

## The Arctic Race: Geopolitics at the Top of the World

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The Arctic, once a remote and inhospitable expanse, has rapidly transformed into a focal point of global geopolitical competition. This transformation of becoming an arena for power projection and geopolitical tension is driven by the dramatic retreat of sea ice due to climate change, unlocking new maritime routes and access to vast, previously untapped natural resources. Eight countries have territory in the Arctic Circle: Canada, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States. As the ice melts, the region's strategic significance grows. The region now offers unprecedented opportunities for resource extraction and maritime navigation, attracting significant interest from global powers. The opening of new shipping lanes, such as the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage, and the vast reserves of hydrocarbons and minerals beneath the Arctic seabed have intensified competition among key players<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Hadi Pradnyana. 2025. "Arctic Showdown: Global Power Struggles & ASEAN's Stake in the Ice." Modern Diplomacy. February 28, 2025. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/02/28/arctic-showdown-global-power-struggles-aseans-stake-in-the-ice/>.



Source: WorldAtlas

## Geography of the Arctic

The Arctic Circle begins at 66.5°N (north of the equator). It encompasses about 20 million square kilometers, or roughly 4% of the planet's surface. The landscape is dominated by a vast, mostly frozen ocean surrounded by landmasses and archipelagos, with the central Arctic Ocean covered by a perennial drifting polar ice pack that averages 2–3 meters in thickness<sup>3</sup>, though pressure ridges can be much thicker. The Arctic is home to unique ecosystems and indigenous peoples who have adapted to its harsh conditions, and its geography is further defined by natural hazards such as drifting ice islands, icebergs, and persistent environmental fragility. The Arctic region is very rich

<sup>3</sup> ://austria-forum.org, Austria-Forum https. 2016. "Geography." Global-Geography. 2016. [https://global-geography.org/af/Geography/Territories\\_Oceans\\_and\\_Islands/Arctic\\_Ocean/Geography](https://global-geography.org/af/Geography/Territories_Oceans_and_Islands/Arctic_Ocean/Geography).

on resources, oil, gas, mineral resources, abundant fisheries and freshwater resources. In addition to oil and gas resources, the world's largest coal mines are found in the Arctic, as well as iron, copper, lead, zinc, asbestos, tungsten, gold, diamond, phosphorus and other precious metal mines. With the development of tourism and scientific research, the Arctic also has significant exploitable hydroelectric resources. Nowadays, with the advancement of science technology and the trend of global warming, the exploitation of Arctic resources will enter a new phase.

### **Historical Context: From Cold War Buffer to Global Chessboard**

The Arctic's geopolitical importance is not a recent phenomenon. During the Cold War, it served as a strategic buffer between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both superpowers established military bases and deployed nuclear submarines to monitor and deter each other. The end of the Cold War reduced political pressures in the Arctic region and ushered in a period of relative stability, marked by international cooperation on environmental and scientific research, most notably through the Arctic Council-a forum that includes the eight Arctic states and indigenous organizations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hadi Pradnyana. 2025. "Arctic Showdown: Global Power Struggles & ASEAN's Stake in the Ice." Modern Diplomacy. February 28, 2025. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/02/28/arctic-showdown-global-power-struggles-aseans-stake-in-the-ice/>.



*Norway's Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre during a visit to Tallinn on November 24, 2023 said, "In Norway we want to see a high north with low tension." Source: Stenbock House*

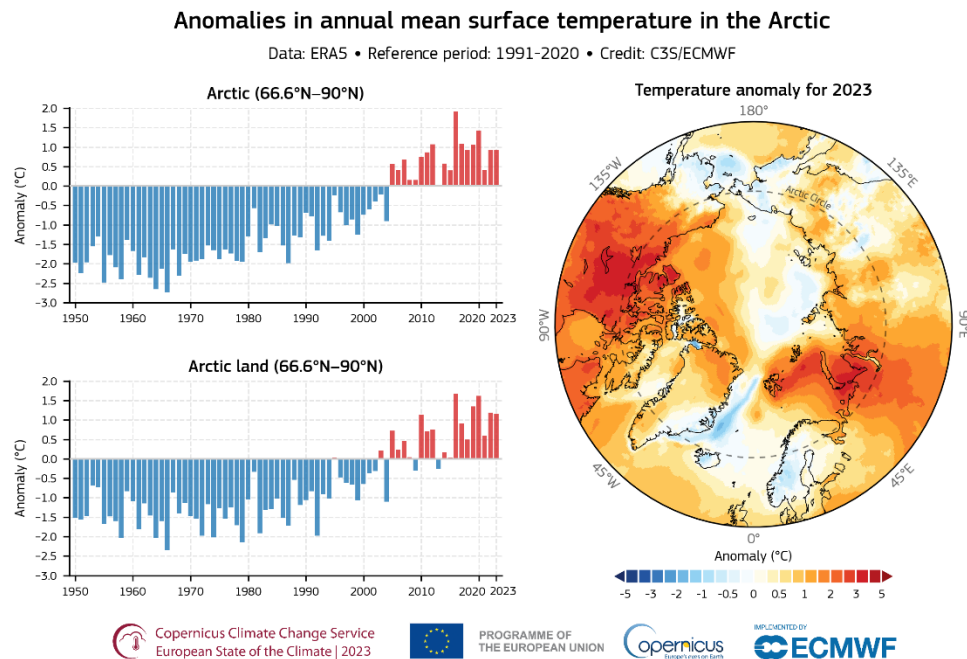
The spirit of the Norwegian concept, "High North, Low Tension" prevailed<sup>5</sup>. The strategic situation has mutated into a new configuration. By 2023, renewed great power competition around the world is manifest in the Arctic region. However, the onset of climate change in the early 21st century revitalized interest in the region, transforming it from a zone of scientific cooperation into a contested geopolitical arena.

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<sup>5</sup> Brimmer, Esther. 2023. "Changing Geopolitics in the Arctic." Council on Foreign Relations. July 18, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/report/changing-geopolitics-arctic-0>.

## Climate Change and the Opening of the Arctic

The most profound driver of the Arctic's geopolitical transformation is climate change. The steady thinning and shrinking of the Arctic ice cap, especially during the summer months, has made areas previously inaccessible now open to exploration and exploitation<sup>6</sup>.



This environmental shift has two main consequences:

**Resource Access:** The Arctic is believed to contain up to 25% of the world's undiscovered petroleum reserves, along with significant deposits of natural gas, minerals, and fish stocks. The potential for resource extraction has intensified competition among Arctic and non-Arctic states alike.

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<sup>6</sup> "Arctic Ocean Territorial Claims | EBSCO." 2020. EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | [www.ebsco.com](http://www.ebsco.com). 2020. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/law/arctic-ocean-territorial-claims>.

New Shipping Routes: Melting ice has opened up the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along Russia's coast and the Northwest Passage through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. These routes can significantly reduce shipping times between Asia, Europe, and North America, offering economic and strategic advantages.

## **The Main Actors and Their Strategies**

### Russia: The Arctic as a Strategic Lifeline

Russia's approach to the Arctic is shaped by geography, economics, and national security. The region is essential for Russia's economic prosperity-accounting for approximately 20% of its GDP and 30% of its exports, primarily through hydrocarbons<sup>7</sup>. The NSR is central to Moscow's strategy, potentially transforming Russia into a global maritime power by providing a shorter link between Europe and Asia.

To secure its interests, Russia has embarked on a massive militarization campaign by deploying advanced missile systems, building nuclear-powered icebreakers, and modernizing Arctic bases. By 2024, Russia had stationed over 100,000 troops and operated 40 icebreakers in the region, dwarfing the capabilities of other Arctic states<sup>8</sup>. This military buildup is designed to assert control over the NSR, protect resource interests, and deter NATO encroachment.

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<sup>7</sup> Hadi Pradnyana. 2025. "Arctic Showdown: Global Power Struggles & ASEAN's Stake in the Ice." Modern Diplomacy. February 28, 2025. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/02/28/arctic-showdown-global-power-struggles-aseans-stake-in-the-ice/>.

<sup>8</sup> Review of Arctic Geopolitics in 2025: A Comparative Analysis of Military Strategies, Capabilities, Sovereignty Claims among Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden. 2025. Debug Lies. March 9, 2025. [www.debuglies.com](http://www.debuglies.com).



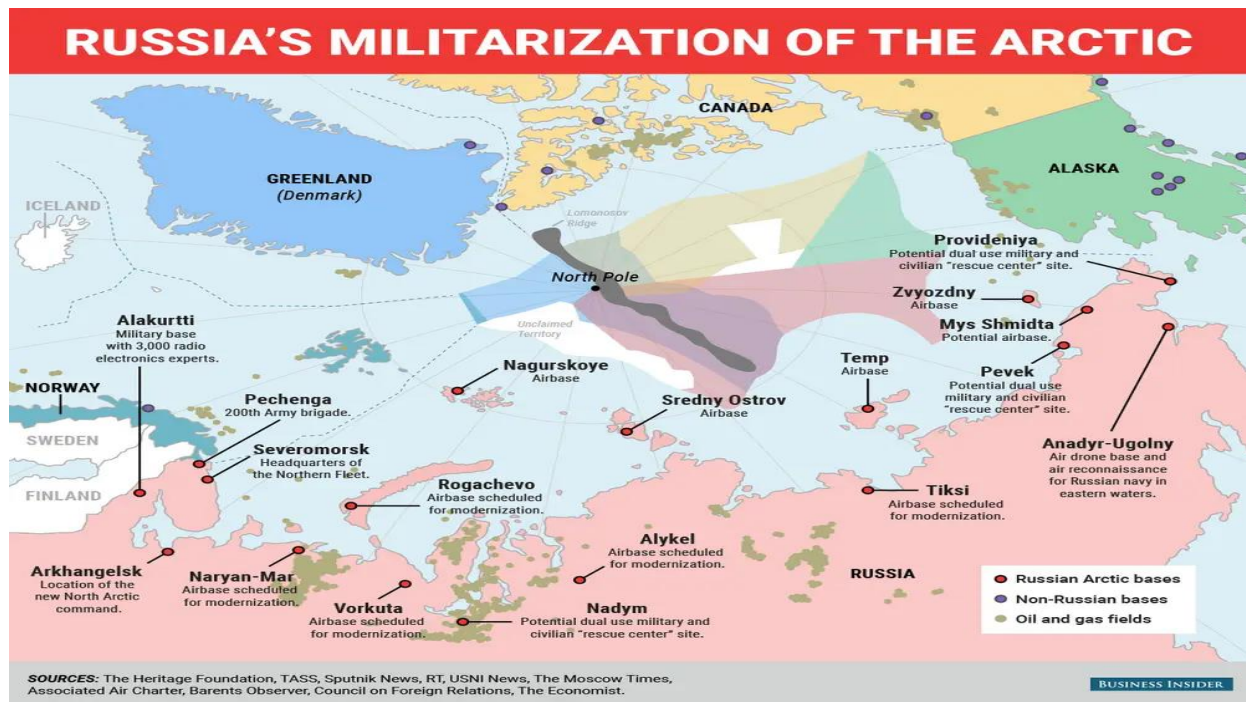


Chart of Russia's Militarization in the Arctic

### The United States: Security and Freedom of Navigation

For the United States, the Arctic is both a resource frontier and a security challenge. Alaska provides direct access to the Arctic Ocean and serves as a crucial military outpost for monitoring Russian activities. The U.S. emphasizes freedom of navigation in emerging shipping routes, aiming to counter both Russian and Chinese ambitions. Alaska's strategic location not only enables the U.S. to project power and monitor activities in the Arctic but also positions it at the crossroads of potential new maritime trade routes as sea ice recedes<sup>9</sup>. The U.S. Arctic policy has evolved significantly in recent years. The 2024 U.S. Arctic Strategy emphasizes four key pillars: security,

<sup>9</sup> Pechko, Kiel. 2025. "Rising Tensions and Shifting Strategies: The Evolving Dynamics of US Grand Strategy in the Arctic." The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies. January 7, 2025. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/rising-tensions-shifting-strategies-evolving-dynamics-us-grand-strategy-arctic/>.

climate change adaptation, sustainable development, and international governance, with a focus on protecting U.S. sovereignty, maintaining regional stability, and ensuring the Arctic remains a secure avenue for power projection<sup>10</sup>. While the U.S. Arctic military presence is smaller than Russia's, its focus is on missile defense and technological superiority, with significant investments in radar upgrades and joint exercises with NATO allies.



*Ice Camp Sargo in the Arctic Circle was the main stage for ICEX 2016, an exercise designed to research, test, and evaluate operational capabilities in the region; Photo by MC2 Tyler Thompson/U.S. Navy*

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<sup>10</sup> Ferdi. 2024. "2024 U.S. Arctic Strategy: Summary and Key Points." TASAM | 2024 U.S. Arctic Strategy: Summary and Key Points. TASAM - Turkish Asian Center for Strategic Studies. August 5, 2024. [https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/72624/2024\\_us\\_arctic\\_strategy\\_summary\\_and\\_key\\_points](https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/72624/2024_us_arctic_strategy_summary_and_key_points).



## Canada: Sovereignty and Incremental Buildup

Canada's role in Arctic geopolitics is shaped by its vast northern geography, strategic interests, and evolving security environment. With the world's longest Arctic coastline and a significant portion of its territory above the Arctic Circle, Canada regards the Arctic as central to its national identity and sovereignty. Canada's approach is defined by a dual imperative: asserting sovereignty over its Arctic territory and waters, while also engaging in multilateral cooperation to manage disputes and promote stability. In recent years, Canada has significantly increased its investments in Arctic defense and infrastructure. The government has committed to modernizing its military capabilities in the region, deploying six new Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships, up to 15 new River Class Destroyers, advanced drones, anti-submarine aircraft, and a new fleet of F-35A fighter jets. A \$38.6 billion plan to modernize NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) is underway, enhancing domain awareness through upgraded surveillance systems, space-based communications, and infrastructure improvements at northern airfields. An additional \$8.1 billion over the next five years, and \$73 billion over twenty years, has been allocated to bolster Arctic security, including the development of new bases and support hubs<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Canada, Global Affairs. 2022. "Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy." GAC. 2022. <https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/transparency-transparence/arctic-arctique/arctic-policy-politique-arctique.aspx?lang=eng>.



*Canadian soldiers during a combat exercise near Resolute Bay, Nunavut, in March*

*2024. Photographer: Louie Palu/Agence VU*

Canada's Arctic policy centers on asserting sovereignty and enhancing self-sufficiency. Recent investments include a 20-year, \$1.86 billion plan to build military support hubs across Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, aiming to improve logistics, airfields, and port facilities. Canada's approach is incremental, focusing on strengthening its presence and supporting indigenous communities, while also participating in joint exercises with NATO partners.

#### Nordic Countries and Denmark: NATO's Northern Flank

Norway, Denmark (via Greenland), Finland, and Sweden each pursue distinct Arctic strategies shaped by their geographic realities and alliance commitments. Norway has pivoted towards greater NATO integration, while Denmark's focus is on Greenland's strategic importance. Finland

and Sweden's recent NATO memberships have further strengthened the alliance's position in the Arctic, though their combined icebreaker fleets still lag behind Russia's capabilities.

### China: The "Near-Arctic" Power

Although not an Arctic state, China has declared itself a "near-Arctic" power, seeking a role in regional governance and resource development. China's interests include securing access to shipping routes and resources, participating in infrastructure projects, and influencing the rules of Arctic governance. It has actively engaged in multilateral agreements, such as the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, where it joined Arctic and non-Arctic states to regulate fishing in newly accessible waters<sup>12</sup>. Its growing presence is viewed with suspicion by both Arctic and non-Arctic states, adding another layer of complexity to the region's geopolitics.



*Chinese Icebreaker ship in the Arctic.*

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<sup>12</sup> Liu, Nengye. 2018. "How Has China Shaped Arctic Fisheries Governance?" Thediplomat.com. The Diplomat. June 20, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/how-has-china-shaped-arctic-fisheries-governance/>.

## **Territorial Claims and Legal Frameworks**

The retreat of Arctic Sea ice has triggered a diplomatic race to lay claim to underwater territories and resources. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) allows nations to extend their claims beyond 200 nautical miles if they can demonstrate that their continental shelf extends further. Russia, Canada, and Denmark have all submitted overlapping claims, particularly over the Lomonosov Ridge, a geological feature under the Arctic Ocean. The United States, which has not ratified UNCLOS, nonetheless asserts its own interests, while Norway, Sweden, and Finland also maintain potential claims<sup>13</sup>.

These overlapping claims remain unresolved, with military enhancements and strategic preparations underway as nations prepare for an increasingly accessible Arctic. The legal and diplomatic battles over sovereignty are closely tied to the prospect of petroleum exploration and control over new shipping lanes.

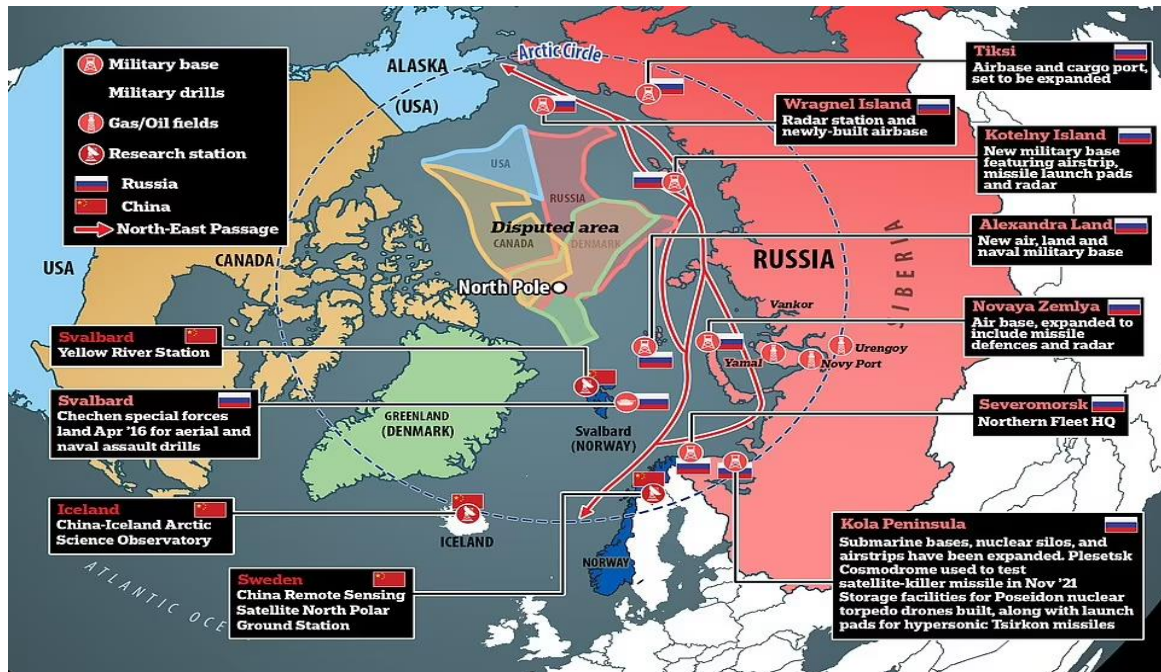
## **Militarization and Security Dilemmas**

The Arctic's militarization is a defining feature of the current geopolitical landscape. Russia's troop and naval dominance is countered by NATO's technological edge and collective exercises, such as Nordic Response and Operation Nanook, which involve tens of thousands of personnel from

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<sup>13</sup> "Arctic Ocean Territorial Claims | EBSCO." 2020. EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | [Www.ebsco.com](http://www.ebsco.com). 2020. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/law/arctic-ocean-territorial-claims>.

multiple nations<sup>14</sup>. The disparity in icebreaker fleets-Russia's 40 versus NATO's 17-highlights a persistent mobility gap, but NATO's control of 70% of the Arctic landmass provides a strategic counterweight.



The interplay of military strategies reveals a region at a tipping point. Russia's economic reliance on Arctic hydrocarbons drives its militarization, while Canada and the U.S. focus on deterrence and presence. The Nordic countries' integration into NATO strengthens the alliance's northern flank, but also raises the stakes in the event of a confrontation.

<sup>14</sup> Terrone, Donato. 2025. "Geopolitics of the Arctic Region: Mapping New Frontiers -." Iari.site. February 7, 2025. <https://iari.site/2025/02/07/geopolitics-of-the-arctic-region-mapping-new-frontiers/>.

## **Governance, Cooperation, and Indigenous Rights**

Despite the growing competition, the Arctic is also a zone of cooperation. The Arctic Council remains the primary forum for dialogue and collaboration on environmental protection, scientific research, and sustainable development. International bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union play crucial roles in mediating disputes and promoting cooperation.

The future of Arctic governance will depend on the ability of the international community to balance extractive uses with environmental protection and the rights of indigenous peoples, who have lived in the region for millennia<sup>15</sup>. The politics of climate change, environmental degradation, and resource management compel states to choose cooperation over conflict, but this potential scenario hinges on the effectiveness of global governance arrangements.

## **The Specter of Conflict and the Promise of Cooperation**

The Arctic's future is uncertain. On one hand, the region could become a primary source of international tension, with Russia and NATO scrambling to control strategic trade routes and resources. The militarization of the region, coupled with unresolved territorial disputes, raises the risk of confrontation, especially as global powers pursue their interests with increasing assertiveness.

On the other hand, the shared challenges of climate change and environmental degradation could compel states to cooperate, recognizing that the Arctic's fragile ecosystem requires collective

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<sup>15</sup> Terrone, Donato. 2025. "Geopolitics of the Arctic Region: Mapping New Frontiers -." Iari.site. February 7, 2025. <https://iari.site/2025/02/07/geopolitics-of-the-arctic-region-mapping-new-frontiers/>.



stewardship. The Arctic Council, the United Nations, and other international bodies will be crucial in preserving stability and promoting sustainable development.

### **Conclusion: The Arctic as a Test Case for Global Governance**

The Arctic race is a microcosm of broader global trends: the intersection of climate change, resource competition, and shifting power dynamics. As the region becomes more accessible, the stakes for Arctic and non-Arctic states alike will only grow. The ability of the international community to manage competing interests, protect the environment, and respect indigenous rights will determine whether the Arctic becomes a zone of conflict or cooperation.

In the coming decades, the Arctic will remain at the forefront of geopolitical attention—a place where the ambitions of great powers, the promise of untapped resources, and the imperatives of environmental stewardship converge at the top of the world.