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**Current geostrategic impacts and viewpoints on Arctic maritime co-operation**



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## ABOUT AI-ARC

The AI-ARC "Artificial Intelligence based Virtual Control Room for the Arctic" project's main objective is to create an innovative and user-friendly AI based platform, the Virtual Control Room (VCR), that has the power to greatly improve maritime situational awareness, decision-making, communication, available rescue resources, and thus the safety of all maritime actors, particularly in the Arctic Sea.

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Lofotveggen consists of granite and volcanic rock formations that rose from the sea after the last ice age. Among its best-known peaks are Vågakallen on Austvågøy. Vestfjorden itself is actually not a fjord at all. It is an enclosed area of the North Sea, extending from Værøy in the west for 155 kilometres to Barøy lighthouse at the entrance to Ofotfjord. The area has always been difficult for seafarers to navigate.

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Figure 1 Lofotveggen (Timo Hellenberg)

# Current geostrategic impacts and viewpoints on Arctic maritime co-operation

## 1.1 Overview

During the last two decades we were used to increase cooperation in the Arctic, because the benefits for all participants were so evident. However, new geostrategic and geopolitical frictions are now rapidly emerging in the Arctic and High North. War in Ukraine is steadily freezing the East-West relations and those remaining intergovernmental bridges and cooperation structures will be halted. For example, an increase in military activities by some Arctic states is the result of the need to patrol and defend access to new maritime routes and ensure greater access to maritime resources.

Another point of tension is the increased focus on how to respond to the threat of climate change within Arctic environments; and the impact of this on Arctic populations and especially indigenous peoples. This is adding to the complexities of relations between different players and creating new dynamics of cooperation and competition in and around the region. The increasing interest and potential influence of China in the Arctic is one of the most significant developments in recent years, as this rising power in global politics could potentially exert a strong influence in the region. Therefore, as the Arctic has become somewhat less inhospitable, both climatically and physically, it has also become less benign in a geostrategic sense.

However, it can be argued that, compared with other regions, the Arctic remains an arena of relatively low tension overall. Still, the increasing elements of political and economic competition will increase the level of security risks as there is a lack of political mechanisms to engage with military security and defence issues. This means that it is difficult to even discuss these issues in a region that includes powerful states (US/Russia) which have the ability to not only strongly influence political developments in the Arctic but in global politics.

Tensions between the EU/USA and Russia over sanctions have remarkably affected Arctic cooperation, although it has not been paralyzed totally. Sanctions imposed on Russia have also targeted the development of Russia's Arctic regions and, in particular, its offshore projects. Trade sanctions on goods, services and technologies have reciprocally made it more difficult for Western borrowing capital and expertise to access key investment projects in the region.

Currently, the Russian Federation holds the Arctic Council chairmanship, which rotates leadership every two years. However, the Arctic Council Ministerial meetings have been suspended (for the year of 2022) due to the War in Ukraine. At the same time, Russia appears to be acting normally as Arctic Council chair although some of the Council's activities such as the ministerial meetings remain frozen. After all, Russia generates ca. 10% of its GDP in the Arctic zone. It would be useful that the U.S. should continue to work alongside all Arctic nations – including Russia – to support a “High North, Low Tensions” model of diplomacy.

The fundamental question at present is: Could Arctic cooperation still serve as a bridge between East and West or does it have to correlate to an intergovernmental confrontation that we are currently witnessing generally as a result of the war in Ukraine?



## 1.2 Development of basic geopolitical, economic and strategic factors in the North

After 1945, with the onset of the Cold War and the development of new military technologies, the region's strategic significance grew. The route over the northern polar region provided the shortest distance of travel for nuclear-armed strategic bombers and ballistic missiles between the United States and the Soviet Union, and therefore it also became a key location for strategic early warning and air defence sites. The Kola Peninsula was also the home to the Soviet Union's most powerful naval formation, which included the bulk of Moscow's offensive missile submarines, at the time both conventionally powered (SSBs) and nuclear-powered (SSBNs).

During the Cold War (1947–1990) the Arctic areas were the main confrontation line between the United States and Soviet Union. It was due to nuclear strategy and geography that the shortest attack routes of air forces and strategic missiles between those countries were in the North over Polar areas. The US Strategic Air Forces built forward bases in Greenland for bombers as well as early warning radars. The North American air defence system NORAD was directed against Russia over the Arctic. Likewise, the Soviet air defence had a long chain of bases against America employing its best aircraft and other air defence systems. The other strategic core practice for Soviet armed forces was using the Arctic Sea as the staging area for nuclear submarines with ballistic missiles.

The harsh winter conditions and the large ice coverage were no obstacles to the military because the abovementioned weapons travelled through the air rather than the water. At the same time, it could be argued that parts of the Arctic Ocean, i.e. Russia's Northern Sea Route became more commonly used for transporting cargo and supplies towards the end of the Cold War (1970s and 1980s) from major ports such as Murmansk to towns and regions in Siberia.

With the end of the Cold War, however, the military significance of the Arctic fell away, not least because the focus of chiefly Western defence and security attention shifted elsewhere. Moreover, Soviet and subsequently Russian military capabilities in the region fell rapidly and dramatically into disrepair.

While the immediate post-Cold War years were characterised by a collaborative political and diplomatic atmosphere in the Arctic, by the early years of the twenty-first century there were already the stirrings of factors that would begin a shift back to something more uncertain and discordant, and put the more cooperative institutions and intentions under strain. First was the dawning realisation of the impact of the profound environmental changes that were being observed, and particularly the potential opening of the sea routes and increased access to untapped resources, a key driver in what some have referred to as the 'globalisation' of the Arctic. This fuelled discussion of the prospect of an 'Arctic great game' for control of the region.

After the Cold War, both the USA and Russia decommissioned the Northern offensive-strategic systems almost totally. Some of these military bases were transformed to civilian use and production sites and for instance some of the nuclear capable submarines were destroyed. A major part of this work was done during the 1990s by the US through initiatives such as the US Department of Defence Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program, also known as the Nunn-Lugar program, which was created for the purpose of securing and dismantling weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their associated infrastructure in the former states of the Soviet Union. Only the bases in Murmansk have been kept in use for the Russian Navy, and this area is still strategically most important. Of those organisations that were created to uphold Cold War defence strategies, NORAD and NATO continue to exist today, despite the fact that their original functions were to organise the bilateral and collective defence of the west against the Soviet attack during the Cold War.<sup>1</sup>

A more stable and peaceful geo-political situation emerged in the 1990s in the Arctic. However, there was also a growing awareness of new unconventional threats, particularly those caused by rapid climate change. In the 21st century, there have been much better preconditions and environmental protection laws in place for the

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<sup>1</sup> Wider Arctic safety and security cooperation - Review of Crisis Coordination and Response Arrangements in the European Arctic and High North (D2.3). Fitzgibbon, Milne, Visuri and Hellenberg. 2023.

commercial use of Arctic areas. First and foremost, it is the exploitation of natural resources that has resulted in significant interest and investment in the region. However, a second focus is the increasing interest surrounding the possibility to use northern sea routes for traffic between Asia and Europe. A recent development is that the Barents Sea has become ice-free for longer periods, and thus increasing the time that the Barents sea is navigable and linked directly to the Atlantic.

Scientific research in climate modelling has shown that Arctic winter sea ice loss is most pronounced in the Barents Sea, resulting in winter sea ice being reduced to less than one-third on average. This implies that the Barents Sea will be navigable for longer periods of time, with shipping routes connecting the Barents Sea to the Atlantic via the Norwegian and North Seas remaining open even during winter.

The northern routes from Russia to the Oceans are becoming ever more important if the embargo of Russian harbours in the Baltic and Black Sea will be an obstacle for transports because of the political and military tensions between the West and Russia. This is why, especially, the Murmansk region and Arkhangelsk will again become strategically important for Russia, something like they were during the Second World War.

The geopolitical challenge remains: how much the political tensions from other parts of the world would affect the non-military use of those Northern waters? At present, the Arctic maritime area is not a zone of conflict, but a so-called horizontal escalation from other, more disputed regions is now a cause of concern in the North.

The new and potentially most important participant in the maritime activities of the North is China. It will use the sea routes through Northern waters to Europe and America for commercial transport. So far, the high costs of transport by ship in the Northern waters have reduced the cost-effectiveness of transport via the Northern Sea routes. It is also possible that China can use Northern areas for military purposes together with Russia or independently. Therefore, the United States is very concerned and follows keenly the developments as well as the strategic influence of the Chinese Arctic activities. China's activities in the North have been mainly scientific enterprises, but the rival powers see them also as strategic attempts by China for enlarging Arctic knowledge and preparing infrastructure for further enterprises.

Both parties, the West and East (i.e. Russia and China), have increased their military infrastructure and preparedness in the Arctic, but the scale is still rather small in comparison with the Cold War situation over 30 years ago. At that time, the "Northern Front" was considerably more important militarily than it is at present. One reason is the technical modernization of communications and surveillance arrangements. Modern communication and surveillance systems do not depend on a military presence or physical occupation of the area (eg. situating air or naval bases in the high north) as was the case during the Cold War. Now, satellites and cyber networks can operate effectively and be controlled remotely without ground bases and permanent infrastructure being required in the Arctic for military use.

Some recent reports describe the present military infrastructure and exercise activities in the North rather profoundly. They conclude that Russia will seek to ensure that their Northern territories and adjacent sea routes are defended militarily but that it has no larger expansive aims. The United States has also increased military activities in the North but rather carefully. The large-scale military exercises in the North have increased especially from 2018 onwards. The trend in the area has been towards more military importance, and its intensity is dependent on the general political developments. There are still rather good possibilities to continue the relative balance between the forces so that neither side could find it useful to begin some offensive actions.

An assessment from summer 2022 focusing on the Russian strategy in the Arctic concludes: "In the Arctic, Russia's main threat perception relates to the fear of encirclement by NATO and its allies. In the context of Russia's renewed war against Ukraine since February 2022, the Finnish and Swedish applications to join NATO and the likely expansion of the alliance are a case in point... Moscow views the Arctic as a strategic continuum stretching from the North Atlantic to the North Pacific. The Kremlin's priorities are to: impose costs on other countries' access to Russia's European Arctic; protect the Northern Sea Route; defend North Pole approaches; remove tensions from the region; and extend Russia's military capabilities beyond the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF)... Russia is rebuilding its military capabilities and modernizing its regional military infrastructure by using a 'double dual' approach: Arctic infrastructure is being used for civilian and military purposes (dual-use), while Russia is also blurring the lines between offensive and defensive intent (dual-purpose)."

## 1.3 Conclusion

One of the most important strategic factors for all parties will be the ever more threatening affection of climate change. Its influence should be taken into account in many functional areas, beginning from exploitation of natural resources and ending to all kind of military activities, in order to prevent and mitigate damages. For those measures good communications and abilities to maintain a real time situational awareness will be most important.

The climate change and ice melting permafrost are affecting aging port facilities and other infrastructure in the Arctic. A case in point is the oil spill that happened in Norilsk in Arctic Russia back in 2020 as a result of a storage tank collapsing because of melting permafrost. Norilsk Nickel had announced the melting of permafrost under the foundation of the reservoir as the cause of the accident. As a result of the sinking of the base supports of the storage tank in May 2020, 21,000 tons of diesel fuel ran into streams and the Ambarnaya River, and further into the ground.

A 2017 report to the Arctic Council, an international forum which includes Russia, warned that because of global warming and melting ice, foundations in permafrost regions could no longer support the loads they did as recently as the 1980s. Despite the frozen intergovernmental East-West relations it is clear that Arctic cooperation might be too important and too fragile to be blocked at this stage due other confrontative issues.

In order to create a common Arctic rescue area, the AI ARC project ([www.ai-arc.eu](http://www.ai-arc.eu)) creates a framework and a competence pool. This target state would be achievable by 2025, and concrete targets and an action plan should be created on the basis of it within the framework of the Arctic Council.

The value of our AI ARC solution applies to the Coast Guard and Border Patrol, private entities and private companies such as the fishing and cruise industries, commercial shipping, seabed mining and offshore oil drilling industries. It will improve situational awareness, communication, potential rescue funds and thus the safety of all actors in the maritime sector.