

Arctic Geopolitics Reconsidered: Pathways to Conflict and Cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

The Arctic region is widely considered to be one of the planet's last frontiers.¹ As the world's countries competed for Earth's resources, few areas of the world were left unscathed; the Arctic was one of those regions. However, as climate change accelerates the melting of sea ice in the Arctic, previously inaccessible areas, believed to contain an abundance of natural resources such as minerals, natural gas, and oil, will soon become available for extraction. These resources are expected to provide many economic benefits to the countries in the region and potentially provide a shift in power that could alter geopolitics.² As a result, the Arctic is sparking interest around the globe for its newfound geopolitical and economic potential.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Arctic has mostly been a region of cooperation comprised of eight states: Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, and the United States.³ However, the potential for an economic boom from a trove of newly accessible Arctic resources could result in a battle for Arctic hegemony and threaten peace.⁴ Russia's actions in the Arctic have caused the most concern.

Russia is the world's largest Arctic country.⁵ Historically, it has been one of the few countries dedicated to developing this area. Recently, the United States and the European Union (EU) have made concerted efforts to ramp up their presence in the Arctic. As the Arctic has transformed, Russia has increased their activity in the region, seeking to take an early

¹ National Strategy for the Arctic Region, President of the United States, White House Archives, May 2013

² Matthew Bryza, Oliver Moru, Kalev Stoicescu, and Natalia Jegorova, "Cooperation and Conflict in the Arctic: A Road Map for Estonia," *International Centre for Defence Studies*, November 2014

³ "Arctic States," *The Arctic Council* <https://arctic-council.org/en/about/>

⁴ *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 2018

⁵ Nicholas Breyfogle and Jeffrey Dunifon, "Russia and the Race for the Arctic," *Origins*, vol. 5, Issue 11, August 2012

competitive advantage over possible rivals.⁶ As such, Russia's actions have raised suspicions of the other Arctic nations, fueling concerns of a new Cold War in the Arctic.

Much of the existing scholarship on Arctic geopolitics in the 21st century portrays the Arctic region as a *terra nullius*, surrounded by ambitious countries, looking to fiercely compete with each other and reap the economic rewards from resource extraction.⁷ Moreover, this scholarship frequently distinguishes Russia as an aggressor that manipulates conditions to give themselves an advantage over the other Arctic nations.

Additional scholarship on contemporary Arctic geopolitics features alarmist rhetoric, raising concerns over potential conflict and alleged positioning for future Arctic hegemony. These concerns encourage the key actors to proceed down a path that is more susceptible to conflict, rather than cooperation, as it echoes the tenets of the "security dilemma." Mutual distrust fosters an environment to rationalize the motivations of each actor's geopolitical actions as bellicose or hostile. Intrinsicly, this creates obstacles in establishing pragmatic compromises that could provide some positive solutions for all countries involved. As such, this paper asks: what conditions would be necessary for the current tense relations between the key actors - United States, Russia and the European Union (EU) - to result in cooperation that could render the Arctic a region of *détente* in the twenty-first century?

First, the paper provides an overview of the geography of the Arctic, with a focus on its natural resources, the environmental impact of extracting those resources, and the potential impact of melting sea ice due to climate change among the various nations that have borders within the Arctic Circle. Next, it will examine the Arctic interests of the United States, Russia, and the EU, while evaluating the pursuits of each of their main priorities and core interests. The

⁶ Maria Lagutina, *Russia's Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*

⁷ Juha Kapyla and Harri Mikkola, "Arctic Conflict Potential," *FIIA Briefing Paper*, September 2013

following two sections will elaborate on the main conditions that could, respectively, lead to geopolitical tensions in the region and prolonged conflict, or, ensure mutually beneficial, institutionalized cooperation based on rules and norms that all key actors follow. Last, this paper will conclude with analysis of the previous three sections to suggest some tentative recommendations that could bring about sustainable cooperation in the Arctic.

GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE ARCTIC

Climate change has made the Arctic region a focus of the world. This section will provide an overview of the Arctic and climate change, as well as a summary of the literature that analyzes possible geopolitical scenarios stemming from these changes. As such, it establishes the dichotomy between the potential for conflict or cooperation in the Arctic and the differences of the priorities and core interests of the United States, EU, and Russia. The different perspectives analyzed will lead to a broader comprehension of the dynamics between these actors in the Arctic.

At 5.5 million square miles, the Arctic comprises roughly six percent of the Earth's surface.⁸ This vast area is undergoing some of the planet's most significant environmental transformations due to climate change; it experiences warming at a rate almost twice the global average – faster than any other region.⁹ According to NASA, between 1979 to 2018, Arctic sea ice is “declining at a rate of 12.85 percent per decade” as a result of this warming.¹⁰

Meanwhile, studies show that the Arctic contains an estimated 22 percent of the world's undiscovered fossil fuel resources.^{11 12} Some estimates reveal that up to “90 billion barrels of oil and 1,670 trillion cubic feet of natural gas is located under the region's disputed international waters.”¹³ These are “some of the world's largest remaining untapped oil and gas reserves.”¹⁴ As the melting sea ice exposes these vast resources, competition between actors such as the United States, Russia, and the EU has intensified. As such, a lot of the scholarship on Arctic geopolitics

⁸ Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, “The Arctic: Location and Geography,” <https://divediscover.whoi.edu/archives/arctic/location.html>

⁹ “Arctic Climate Change.” *Arctic World Wildlife Fund*.

¹⁰ “Arctic Sea Ice Minimum.” *NASA: Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet*.

¹¹ Christopher Tremoglie, “Is A Truly Cold War Emerging in the Arctic?”

¹² Elina Brutschin and Samuel R. Schubert, “Icy Waters, Hot Tempers, and High Stakes: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics of the Arctic.”

¹³ Christopher Tremoglie, “Is A Truly Cold War Emerging in the Arctic?”

¹⁴ *Ibid*

focuses on the likelihood of a future conflict. Frequently, this scholarship infers this competition will ultimately lead to an outbreak of a Cold War in the Arctic.

In evaluating the existing scholarship, it is essential to acknowledge that the catalyst for predicting future conflict occurred in 2007. During that year, a Russian submarine planted a Russian flag on the ocean floor during a scientific exploration mission.¹⁵ This was widely viewed as an act of aggression, with many thinking that Russia was “planning to seize territory the old-fashioned way.”¹⁶ It launched fears that geopolitical conflict was looming in the Arctic.¹⁷ Many scholars, policy advisors, academicians, and think tanks used it to advance such a narrative.

For example, in “Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming,” Scott G. Borgerson promoted a realist argument that geopolitical anarchy in the region would ultimately result in conflict.¹⁸ In his research, Borgerson stated that a combination of countries looking to cash in on resource availability, because of melting sea ice and a lack of rules governing the region, would result in armed conflict in the Arctic.¹⁹

Borgerson emphasized two things in his prediction of future conflict. First, the lack of governing authority in the Arctic without “any comprehensive multilateral norms and regulations” would result in an eruption of an “armed mad dash for its resources.”²⁰ Borgerson added that the “Arctic powers are fast approaching diplomatic gridlock” that would eventually lead to “armed brinkmanship that plagues other territories.”²¹

¹⁵ Nele Matz-Luck, “Planting the Flag in Arctic Waters: Russia’s Claim to the North Pole,” *Göttingen Journal of International Law* 1 (2009) 2, 235-255

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Alun Anderson, “Can We Keep Up with Arctic Change?” *The Fast-Changing Arctic: Rethinking Arctic Security for a Warmer World*

¹⁸ Borgerson, Scott G. “Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming.” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 2, 2008, pp. 63–77. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20032581. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

¹⁹ Borgerson, Scott G. “Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming.” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 2, 2008, pp. 63–77. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20032581. Accessed 23 Apr. 2020.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

Additionally, melting sea ice will impact maritime travel as previously inaccessible passages will now be open. This will create new and more efficient trade routes that are considerably shorter than those currently being used.²² Quicker transport time means “huge potential savings in time and costs.”²³ As “90% of goods are transported by ship,” this has a ripple effect on the rest of the world. Perhaps the main sea route this will benefit is the Northern Sea Route - which Russia controls. As a result, Russia has proactively regulated these routes for their economic benefit – further incentivizing competition in the area. This has angered the United States and EU, who accused Russia as not being cooperative but instead exploiting this newly accessible trade route for their own interests and economic gain. Subsequently, this has led to an increase in activity in the region and caused tension with Russia.

The narrative of Arctic conflict as a result of an aggressive Russia has become the dominant voice (at least in the West) when discussing Arctic politics. As such, it could be legitimately argued that the real threat for conflict in the Arctic is not hedged on the actions of countries, but the writings of scholars.

For example, in “Russian Strategies in the Arctic: Avoiding a New Cold War,” this literature warns of future conflict resulting from Russian aggression. It details some geopolitical experts who classify Russian Arctic policies as aggressive and “an example of gunboat diplomacy.”²⁴ Furthermore, this aggression is explained by the aforementioned competition for resources and trade routes.

Another example would be “Russia’s Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a ‘Low Tension’ Environment.” Here, Mathieu Boulege asserted that “Russia sees the

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Lassi Heininen, Alexander Sergunin, Gleb Yarovoy, “Russian Strategies in the Arctic: Avoiding A New Cold War,” *Valdai*. September 2014

Arctic as a military continuum between theaters of operation in the Baltic Sea, the North Atlantic, and ultimately as far away as the North Pacific.”²⁵ Additionally, Boulege stated that “Russia’s primary threat perception concerning the Russian Arctic concerns NATO’s military capabilities and projected intentions.”²⁶ Moreover, the idea of conflict in the Arctic is reinforced by highlighting Russia’s intention to “intimidate Arctic neighbors and NATO during peacetime – and to disrupt operations in wartime,” Boulege wrote.²⁷

Yet the race for these resources could also have dire consequences for the global community. For example, while resource extraction comes with considerable economic benefit to Arctic nations, doing so can permanently damage the ecological system in the region.²⁸ Lingering effects from this will impact the world. Legitimate concerns predicated on “the weak resilience of ecosystems to withstand risk events and the potentially severe environmental consequences of disasters in the fragile Arctic ecosystem” plague any competitive extraction efforts.²⁹ The more countries that are competing, the more likely a disaster will happen.

Competition can bring out the worst in the Arctic. A swift escalation of Arctic activity that includes an increased presence of ships, greater pollution, rising tensions from competing for resources without any “political or legal structures that can provide for the orderly development of the region” will be a noxious amalgamation.³⁰ As these resources will bring substantial economic benefits to the Arctic actors, an unmitigated competition among self-interested actors will impact the global environment. While the events that transpire in the Arctic are a regional

²⁵ Boulègue, Mathieu. *Russia’s Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a “Low Tension” Environment*. Report. NATO Defense College, 2019. 25-30. Accessed April 23, 2020. doi:10.2307/resrep19965.11.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Heather Conley, “Arctic Economics in the 21st Century,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 2013

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Scott G. Borgerson, “Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming,” *Foreign Affairs*

phenomenon, the potential negative ramifications of these are worldwide. As such, Arctic geopolitics should be an integral concern of the global community.

ARCTIC ACTORS: EUROPEAN UNION, UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA

The European Union

Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, and Denmark are five of the Arctic Eight countries that have ties to the European Union (EU). Denmark, Finland, and Sweden are members of the EU. At the same time, while Norway and Iceland are part of the European Economic Area (EEA), which allows them to be included in the EU's single market. All of them – whether through the EU or EEA - have geopolitical and economic interests in the Arctic.

As a result of the Arctic's significant importance in the development of the world – present and future – the EU “declared a clear intention to be more engaged in Arctic affairs and to develop its own Arctic policy.”³¹ And, as “a necessity to protect and promote its own interests and values,” this represents a sound policy decision for the EU.³²

Consider the significant ties between the EU and the Arctic. Approximately 25 percent of all the “oil and gas extracted from the Arctic flows to the EU and contributes to its energy security.”³³ Next, half of the “fish caught in polar waters are consumed in the European Union.”³⁴ Given the magnitude of the EU's shipping industry (40 percent of world commercial shipping), while also being the world's largest trading block, it is of utmost importance for the EU to facilitate foreign policy predicated on securing access to Arctic trade routes.³⁵ For example, consider Italy. Even though Italy is not located in the Arctic region, the global affairs that occur there most certainly have ramifications for the Italian government and people through energy resources and food exports.³⁶

³¹ Steffen Weber and Iulian Romanyshyn, “Breaking the Ice: The European Union and the Arctic.”

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

More recently, the EU has taken steps to be a cooperative partner in the Arctic. In October, the 2019 EU Arctic Forum took place in Sweden.³⁷ Federica Mogherini, the EU's foreign policy chief, was among the leaders who committed to developing the Arctic in the wake of the recent developments resulting from climate change.³⁸ Looking towards the future, the EU declared its "strategic role and interest in the Arctic" as well as keeping the region a 'low-tension-high cooperation area.'³⁹ If this promise is kept, it will go a long way to promoting "sustainable growth" in the area as well as keeping peace in the Arctic.⁴⁰

A significant EU presence in the Arctic would transform geopolitics. Currently, the three Arctic EU nations provide a forum to advance EU interests in the region while also promoting coherent strategy in multilateral decision making. It also allows the EU to expand its influence by advancing policy in the region with a concentrated effort to focus on sustainable development, resource extraction, and interaction with the Arctic Council. A strong EU presence provides geopolitical diversity that affects policy and strengthens cooperation in the region.

Between 2008 and 2018, the EU's expanding presence in the Arctic did much to "construct legitimacy" in this region.⁴¹ During this time, the EU has sought to demonstrate "geopolitical ambitions alongside its own conceptualization of world order, rule of law, and good governance."⁴² Yet this attempt at legitimacy has come quickly and, rather aggressively compared to many EU initiatives.⁴³ This geopolitical swiftness can cause anxiety to non-EU Arctic states while also potentially souring relations and increasing animosity in the region.

³⁷ "EU Enhances International Cooperation in the Arctic." *University of the Arctic*

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Andreas Raspotnik, "What About the Arctic? The European Union's Geopolitical Quest for Northern Space."

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

The United States

The United States has its own Arctic territory providing resources as well, Alaska. While the area is vastly smaller than Russia, the effects of climate change around the Alaskan peninsula have also resulted in the emergence of otherwise inaccessible resources. On November 27, 2019, Congressional Research Service released a report that detailed the changing Alaskan Arctic landscape and what that could mean for the United States.⁴⁴ As with Russia and the EU, the potential for new accessibility to resources and maritime shipping routes received significant attention in the report.⁴⁵

The outer continental shelf of the United States is located offshore of Alaska, and it “covers more than one billion acres, including some areas with high oil and gas potential.”⁴⁶ Moreover, in 2017, the DOI’s Bureau of Ocean Energy Management estimated that Alaska has “undiscovered, technically recoverable resources of approximately 27 billion barrels of oil and 132 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.”⁴⁷ If discovered, suffice to say, these resources can considerably impact the world’s geopolitical resource distribution and fossil fuel industry. Additionally, it is believed to contain vast mineral deposits that were previously not accessible.⁴⁸ Large deposits of “gold, iron ore, precious metals, and other minerals previously covered by ice could be accessible in the Arctic region.”⁴⁹

Other benefits of Alaska include some of the world’s largest oil and gas fields located in Alaska’s North Slope.⁵⁰ Additionally, the United States’ Arctic presence has a significant economic impact on the mineral and fishing industry. Studies showed that in 2016, the Alaskan

⁴⁴ “Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*.

⁴⁵ “Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

⁴⁹ *Ibid*

⁵⁰ Heather A. Conley and Matthew Melino, “The Implications of U.S. Policy Stagnation toward the Arctic Region.”

mineral industry was worth \$2.83 billion, while “fisherman landed \$5.4 billion of fish and shellfish in 2017.”⁵¹

Furthermore, maritime travel around Alaska will also be impacted and provide several new routes that will expedite shipping. According to the from the Congressional Research Service report, the Northwest Passage (NWP) can “run through the Canadian Arctic Islands.”⁵² There is a southern NWP that includes travel “through Peel Sound in Nunavut.”⁵³ The northern NWP involves traveling “through McClure Strait from Baffin Bay to the Beaufort Sea north of Alaska.”⁵⁴ The Northwest Passage has more limitations than Russia’s Northern Sea Route due to ice blockage and concern for unsafe passage in the waters.⁵⁵ Currently, the NWP is “potentially applicable for trade between northeast Asia (north of Shanghai) and the northeast of North America, but it is less commercially viable than the NSR.”⁵⁶ However, if the Arctic sea ice continues to melt at its current rate, over time, this will change.⁵⁷ In turn, this, can also lower sea travel time and costs while simultaneously financially rewarding the U.S. and Canada with an economic boom.⁵⁸

In June 2019, the Department of Defense released its Arctic Strategy report to Congress. The strategy is an update of the 2016 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy.⁵⁹ Given Alaska’s proximity to Russia, separated from Russian territory only by the Bering Strait, the area represents a significant part of national security and foreign policy. The 2019 report “outlines

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ “Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy.”

DoD’s strategic approach for protecting U.S. national security interests in the Arctic in an era of strategic competition.”⁶⁰

This particular report reinforces the desire of the United States to establish a strong Arctic presence. As the report states, the Department of Defense’s “desired end-state for the Arctic is a secure and stable region in which U.S. national security interests are safeguarded, the U.S. homeland is defended, and nations work cooperatively to address shared challenges.”⁶¹ The report also specifies the importance to “quickly identify threats” and prompt and effective response to those threats.⁶² Most importantly, the United States Arctic Policy is predicated on three main, yet vague, strategies to achieve the country’s Arctic objectives: “the building of Arctic awareness, enhancing Arctic operations, and strengthening rules-based order in the Arctic.”

Russia

Russia is the world’s largest Arctic country with territory that covers approximately 15,000 miles.⁶³ Additionally, of the four million people that live in the Arctic region, slightly more than half live in Russia.⁶⁴ Russia’s Arctic territorial claims supersede the rest of the world. Given this advantage in landmass and population, Russia views itself as the preeminent Arctic power.^{65 66}

Studies show that the Arctic is critical to the energy policy of the Russian Federation; it is responsible for approximately 30 percent of Russia’s GDP.^{67 68} In 2008, President Medvedev

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ “Russia,” *The Arctic Institute*.

⁶⁴ “Socio-demographic situation in the Arctic,” *Russian Geographical Society*

⁶⁵ Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy.

⁶⁶ Christopher Tremoglie, “Is A Truly Cold War Emerging in the Arctic?”

⁶⁷ Christopher Tremoglie, “Is A Truly Cold War Emerging in the Arctic?”

⁶⁸ “Russia Imposes Foreign Sailing Restriction on Northern Sea Route,” *The Warsaw Institute*

established the “Russian Federation Policy for the Arctic to 2020.”⁶⁹ The objective of this strategy was to establish Russia as the Arctic hegemon through transforming the “region into Russia’s future resource base by providing greater investments, protecting Russian borders and safeguarding territory, ensuring environmental safety, promoting science and research, and contributing to international stability” while establishing Russia as the Arctic hegemon and furthering the country’s interests.⁷⁰

The “Russian Federation Policy for the Arctic to 2020” was divided into three different periods.⁷¹ The first stage was designated between 2008-2010. During this timeframe, the objective was to “substantiate Russia’s Arctic claim and put it on a sound footing by providing extensive scientific evidence, in addition to expanding the possibilities for international cooperation and establishing a framework for the development of port infrastructure, high-tech industrial clusters and special economic zones in Russia’s northern regions.”⁷²

Next, the second stage occurred from 2011-2015. This period was expected to result in “international legal recognition of Russia’s external borders in the Arctic.” Additionally, another objective during this time was to focus on the region’s resources. Specifically, the government was to expand its “competitive advantages in the extraction and transportation of resources.”⁷³

Lastly, the third stage was to occur between 2016-2020. The focus during this time was to develop and transform the Arctic region into a significant resource base for the country.⁷⁴ At this critical juncture, the overall goal was to reinforce hegemony in the Arctic region while utilizing it as the main area for strategic resources in the country.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Russian Federation Policy for the Arctic to 2020

⁷⁰ Roderick Kefferputz, “On Thin Ice? (Mis)interpreting Russian Policy in the High North

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Ibid

Also, the Arctic is vital to Russia's future economic growth; it is designated as its "strategic resource base."⁷⁶ The Russian Arctic contains "extensive hydrocarbon deposits already discovered, as well as the vast expanses yet to be explored."⁷⁷ Currently, Russia dominates the Arctic when it comes to oil and natural gas fields.⁷⁸ Recent data has shown that there have been approximately sixty oil and natural gas fields discovered in the Arctic; forty-three of those fields are in Russia.⁷⁹ One of those fields is located on Russia's Yamal Peninsula. Previously, sea ice obstructed access, and the areas were considered too costly to attempt to extract and develop.⁸⁰ However, melting sea ice changed that.⁸¹ Additionally, there could be an abundance of precious metals such as nickel, copper, gold, and platinum, along with diamonds that will be newly accessible as a result of melting sea ice.⁸²

Another significant factor in Russian Arctic policy is control over the Northern Sea Route (NSR); it is the most trafficked shipping route, and it is located in Russian territory.⁸³ It runs from the Bering Strait between Alaska and Siberia to Russia's border with Norway in the Barents Sea.⁸⁴ This passage could be vital to the future of the shipping industry; it considerably reduces travel time.⁸⁵ New accessibility allows a sea route that "will become an essential corridor to extract and transport resources to Asia and Europe."⁸⁶

⁷⁶ Matthew Bryza, Oliver Moru, Kalev Stoicescu, and Natalia Jegorova, "Cooperation and Conflict in the Arctic: A Road Map for Estonia," *International Centre for Defence Studies*, November 2014

⁷⁷ Council on Foreign Relations, "The Emerging Arctic"

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Dan Lamothe, "The New Arctic Frontier," *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2018

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ "What is the Northern Sea Route?" *The Economist*

For example, consider a “ship traveling from Germany to South Korea.”⁸⁷ This voyage would “require passage through the Suez Canal and would take nearly 34 days.”⁸⁸ Conversely, traveling to those same locations through the Northern Sea Route would reduce time by nearly a third – to 23 days.⁸⁹ Realizing this massive benefit, Russia uses the Northern Sea Route (NSR) for its benefit by regulating travel and charging transit fees to foreign nations who use this passage.⁹⁰

In 2008, President Medvedev realized the significance of the pivotal role the Arctic region is slated to play in foreign affairs.⁹¹ An abundance of resources is going to bring, at best, suitors looking to cooperate, or, at worst, challengers by foreign nations.⁹² This vital maneuver by Medvedev allowed Russia to establish a plan and prepare for a future of conflict or cooperation. When re-elected as president, Vladimir Putin continued this policy.

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Ibid

GEOPOLITICAL ASSESSMENT OF ARCTIC ACTORS' INTERESTS

Given the analysis of the Arctic interests of the United States, EU, and Russia, this section will discuss the similarities and differences among each actors' perspective.

From a Russian perspective, being the largest Arctic country, Russia has moved to establish itself as the Arctic hegemon. This has resulted in the country increasing its military, economic and political presence in the region. They see the Arctic as a region with limitless opportunities in maritime travel, trade, energy, and security. Their economic future depends on maximizing the Arctic opportunity.

From the perspective of the European Union, their objective is to position themselves to continue to benefit from the resources and goods of the Arctic. It is represented in the Arctic by Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. Individually, the EU is an extremely powerful political and economic union. It is not a country which puts it at a disadvantage compared to the other Arctic actors. While they indeed have representation, the interests of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark supersede those of the EU.

The United States also has a vested interest in the economic return of the resources melting sea ice will expose in the Arctic. Gas and oil resources, mineral deposits, fisheries, shipping, trade routes, and even tourism shape the policy – and future policy – of the United States in the Arctic. Additionally, given the reputation as the preeminent world power, the United States would not want to look inferior in this region, especially Russia.

Russia, the EU, and the United States all seek to benefit from Arctic resources. However, the actions of the United States and the EU to pursue and protect their Arctic resources has made Russia uncomfortable. Concurrently, protective measures taken by Russia have made the EU and

the United States uneasy as well. This toxic combination of mutual ambition and distrust has led to an Arctic Security Dilemma.

Objectively observing the situation, the EU is probably in the weakest position of the Arctic actors discussed in this paper. When adding the rest of the Arctic nations into the conversation, the EU's position falls even more. The economic partnership between some Arctic nations and EU countries is an integral part of why the EU has any prominence in the Arctic. The geopolitical role in the world – especially considering their relationships with Russia and the United States – is another reason. Yet, what the EU possesses in economic power, it lacks in an official territory in the Arctic. As a result, while the notion of conflict involving the EU should not be eliminated entirely, it should be considered mostly as an actor of cooperation.

Russia presents the most formidable challenge. They have had some history of tense moments with Finland but also Norway - a country not directly tied to the EU. However, pertaining to the scope of this paper, Russia and the United States, are the actors that present the most likely combination that could turn into conflict and the components of the Arctic Security Dilemma. Sergey Sukhanin advanced this notion in “Russia’s Two-Pronged Approach to Militarizing the Arctic.”⁹³ Sukhanin cited the increasing presence of the United States and NATO in the Arctic as “an acute competition” ushering in an “era of *realpolitik*” that will eventually become “an area where geopolitical interests of major global players will clash.”⁹⁴

Additionally, other scholars advocated a necessity for an assertive Russian Arctic policy “to resist the Western ‘encroachment’ in the Arctic.”⁹⁵ This literature also proposes a “realist

⁹³ Sergey Sukhanin, “Russia’s Two-Pronged Approach to Militarizing the Arctic,” *Jamestown Foundation*, May 2019

⁹⁴ *Ibid*

⁹⁵ *Ibid*

discourse” that forecasts conflict in the Arctic as Russia tries to assert its hegemony over the region and protect its national interests.⁹⁶

Moreover, in July 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly raised concerns about potential Arctic conflict.⁹⁷ Pompeo expressed concern about an increase of Russian military forces in the Arctic as well as “a pattern of aggressive behavior in the Arctic.”⁹⁸ This aligns with much of the scholarly literature and ideas of think tanks and policymakers.

This potential for conflict runs parallel to the shared Arctic interests of Russia and the United States. Yet, with these similarities, comes stark differences over infrastructure and authority in the region. Also, environmental concerns should be noted as another difference. Despite their stated goals, the Russians do not appear to be as committed to environmental safety in the Arctic, as the United States does. These differences, under the appropriate geopolitical circumstances, could pave the way for conflict.

As previously discussed, the EU, Russia, and the United States all have Arctic interests contributing to the rising tension in the area. The crux of these issues is based on economic pursuits as a result of the effects of climate change. Yet, options exist that could and should lead to cooperation. In the next sections, this paper will discuss the potential for conflict and the potential for cooperation between the Arctic actors discussed.

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Chris Tremoglie, “Is a Truly Cold War Emerging in the Arctic,” *National Review*

⁹⁸ Ibid

POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT

Renowned International Relations theorist Kenneth Waltz, theorized, “With many sovereign states, with no system of law enforceable among them, with each state judging its grievances and ambitions according to the dictates of its own reason or desire – conflict, sometimes leading to war, is bound to occur.”⁹⁹ There are institutions, such as the Arctic Council, that try to remedy any conflicts. However, with a lack of a legitimate governing authority, the countries are in direct competition with each other for Arctic hegemony and its subsequent economic benefits. As the stakes are raised in this region, conflicting interests supersede common ones.¹⁰⁰ In this section, this paper will show how geopolitical interaction between Russia, the European Union (EU) and the United States presents several factors that could escalate to a level of conflict.

Maritime Trade Routes

One of the more likely sources for potential conflict between Russia, the EU, and the US is the Northern Sea Route. The Northern Sea Route (NSR) runs from the Kara Gate to the Bering Strait.¹⁰¹ It is projected to develop into a major maritime transport route in the future as more sea ice melts.¹⁰² Use of the NSR will significantly reduce travel time on trade routes compared to existing routes.

⁹⁹ Kenneth Waltz, *N. Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. Accessed April 25, 2020. doi:10.7312/walt12537.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Bryza, Oliver Moru, Kalev Stoicescu, and Natalia Jegorova, “Cooperation and Conflict in the Arctic: A Road Map for Estonia,” *International Centre for Defence Studies*, November 2014

¹⁰¹ “The Emerging Arctic,” *Council on Foreign Relations*,

¹⁰² Matthew Bryza, Oliver Moru, Kalev Stoicescu, and Natalia Jegorova, “Cooperation and Conflict in the Arctic: A Road Map for Estonia,” *International Centre for Defence Studies*, November 2014

A lot of the tension originates from Russian authority over the NSR.¹⁰³ Typically maritime issues are usually resolved through application of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This splits the world's body of waters "into different zones, including internal waters, territorial seas and the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), all with different levels of sovereignty and navigation rights."¹⁰⁴ At the crux of the matter is the validity of Russia's regulation of the NSR.¹⁰⁵

Under international law, the NSR falls under Russian jurisdiction.¹⁰⁶ Yet other countries, such as the US and those from the EU, want to utilize the NSR. However, they are wary of any potential Russian regulations of the NSR because they feel Russia will extort others for own benefit. As such, the tension is a result of the unknown extent to which Russia will regulate maritime travel through the NSR. The dispute stems from interpreting and determining the legality of specific parts of UNCLOS.¹⁰⁷ The Arctic Council can provide suggestions or insight but does not have any governing mandate. A lack of governance, in this instance, is facilitating instability and creating controversy.

Article 234 of the UNCLOS refers to the legality of international waters and a nation's control over it.¹⁰⁸ As the NSR is located in a Russian EEZ but only passes "at certain points through Russian internal waters," Russia moved to claim jurisdiction on this area by enacting Article 234.¹⁰⁹ It gave Russia de facto control of the NSR by allowing them to claim environmental protection requirements for all maritime travel through this area; this requires

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Maria Lugatina, *Russia's Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*

¹⁰⁷ Kriz, Zdenek, and Filip Chrastansky, "Existing Conflicts in the Arctic and the Risk of Escalation: Rhetoric and Reality." *Perspectives* 20, no. 1 (2012): 111-39. Accessed March 23, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23616259.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

mandatory “ice-breaker escort from the Russian breaker fleet for any ship” traveling on the NSR.¹¹⁰ This has increased concerns not just among the United States and the EU but all over the world.¹¹¹

Territorial Disputes

Another potential source of conflict is existing border disputes. Historically, border disputes and territorial expansion are closely related. In terms of prestige and power in geopolitics, one way a state has sought to increase their power and influence is through territorial expansion. Such a maneuver comes into play when disputes arise over borders and control over land and seas. In this case, two such examples are the Lomonosov Ridge and the Svalbard Treaty.

The Lomonosov Ridge is a continental shelf in the Arctic. It extends from “the North Pole from the New Siberian Islands in Russia over the Arctic Ocean to the Ellesmere Islands of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago.”¹¹² While it is technically a border dispute, it can also be characterized as an economic dispute given what the vast resources the ridge is believed to contain and the economic benefits from their extraction.

This dispute involves the separation of the continental shelves under the Arctic Ocean. UNCLOS specifies that “coastal countries are entitled to economic control over waters that stretch as far as 200 nautical miles from their shores.”¹¹³ This effectively determines what country controls what areas of the seas in the Arctic. Challenges could be placed in an attempt to

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Matthew Bryza, Oliver Moru, Kalev Stoicescu, and Natalia Jegorova, “Cooperation and Conflict in the Arctic: A Road Map for Estonia,” *International Centre for Defence Studies*, November 2014

expand jurisdiction; however, this is predicated on a nation proving its continental shelf extends past current borders to claim that territory as part of their country and their EEZ.¹¹⁴ The aforementioned Russian flag planted on the ocean floor is an example of this type of conflict. Currently, the dispute involves Russia, Canada, and Denmark who all claim the Lomonosov Ridge is a natural extension of their respective continental shelves.¹¹⁵ While territorial disputes like these are relatively few, given the vast resources involved, lingering disagreements can evolve into potential conflict.

If a country wishes to pursue an expansion of their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), the UNCLOS necessitates a “formal submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf CLCS.”¹¹⁶ Such claims are vetted through scientific data to “justify that the extended EEZ correlates with the ‘natural’ extension of the coastal state’s continental shelf.”¹¹⁷ In such instances, those countries that win their appeal “enjoy sovereign rights to the seabed resources, but not to the water column resources, which are part of the high seas without national jurisdiction.”¹¹⁸ This can result in simmering tensions between nations and a potential catalyst for conflict, even leading up to outright war.

Additionally, the controversy over the Svalbard Treaty is another territorial dispute in the region. The origins of this treaty trace back to 1920.¹¹⁹ The Svalbard Treaty regulates the Svalbard archipelago in the Arctic Ocean and is signed by many countries in the EU and Russia.¹²⁰ It gives Norway authority over the archipelago and allows the countries that signed the treaty “free access to the islands and equal rights to engage in economic activity (rights fully

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Juha Kapyla and Harri Mikkola, “Arctic Conflict Potential,” *FIIA Briefing Paper*, September 2013

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Matthew Bryza, Oliver Moru, Kalev Stoicescu, and Natalia Jegorova, “Cooperation and Conflict in the Arctic: A Road Map for Estonia,” *International Centre for Defence Studies*, November 2014

¹²⁰ Ibid

exercised only by Russia, which inherited the Soviet mining settlement of Barentsburg on Svalbard Island).”¹²¹

Disagreements between these countries have centered around the exact territory the treaty has authority over - the archipelago and the territorial waters or beyond.¹²² Each country will naturally look to advance an argument that benefits their interests. Norway looks to take advantage of the archipelago’s location and claim authority over the islands and surrounding waters.¹²³ Conversely, other countries that signed the treaty feel the treaty should “be interpreted more expansively” and limit Norwegian authority in those waters.¹²⁴ And while this dispute has not led to outright conflict yet, it has the potential to.

Fisheries

Another incentive for jurisdiction over regional waters is of fishing rights. The seas contain an abundance of fishing resources. Disagreements overregulating such areas have resulted in disputes between Arctic nations. One such example is Norway, which established a Fisheries Protection Zone (FPZ) around the aforementioned Svalbard archipelago.¹²⁵ Thus far, Norway has utilized the UNCLOS to uphold its dominion over this area.¹²⁶ As part of establishing their FPZ, they have deemed the Svalbard Treaty irrelevant; this has caused friction among the countries that signed the treaty.¹²⁷ This remains an ongoing and fluctuating matter in the region that has the potential to escalate into conflict.¹²⁸

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ Ibid

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Ibid

Disagreements over fishing rights are not a new phenomenon.¹²⁹ When it comes to the Arctic countries – and the EU countries that consume a lot of the fishes caught in the Arctic – dominion over fisheries is important.¹³⁰ Statistics show the significance of the fishing industry in the Arctic and the EU. For example, fishing counts towards 85% of Greenland’s total exports, 40% of Iceland’s total exports, and Norway’s second-largest export commodity.¹³¹ Additionally, nearly a third of the fish caught in the Arctic are sold in EU markets.¹³² There are significant economic stakes in the Arctic fishing industry that result in competition between nations. As such, this, along with regulations and restrictions over maritime access, are factors that could escalate into conflict in the Arctic.

Environmental Concerns

Moreover, there are various environmental impacts of fishing in the region as well. With sea ice levels lowering, this incentivizes more people to fish in the area which leads to further harm.¹³³ First, a larger quantity of fishing ships will lead to more pollution in the area. In turn, this creates havoc on the Arctic ecosystem. Next, Arctic states attempt to regulate fisheries to protect the biodiversity of the seas.¹³⁴ Arctic fish stocks encounter problems by overfishing; species become endangered as a result.¹³⁵ The economic and environmental impacts of overfishing are dire.¹³⁶

¹²⁹ Ibid

¹³⁰ Ibid

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ Ibid

¹³⁶ Ibid

To better preserve the Arctic, nations put into effect laws to regulate fishing in areas.¹³⁷ Yet, despite the noblest of intentions, historical precedent shows that regulations of areas can lead to disputes and conflicts. Furthermore, there is also the concern of non-Arctic countries illegally fishing in these areas. Such activities increase the risk of misunderstandings or maritime accidents, which can lead to conflict.

Hydrocarbon Reserves and Other Natural Resources

The competition over the extraction of newly available resources in the area will be daunting; stakes will be high. The acquisition of hydrocarbon reserves, minerals, precious metals, and rare earth elements can result in significant economic advantages over other countries.¹³⁸ Countries could vie for Arctic supremacy given the potential benefits which is probably the most significant factor when evaluating potential conflict scenarios.

Russia plays a major role in Arctic tension. Their policy is to “turn the Arctic into Russia's resource base of the 21st century.”¹³⁹ As a result, they have dedicated considerable time and effort to build an infrastructure to position themselves to maximize potential in the Arctic. Their aggression has worried other countries and a reason they are the country most identified, at least by Western media, scholars, and policymakers, to initiate a conflict in the region.

As discussed previously, one tactic Russia has used is attempting to expand their Arctic jurisdiction by claiming land based on their alleged scientific research (hence the controversy over the Lomonosov Ridge and the planting of the flag on the ocean floor). Also, Russia has

¹³⁷ Ibid

¹³⁸ Ibid

¹³⁹ Juha Kapyla and Harri Mikkola, “Arctic Conflict Potential,” *FIIA Briefing Paper*, September 2013

tried to expand their territory and influence in the Arctic by selectively applying UNCLOS when it most benefits them and “aggressive bargaining.”¹⁴⁰

Russia attempted to claim sovereignty over the Lomonosov Ridge, and thereby the resources it contains, other countries pushed back – one of which was the United States. The United States asserted that the ridge is “free-standing feature in the deep oceanic part of the Arctic Ocean Basin,” and therefore not “a component of the continental shelf of either Russia or any other state.”¹⁴¹ As the Lomonosov issue remains unresolved, such a dispute, or similar ones in the future, if not resolved properly, could lead to an enormous conflict - involving most of the Arctic Council.¹⁴²

Additionally, Russia announced they were “willing to use military force to protect” their interests in the Arctic.¹⁴³ This has led to a reopening of old Soviet-era military bases and an expanding military presence throughout the region.¹⁴⁴ As a competing superpower, this has made the United States uneasy and they responded. An increased military presence and joint drills with NATO was the United States’ answer to Russia’s actions. In turn, this made Russia uncomfortable. The security dilemma that has developed as the result of these two countries’ actions warrants caution and attention.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Ibid

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

POTENTIAL FOR COOPERATION

Scholarship on Russian cooperation focuses on benevolent intentions in the Arctic committed to multilateralism, institutions, and international law. Additionally, given their prominence in the Arctic, this scholarship discusses Russia's "economic prospects and pragmatic concerns for security."¹⁴⁵

Consider Jeremy McKenzie's "A Case for a Stronger Partnership with Russia in the Arctic," which argued that Russia is a good partner in Arctic geopolitics.¹⁴⁶ McKenzie cited historical precedent for such a declaration and referenced the many international agreements the country has signed in promoting cooperation and multilateralism. McKenzie's literature mentioned the successful interactions starting with the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, McKenzie highlighted the success of numerous multilateral agreements within the Arctic Council.¹⁴⁸ These include the 2011 Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic, the 2013 Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic, and the 2017 Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation.¹⁴⁹

Furthermore, McKenzie presented the benefits of cooperation and how it will benefit the Arctic Council countries. All of the Arctic nations benefit immensely with cooperation with Russia; it is in the best interest of all to cooperate.¹⁵⁰ First, cooperation decreases the inefficiency

¹⁴⁵ Pavel Devyatkin, "Russia's Arctic Strategy: Aimed at Conflict or Cooperation?" *The Arctic Institute*, February 6, 2018

¹⁴⁶ Jeremy McKenzie, "A Case for a Stronger Partnership with Russia in the Arctic," *Pacific Council on International Policy*, December 23, 2019

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

¹⁴⁸ Ibid

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

and infrastructure disparity that all Arctic nations have.¹⁵¹ Second, cooperation augments security and “is essential to the sustainable development of the Arctic region.”¹⁵²

Additionally, Liu, Kirk, and Henriksen argue in *The European Union and the Arctic*, that Russia and the EU share an interest in resource development in the Arctic.¹⁵³ It highlights a “symbiotic relationship” around petroleum.¹⁵⁴ Russia desires to develop its petroleum resources to benefit its economy while the EU is a “major petroleum consumer.”¹⁵⁵ Additionally, priorities overlap regarding maritime travel. In this scenario, the “EU seeks to protect the Arctic and gain access to shipping routes while Russia wants to develop and control the NSR in order to financially benefit and to preserve the Arctic for future generations.”¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, there is a mutual need for building infrastructure to aid maritime travel in areas such as the NSR.¹⁵⁷ Collaborative efforts such as these are mutually beneficial and, most importantly, reinforce multilateralism in the Arctic.

Moreover, consider the scholarship of Valery Konyshov and Alexander Sergunin, who advance the idea that at its core, Russian Arctic strategy “is not oriented towards military confrontation.”¹⁵⁸ Their scholarship emphasizes collaborative efforts on developing the Russian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the economic benefits of Arctic development.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, while many detractors of Russian cooperation in the Arctic frequently mention Russia’s military build-up, Konyshov and Sergunin dismiss this as alarmist rhetoric and

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Ibid

¹⁵³ Hunter, Tina. “Russian Arctic Policy, Petroleum Resources Development and the EU: Cooperation or Coming Confrontation?” In *The European Union and the Arctic*, edited by Liu Nengye, Kirk Elizabeth A., and Henriksen Tore, 172-99. LEIDEN; BOSTON: Brill, 2017. Accessed April 27, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h3gv.12

¹⁵⁴ Ibid

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

¹⁵⁸ Pavel Devyatkin, “Russia’s Arctic Strategy: Aimed at Conflict or Cooperation?” *The Arctic Institute*, February 6, 2018

¹⁵⁹ Ibid

attribute it to “upgrading old units, securing the wide-reaching border, and improving search and rescue (SAR) services” in the Arctic region.¹⁶⁰ Konyshv and Sergunin’s research attempts to lessen concerns about Russia’s military presence in the Arctic. As this concern is an integral part of the literature promoting conflict, their scholarship can be used as both a refutation to existing research and evidence of the benefits of cooperation over conflict.

Also, Kathrin Keil promotes the idea of cooperation over conflict as a more pragmatic and mutually beneficial approach. Keil argues that interactions among the countries should be focused on cooperation because “of the vast resource bases in the Arctic countries’ undisputed territories and water areas.”¹⁶¹ Moreover, collaborative efforts in resource extraction will be financially rewarding and lead to sustained “economic collaboration to resolve common challenges” that will be mutually beneficial.¹⁶² As such, here are several factors as to why cooperation could prevail over conflict.

Historical Precedent

First, there is precedent for conflict-free existence in the polar regions – Antarctica and the Arctic. With the exception of Antarctica, the Arctic is the most conflict-free region in the world.¹⁶³ Yet unlike Antarctica, the Arctic has different countries with territory in the region, all of whom are competing for high-stakes resource extraction and long-term economic gains. However, historically, these countries have demonstrated a commitment to maintaining cooperation as the best method to advance all of each nation’s interests.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Ibid

¹⁶¹ Ibid

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Stephanie Pezard, Abbie Tingstad, and Alexandra Hall, “The Future of Arctic Cooperation in a Changing Strategic Environment,” *Rand Europe*

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

Arctic Council

The Arctic Council is the organization that created the culture of zero conflict. Started in 1996, it promotes an agenda of “Arctic governance towards interstate peace and cooperation.”¹⁶⁵ One such example would be the Arctic Council’s Kiruna Declaration. This strengthened a commitment to multilateralism by promoting the “status of the Council as the leading forum for international cooperation in the Arctic.”¹⁶⁶ Additionally, it has acted as an arbiter in resolving regional disputes - an integral part of maintaining peace.¹⁶⁷ In efforts to sustain cooperation, the Arctic Council served as the intermediary among Arctic nations which resulted in several binding agreements and reinforced multilateralism: the Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement, the Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Agreement, and the Arctic Science Cooperation Agreement.¹⁶⁸

Institutionalism

Institutionalism is another important reason as to why cooperation is successful in the Arctic. Relationships built through institutionalism allow countries collaborating to achieve common objectives in the Arctic. This encourages sustainable cooperation and promotes joint efforts to protect the Arctic’s indigenous population, maritime safety, and search and rescue efforts.¹⁶⁹ In turn, institutionalism can help protect the Arctic from environmental challenges from the effects of climate change and pollution.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ Ibid

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

¹⁶⁸ David Balton, “Will the Task Force on Arctic Marine Cooperation Deliver?” *The Wilson Center* October 2018

¹⁶⁹ Matthew Bryza, Oliver Moru, Kalev Stoicescu, and Natalia Jegorova, “Cooperation and Conflict in the Arctic: A Road Map for Estonia,” *International Centre for Defence Studies*, November 2014

Environmental Challenges

Curbing Arctic pollution is an interest shared by all Arctic countries. Arctic resource and energy extraction presents a challenge to protecting the environment from the risks associated with oil rigs, oil pipelines, and oil well leaks.¹⁷⁰ There is limited technology that can mitigate the risks associated with the damage from an oil spill.¹⁷¹ As oil spills “do not biologically decompose, evaporate, dissolve, or precipitate,” there are many risks that could result in a disaster.¹⁷² Which, in addition to the harm such a catastrophe would cause to the Arctic ecosystem, it would create tangential economic devastation. Moreover, as the melting sea ice expects to bring a significant increase in maritime travel in the region, pollution from the shipping industry will result in a rise in “water, air, and sound pollution” in the Arctic.¹⁷³ Given these potentially devastating consequences, it is important for Arctic nations to maintain a zone of cooperation.

Cooperation among the Arctic nations has resulted in agreements to mitigate pollution in the region. Multilateral efforts were developed to limit such risks. Such cooperation has resulted in policies such as the Arctic Council’s Working Group on Emergency Prevention, Preparedness, and Response (EPPR).¹⁷⁴ Also, the Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic (MOSPA) agreement facilitated a cooperative effort among all Arctic nations that created guidelines to limit pollution as well as emergency preparedness.¹⁷⁵ Part of this process includes annual disaster simulation exercises between all Arctic countries.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

¹⁷¹ Ibid

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ Ibid

¹⁷⁴ “Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR), *Arctic Council*

¹⁷⁵ “Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic,” *Arctic Council*

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

The Arctic is one of the planet's more vulnerable areas to the effects of climate change.¹⁷⁷ Studies show a significant change to the Arctic region as a result of climate change.¹⁷⁸ In the past forty years, Arctic summer ice has declined by approximately 30%, while ice thickness has decreased around 40%.¹⁷⁹ Over the past 100 years, the temperature in the Arctic has increased over 35 degrees Fahrenheit.¹⁸⁰ As a result, Arctic countries have cooperated to adjust to the changing climate and effectively limit the repercussions.

In addition to melting sea ice, rising temperatures also have a lasting effect on the region's ecosystem.¹⁸¹ Rising temperatures cause a change in plant growth, which leads to a shift in animal populations. Also, the melting sea ice affects the dwellings of the local animal populations too. Arctic wildlife such as seals, walruses, reindeer, and polar bears are some of the animals whose habitat has diminished.¹⁸² As a result, this has prompted multilateral efforts by countries (even some non-Arctic countries) to work together to conserve the biodiversity in the region and help prevent the extinction of species that call the Arctic home.¹⁸³ Arctic countries in the EU and North America have joined with Russia to construct designated protected areas in the region.¹⁸⁴

Moreover, environmental threats also put the indigenous population of the Arctic at risk. Changing habitats can result in drastic changes to the indigenous people in the Arctic who rely on the ecosystem for food through fishing, hunting, and gathering.¹⁸⁵ Emerging threats jeopardize indigenous "cultural continuity" by potentially causing a change to their food sources,

¹⁷⁷ Matthew Bryza, Oliver Moru, Kalev Stoicescu, and Natalia Jegorova, "Cooperation and Conflict in the Arctic: A Road Map for Estonia," *International Centre for Defence Studies*

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

¹⁷⁹ Ibid

¹⁸⁰ Ibid

¹⁸¹ Ibid

¹⁸² Ibid

¹⁸³ Ibid

¹⁸⁴ Ibid

¹⁸⁵ Ibid

cultural customs, and way of life.¹⁸⁶ In an effort to protect these populations, Arctic countries have worked together to safeguard “culture and identity population, health concerns, economic activities, and local communities.”¹⁸⁷ This transcends borders and boundaries in a cooperative effort to achieve a greater good. This multilateral initiative also bolsters a culture of cooperation, which, in turn, decreases the probability of Arctic conflict.

Joint Military Drills

Military buildup has been identified as one of the key factors for potential conflict, but it can also be viewed as a factor for Arctic cooperation. Joint military drills allow the Arctic countries to practice emergency responses for scenario-based dilemmas.¹⁸⁸ This occurs in various forms, from military drills to search and rescue operations.

Such drills forge relationships of cooperation that help ease tensions between governments and organizations.¹⁸⁹ For example, Russia and NATO member Norway, have conducted joint military exercises in the Arctic in the Barents Sea.¹⁹⁰ Additionally, Russia and NATO, two geopolitical adversaries with an uneasy, fickle relationship, have a limited history of cooperation. Russia, the EU, and the United States conducted joint military exercises (outside of the Arctic) known as FRUKUS for a decade between 2003 and 2013.¹⁹¹ There have also been numerous joint coast guards search and rescue (SAR) exercises between Russia, the United States, and the EU. While Russia expanding their military presence in the Arctic did cause widespread global concern, by and large, the evidence shows that much of Russia’s military

¹⁸⁶ Ibid

¹⁸⁷ Ibid

¹⁸⁸ Pavel Devyatkin, “Russia’s Arctic Strategy: Military and Security (Part II),” *The Arctic Institute*, February 2018

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

¹⁹⁰ Pavel Devyatkin, “Russia’s Arctic Strategy: Military and Security (Part II),” *The Arctic Institute*, February 2018

¹⁹¹ Ibid

operations are “pragmatic in nature and have allowed a certain degree of cooperation between the Arctic states.”¹⁹² Habitual cooperation between these nations strengthens bonds and promotes stability.

Russia

Russia is often seen as the aggressor in the Arctic but plays a vital role in maintaining cooperation. As previously discussed, Russia has made no secret of its policy to establish the Arctic as its resource base. The Basics of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Region states as much and promotes a strong Arctic presence, asserting that “all activities in the Arctic should be tied to the interests of ‘defense and security to the maximum degree.’”¹⁹³

However, while much of the West voiced concerns about Russia’s military presence in the Arctic, it should not automatically be seen as a march to conflict. A key component of Russia’s Arctic policy is its commitment to cooperation. Russia’s *Basics of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the period till 2020* declares as a main objective “in the sphere of international cooperation was defined as ‘maintenance of a mutually advantageous bilateral and multilateral cooperation of the Russian Federation with the Arctic states on the basis of international treaties and agreements to which the Russian Federation is a party.’”¹⁹⁴

Also, Russia has taken a prominent role in the Arctic Council. They held the Arctic Council’s first chairmanship in 2004 and are scheduled to assume that position again in 2021.¹⁹⁵ Given that Russia is the Arctic’s premier power, its commitment to cooperation will go a long way to preventing conflict (even if scholars, pundits, and foreign policy experts warn otherwise).

¹⁹² Ibid

¹⁹³ Ibid

¹⁹⁴ Maria Lagutina, “Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century”

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Nikolay Korchunov, Russia’s Senior Arctic Official, *The Arctic Council*, March 2020

Furthermore, the *Concept of Foreign Policy of the RF-2016* placed a strong emphasis on cooperation.¹⁹⁶ It advocated a policy “directed at preserving peace, stability, and result-oriented international cooperation in the Arctic.”¹⁹⁷ Also, there was an expressed desire to “strengthen cooperation within the Arctic Eight.”¹⁹⁸ It also included a commitment to “resist any attempts to introduce into the Arctic elements of the politics of antagonism and military confrontation, to politicize international interaction in the region in general.”¹⁹⁹

Russia’s actions have to match its stated policy. So far, it has. Its commitment to “maintain the Arctic as a region of peaceful cooperation” could be a significant factor in keeping the Arctic an area of cooperation.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Ibid

¹⁹⁷ Ibid

¹⁹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹⁹ Ibid

²⁰⁰ Ibid

CONCLUSION

As polar ice melts at record speed, a race to obtain newly accessible resources, establish new economic opportunities, and gain a strategic upper hand in geopolitical positioning of these pursuits has led to the concern of potential conflict in the Arctic. Scholarship and rhetoric mainly focus on the idea of conflict instead of cooperation. This paper provided an analysis of the points of contention that could lead to conflict and how the Arctic could evolve into a skirmish for power and competition.

With that caveat in mind, this paper takes steps into offering insight that shows how mutually beneficial sustainable cooperation in the Arctic should, and could, be achieved. Historical precedent, institutionalism, protection of the Arctic ecosystem and indigenous people, mutually beneficial economic opportunities, and legislative policies of the Arctic actors represent the foundation of the reasons supporting cooperation.

First, consider the Arctic Council. Formed in 1996, the Arctic Council has provided guidance and has acted as an arbiter to maintain peace in the region. So far, through all of its existence, the Arctic region was one of peace and cooperation. The Arctic Council is a big reason why. Additionally, the Arctic Council has facilitated other bilateral and multilateral agreements that have spurred cooperation. Even with tensions mounting on occasions, this will continue. Furthermore, the number of common interests that each Arctic nation shares will act as a strong reinforcement to maintain cooperation and diminish the possibility of conflict.

Next, historical precedents are another factor as to why cooperation should prevail over conflict. For example, it can be legitimately argued that the decision not to escalate to conflict after Russia's flag-planting on the ocean floor in 2007 reveals a commitment to *détente*.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Juha Kapyla and Harri Mikkola, "Arctic Conflict Potential," *FIIA Briefing Paper*, September 2013

Instead, the countries sought a peaceful resolution. This maintained peace in the region and enabled continued cooperation. As a result, to address such concerns, the *Ilulissat Declaration* was announced and signed by the five coastal states of the Arctic that prohibited any “new comprehensive international regime to govern the Arctic Ocean.”²⁰² The existing infrastructure of cooperation, spearheaded by the Arctic Council, is the most significant factor in promoting cooperation over conflict in the region.

Also, Arctic countries should ramp up their efforts of multilateralism – more so than they already do. Multilateralism can facilitate institutionalist efforts to construct more efficient cooperation in the region. In addition to the Arctic Council, the countries rely on frameworks of governance such as the UNCLOS that provide some structure and leadership in the area. And, given that the United States has not signed the UNCLOS, this sometimes makes arbitration challenging. Given its global prominence and desire to establish a more permanent position in the Arctic, one recommendation is for the United States to sign the UNCLOS. This will enable better efficacy in the area while reinforcing sustainable cooperation.

Since much of the anxiety comes from worry over competition of resources, another recommendation is for all actors to make a commitment for there to still be an Arctic from which to extract resources. As such, a priority for the Arctic nations should be cooperative measures to preserve the Arctic. The region already is experiencing the ramifications of climate change faster than any place on the planet. As traffic is expected to increase in the area in the future, a lack of a plan to control pollution will devastate the area – from the ecosystem and indigenous populations to the vast resources each country hopes to unearth. Clearly, preserving the Arctic is a priority. A collaborative effort towards preservation will empower a commitment to cooperation.

²⁰² Albert Buixade Farre, “Commercial Arctic shipping through the Northeast Passage: routes, resources, governance, technology and infrastructure,” *Polar Geography* vol. 34, Issue 4, October 2014

Additionally, countries in the Arctic region should take a lesson from Antarctica and sign a treaty. The Antarctic Treaty was an agreement by the nations of the world to regulate international relations in Antarctica.²⁰³ A core tenet of this agreement is that Antarctica only to be used “for peaceful purposes.”²⁰⁴ The treaty forbids “any measures of a military nature, such as the establishment of military bases and fortifications, the carrying out of military maneuvers, as well as the testing of any type of weapons.” Still, it does permit military personnel and equipment for scientific and other benevolent reasons.²⁰⁵ And even though Antarctica is different from the Arctic because there are no countries that have any claim to territory there, creating a treaty among Arctic nations would further strengthen a commitment to cooperation.

Another recommendation that could help achieve sustainable cooperation and settle the Arctic security dilemma is joint participation in military drills. As previously discussed, a lot of the tension in the area stems from the uncertainty of military maneuvers by Russia and the United States. Each country does not trust the other. Having each other collaborate will provide much-needed trust and reassurance. Furthermore, given the rigors of the Arctic terrain, joint military drills and its subsequent sharing of military resources can lead to mutually beneficial exploration and excavation efforts.

And, while much of the scholarship on Arctic geopolitics discussed a looming “Cold War” in the Arctic, the fact is there is little incentive for this to come to fruition. Military conflict in the region would do irreparable damage to the Arctic environment – defeating the whole purpose of being in the Arctic. Also, given Russia’s Arctic prominence, from their perspective,

²⁰³ “Antarctic Treaty,” U.S. Department of State, December 1959

²⁰⁴ Ibid

²⁰⁵ Ibid

there is little incentive to pursue international conflicts in the Arctic.²⁰⁶ Russia would hurt the most, but the entire world would suffer if conflict broke out.

The geopolitical situation in the Arctic will receive in the immediate future. Russia and the United States are set to update their existing Arctic policy. Meanwhile, the European Union is positioning itself for greater influence in the Arctic region. Climate change is revolutionizing international relations in the area and vast economic resources, once inaccessible, will provide an economic boom to the world. A commitment to maintaining cooperative multilateralism efforts with sustainable peace is essential to global security.

As Arctic geopolitics enter a new decade, a new normal will take shape. While the sources of competition will certainly be seductive for many countries, a dedication to cooperation must be a core tenet of Arctic geopolitics. This will allow Arctic nations to mutually benefit from the region's resources and build an agenda towards common initiatives to be carried out through several layers of institutionalism – benefiting all.

²⁰⁶ Maria L. Lagutina, *Russia's Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*

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