

---

## THE ARCTIC REGION - RUSSIA, US AND CHINA

---

Tripti, Rashtriya Raksha University

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Arctic Circle has become an important symbol of the devastating effects of climate change, but its role as a central focus of geopolitical conflict deserves equal attention and concern. The Arctic Circle, marked by melting polar ice caps, is becoming a major stage in global competition and may increase conflicts between major powers in the near future. As the dangerous Arctic ice caps melt, nations embark on a modern-day gold rush across the region's unclaimed territories, natural resources and strategic location. The rapid disappearance of the polar ice caps has led to the proliferation of unclaimed areas of land and sea beyond the control of nations, over which countries seek to assert jurisdiction for purposes such as mining and commercial shipping lanes. Beyond economic motivations, countries such as the United States, Russia and China compete in the region for military superiority and the pursuit of greater power. The Arctic also sits at a critical point between North America and Eurasia, making it an important strategic location for projecting military force.<sup>1</sup> The present article will focus on three nations that is Russia, China and US. Like why and how these nations interest are declined towards the Arctic region.

### RUSSIA AND THE ARCTIC

Russia is endowed with large hydrocarbon reserves and ranks as one of top exporting countries for fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) in the world. The Russian economy heavily depends on the energy sector and fossil fuel export revenues.<sup>2</sup> Russia has the longest Arctic coastline among all the region's states. The goal of Russian Arctic policy is to boost the country's economy by developing untapped energy resources. This includes the connected Yamal LNG (liquefied natural gas) and Northern Sea Route (NSR) projects, which are boosting the Russian economy, closing sea lanes, and helping Russia establish itself as a major player in the area. Aside from

---

<sup>1</sup> Geopolitical Competition in the Arctic Circle, Mathew Gross, 02-Dec-2020, Harvard International Review, assessed on 23-04-2024, < <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-arctic-circle/> >

<sup>2</sup> The Role of the Arctic in Russia's Energy Strategy, Pier Paolo Raimondi, Istituto Affari Internazionali, assessed on 23-04-2024, < <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893683142.pdf> >

this, the Arctic is now more valuable in the Kremlin's geopolitical calculations due to Russian efforts to develop and use the NSR as a worldwide shipping route. Furthermore, Russia sees the US as a rival geopolitical power in the Arctic. Russia wants to hang onto the undeveloped energy resources in the area because of its diminishing energy resources and because it uses its position as an energy superpower as a lever for foreign policy. As a result, the region is now the center of a resurgent geopolitical rivalry between the great powers due to the interaction of geopolitics and economics.<sup>3</sup>

"The development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a competitive national transport artery with the possibility of its international use for transportation between Europe and Asia" is still one of Russia's core goals in the Arctic. One of the new Russian foreign policy priorities in the Arctic should be "ensuring the invariability of the historically established international legal regime of the internal sea waters of the Russian Federation," which is related to the NSR.<sup>4</sup>

Russia's plan to increase its political and economic clout in Europe includes its Arctic policies, both security- and economic-related. Thus, maintaining Russia's geostrategic and geoeconomic interests and safeguarding its territory depend more and more on the combined and coordinated efforts of its Baltic and Northern Fleets. During the 2019 Ocean Shield exercise, the close ties between the two regional forces were put to the test. From both Russia's and NATO's viewpoints, the High North is a difficult to define geographical region. Rather, it shares a tight relationship, as does the Arctic, with the neighbouring geographical and geostrategic regions of the Atlantic, Baltic, and intermedium, as well as with their respective uses in terms of politics, economy, and military affairs.<sup>5</sup>

## **RUSSIAN ARCTIC POLICY:**

The policy posture adopted by Moscow as its Arctic strategy 2020 includes the utilization of the Arctic as a strategic resource base to fulfil the country's socioeconomic needs.<sup>10</sup> It also centers on using the NSR as a national transport route for Russia in the Arctic. The Kremlin's

---

<sup>3</sup> Russia's Reimagined Arctic in the Age of Geopolitical Competition, Shaheer Ahmand & Mohammad Ali Zafar, 09-March, 2022, assessed on 23-04-2024, < <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2959221/russias-reimagined-arctic-in-the-age-of-geopolitical-competition/> >

<sup>4</sup> The Arctic in the 2023 Russian Foreign Policy Concept, Nikita Lipunov and Pavel Devyatkin, 03-05-2023, assessed on 23-04-2024, < <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-2023-russian-foreign-policy-concept/> >

<sup>5</sup> Development Plans, Military Potential, and Conflict Prevention, Micheal Paul, 03-Feb,2022, assessed on 23-04-2024, < <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022RP03/> >

desire to gain access to the naval chokepoints in Greenland, Iceland, and the UK is evident in the policy stance of 2035, which aims to highlight the importance of Russia's sea strength. Russia is thus shifting from being a continental to a marine power in the region with the opening of the NSR and the resuscitation of the Northern Fleet.

The national interest of Russia in designating the Arctic as a strategic resource base accounts for the policy stances of 2020 and 2035. Moscow hopes to take advantage of the chance to expand its energy reserves, which include 17.3 billion metric tons of crude and condensate oil and 85.1 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. Additionally, by 2035, it hopes to increase its LNG production to 91 million tons. In addition, it intends to raise the Arctic's share in the production of crude and condensate oil to 20 percent in 2024, 23 percent in 2030, and ultimately 26 percent in 2035. However, the NSR's ability to operate effectively is crucial to these financial gains.<sup>6</sup>

## US AND THE ARCTIC REGION

After acquiring Alaska in 1867, the US became an Arctic nation. In addition to supporting and promoting scientific research throughout the region, the United States has a variety of interests in the Arctic, including environmental protection, sustainable development, national and homeland security, and fostering cooperation and collaboration with other Arctic nations. The nation aspires to a conflict-free, peaceful and stable area where its interests are upheld, its homeland is secured, and the Arctic States collaborate to tackle common problems.<sup>7</sup> The Arctic region should be cooperative, peaceful, stable, and affluent, according to US policy. The United States has outlined a positive plan to achieve this vision over the next 10 years in the new National Strategy for the Arctic Region. This plan, which updates the one from 2013, takes a more urgent approach to the climate problem and focuses new funding on sustainable development to enhance the standard of living for those living in the Arctic while protecting the ecosystem. It also takes into consideration the growing strategic rivalry in the Arctic, which has been intensified by Russia's conflict in Ukraine without cause and China's stepped-up

---

<sup>6</sup> Russia's Reimagined Arctic in the Age of Geopolitical Competition, Shaheer Ahmand & Mohammad Ali Zafar, 09-March, 2022, assessed on 23-04-2024, < <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2959221/russias-reimagined-arctic-in-the-age-of-geopolitical-competition/> >

<sup>7</sup> The United States and the Arctic Region, Arctic Council, assessed on 24-04-2024, < <https://arctic-council.org/about/states/the-united-states/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20has%20varied,and%20supporting%20and%20promoting%20scientific> >

attempts to gain influence there. The goal is to put the US in a position where it can successfully manage tensions and compete in the region. US has laid focus on certain points, which are:

1. Security: enhance the capabilities necessary to protect American interests in the Arctic, while coordinating cooperative security strategies with partners and allies and reducing the possibility of unintentional escalation, in order to deter threats to the American homeland and allies. maintain American government presence in the Arctic as needed to safeguard American citizens and our sovereign land.
2. Climate change and environmental protection: The United States government will collaborate with the State of Alaska and Alaskan people to increase resilience to the effects of climate change. It will also endeavour to preserve Arctic ecosystems, enhance scientific understanding, and lower emissions from the region as part of larger global mitigation efforts.
3. Sustainable Economic Development: By making infrastructural investments, expanding service accessibility, and lending assistance to burgeoning economic sectors, it may achieve sustainable development and raise living standards throughout Alaska, especially for Alaska Native people and to boost sustainable development and high-standard investment throughout the Arctic area in collaboration with partners and allies.
4. International cooperation and governance: The United States will work to maintain institutions for Arctic cooperation, such as the Arctic Council, and position these institutions to manage the effects of increasing activity in the region and seek to uphold international law, rules, norms, and standards in the Arctic, despite the challenges to Arctic cooperation brought about by Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>

## **US ARCTIC POLICY**

Human health, sustainable development, and the role of indigenous people and other Arctic dwellers as stakeholders in the region are all prioritized in U.S. Arctic policy. The United States wants to support Arctic communities' socioeconomic sustainability. Furthermore, in order to

---

<sup>8</sup> Fact Sheet: The United States' National Strategy for the Arctic Region, 07-10-2022, assessed on 24-04-2024, < <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/07/fact-sheet-the-united-states-national-strategy-for-the-arctic-region/> >

accomplish Arctic objectives, the US is committed to advancing international cooperation and funding scientific research. The six main goals of US Arctic policy are as follows:

- preserving the life resources of the Arctic and safeguarding its ecosystem.
- encouraging regional economic growth and environmentally responsible resource management.
- meeting the needs for national security and defense after the Cold War.
- bolstering the eight Arctic nations' structures for collaboration.
- involving Arctic indigenous people in decision-making processes that have an impact on them.
- improving scientific research and observation of environmental concerns at the local, regional, and global levels.<sup>9</sup>

## CHINA AND THE ARCTIC

China declared itself to be a "near-Arctic state," a designation that has subsequently sparked debate. Beijing has always considered the Arctic to be important for its geopolitical, commercial, and environmental goals. China also maintains that it has rights to conduct scientific research, exercise freedom of navigation and overflight, engage in fishing, lay cables, and develop resources in the high seas of the Arctic in accordance with international legal treaties, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Spitsbergen Treaty.<sup>10</sup> In order to monitor various fluxes in the ocean, sea ice, and atmosphere, the ninth expedition set up China's first unmanned ice station in the area. As "an effective supplement in the absence of scientific expedition vessels," the station was mentioned in the report. The same expedition also made use of China's indigenously developed Haiyi underwater glider for the first time. China's tenth Arctic research mission was a little different, using the indigenous Haiyan underwater glider for ocean observation and the oceanographic research vessel

---

<sup>9</sup> US Arctic Policy, US Department of State, assessed on 24-04-2024, < <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/oes/ocns/arc/> >

<sup>10</sup> China's strategic interest in the Arctic goes beyond economics, Swee Lean Collin Koh, 12-05-2020, assessed on < <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/05/11/chinas-strategic-interest-in-the-arctic-goes-beyond-economics/> >

Xiangyanghong 01, which made its debut, in place of the dependable icebreaker Xuelong.<sup>11</sup> China has prioritized scientific goals in its Arctic strategy, policy, and initiatives. These examine how this region's geography, climatology, geology, glaciology, and oceanography are affected by climate change. For that reason, starting in 2004, China has constructed, established, and run its own scientific outpost in the Arctic. China's financial interests and concerns about protecting and growing its energy supply chains are significant additional reasons for the country's keen interest in the Arctic. In the upcoming years, Chinese energy companies will be fighting for access to the onshore oil and gas explorations in the Arctic. China is the world's largest energy user; thus, the use of the Arctic Sea routes and the research and development of the region's resources could have a significant influence on China's energy strategy. China's economic power, technological prowess, market size, knowledge, and experience will all be important factors in expanding the networks of maritime routes. China is attempting to bolster its legal authority to have a greater say in geo-political developments by declaring itself to be a near-Arctic state.<sup>12</sup>

## CHINA'S ARCTIC POLICY

China became a party to the Spitsbergen Treaty in 1925 and began to take part in Arctic affairs. Since then, China has increased its efforts to explore the Arctic, broadening the range of its operations, accumulating experience, and strengthening its relationships with other players. China became actively involved in Arctic scientific research when it joined the International Arctic Science Committee in 1996. China has arranged several scientific trips to the Arctic since 1999, using its research ship Xue Long (Snow Dragon) as the base. China constructed the Arctic Yellow River Station on the Spitsbergen Archipelago's Ny Alesund in 2004. By the end of 2017, China had explored the Arctic Ocean on eight separate scientific excursions and had been using the Yellow River Station as a base for study for fourteen years. China has progressively built a multidisciplinary monitoring system that covers the sea, ice and snow, atmosphere, biological system, and geological system of the Arctic using its research vessel and stations as platforms. China hosted the Arctic Science Summit Week, a high-level conference on Arctic matters, in 2005, making it the first nation in Asia to do so. China joined the Arctic Council as an approved observer in 2013. Chinese businesses have started looking

---

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> China's Polar Silk Road: Implications for the Arctic Region, Anu Sharma, 25-10-2021, assessed on 26-04-2024, < <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2820750/chinas-polar-silk-road-implications-for-the-arctic-region/> >

into the business potential of Arctic maritime routes in recent years. China's Arctic activities have extended beyond scientific research into a variety of Arctic affairs domains, including scientific research, ecological environment, climate change, economic development, and cultural exchanges, as well as platforms for global governance, regional cooperation, bilateral and multilateral affairs, and other Arctic affairs. China, a significant player in the global community, has contributed positively to the creation of international regulations pertaining to the Arctic and the advancement of its governance framework.

**China's Arctic policy is:**

- To comprehend, preserve, develop, and engage in the region's governance in order to uphold the shared interests of all nations and the global community there and to encourage the region's sustainable development.
- In order to better understand the Arctic and enable humanity to better protect, develop, and govern it, China will enhance its scientific research capacity and capability, seek a deeper comprehension of Arctic science, and investigate the natural laws guiding its evolution.
- In order to safeguard the Arctic, China will take proactive measures to combat climate change in the region, preserve its distinct ecosystem and natural environment, foster resilience in its own climate, environment, and ecology, and honor the rich cultural diversity and long-standing customs of the indigenous peoples.
- In order to develop the Arctic, China will increase its ability to use applied Arctic technology, promote technological innovation, protect the environment, use its resources wisely, and expand its shipping routes. It will also work to improve the social and economic development of the region, enhance locals' quality of life, and work toward common development.
- China will take part in the regulation and management of the Arctic's affairs and activities based on norms and methods in order to take part in its governance. China is dedicated to upholding the current body of international law, which includes the UN Charter, UNCLOS, environmental and climate change treaties, and pertinent International Maritime Organisation rules. It also aims to address a range of

conventional and non-conventional security threats by means of global, regional, multilateral, and bilateral mechanisms, as well as to establish and preserve an equitable, rational, and well-functioning Arctic governance system.<sup>13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The rising number of states, both European and Asian, large and tiny, polar and tropical, are showing political interest in the Arctic Ocean. This interest is connected to six Arctic geopolitical features to differing degrees.

- Its geographic location, which places it between the continents of America, Europe, and Asia, allows for both transit and short trading distances.
- Its presumed abundance of strategically significant industrial resources and mineral deposits, especially gas and oil, provides participants in regional resource extraction with varying degrees of increased economic and energy security.
- Its sea ways, both inside and outside the area, and the operating circumstances brought about by humans.
- Due to climate change and global warming, the sea ice regime is decreasing, providing easier access to resources and improved conditions for exploitation in the area.
- Its distinct susceptibility to environmental shocks, as well as its ecological relationships with ecosystems in southern latitudes
- Its regulatory affinities with the third Law of the Sea Convention of 1982 and other current international ocean treaties

---

<sup>13</sup> China's Arctic Policy, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 26,01-2018, assessed on 26-04-2024, <[https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm)>