

NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANISATION



AGENDA: CONFLICT IN THE ARCTIC
(2036)

INTRODUCTION

The Arctic, a vast and unique region situated at the northernmost part of the Earth, has long captivated the world's attention. Traditionally characterized by its frozen landscapes and extreme conditions, the Arctic has increasingly become a hotspot of geopolitical interest and contention in recent years.

The Arctic region has historically been governed by the Arctic Council, a cooperative forum consisting of eight member states, including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. However, the evolving geopolitical landscape and the prospect of extensive resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, have brought the Arctic to the forefront of international discussions. The effects of climate change, leading to the shrinking of ice cover, have opened up new opportunities for resource exploration, shipping routes, and territorial claims.

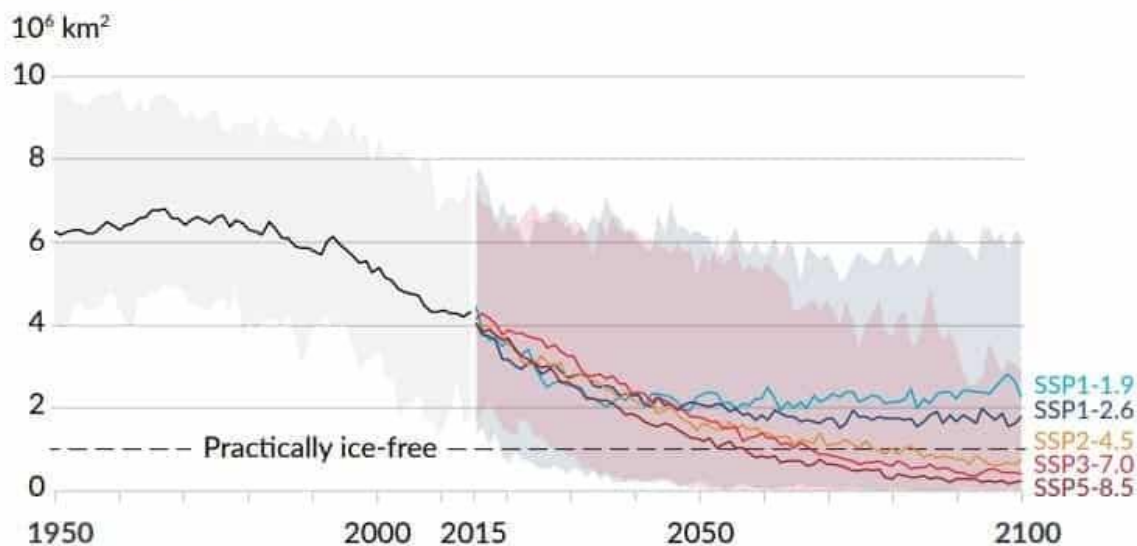
The potential wealth hidden beneath the Arctic's icy surface has sparked intense competition among states and commercial interests. Countries bordering the Arctic have been vying for control over vast stretches of the region, each seeking to secure exclusive access to its natural resources. The race for economic dominance in the Arctic is not limited to resource extraction alone. The opening of new shipping routes, such as the Northern Sea Route, has the potential to significantly reduce transportation times between Europe and Asia, providing economic advantages for those with access and control.

The issue of territorial claims in the Arctic remains a contentious matter. States with Arctic borders have been asserting their rights and seeking to expand their respective jurisdictions in accordance with international law. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) plays a vital role in defining the legal framework for resolving disputes and determining maritime boundaries. However, differing interpretations and overlapping claims have created tensions between states, particularly between Russia, Canada, Denmark, and the United States.

THE FUTURE OF THE NORTH POLE

The significant changes occurring in the Arctic's physical environment are serving as a compelling driver for increased NATO involvement in the region. One of the most profound transformations is the disappearance of the polar ice cap. Satellite observations have revealed a steady decline in sea-ice extent, with an approximate reduction of 13% per decade. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), all projected scenarios indicate a continued rapid decrease in sea-ice, with extreme cases suggesting a high likelihood of the Arctic becoming consistently ice-free by 2050. More optimistic estimations propose this scenario could occur by 2070.

(b) September Arctic sea ice area



This radical reduction in sea-ice coverage has far-reaching implications. It is anticipated that the Arctic's coastal regions will experience a rise in sea levels ranging from 0.3 to 0.4 meters. Coupled with the melting of permafrost, this poses a significant threat to extensive stretches of the Arctic coastline. The combined impact of sea-level rise and permafrost degradation could have dire consequences for the stability and viability of coastal communities and ecosystems.

These geophysical alterations and their potential security ramifications have prompted NATO to recognize the importance of the Arctic region. As the changing environment opens up new possibilities for resource exploitation,

commercial shipping routes, and strategic positioning, the alliance is compelled to enhance its involvement in the Arctic. The fragile balance of power and interests among Arctic states necessitates the development of cooperative strategies and collective security measures.

NATO's increased engagement in the Arctic aligns with its core objective of ensuring the security and defense of its member states. The evolving geopolitical dynamics, combined with the potential for resource competition and territorial disputes, demand a proactive approach from the alliance. By strengthening its presence and capabilities in the region, NATO aims to promote stability, deter potential conflicts, and safeguard the interests of its member nations.

Furthermore, the changing Arctic landscape poses unique challenges for NATO. The region's vast expanse, extreme weather conditions, and limited infrastructure necessitate specialized capabilities and cooperation among member states. NATO's involvement in the Arctic encompasses various aspects, including surveillance, monitoring, information sharing, and joint exercises, with a focus on maintaining situational awareness and ensuring the alliance's ability to respond effectively to any emerging security threats.

NON-NATO INTEREST IN THE ARCTIC

From a security perspective, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China emerge as NATO's most significant competitors in the Arctic. Under President Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia has prioritized its polar territories, with the 2035 Arctic Strategy refocusing the nation's efforts on exploiting the region's abundant resources that are becoming more accessible. Russia aims to solidify its position as a pivotal power in the Arctic by developing the Northern Sea Route (NSR), enhancing regional infrastructure, and expanding business opportunities.

China, despite lacking direct Arctic territory, has expressed keen interest in extending its influence into the High North. In 2018, the People's Republic of China declared itself a "near-Arctic power" and highlighted the region as a target for significant investments. While China's individual attempts to expand its presence in Greenland faced challenges due to US intervention, Russia presents a potential partner for Chinese regional ambitions. Together, Russia and China form a powerful bloc that challenges the stable cooperative order that NATO seeks to protect in the Arctic.

The growing interests of Russia and China in the Arctic present complex security implications for NATO. Russia's assertive posture and territorial claims, coupled with its military buildup in the region, have raised concerns among NATO member states. China's pursuit of economic opportunities, resource access, and strategic positioning in the Arctic raises questions about its long-term intentions and the potential for power projection.

NATO recognizes the need to respond to the changing security dynamics in the Arctic region. The alliance has been actively monitoring and conducting military exercises in the High North, enhancing its situational awareness and preparedness. NATO's focus on collective defense, deterrence, and cooperative security mechanisms is crucial in countering potential challenges from Russia and China in the Arctic.

To maintain stability and protect its interests, NATO engages in dialogue with Russia and closely monitors China's activities in the region. The alliance aims to strengthen its cooperation with Arctic states, including Sweden and Finland, to ensure a comprehensive approach to security. It also encourages adherence to international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in addressing territorial disputes and promoting responsible behavior in the Arctic.

NATO'S CONCERNS

While NATO's consensus-based decision-making process can sometimes slow coordination, there is a consensus among member states that the future of the Arctic is a priority. The alliance has increased its attention on the region through joint military exercises like Trident Juncture in 2018 and Cold Response, a Norwegian-sponsored operation in 2022. The inclusion of Sweden and Finland in NATO further enhances the alliance's resources dedicated to the Arctic issue. However, NATO needs to go beyond exercises to demonstrate the Arctic's importance.

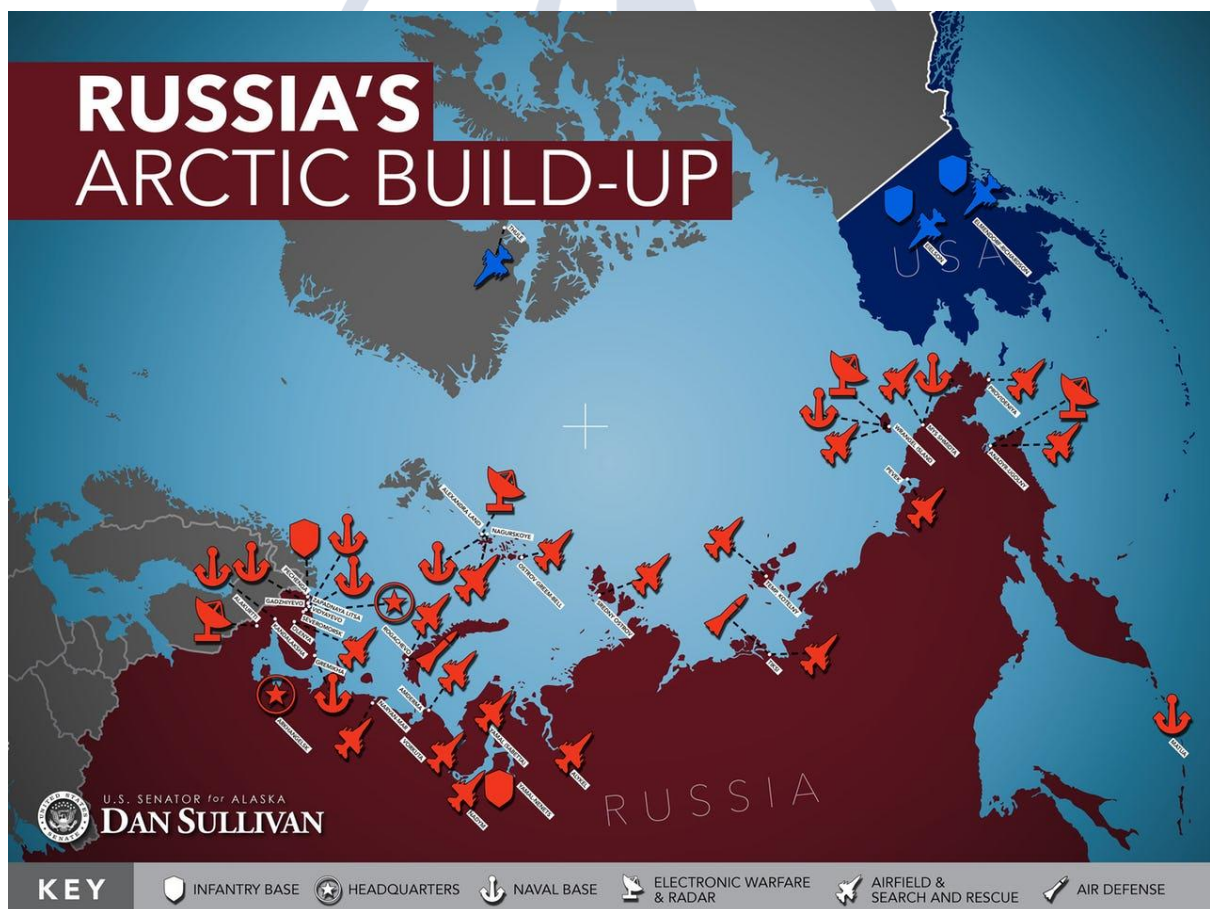
To effectively address the growing influence of Russia and China in the Arctic resulting from climate change, NATO must build political consensus on Arctic policy, enhance domain awareness, ensure allies can operate effectively, and maintain stability through discussions and, if necessary, deterrence. The addition of Finland and Sweden would significantly expand NATO's presence in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic Circle, strengthening the alliance's capabilities in the region. Establishing a new command to coordinate these efforts would signal NATO's serious commitment to the future of the High North.

Additionally, NATO must acknowledge the uncertainty surrounding energy security amid the transition to renewable energy. Russia, and to a lesser extent, China, will continue to securitize strategic energy reserves. Russia has already demonstrated its ability to use oil shipments as a diplomatic tool during the Crimean invasion, and the energy sector remains outside the current European sanctions regime. NATO must intensify its coordination of political and military deterrence against such actions, with an Arctic Command (ARCCOM) serving as an ideal platform for these efforts in the High North.

Another future priority outlined in "NATO 2030" that directly relates to future Arctic operations is climate and green defense. All NATO members are expected to face significant security and economic impacts from climate change. NATO must consider how these changes will redefine geopolitical competition, freedom of navigation in the High North, and migration streams from the south, as these issues involve vital Allied interests. The potential consequences of climate change are likely to be felt throughout the alliance.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ARCTIC

The Arctic's vulnerability to climate change has turned it into a dynamic geopolitical arena. Russia is capitalizing on this change through infrastructure and security measures, aiming to maintain regional dominance. China also seeks recognition as a circumpolar power. Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine has heightened tensions in the region. Concerns arise about territorial integrity and the potential for coercion or force in an Arctic where borders are still being determined. Russia's investments in infrastructure and military activities, though claimed to be cooperative, raise questions about its intentions. It is crucial for nations to ensure deterrence, promote stability through dialogue, and protect their interests in this rapidly evolving region.



China, like Russia, seeks to expand its maritime power and economic influence in the Arctic through the establishment of a "polar silk road" as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. The main motivation behind this is to reduce China's dependence on global shipping chokepoints controlled by the United States, such as the Straits of Malacca and Gibraltar. China aims to decouple its economic power from perceived outside interference. The Northern Sea Route (NSR), controlled by a cooperative Russia, not only offers economic advantages but also serves as a significant step in asserting China's maritime independence and accelerating its rise as a major maritime power.

