

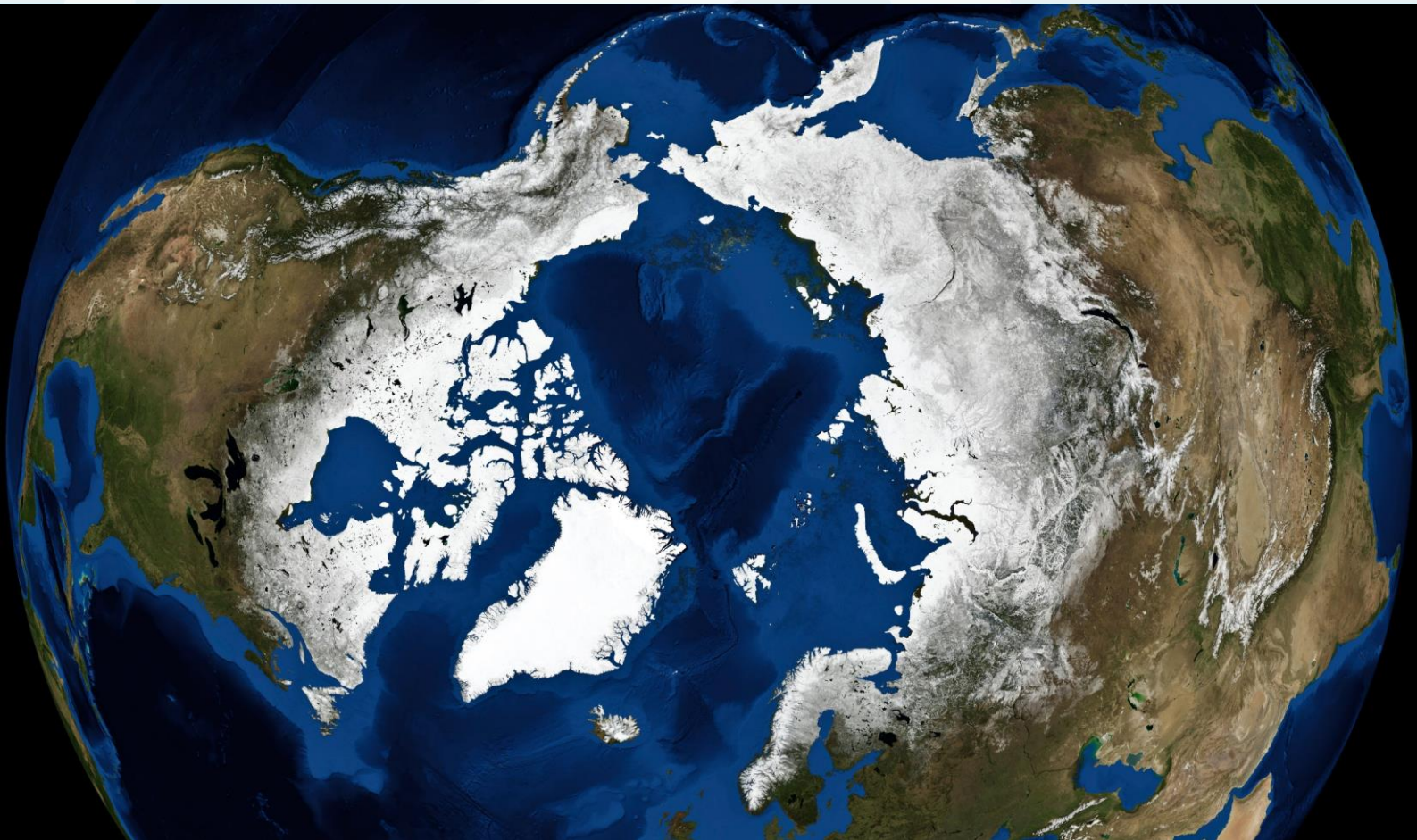


FNI REPORT 1|2024

ISELIN NÉMETH WINTHER AND ANDREAS ØSTHAGEN (EDS)

# The Big Picture of Arctic Geopolitics:

An actor-oriented analysis



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## Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has drastically altered the relationship with the West, and questions about what China's "neutral" stance in the West-Russia axis and the USA-China rivalry means for the Arctic are raised. Additionally, other actors, such as the EU and India, are increasingly showing an interest in the region. The tension in the north is primarily attributed to spillover from global power struggles and events taking place *outside* the Arctic, yet still influencing the regional dynamics. In this report, we aim to provide a concise overview of some of the key actors in Arctic geopolitics: Russia, the United States, China, the European Union, and India. First, we examine what has changed in the approach of these actors in the Arctic following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, exploring these changes in the context of geopolitics and security policy. We find that the actors' approach to the Arctic seems to be influenced not only by the geopolitical shifts resulting from Russia's aggression, but also by China's increased global significance, which, in turn, has regional impact in the Arctic. Second, we briefly consider the implications of a changed geopolitical landscape for Norway, finding that the most significant implication is linked to Norway's relationship with Russia, characterized by a more hostile and risk-prone neighboring country.

## Sammendrag

Russlands invasjon av Ukraina i 2022 har drastisk endret forholdet mellom Russland og Vesten. Samtidig stilles det spørsmål om hva Kinas «nøytrale» holdning i Russland-Vesten-aksen, samt rivaliseringen mellom USA og Kina, betyr for Arktis. I tillegg viser andre aktører, som EU og India, økende interesse for regionen. Spenningen i nord stammer i hovedsak fra overspill fra globale maktkamper og hendelser utenfor Arktis, men som likevel påvirker den regionale dynamikken. I denne rapporten har vi som mål å gi en oversikt over noen av de sentrale aktørene i arktisk geopolitikk, Russland, USA, Kina, EU og India. Først ser vi på hva som har endret seg i tilnærmingen til disse aktørene i Arktis etter Russlands invasjon av Ukraina i februar 2022, og utforsker disse endringene i lys av geopolitikk og sikkerhetspolitikk. Vi finner at aktørenes tilnærming i Arktis synes å bli påvirket ikke bare av det geopolitiske skifte som følge av Russlands aggresjon, men også av Kinas økte globale betydning, som igjen har regional innvirkning i Arktis. Til slutt vurderer vi kort hvilke konsekvenser det endrede geopolitiske landskapet har for Norge, og finner at den mest betydelige implikasjonen er knyttet til Norges forhold til Russland, som er preget av et mer fiendtlig og risikovillig naboland.

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# 1. Introduction

*By: Iselin Nemeth Winther, researcher at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, and Andreas Østhagen, senior researcher at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute.*

This report emerges as a contribution within the framework of the project “Arctic Geopolitics in a New Era”, led by the Fridtjof Nansen Institute and funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The overarching objective of the project is to enrich the ongoing discourse on security and geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic, concentrating notably on the Norwegian High North. The aim is to bring forth findings, nuances, and emerging trends to the public sphere and among academic communities and actors with a particular interest in Arctic geopolitics.

At the onset of the century, the Arctic region was put into the global spotlight. The renewed attention was driven in part by climate change and the prospect of natural resource exploration and ice-free shipping routes between Europe and Asia. Subsequently, the Arctic states turned their attention to their northern parts, while non-Arctic actors expressed their interest in the region. The changing dynamic of the region and arrival of new actors have at times led to an exaggerated perception that a “resource war” and “geopolitical game” are looming at the threshold of the Arctic region. Paradoxically, the region has simultaneously been considered shielded from geopolitical trends elsewhere in the world, leading to its characterization as “exceptional”. Neither of the two conflicting, somewhat simplified narratives has proven to stand firm. While there are relatively few causes of potential conflict originating within the region, Arctic security relations are heavily influenced by events unfolding elsewhere in the world.

Arctic relations are predicated on the larger dynamics between Russia and ‘the West’. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has drastically altered the relationship with the West, prompting Finland and Sweden to seek NATO membership, thus extending the alliance to seven out of eight Arctic countries. This rift between Russia and the West was apparent already before 2022, manifesting regionally through military presence and exercises, sharp rhetoric, and instances of provocations and suspected sabotage. Furthermore, questions about what China’s “neutral” stance in the West-Russia axis and the USA-China rivalry means for the Arctic are raised. While other actors, such as the EU and also India – with its Arctic policy from 2022 – are increasingly showing an interest not only in the scientific and economic dimensions of Arctic development, but also the geopolitical.

The tension in the north is primarily attributed to spillover from global power struggles and events taking place outside the Arctic, yet still influencing the regional dynamics. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the global actors shaping the geopolitical dynamics in the region.

This report aims to provide a concise overview of some of the key actors in Arctic geopolitics, namely Russia, the United States, the European Union, China and India. Our objective is not to delve into details of each actors’ interests or how they perceive their own interests, as such information is readily accessible through their Arctic strategies/policies. Instead, we first inquire: What, if anything, has changed in the approach of these actors in the Arctic following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and what is the nature of these shifts in terms of geopolitics and security policy? In the end, we briefly consider what implications these changes hold for Norway.

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## 2. Russia

*By: Erdem Lamazhapov, researcher at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, and Arild Moe, research professor at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute.*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has triggered a significant shift in the strategic calculations of the Arctic nations, particularly those bordering Russia, leading to renewed concerns about Moscow's intentions and actions in the region. The following part highlights important developments *inside* the Russian Arctic. What can they tell us about Russia's understanding of its security interests? According to official documents and rhetoric, little, if anything, has changed with the implementation of Russia's ambitious plans for Arctic development. But in reality, developments are strongly affected by the war.

### 2.1 Hydrocarbons

Russia's Arctic economy is dominated by production and export of hydrocarbons. Some 90 per cent of Russian gas production takes place in Northwestern Siberia. In the course of 2022, the export volume of pipeline gas to Europe fell by some 80 per cent and in 2023, income plummeted. The shortfall in revenue creates serious financial problems for Gazprom, the state dominated gas company, and there are no alternative markets for this gas since the pipelines only connects with western Russia and Europe. As a consequence, production has to be cut, with potential negative social repercussions in the production areas.

Ironically, liquefied natural gas – LNG - produced in the same region but transported by ship, enjoyed a boom in Europe. Almost all the output from Yamal LNG in 2022 was sold there and the same has been the case in 2023. The majority owner of this project, the privately owned gas company Novatek – along with foreign partners – earned huge windfall profits because of the extraordinary high gas prices. Western countries did not introduce sanctions against Russian gas exports, but they have restricted sales of technology to LNG projects. This delayed the construction, but it did not stop Novatek going ahead with a second large LNG project – Arctic LNG 2 – expected to start producing early 2024. In November 2023, the United States announced sanctions against sales from this particular project. Thus, there are uncertainties about both technology and market access as well as financing of Russian LNG, an industry which had been given the highest priority by the Russian government.

Further east, on the Taymyr peninsula, the state-dominated oil company Rosneft is developing what was set to be the biggest industrial project in the Arctic – the Vostok oil project. The project is in need of finance and Rosneft together with the government is actively courting Chinese investors. The profitability of the project will be strongly affected by the longevity and effectiveness of sanctions targeting sea-born Russian oil.

### 2.2 Northern Sea Route

The Northern Sea Route (NSR) remains an essential transport corridor in the eyes of the Russian state, possessing geopolitical and geoeconomic significance, in addition to commercial potential. As part of Russia's strategy in the Arctic, President Putin set the goal of transporting

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80 million tons of cargo by 2024, which was unrealistic from the outset. International transit traffic has always been marginal on the NSR, but in 2022, due to uncertainty caused of the sanctions imposed on Russia, it came to nearly a complete halt. It was also very little in 2023, but a new Chinese company started a small-scale container route. Total volume in 2023 is expected to be around 37 million tons, consisting mainly of LNG and oil shipments.

Increased reliance on the NSR for oil transport can be seen as a result of the new geopolitical reality. Oil previously destined for Western markets from Arctic fields, such as Novy Port, Varandey and Prirazlomnoye has been re-routed to Asia via the NSR. Russia has also sent tankers with oil from terminals in the Baltic Sea via NSR. According to newspaper Kommersant, 1.5 million tons of oil were shipped this way to China in 2023. Ever since the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, environmental safety of oil shipments in the Arctic has been a serious concern. Shipment of oil is subject to regulations under the IMO's Polar Code. Russia's use of vessels without ice class for some of the transport last summer caused concern among environmental groups.

### 2.3 Arctic environment/climate: the biggest loser

The Russian Hydrometeorological Service's third climate change assessment report (2022) underlines the vulnerability of the Russian Arctic to climatic changes and highlights the need for policy response to address various risks associated with climate change. Historically, Russia has been a norm-taker in the field of climate action and environmental protection, but since the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal, it has strived to develop a more independent climate policy. Increasing challenges for Russian-Western scientific cooperation has led to further weakening of already marginalized academic debates on climate change policy. Considering a high environmental risk willingness in Russian economic operations in the Arctic, environmental and climatic challenges will likely become aggravated in the years to come.

### 2.4 Russia and China

China is increasingly seen as the solution to problems stemming from the estrangement of Russia from western markets. Russia's partnership with China was set high on the agenda already after the "pivot to the East" following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, but Russia remained largely sceptical to Chinese intentions in the Arctic. Following February 2022, Russia has declared its wish to intensify cooperation with China, such as setting up a "joint working body for the Northern Sea Route". This represents a significant geopolitical change for Russia which traditionally defines control of the Northern Sea Route as its national prerogative, and the change reflects Russia's increased reliance on China as its strategic partner, also in the Arctic region.

### 2.5 Conclusion

Despite the lack of an official acknowledgement of changes to Russia's geopolitical environment as a result of its war on Ukraine, Russian Arctic strategy has undergone significant adjustments. First, Russia's exports of hydrocarbons have been partially re-routed to Asian markets. Second, it seems the war has led to more environmentally risky projects being realised in the Russian Arctic. Third, Russia has become less sensitive about allowing China to take a larger role in the Arctic.



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Over the longer term, progress in Russia's development of the Arctic is dependent on cooperation, if not with western countries, then with China. There was some speculation whether Russia would withdraw from the Arctic Council following the western members' suspension of cooperation with Russia in March 2022. Establishment of alternative fora were mulled, but Russia decided to stay on, even if new arrangements for its participation are not yet clear. Russia has nothing to lose and perhaps something to win from participation in multilateral fora. Russia did, however, formally withdraw from the Barents Council, marking the final nail in the coffin of a cooperation promoted by Norway since its establishment in the early 1990s.

Whereas Russia-NATO tensions in Europe are very high, paradoxically Russia's military preparedness in the Arctic has been reduced, as a significant share of land forces on the Kola peninsula were deployed in Ukraine. It also seems that both Russian and western naval operations in the European Arctic have been more restrained to avoid incidents. On the strategic level, Russia is reassessing its position with Finland and Sweden in NATO and the possibility of US military presence near its borders. A cooperation agreement between Russian and Chinese coast guards signed in Murmansk does not have any immediate military significance, but is probably meant to signal that military cooperation in the Arctic between the two countries is not ruled out.

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## 3. The United States

*By: Troy Bouffard, director for Center for Arctic Security and Resilience, and Andreas Østhagen, senior researcher at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute.*

For the United States, the Arctic's importance in terms of security and geopolitical affairs has been on the rise. The State of Alaska continue to inform the lower 48 of critical knowledge and policy recommendations, although Arctic issues challenge the understanding and application of both U.S. soft- and hard-power competence.

### 3.1 Current developments in US Policy

The United States has an updated suite of Arctic strategies and policies published in alignment with national security priorities. The Department of Defense Arctic Strategy is due in early 2024 and will inform the next versions of joint and service component strategies likely to follow, all part of a suite of national-level strategies. With the Arctic as part of the National Security Strategy for the first time, such policies can now advance to the funded requirements phase involving congressional governance consideration. Here it is vital remember that the United States – as the lone global superpower – is always managing its interests from a world-wide context, where the Arctic is but one of many important regions, others often more critical.

### 3.2 Concerns in Alaska / Homeland Defence

Often forgotten by the 'lower 48', the US' largest state has specific security challenges that are of both local and national concern. The Arctic as a U.S. national security priority offers both military challenges and opportunities. However, the current U.S. DOD Arctic enterprise remains less than optimal, or in some cases, even nominal. Key challenges involve legacy missions as well as command relationship issues.

The post-Cold War legacy continuing mission of North American defense tends to distract from the developing requirements for Arctic operational capabilities. The U.S. Air Force and Navy have served for decades as the DOD leads for northern-related Cold War defense, which involved an effective understanding of the Arctic as an avenue of approach for the primary threats. That responsibility is managed by different strategies and resources though, and must be understood as separate and distinct from the new strategies and resource requirements needed to achieve the emerging definitions of Arctic operational capabilities.

The shared boundary with Russia across the Bering Strait and Sea entails proximity to Russian strategic forces in the Russian Far East. The more tense the relations between Russia and the US, the greater the need for the Air Force to be able to control and respond to Russian airborne activity across the Bering Strait. Moreover, Russia is increasingly seeing the whole Arctic coast-line – stretching from Norway in West Europe to the shores of the Aleutian Islands in Far East – as a continuous strategic domain.

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Alaska's role in modernizing North American defense and infrastructure needs should involve efficiency in achieving deterrence and prevention, but not to the detriment of developing requirements involving a new era of Arctic operational capabilities. Effective military readiness will be measured by joint multi-domain, precision-based combined arms warfare capabilities, where Russia had been significantly more capable mainly because of Arctic land forces developments but has suffered massive setbacks because of the war in Ukraine. As a result, the United States can now take advantage of the opportunity to close those specific Arctic military capability gaps and achieve higher levels of deterrence and prevention from adversarial threats.

The Arctic is currently divided between three geographic combatant commands according to the DOD Unified Command Plan, including USNORTHCOM (homeland), USEUCOM (Europe), and USINDOPACOM (Pacific).

When thinking about the newer Arctic operational requirements, this legacy situation is straining the ability to have a establish a more organic structure to manage the mission. For example, DOD's first unit in history to be designated to the region, the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division (Arctic), is owned by USINDOPACOM, as have the previous U.S. Army units in Alaska. For USINDOPACOM though, the Arctic is not a priority mission, and rightly so, as it is responsible for the top national security threat defined by the United States: China. Moreover, USNORTHCOM remains appropriately focused on homeland defense, whereas current potential for crisis or conflict in the Arctic is likely to occur in the European Arctic, where forces like those in 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne can be expected to mobilize and deploy for support under USEUCOM. The issue is thinking about how best to establish effective prevention and deterrence from adversarial threats that accomplishes both homeland defense as well as force projection capabilities.

With the increasing ice-melting north of the Bering Strait and expectations of increased civilian and military traffic in the area, Russia has also increased military exercise activity to Alaska – angering Alaskan fishers. Additionally, Alaska is experiencing what most often is thought about when thinking of Arctic security, i.e., the immediate effects of coastal erosion, changing ice conditions and the need to adapt both local communities and emergency response capacities. Here, the U.S. Coast Guard faces an increase in 'soft' security challenges, ranging from emergency response to fisheries inspections. In consequence, three polar security cutters are being built with the first ship set to arrive in 2025, after the Coast Guard had been calling for new assets for more than a decade.

### 3.3 Strategic concerns – China / Russia

The second challenge reverts to the focus on Russia and China – not only in the Arctic but in US global posture write large. While the commander of the U.S. Northern Command stated that Russia remains the top 'acute' threat to the United States, the U.S. National Security Strategy names China as the top 'pacing' threat. Such positions do not represent a conflict, but rather clarifies how Russia's military threat to the United States now is different than the developing diplomatic and economic threat of China. The Chinese threat has often not been linked to a specific Chinese action in the North, but instead it has emerged as a consequence of the wider systemic rivalry between the United States and China, as China is expanding both its military power and global outreach.

Meanwhile, both Russia and China maintain significant Arctic interests, sometimes combined, and the United States must be diligent to secure an effective understanding of adversarial Arctic

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influence and direction from within and outside the Arctic, in balance with the rest of U.S global interests. The U.S. Arctic position has both improved and altered negatively. While Russia remains busy with its war in Ukraine, most of the Kremlin's Arctic strategic developments have suffered throughout all sectors, emphasized by the previous impressive advancements that have been severely degraded in support of Moscow's failing priorities elsewhere. Meanwhile, China has found new opportunity because of Russia towards its number one Arctic objective: gain access and influence on Arctic governance. For now, China continues to entrench itself in current efforts that serve the more immediate needs involving energy sources and shipping opportunities.

### 3.4 The challenge

The United States has proven effective at publishing Arctic strategies and policies, especially as of October 2022, when the White House National Strategy for the Arctic region and inaugural Department of Energy Arctic Strategy as well as updated Arctic content in the National Defense Strategy and first ever Arctic language in the National Security Strategy. However, the core challenge for the U.S. in the Arctic is implementation of such national guidance and intent. Strategies are often followed by identifying and defining requirements, which leads to the most important and difficult step: resourcing. Without funding, strategies have little meaning. Moreover, fiscal stability is just as critical, where programs must be at least nominally funded or risk collapse, where commitment must be solid. Moreover, there are some 'soft security' Arctic challenges that would benefit from efforts involving cooperation and confidence building where Russia is included. Civil and military security are not mutually exclusive necessarily, especially in a region where unilateral solutions are the least preferred options.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In a US context, the Arctic is moving from a niche to a major security concern that has a unique mix of the local, regional, and global. This is increasingly reflected in the way the US government discusses and describes its Arctic security approach. The continuing difficulty of the Arctic is the proactive nature of most major commitments, where spending time, money and effort in a relatively stable region is extraordinarily challenging when real problems consume all attention. Yet, the Arctic region is increasingly becoming part of the globalized world where known environmentally-related challenges and changes need to be properly understood and addressed. For the United States, the whole-of-government approach remains the most enduring way to managing Arctic interests and issues. Geopolitically, the United States can expect to take on an increased leadership role.

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## 4. China

*By: Gørild Heggelund, research professor at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, and Iselin Stensdal, researcher at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute.*

After then US state secretary Mike Pompeo's thunderous speech in 2019, where he targeted China and Russia, there was little doubt that geopolitics well beyond the Arctic also directed the US view of the Arctic. Hence, China's room of maneuver in the Arctic was affected accordingly; the US allies would also be more skeptical to Arctic cooperation with China. That left only one Arctic country to cooperate with further: Russia. However, changing geopolitics since Russia's invasion of Ukraine have had impact on China, and made its Arctic engagement more challenging. Despite declarations of friendship with no limits in a joint statement 4 Feb 2022,<sup>1</sup> we have observed that the cooperation is not without challenges, and there have been shifts towards a deteriorating relationship since the invasion. We here note three developments:

### 4.1 Shipping: not so smooth sailing

A shift has happened in relation to the *Polar Silk Road*. The Polar Silk Road was jointly announced by Russia and China in 2017. It came as a suggestion by Russia who saw opportunities for Chinese investments along its Northern Sea Route. Furthermore, China incorporated the Polar Silk Road into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017. Expectations of Chinese investment in the Polar Silk Road and the Northern Sea Route were high at the time. China nevertheless expressed in its 2018 Arctic Policy (White Paper) the desire to cooperate with any country on developing transportation routes in the Arctic, not just Russia. While being a joint announcement, the Polar Silk Road as part of the Chinese BRI is not limited to the Russian Northern Sea Route, but also include the trans-ocean route, and the north-west passage.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, projects along the Northern Sea Route have not materialized despite fine speeches from the two countries' leaders. Reasons may be a lack of trust between the nations on lower levels as well economic profitability. Recently, the Polar Silk Road seems to have disappeared from Sino-Russian negotiations, although development of transport corridors remains on the agenda. In particular, the development of the Polar Silk Road since 2022 seems to have slowed down drastically as the numbers show.

Between 2013 and 2021, the state-owned China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) Shipping Specialized Carriers arranged 42 voyages on the Northern Sea Route with 33 vessels, 14 of which were carried out with icebreaker escort. It is ironic that Russia's war on Ukraine has impacted on shipping in the Northern Sea Route. In 2022, for fear of secondary sanctions and high costs, not a single COSCO or Chinese-owned ship has sailed along the Northern Sea Route. In 2023, there were no COSCO sailings, only a handful of sailings from other smaller shipping companies.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>

<sup>2</sup> <https://hakaimagazine.com/videos-visuals/in-graphic-detail-the-polar-silk-route/>

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With cooperation across the Arctic becoming more difficult, the Polar Silk Road seems to be gradually waning.

Yet, there has been some movement in the transport between Russia and China on the Northern Sea Route due to increasing direct trade between China and Russia. The privately owned Chinese company Newnew (Xinxin) has established a container route along the Polar Silk Road this year. Newnew's container ships have made a few transits in 2023, and the Newnew Polar Bear's anchor was found close to the Baltic connector pipeline between Finland and Estonia, after it was leaking, resulting in a sudden drop in pressure on October 8, 2023. While one can only speculate about intent, it seems to us that the most likely explanation is that it was a mistake.

## 4.2 LNG still going strong

The *energy cooperation* in the past year has not suffered between the two countries. China has invested in projects in the Arctic under the umbrella of the Polar Silk Road, the most important project being Yamal LNG. Production commenced in 2017, and execution and operation of the project is regarded as successful. Here China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Chinese Silk Road Fund have a combined 30 percent stake. Chinese firms supplied much of the equipment.

China has not withdrawn from Yamal's second phase Arctic LNG 2. China's most important role in the project is as a production supplier. Arctic LNG 2 modules are assembled in several factories in China, then they are sent to Murmansk, and from there to the Arctic LNG 2 area in the Arctic. For fear of secondary sanctions, China has been cautious. Strengthening of energy cooperation was on the agenda when the Russian Prime Minister visited China (Dec 2023). China is now Russia's biggest energy buyer. Compared with 2022 averages, China's imports from Russia increased by 23% (400,000 b/d). China needs gas as a bridging fuel to its carbon neutral transition, and as such LNG from the Arctic is welcome.

## 4.3 China rising

The most significant shift in the past year may be *China's growing power* and stronger position vis-à-vis Russia. With Russia's growing isolation, the country is increasingly looking to and relying on China for both economic and political cooperation. For 13 consecutive years, China has been Russia's largest trading partner. While the two leaders are supporting each other, such as Putin attending the BRI Forum held this October, having patroned all three of them, and Xi pointing to that Putin was the first foreign leader he visited after becoming President in 2013<sup>3</sup>, the power imbalances are beginning to show. One example is the ongoing discussions about the construction of the Power of Siberia 2 natural gas pipeline. China has bargaining leverage over Russia, and discussions have progressed slowly as per China's interests, against a very eager Russia. Another examples of letting China gain a further foothold in the Arctic is that China and Russia have discussed bilateral cooperation in the Arctic, also within the Arctic Council. As the two countries continue their delicate dance, it is not just a question of how far in Russia will let China, but also how much China is willing to engage a Russia for fear of risking collaborations with other countries.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/202303/t20230320\\_11044359.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/202303/t20230320_11044359.html)

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## 4.4 Conclusion

In sum, in the past year there were shifts in China's Arctic activities. The Polar Silk Road has slowed down since 2022. Energy cooperation with Russia (LNG) is still going strong. China is nevertheless more careful in its approach to cooperation with Russia in the Arctic for fear of secondary sanctions due to Russia's war in Ukraine. Russia's increasing isolation has resulted in growing reliance on China for both economic and political cooperation. The coming year(s) will show whether China will take advantage of the opening to get a stronger foothold in the Arctic.

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## 5. The European Union

*By: Andreas Raspotnik, senior researcher at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute and Adam Stepien, researcher at the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland.*

February 2022 was a turning point in European history and might also herald the start of a historical turning point for the European Union. The return of hard power considerations at the EU's borders have also been forcing the European Union to think in geopolitical terms. While this is a complex task in itself, it becomes even more complicated in the Arctic context.

Arctic security and cooperation are in flux and the European Union is a complicated geopolitical creature, constantly in the process of defining what kind of geopolitical actor it wants to be (or is allowed to be by its Member States). The EU is not a hard security actor. The special nature of the EU in the international context as well as the complicated division of competences between the EU and its Member States make the EU a unique global/Arctic actor. Although the EU has competences in many policies pertaining to the Arctic – either exclusive, shared or complementary with the Member States – foreign and security policy remains a policy domain very much dominated by the 27 Member States.

From an EU-Arctic perspective this set-up becomes even more complex as Arctic-related concerns reside in Brussels within the realm of a soft (security) policy – not written into the Treaties, with no distinct budget line and no set rule book on how to contribute to Arctic security. What does that mean for an Arctic security situation that is currently in flux?

Over the past decade, the EU has felt a need to adapt its posture on the increasingly conflicted world stage. However, the Arctic has hardly fit into the mold of emerging European strategic and security considerations. For the past two decades, the EU has rather timidly covered Arctic hard security matters, and has only lightly touched the region in the 2022 Strategic Compass<sup>4</sup> – to name one example. EU positions and actions of relevance to Arctic security have included the strengthening of low-level regional and multilateral cooperation, the adherence to an international legal order and the vision of a cooperative Arctic that is not affected by any global spill-over effects.

Moreover, the EU's Arctic geography – three EU Member States being Arctic states, as well as the Union's close relationships with Iceland and Norway – has never translated into a clear EU Arctic strategy that would take account of the security concerns of these countries, including how to manage their Arctic security relations with Russia and increasingly with China. Notwithstanding, if we consider the EU's geopolitical ambitions together with its capabilities and competences, three interconnected policy areas might have the potential for stronger Arctic security engagement—energy/resource security, maritime security and space security.

### 5.1 Energy and resource security

First, energy and resource security. Even since before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the European Green Deal has been considered an EU tool for strategic engagement in the Arctic, with profound

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<sup>4</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>



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consequences for the Russian Federation – both on fossil fuels as well as energy-intensive exports, such as metals, chemicals and fertilizers. Developments over the past two years have produced a rather complex picture.

While a broad range of economic sanctions against Russia have led the EU to become less connected to Russia in economic terms, European countries continue to import Russian Arctic liquefied natural gas at record levels. Similarly, imports of Norwegian hydrocarbons have gained a stronger economic significance for the EU. As such, natural gas remains a *de facto* transitional fuel for major sectors of EU economy. Accordingly, the promotion of the 2021 EU call for considering a ban on importing hydrocarbons from newly developed Arctic reserves becomes unattainable<sup>5</sup>, even if EU energy strategies adopted since February 2022 increasingly focus on boosting renewables.

With respect to critical minerals, the EU has also set ambitious goals to increase European production and processing of minerals, and limit its dependence on single external suppliers for particular raw materials, mainly China. The Arctic will be important both with respect to domestic production in the European Arctic and increasing diversification through resource trade with Canada, Greenland, Norway and the United States.

## 5.2 Maritim security

Second, maritime security. Maritime transportation, fisheries, deep-sea-mining – the EU, with its extensive set of legal and financial competencies and capabilities, could play a stronger role in this particular Arctic security setting.

Today, the EU has major stakes in the maritime domain as its economy and trade are dependent on maritime transportation. The related security activities comprise: keeping international shipping lanes secure and seafarers safe as well as supporting Member States' interests in related marine issues, such as fisheries and marine protection. The EU has already been active with respect to Arctic fisheries (e.g. Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement) or shipping (e.g. Polar Code). Moreover, the EU can be expected to be among vocal proponents of establishing maritime protected areas in the Arctic, e.g. for the still ice-covered waters around the North Pole.

While the EU had been critical of the Norwegian approach to fisheries governance around Svalbard, the changed geopolitical situation encouraged both sides to reach a political resolution. However, the questions related to fisheries around Svalbard – and other differing interpretations of the Svalbard Treaty – will continue to carry risk of disputes between Norway and Russia, with consequences also for the European Union.

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<https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Joint%20Communication%20on%20a%20stronger%20EU%20engagement%20for%20a%20peaceful%2C%20sustainable%20and%20prosperous%20Arctic.pdf.pdf>

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### 5.3 Space security

Third, space security. Space is increasingly recognized as a strategic domain and contested area, particularly vis-à-vis China-U.S. strategic competition. This is also the case for the European Union, which issued its first Space Strategy for Security and Defence in March 2023.<sup>6</sup>

Space infrastructure and services, such as Galileo or Copernicus, are critical for the strategic autonomy of the EU and relevant for a range of security matters, from maritime safety, environmental monitoring, border management, telecommunications to civil protection and crisis management. Many activities in the Arctic, especially of maritime nature, rely on remote sensing, earth observation and satellite surveillance.

Furthermore, increasing Chinese ambitions and space cooperation efforts between China and Russia add to EU concerns and are likely to also have Arctic implications. Similarly, threats to subsea communications infrastructure – as highlighted by the recent damage to the cable connecting Finland and Estonia or the Svalbard cable disruption – have made European leaders more aware of a Northern/Arctic context of such threats.

### 5.4 Conclusion

To sum up, the EU – together with its Member States – has not sharpened its security lens towards the Arctic since February 2022. However, if the EU wants to more comprehensively reflect on its future role as a security and geopolitical actor, the Arctic, and the Union's related relationship with Russian and increasingly China, needs to play a key role, particularly with respect to energy and resources, maritime affairs as well as space.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-space-strategy-security-and-defence-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-space-strategy-security-and-defence-0_en)

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## 6. India

*By: Bipandeep Sharma, research analyst at Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses.*

India released its first Arctic Policy white paper in March 2022. India's policy document rests on six key pillars that include; 1. Science and Research 2. Climate and Environmental Protection 3. Economic and Human Development 4. Transportation and Connectivity 5. Governance and International Cooperation and 6. National Capacity Building.<sup>7</sup> Though pursuits in 'Arctic Science' and studying the region from multiple scientific perspectives remain to be the key fulcrum of India's engagements in the region, India remains concerned with the new evolving geopolitical realities in the Arctic. The suspension of the Arctic Council in 2022, followed by limited resumption of cooperation in the working groups of the council under Norway's chairship, has significantly impacted the pace of scientific research and the already limited space for observers and non-Arctic states like India in the Arctic.

### 6.1 Key geopolitical concerns

In geo-strategic contexts, Russia's isolation in the Arctic has triggered its enhanced geo-economic and geopolitical cooperation with China. This growing cooperation is not only seen with concern in the West, but India equally views Russia's increasing dependency on China with serious concerns. The increasing scales and sizes of annual military exercises, the incidents of electronic interferences and increasing accounts of air space violations through regular patrols and reconnaissance aircraft flights on either side, are some of the few instances of emerging greater geopolitical insecurities in the Arctic. Therefore, analysing the present and predicting the near future geopolitical realities between Russia and the other Arctic states, India has maintained its position of refraining from joining any geopolitical alignments in the Arctic. In this widening East-West divide, India has rather adopted for enhancing its independent bilateral engagements with all the eight Arctic States in the region.

Sidelining Russian researchers and freezing financial support to projects involving Russia has further raised speculations regarding Russia's possible exits from the council. Any such future split raises concerns for Asian states regarding the future legitimacy of Arctic decision-making and governance on various issues of common global concerns. Impositions of economic sanctions against Russia, Western company's exits from multiple hydrocarbon projects involving Russia in the Arctic, expansion of the NATO alliance and escalated thresholds of militarization on both sides in the Arctic, are seen with concern in Indian policy spheres as some of these bears direct and indirect implications for India's interests.

### 6.2 Environmental Vulnerabilities

India remains directly vulnerable to the environmental transitions in the Arctic, which bears linkages with the Indian annual monsoons and weather system on which the majority of the country's agriculture output depends. Any variation in the Indian annual monsoon system could potentially pose serious implications for India's food security and overall economy.

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<sup>7</sup> '[India's Arctic Policy: Building a Partnership for Sustainable Development](#)', Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India, 17 March 2022.

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Studying the region from an environmental perspective therefore remains essential for Indian scientists and despite limited cooperation, India has been consistent in its approach to addressing these issues of environmental and climate change concerns. Indian researchers and scientific communities are of the view that the Arctic environmental challenges pose real existential threats to global mankind and have been presently overshadowed by powerful discourses of traditional geopolitics.

### 6.3 Rising Energy demands

In order to sustain the growing demands of the large Indian population and growing Indian industry, Arctic hydrocarbons and other potential reserves of resources remain important for India. India's interest therefore naturally aligns with all those Arctic states where India envisions existing opportunities for securing its long-term energy and other resource needs. India has a history of strong bilateral relations with Russia. Post Russia-Ukraine war, the India-Russia economic partnership reached new highs. This was a result of India's import of large volumes of crude from the Russian High North and its Far East regions post imposition of Western sanctions, was offered to India at heavily discounted prices and other favorable conditions. It is important to highlight that post European ban on the imports of Russian oil, various reports suggested that India mainly catered to the European high demands of diesel and jet fuel. Similarly, Indian shipments of vacuum gas oil (VGO) to United States also witnessed a significant uptick.

### 6.4 Connectivity

Shipping via the Northern Sea Route (NSR) though seems promising from some Asian states' viewpoints, but opening up of NSR does not offer much prospects for India in terms of shipping distance, travel time and financial costs. India the other hand, through its 'Act Far-East' policy,<sup>8</sup> seeks to connect India's Eastern ports with the Russian Far East regions in the Arctic to provide itself with alternative energy sources and supply lines. Despite India's growing need for hydrocarbons, India's calls for sustainable exploration and exploitation of these resources has remained persistent. India has made significant progress in transitioning towards clean and green technologies where its engagements with Norway and other Nordic states have remained crucial.<sup>9</sup>

### 6.5 Conclusion: India's possible role in the ongoing scenario

Against the backdrop of these multiple regional geopolitical developments in the Arctic, India without taking sides, seeks a re-return of dialogue in the region. Arctic states need to find some measures for the resumption of suspended cooperation in the region where the initial revival in scientific and academic collaborations could act as re-starting pointers (bottom-up approach). India's strong bilateral relations with all the Arctic states could possibly be used as a bridge to revive some level of lost cooperation between these states, where the support of other Asian states could further supplement such initiative. It is important to highlight that despite optimism, India has always emphasized states on respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity

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<sup>8</sup> 'English Translation of Address by Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi at the plenary session of the Eastern Economic Forum 2022', Press Information Bureau, 7 September 2022.

<sup>9</sup> '2nd India-Nordic Summit', Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 4 May 2022.

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of each other and has called for the peaceful resolution of disputes as per the existing international mechanisms.

India through its Arctic Policy and other forums has consistently raised its voice for Arctic indigenous communities, that currently remain most vulnerable to climate change and ongoing geopolitical complexities of states. Another area where India's contribution in the Arctic could make a considerable difference is with regard to India's capabilities in outer space. India's expertise in launching cost-effective satellites in outer space can be used by Arctic states to fill the existing gaps in satellites in outer space for the region. This can provide effective satellite-enabled communications and digital connectivity in the Arctic which can act as an important factor in enhancing socio-economic conditions in the region.

Lastly, India has always acknowledged Norway's role in promoting Arctic Science. India's own scientific research and academic collaborations with Norway in the Arctic outnumber all other Arctic states in the region. India remains optimistic that Norway under its chairship of the Arctic Council would initially at least try to keep the Council alive by adopting measures of a balanced approach that differentiate "science" from "active geopolitics" in the region (as outlined in its Arctic Council Chairship document)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Norway's Chairship Arctic Council 2023-2025', Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 March 2023.

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## 7. Concluding Remarks

*By: Iselin Németh Winther, researcher at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, and Andreas Østhagen, senior researcher at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute.*

The Arctic in the 21st century is transforming from a relatively uneventful space in global geopolitical affairs, to a domain increasingly influenced by great power politics. It is the part of the globe that is most rapidly experiencing the effects of climate change, while as a geopolitical region it includes Russia, the US, Canada and the Nordic countries. Other actors are also increasingly showing an interest in Arctic geopolitics, like the EU, China and even India.

Russia's war against Ukraine and the subsequent strengthening of NATO have reshaped the geopolitical landscape globally, as well as in the Arctic. Particularly in the European part of the Arctic, the tension between NATO and Russia is high compared to the situation before 2014. Despite a significant reduction in Russia's land forces in the European Arctic, its sea and air forces remain largely intact, as do Russia's long-range precision weapon deployed in the region and the related second-strike capabilities. Although both Russia and the West have demonstrated some restraint in naval operation in the region to avoid incidents after February 2022, increased occurrence of aggressive and provocative incidents by Russian actors, alongside with insecurity and distrust regarding each other's intentions, heightens the risk of unintended escalation through miscalculations and misinterpretations in the region.

All the actors examined in this report views on the Arctic appear to be influenced not only by the geopolitical shifts stemming from Russia's aggression, but also by China's increased global significance that in turn has regional impacts – like in the Arctic. Faced with Western sanctions and increasing isolation, Russia is turning to China for both economic and political cooperation. Russia's growing reliance on China has allowed China to assume a more significant role in the Arctic region, recently illustrated by a joint naval exercise in the Bering Strait just off the coast of Alaska. However, there is still a way to go before such cooperation fully develops and gains large-scale military significance. Historically, Russia has exercised caution about involving non-Arctic states in its Arctic region, as well as Arctic affairs in general. Additionally, China is carefully balancing its relationship between the Russia and the West, adopting a cautious approach to cooperation with Russia to avoid isolation due to a too-close relationship with Russia.

Paradoxically, it appears that Western sanctions have led to what particularly the USA seeks to prevent – an increased Chinese presence in the region. While the USA has bolstered its commitments in the Arctic, the state manages its interest globally, considering the Arctic as merely one of numerous significant regions. In this broader perspective, there are other regions that are considered more critical, also in the context of the rivalry with China. China's strategic position also indirectly affects the EU's stance on the Arctic. Despite the EU not being a hard security actor, the deteriorating relationship with Russia, and increasingly China, compels the Union to consider geopolitical conditions, also in the Arctic, where particularly the fields of maritime security, resource and energy security and space security applies. The two latter policy areas are closely intertwined with geopolitical implications arising from an ascending China.

Furthermore, it seems like natural resources in the Arctic region are contributing to the evolving geopolitical dynamics observed after February 2022. However, unlike the notion of a “resource

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war” which implies intense competition or conflict over resources, it is the natural resources within the borders of the Arctic states that play a role in shaping the transformed geopolitical landscape, influencing economic relations rather than triggering direct conflict. A significant portion of oil extracted in Russia is rerouted to Asian markets – like India – due to Western sanction, while hydrocarbons extracted in Norway have gained increased importance for European markets, indicating a shift in the dynamics of market dependence. Additionally, the access to natural resources extracted outside of the Arctic also influences the region. The EU’s dependence on critical raw materials from China might prompt the Union to look to the Arctic for alternative suppliers, potentially strengthening the Union’s strategic engagement in the region.

## 7.1 Implications for Norway

Against this backdrop, what are the geopolitical implications for Norway in a somewhat altered Arctic landscape post-February 2022? The most significant implication is undoubtedly linked to Norway’s relationship with Russia. In the period after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Norway has had to deal with a more hostile, unpredictable, and risk-prone neighbouring country. Following Russia’s break with the West, Norway has had to navigate intrusive Russian assertive military exercises in the Arctic, along with incidents of possible sabotage and provocation. Events such as the pursuit of the Norwegian research vessel “Kronprins Haakon” by a Russian ship in the Fram Strait, symbolic posturing in Barentsburg on Svalbard, and the damage to the telecommunication cables to Svalbard probably involving Russians fishing vessels, illustrate a more aggressive behaviour from Russia than witnessed a decade ago.

However, the current situation is not unfamiliar to Norway, as the country has navigated between reassurance and deterrence towards its eastern neighbour for more than half a century. What has changed, however, is the room for manoeuvre between these two strategies, where the necessity for deterrence has become more acute. The latitude for Norway in its policy towards Russia in the High North may also have decreased as a result of other NATO allies increased presence in the High North, perhaps valuing a more offensive power projection in the region. For example, although U.S. nuclear-powered submarines docking in Tromsø have become somewhat common over the past three years, the presence has intensified, most recently when, for the first time, an Ohio-class submarine, USS Florida, visited in September 2023. While Norway bases its security policy on stability and predictability, military unpredictability is a significant part of the American military strategy. There is not necessarily a contradiction between Norwegian and allied interests in the Arctic, but increased East-West tension requires Norwegian-led coordination to maintain the Norwegian goal that military activity in the High North should not create further tensions.

In other areas, Norway has faced criticism for its policies towards Russia. Norway’s decision to allow Russian fishing vessels to deliver their catch to (some) Norwegian ports has faced criticism from some Western allies. Nevertheless, Norway has maintained functional cooperation with Russia on fisheries and resource management, border issues, and emergency preparedness. Arguably, the latter two are even more crucial in light of the situation in the region, as increased military posturing can lead to unintended incidents requiring a communication to prevent further escalation.

Moreover, the alliance commitments of Finland and Sweden are influencing the strategic environment in which Norway operates. Both countries signed a bilateral military agreement with

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the US in 2023, allowing the deployment of American personnel and weapons at several bases, including nine in the Arctic. A possible implication of increased military cooperation between Norway's neighbouring countries and the US is that it could restrict Norway's latitude in *its* interactions with the US. While Norway also has a bilateral agreement with the US allowing American forces at four Norwegian bases, it has shown more restraint in the extent of American presence on its soil compared to what Finland and Sweden is enabling. This further leads to questions about Norway's self-imposed 'reassurance' restrictions put in place during the Cold War vis-à-vis its eastern neighbour, and whether these are even relevant in the new European Arctic security landscape.

The changed geopolitical situation after February 2022 may also have led to Norway getting a greater flexibility in certain issues in the Arctic. Western countries have closed ranks, leading to the EU putting the limited conflict regarding resource rights around Svalbard on hold. In a more turbulent geopolitical time, there is less room for allies to have their own ongoing disputes that could fuel Russian intransigence over the Norwegian management of waters around Svalbard. Additionally, while the EU has been critical of import of oil, coal and gas from Arctic reserves, the sanctions against Russia have increased Europe's dependence on Norwegian hydrocarbons. This increased dependency might alleviate pressure on Norway to phase out hydrocarbon extractions.

In an Arctic or High North context, Norway is a regional power. Two decades of prioritising Arctic issues both in foreign and domestic policy has undoubtedly had an effect. However, when tensions mount between great powers and Arctic affairs turns into strategic considerations and symbolic posturing, the scope for independent action by Norway is limited. Still, Arctic (geo)politics consists of a multitude of layers and issues, and not everything is determined by great power rivalry and interaction. As Norway currently holds the chairship of the Arctic Council, one of its primary tasks over the next year will be to continue to ensure the survival of that forum and finds ways of proceeding with low-level practical cooperation to serve specific Arctic needs. This is despite of overarching tensions and the inability to work with Moscow. It is perhaps within this stratification that the actors examined in this report also can contribute to working towards the goal of 'High North, low tension'.



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