva, S., & Rottem, S. V. (2024). How and why the Arctic Council survived until now – An analysis of the transition in chairship between Russia and Norway. *Polar Geography*, 47(4), 229–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2024.2342111>
- Arctic Council. (2025, May 2). A defining moment for Arctic cooperation. <https://arctic-council.org>
- Åtland, K., Nilsen, T., & Pedersen, T. (2024). Bolstering the bastion: The changing pattern of Russia's military exercises in the High North. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 7(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.375>
- Belfer Center. (2025). Nordic perspectives on Arctic security. Harvard Kennedy School. <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/nordic-perspectives-arctic-security>
- Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. (2026, January 27). Arctic security: Power shifts and transformational change. Harvard Kennedy School. <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/arctic-security-power-shifts-and-transformational-change>
- Biagioni, M. (2023). China's push-in strategy in the Arctic and its impact on regional governance. *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. <https://www.iai.it/en/publications/c05/chinas-push-strategy-arctic-and-its-impact-regional-governance>
- Dumatv. (2024, February 6). В МИД России допустили выход России из Арктического совета [Russian Foreign Ministry acknowledged possibility of Russia's withdrawal from the Arctic Council]. <https://dumatv.ru>
- Dyck, C. (2024). Arctic governance in the face of climate change: A case for "inclusive regionalism." *Canadian Yearbook of International Law/Annuaire canadien de droit international*, 61, 141–166. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cyl.2024.6>
- East-West Center. (2024, August 26). Indo-Pacific lens on the Arctic: How US partners in Asia view Arctic security and governance. <https://www.eastwestcenter.org>
- European Economic and Social Committee. (2024, July 16). Developing Europe's strategy for the Arctic, 2024-29, in dialogue with civil society. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu>
- European Parliament. (2024, January 11). Russia's war on Ukraine: Implications for the Arctic (EP Briefing). <https://www.europarl.europa.eu>
- Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. (2024, November 13). United States, Canada, and Finland sign MOU to build Arctic and polar icebreakers. <https://tem.fi>
- Foreign Policy. (2024, April 1). NATO is unprepared for Russia's Arctic threats. <https://foreignpolicy.com>
- Fridtjof Nansens Institutt. (2025, August 28). Calls for more high-profile Arctic Council. <https://www.fni.no>
- Georgetown Journal of International Affairs. (2025, October 14). The future of Arctic governance in a fractured geopolitical landscape. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. <https://gia.georgetown.edu/conflict-security/the-future-of-arctic-governance-in-a-fractured-geopolitical-landscape/>
- GlobalSecurity.org. (2024, November 13). United States, Canada, and Finland sign MOU to build Arctic and polar icebreakers. <https://www.globalsecurity.org>

- Hansen-Magnusson, H., & Gehrke, C. (2025). The Arctic as a boundary object: Who negotiates Arctic governance? *International Affairs*, 101(3), 925–945. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaf018>
- Hudson Institute. (2024, April 1). NATO is unprepared for Russia's Arctic threats. <https://www.hudson.org>
- IISS. (2024). Washington's push to increase military capabilities in the Arctic. *International Institute for Strategic Studies*. <https://www.iiss.org>
- Kurka, A. (2024, March 11). NATO's welcome enlargement in the North. *Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies*. <https://www.dvidshub.net>
- Liu, Y., & Zhang, X. (2025). Unique risks and evolving trends in Arctic governance: A forward-looking analysis based on policies and practices. *European Journal of Futures Research*, 13, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40309-025-00250-y>
- Marine Policy. (2024). On thin ice: The Arctic Council's uncertain future. *Marine Policy*, 163, 106060. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106060>
- NATO. (2024, March 13). NATO's marines brave the Norwegian Arctic for exercise Nordic Response 2024. <https://www.nato.int>
- NATO Allied Command Transformation. (2023, May 12). The future of the High North. <https://www.act.nato.int/article/the-future-of-the-high-north/>
- Norwegian Arctic Council Chairship. (2024, May 29). Strategic planning with Indigenous Permanent Participant Organizations during Norwegian Chairship meeting. *Arctic Council*. <https://arctic-council.org/ru/news/strategic-planning-with-indigenous-permanent-participant-organizations-during-norwegian-chairship-meeting/>
- ORF Online. (2026, June 24). Eroding exceptionalism and the making of Arctic middle powers. *ORF Online*. <https://www.orfonline.org>
- Owen, R. (2023). The end of Arctic exceptionalism: Swedish-Finnish NATO accession and its impacts on the emerging Arctic security dilemma [Senior thesis, Princeton University]. *Princeton DataSpace*. <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp0102871016t>
- RAND Corporation. (2023, May 15). What is next for the Arctic Council in the wake of Russian rule? <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/05/what-is-next-for-the-arctic-council-in-the-wake-of.html>
- RAND Corporation. (2025, February 6). Is the Polar Silk Road a highway or is it at an impasse? China's Arctic policy seven years on. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/02/is-the-polar-silk-road-a-highway-or-is-it-at-an-impasse.html>
- Responsible Statecraft. (2024, April 18). What will NATO do with its giant Arctic footprint? <https://responsiblestatecraft.org>
- Rhodes, M. (2024). NATO's welcome enlargement in the North. *Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies*. <https://www.dvidshub.net>
- Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies. (2024). Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO in 2023 and 2024. *SJMS*, 7(1). <https://account.sjms.nu>
- Staun, J. (2023). Russia's Arctic policy: Upcoming change? *Polar Record*, 59, e28. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000277>
- Strelnikova, I. A., & Agafonov, D. I. (2026). Arctic exceptionalism and the "new normal": Trends in the development of international relations in the Arctic after 2022. *Analysis and Forecasting. IMEMO Journal*, (1), 97–110. <https://doi.org/10.20542/afj-2026-1-97-110>
- TASS. (2023, March 31). Russia sets sights on peaceful resolution of Arctic issues — Foreign Policy Concept. <https://tass.com/politics/1597761>
- TASS. (2024, February 14). Russia to resume contributions to Arctic Council when it restarts its full-fledged work. <https://tass.com>

- The Arctic Council. (2025, May 12). Arctic Council Ministerial Declaration 2025. Arctic Portal. <https://arcticportal.is>
- The Arctic Institute. (2023, June 13). The Arctic Council in transition: Challenges and perspectives for the new Norwegian chairship. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org>
- The Arctic Institute. (2024, December 5). The Pentagon's new (upside down) Arctic map. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org>
- The Diplomat. (2025, May 24). From rhetoric to reality: China-Russia cooperation in the Arctic accelerates. <https://thediplomat.com>
- The Diplomat. (2026, July 3). Asia is racing to the Arctic, but it's not easy. <https://thediplomat.com>
- The Watch. (2024, September 4). 2024 DOD Arctic strategy: Secure U.S. Arctic interests through enhancing, engaging and exercising. <https://thewatch-journal.com>
- The Watch. (2024, October 9). ICE Pact has potential to reshape Arctic defense. <https://thewatch-journal.com>
- Xinhua. (2024, February 14). Russia suspends annual payment to Arctic Council. <http://english.news.cn>
- Yang, Z., & Li, L. (2024, August 13). New US Arctic strategy reveals its hegemonic ambitions. China Military Online. <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn>
- Zellen, B. S. (2024). Arctic exceptionalism: Cooperation in a contested world. Lynne Rienner Publishers.