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NAVIGATING ARCTIC REALITIES: GEOPOLITICS, SECURITY, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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Introduction

The Arctic is gaining increasing attention from both governments and academics. Some of the region's most distinctive environmental, security, economic features are undergoing significant changes. An ever-growing number of actors and stakeholders are expressing keen interest in the Arctic circle and are eager to engage in the area. This article aims at providing a comprehensive view of the main issues related to recent geopolitical changes in the region, as well as an analysis of the primary scientific findings linked to these issues.

After presenting a historical synthesis, the first section delves into the region's security landscape, with a focus on the most recent shifts. It discusses the issue of the possible militarization of the Arctic and evaluates the impact of climate change on hard security issues in the Arctic Region.

The subsequent part of the article seeks to provide an overview of the main powers involved in the Arctic, highlighting their recent increase in number. It explores their diverse interests and capabilities, as well as the ways in which they plan to project their influence in the region.

The final section concentrates on economic ventures in the Arctic and on the unique features of multilateralism in the area. These domains have been heavily influenced by climate change and recent international events, undergoing significant changes over the last few years.

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1. *Geopolitics and hard security in the Arctic*

1.1 *Preliminary observations*

1.1.1 *Brief geopolitical history of the Arctic*

The Arctic Region has experienced a shift from 'exploration zone' to 'strategic epicentre' over the twentieth century[1] while armed conflict has been largely avoided so far[2], turning the region into a rather peculiar geostrategic pivot.

Before going into further detail, it is compelling to sketch the historical evolution of the region's geopolitical relevance, to appreciate the magnitude of some of the most recent novelties as well as to better understand what we should expect from the region in the future. The region can in fact well be considered a 'latecomer'[3] in international politics, as it is not suited for large scale human settlement. Its relevance has therefore been marginal until recent times. While the sixteenth century urge to discover led to a hard-fought, mercantilist competition in the *terrae nullius* that constituted the Arctic territory during the early seventeenth century, it was only with the technological developments of the 1700s that the region witnessed the first efforts to gain sovereign rights. Rivalries and armed conflicts whose epicentre was elsewhere had an impact on the high North over the following centuries. Finally, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the Arctic fully drawn into geopolitical competition, and the region was a (secondary) theatre of great power conflicts.

World War I prompted the first large-scale use of the Arctic space for military and strategic purposes, as Western allies supplied Russia through the North Atlantic and the Barents Sea. In 1932, the first commercial Northern Sea Route passage was registered. *Foreign Affairs* at

[1] P. Pic, F. Lasserre, *Un paradigme arctique de sécurité ? Pour une lecture géopolitique du complexe régional de sécurité*, in "L'Espace Politique ", n. 3, 2017, pp. 3-4.

[2] R. Kee, *Key Issues to Arctic Security*, in D.R. Menezes, H.N. Nicol (eds.), "The North American Arctic – Themes in Regional Security", Berkeley, ca, ucl Press, 2019, p. 101.

[3] R. Tamnes, S.G. Holtsmark, *The geopolitics of the Arctic in historical perspective* in R. Tamnes, K. Hofferdal (eds.), "Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic – Regional dynamics in a global world", London, Routledge, 2014.

the time saluted the "start of a new phase of man's relations with the Arctic"[4]. The second world conflict was marked by a repetition of the 1914-1918 transport pathways, and land fighting in the Arctic was a consequence of the importance of such 'northern route' to the Soviet Union (USSR hereafter). However, this era saw a much greater focus on natural resources rather than on the military and strategic potential of the region[5]. This situation changed as the Cold War began: the Arctic route was then the shortest flight path for bombers and missiles between the United States (US) and the USSR. This resulted in a heavy militarization of the area, which however remained marginal; NATO's northern flank was often referred to as the 'forgotten flank'[6] of the alliance; the strategic focus was on Central Europe. The Cold War era has also seen the rise of a number of disputes on territorial resources, from land and hunting to sea and related regulations, up to the ownership of oil and gas deposits.

The famous 1987 speech delivered in Murmansk by Mikhail Gorbachev[7] marked a notable shift. A substantial thawing of the tensions in the Arctic after four decades followed, allowing for a more direct pursuit of economic development, commercial interests, environmental protection, and political change in the region[8]. The 1996 Ottawa declaration established the Arctic Council (AC), promising a new era of multilateralism and cooperation in the Arctic[9]. Yet growing militarization – the features and causes of which will be tackled in the following pages – started again in 2008[10], leading to the current situation.

4 B. HOPPER, *Soviet Conquest of the Far North*, in "Foreign Affairs", n. 14, 1936.

5 R. TAMNES, S.G. HOLTSMARK, *The geopolitics of the Arctic in historical perspective*, cit.

6 See for instance O. RISTE, *NATO, the Northern Flank, and the Neutrals* in G. SCHMIDT (ed.), "A History of NATO — The First Fifty Years", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

7 *Mikhail Gorbachev's Speech in Murmansk at the Ceremonial Meeting on the occasion of the presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star to the city of Murmansk*. Murmansk, Oct. 1st, 1987, available online.

8 H. EXNER-PIROT, *The Arctic in International Affairs* in K.S. COATES, C. HOLROYD (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. See also P. PIC, F. LASSERRE, *Un paradigme arctique de sécurité? Pour une lecture géopolitique du complexe régional de sécurité*, cit.

9 V. ILARI, *L'Artico sarà l'epicentro della prossima guerra mondiale*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019, "La Febbre dell'Artico".

10 V. ILARI, *L'Artico sarà l'epicentro della prossima guerra mondiale*, cit.

1.1.2 *Debunking myths*

The dominant narrative proposed for the Arctic by academics, analysts and media outlets is a rather alarmist yet somehow simplistic one. It is indisputable that some relevant changes are happening in the region and will impact every activity that takes place there, and some kind of 'gold rush'[11] in the Arctic is certainly starting. Yet the visions that presage the outbreak of resource wars[12] and armed clashes[13] or the emergence of a new great game in the Arctic, forecasting the escalation of jurisdictional disputes[14] and even the harbingers of a new Cold War "may make headlines, but […] are still more alarmist than alarming"[15].

The outbreak of a war in the high north, however, cannot be excluded, especially in such uncertain times; yet a spill-over of a conflict originating elsewhere today seems a more likely scenario for military confrontation in the region[16]. Other authors[17] have noted a tendency to overstate the likelihood of energy-related conflicts in the Arctic, as the true magnitude of polar oil and gas deposits may be lower than early-2000s estimates, and just a negligible part of such deposits lie in undisputed territories. The approach to security and military studies in the Arctic should thus probably see the region more as a potential theatre in a wider geopolitical frame and less as the epicentre of recently surging tensions.

[11] R. Howard, *The Arctic gold rush: the new race for tomorrow's natural resources*, London and New York, NY, Continuum, 2009.

[12] A. Anderson, *After the ice: life, death, and geopolitics in the new Arctic*, New York, Smithsonian Books, 2009.

[13] D. Fairhall, *Cold front: conflict ahead in Arctic waters*, London and New York, NY, I.B. Tauris, 2010.

[14] M. Byers, *Who owns the Arctic? Understanding sovereignty disputes in the North*, Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre. 2009.

[15] O.R. Young, *The future of the Arctic: cauldron of conflict or zone of peace?*, in "International Affairs", n. 1, 2011, p. 193.

[16] P.S. Hilde, *Armed forces and security challenges in the Arctic*, in R. Tamnes, S.G. Holtsmark, *The geopolitics of the Arctic in historical perspective* in R. Tamnes, K. Hofferdal (eds.), "Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic – Regional dynamics in a global world", London, Routledge, 2014.

[17] D.H. Claes, A. Moe, *Arctic petroleum resources in a regional and global perspective* in R. Tamnes, S.G. Holtsmark, *The geopolitics of the Arctic in historical perspective* in R. Tamnes, K. Hofferdal (eds.), "Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic – Regional dynamics in a global world", London, Routledge, 2014.

According to some studies, the mixing and equating of two distinct narratives, namely, the Russian military buildup and climate change-related economic ventures is another feature of a great deal of scholarly literature on the region and contributes to the depiction of this picture[18].

Despite the most recent obstacles to multilateral cooperation, security can be a driver for collaboration[19]; moreover, the Arctic region has recently been the theatre of unique securitization processes based on common environmental and marine challenges[20], which will be discussed later. In conclusion, several challenges arise from geopolitical shifts in the Arctic, with climate change as the undisputed catalyst for the region's mutating security scenario[21]. In fact, the growing human activity resulting from Arctic thawing will present increasingly demanding tests to human and societal security (we refer to issues related to connectivity across borders) as well as to economic and environmental security (e.g., the increased relevance of the region as a part of shipping routes). The changing character of Arctic politics, induced by the high North's new geopolitical pivot role and by the subsequent increase in the number of actors and stakeholders involved in the region, will thus, possibly, result in the end of what some observers have defined the 'Arctic exceptionalism'[22]. Tensions developed elsewhere are certainly spilling over to this former cooperation and multilateralism sanctuary.

1.1.3 *Traditional and non-traditional security*

We already have highlighted the changing character of Arctic politics; traditionally cooperative interstate relations in the high North are becoming increasingly confrontational due to the higher number of actors involved in a region the importance of which has grown over the years.

[18] A. Østhagen, *The Arctic security region: misconceptions and contradictions*, in "Polar Geography", n. 1, 2021.

[19] P. Pic, F. Lasserre, *Un paradigme arctique de sécurité ? Pour une lecture géopolitique du complexe régional de sécurité*, cit., p. 7.

[20] H. Exner-Pirot, *The Arctic in International Affairs*, cit.

[21] E. Klimenko, *The geopolitics of a changing Arctic*, in "sipri Background Paper", Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019, p. 3.

[22] E. Klimenko, *The geopolitics of a changing Arctic*, cit., p. 11.

Partially related to this, it has been observed that the primary risks to the area come from outside[23]. The discursive dimension of the relations among the so-called 'Arctic five'[24], the coastal states that share several interests, resulted in a dispute management characterised by pragmatism[25]. The main threats in the Arctic are thus represented by global warming increasing the navigability of the area; new technologies enhancing the capabilities to exploit the region's abundant natural resources; and geopolitics, with an ever-growing number of actors willing to play a role above the Arctic circle. This interaction between effects of climate change, the emergence of new technologies, and deeper integration into international economy signifies that the Arctic is now more accessible but also more vulnerable than ever.

While Arctic countries have relied on 'hard' security means until the 1980s[26], there is now an urgent need to reconsider the security dynamics and the involved actors in the region. National security discourses in the Arctic need to include local communities and react to the proliferation of 'softer' threats related to human, cultural, energy, economy, environmental, and ecospheric[27] security, acknowledging them and incorporating them into their strategies[28]. The consideration of such 'soft' security frameworks should be pursued through enhanced interoperability among forces from different countries and agencies within each country.

The AC deals with issues related to all these soft security dimen-

[23] R. TAMNES, K. HOLTSMARK, *The geopolitics of the Arctic in historical perspective*, cit.

[24] This expression is commonly referred to the five Arctic littoral states (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russian Federation, US). The 'Arctic eight' are the countries that exercise sovereignty over the lands within the Arctic Circle (Arctic five plus Finland, Iceland, Sweden).

[25] For instance, Canada and the US have famously 'agreed to disagree' *vis-à-vis* a dispute over Canadian territorial claims of the Northwest Passage. See for instance S. LALONDE, *The U.S.-Canada Northwest Passage Disagreement: Why Agreeing to Disagree Is More Important Than Ever* in K. SPOHR, *et al.* (eds.), "The Arctic and World Order", Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 267-293.

[26] O.S. STOKKE, *International environmental governance and Arctic security* in R. TAMNES, K. HOFFERDAL (eds.), "Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic – Regional dynamics in a global world", London, Routledge, 2014.

[27] D.A. WELCH, *The Arctic and geopolitics*, in K.S. COATES, C. HOLROYD (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

[28] H.N. NICOL, *The Evolving North American Arctic Security Context: Can Security Be Traditional?* in K.S. COATES, C. HOLROYD (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

sions, while, as is explicitly mentioned in its founding document, the Ottawa Declaration, it does not address traditional security concerns. The increased relevance of softer security threats can also be observed by analysing the most recent policy documents of various Arctic and non-Arctic states[29]. All these issues will be analysed across the following sections.

1.2 *Militarization of the Arctic*

Are we currently witnessing an era of remilitarization of the high North? Before the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, the situation was certainly one where cooperation prevailed over confrontation[30]. Uncertainty over the magnitude of the natural resources in the region's subsoil, agreement from the littoral states around the need for multilateral solutions to regional challenges, and economic exploitation ambitions all advocated for cooperation in the region[31]. This situation was reflected by the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration[32] of the five Arctic Ocean states, that the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) presented an adequate overarching legal regime for the region, and by other multilateral and bilateral treaties.

Even though Russia's 2014 unlawful annexation of Crimea have resulted in an 'Arctic security dilemma'[33], relations between Western states and Moscow in the region could not be viewed as unambiguously hostile before the Russian 2022 invasion of Ukraine. "[…] elements of compe-

[29] See e.g. the *National Security Presidential Directive* (NSPD) issued in 2009 on the 'Arctic Region Policy', known as NSPD-66, reinforced by the *National Security Strategy* (NSS) issued in 2010, and followed by the 2013 *US National Strategy for the Arctic* and by the 2014 *US National Strategy for the Arctic implementation plan*. See also Canada's 2009 Northern strategy *Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future* and the 2019 *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework*. More detail in chapter 2.

[30] S.G. HOLTSMARK, *Cooperation rather than confrontation: Security in the High North*, NATO Defense College Research Briefing, 2009.

[31] S.G. HOLTSMARK, *Cooperation rather than confrontation: Security in the High North*, cit.

[32] *Ilulissat Declaration*, adopted at the Arctic Ocean Conference - Ilulissat, Greenland, 27-29 May 2008, available online.

[33] J.K. WITHER, *An Arctic security dilemma: assessing and mitigating the risk of unintended armed conflict in the High North* in "European Security", n. 4, 2021, pp. 649-666.

tition and militarisation [coexisted] with a network of institutions of governance that promote[d] diplomacy and cooperation on a wide range of non-military regional challenges"[34].

The confrontational actions and the stronger risk representations that are currently being proposed have increased the conflict potential in an area where regional cooperative mechanisms for conflict resolution have been described as "underdeveloped"[35]. Yet notwithstanding the recent Russian Arctic buildup, Moscow's unrivalled Arctic fleet[36], and the prospects of cooperation between China and Russia in the region[37], major land and sea forces have recently been sent from the Arctic to the Ukraine by the Kremlin[38].

In sum, even if it is hard to deny that the world's major powers are currently experiencing a new interest in the Arctic region, there is a lack of concrete military investments in the area, alongside a (relatively) low level of military presence and activity. In fact, the Arctic five military spending in the region seems primarily driven by societal rather than security concerns. The development perspectives of the NSR resulted in an increase of (primarily Russian) military presence in the Asian Arctic, but the European side of the region will certainly remain the one with the highest military concentration, as it is the most accessible and hospitable, as well as the one with the highest levels of human activity[39]. The recent Finnish and Swedish NATO membership will only reinforce this trend. Finally, the Arctic is a region of the utmost strategic importance, but of remarkable strategic fragility as well. As some observers pointed out, perhaps a middle way between the two prevailing narratives, (the one according to which the Arctic is peaceful because it is 'exceptional' and the one under which resource wars are on the

[34] J.K. WITHER, *An Arctic security dilemma: assessing and mitigating the risk of unintended armed conflict in the High North*, cit., p. 660.

[35] S.R. DE BUITRAGO *Risk Representations and Confrontational Actions in the Arctic* in "Journal of Strategic Security", n. 3, 2019, pp. 13-36, p. 17.

[36] *Maproom: Arctic Militarization* in "World Policy Journal", n. 2, 2015, pp. 16-17.

[37] R. PINCUS, *Three-Way Power Dynamics in the Arctic* in "Strategic Studies Quarterly", n. 1, 2020, pp. 40-63.

[38] A. BUCKLEY, *Destabilization of the Arctic* in Journal of Autonomy and Security Studies, n. 2, 2023, pp. 128-143, p. 136.

[39] P.S. HILDE, *Armed forces and security challenges in the Arctic*, in K.S. COATES, C. HOLROYD (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

verge of exploding above the Arctic circle), would be best suited to grasp the region's complex perspectives[40], as its probabilities to become a theatre for non-nuclear confrontation remain low due to the inhospitable military environment and the absence of territorial disputes in the area.

1.3 *The impact of climate change on Arctic security*

To what extent the recent novelties in the Arctic security landscape are influenced by climate change? Even though Arctic meltdown was seen by some as the prelude to a "scramble for territories among the five Arctic powers"[41], things seem to have developed differently so far. Yet climate change obviously plays a role in the Arctic five security strategies in the region. The US first acknowledged climate change as a security threat in 1997[42]; the National Security Presidential Directive and Homeland Security Presidential Directive of January 2009 lay out six goals relating to the changing environment in the Arctic region[43], emphasizing cooperation. Just to mention one reason for the US to be wary of the changing Arctic security landscape, Washington's northernmost military outpost, the Thule Air Force Base in Eastern Greenland, is much more vulnerable today than when it was opened in 1943, not least due to climate change[44]. Even the Trump administration, despite its *de facto* denial of climate change, had to acknowledge the presence of threats related to Arctic thawing[45]. Russian military planning has obviously been influenced

[40] F. Petroni, *Centralità e fragilità strategica dell'Artico*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019.

[41] S.G. Borgerson, *Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming* in "Foreign Affairs", n. 2, 2008, pp. 63-77 p. 63.

[42] 1997 US *National Security Strategy*, available online.

[43] M. Brzoska, *Climate change and the military in China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United* States in "Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists", n. 2, 2012, pp. 43–54, p. 47.

[44] G. Backus, *Arctic 2030: What are the consequences of climate change? The US response* in "Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists", n. 4, 2012, pp. 9-16. See also A. Lavorio, *Geography, Climate Change, National Security: The Case of the Evolving US Arctic Strategy*, in "The International Spectator", n. 11, 2020, pp. 111-125.

[45] D. Lindorff, *The US Navy Has a Water Problem*, in "The Nation", September 19, 2019; T.J. Bouffard, R. Burke, *The U.S. Arctic strategic evolution advancing regional capabilities and intent*, in "The Watch Journal", July 31, 2023.

by the consequences of global warming and has led the Kremlin to emphasize military readiness in the region, even though climate change was not mentioned in its 2008 Arctic Policy Strategy[46]. In addition to dealing with problems related to thawing permafrost, Moscow plans to use its proximity to the NSR and to the Arctic undersea resources to turn the area into a strategic resource base and is accordingly investing in remote outposts in the region[47], now seen as one where military conflict could occur in the future[48]. This could suggest a revitalization of the "bastion concept" defence, a cornerstone of the Soviet security strategy during the Cold War, to ensure access to the north Atlantic and to protect the Northern Fleet's headquarters on the Kola Peninsula[49]. The increased accessibility of the Arctic zone makes the once impenetrable northern flank of Russia much easier to reach, nurturing the country's atavistic sense of encirclement. Similarly, Canada has historically been protected by the extreme climates and ice covers, while leaders in Ottawa are now forced to deal with new security challenges[50]. Traditionally a fierce advocate of its sovereignty in the region, many analysts now predict a shift in Canada's "dogmatic"[51] interpretation of the concept that could encourage the country to be more willing to accept to share the burden of the defence of its Arctic territory. As will be seen more in detail in the following section, the arguably largest proponent of increased NATO engagement in the region Norway[52].

Yet, despite the relevance of the transformations produced by climate change in the Arctic, the aforementioned actors would have probably pursued the same strategic assets even if the climate was not changing[53].

[46] *The Foundations of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Arctic until 2020 and Beyond*, available online.

[47] For instance, the air bases at air bases at Nagurskoye, Temp, and Sredny Ostrov.

[48] Y. Morozov, *Arctic 2030: What are the consequences of climate change? The Russian response*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, n. 4, 2012, pp. 22-27.

[49] Z. Lavengood, *The Evolving Arctic in the World-System*, in "Journal of World-Systems Research", n. 2, 2021, pp. 469-493, p. 462

[50] R. Huebert, *Arctic 2030: What are the consequences of climate change? The Canadian response*, in "Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists",n. 4, 2012, pp. 17-21.

[51] Z. Lavengood, *The Evolving Arctic in the World-System*, cit., p. 484.

[52] Z. Lavengood, *The Evolving Arctic in the World-System*, cit., p. 484.

[53] P.S. Hilde, *Armed forces and security challenges in the Arctic*, cit.

1.4 *Conclusions*

In conclusion, strategic considerations, rather than economic calculations and climate change, will ultimately determine the fate of the Arctic. The repercussions of the main great power rivalries will shape the future of the region much more than the melting polar ice cap, the feasibility of hydrocarbon extraction projects or the importance of naval Nordic routes[54]. Furthermore, the perceived economic accessibility to the Arctic and perspectives of commercial success in the region might increase the possibility of a succession of events, eventually leading to military conflict[55]. Consequently, such issues will be addressed in the final section of this work. Yet, it must be acknowledged that the strategic relevance of the Arctic will be the main factor to determine the future trajectories of the region.

2. *Countries overview*

This section will briefly describe the policies and postures adopted by the main powers involved in the region, along with their plans for the forthcoming years. Beginning with the five Arctic Ocean littoral States, we will then focus on the three countries that hold territories above the Polar Arctic Circle but have no outlet on the Arctic Sea. Finally, we will analyse some non-Arctic actors with an interest in the region.

2.1 *The Arctic five*

It has been argued that the Russian approach to the Arctic stands separate from the broader context of Moscow's relations with the West[56]. In fact, despite the presence of both conflict-mitigating and conflict-aggra-

54 F. Petroni, *Centralità e fragilità strategica dell'Artico*, cit.

55 G. Backus, *Arctic 2030: What are the consequences of climate change? The US response*, cit.

56 L.E. Flake, *Contextualizing and Disarming Russia's Arctic Security Posture* in "Journal of Slavic Military Studies", n. 1, 2017, pp. 17-29.

vating elements *vis-à-vis* NATO countries in the region, Russia retains a realist approach to international relations, and the Kremlin's foreign policy is based more on interests than principles; consequently, Russia has shown a considerable capacity to cooperate in some spheres with its adversaries[57].

To date, Russia has complied with all the international legal instruments in the region and demonstrated leadership in the AC before it was 'paused' in 2022, while the argument of Russian remilitarization in the Arctic being a sign of Moscow's aggressive intentions in the region has been dismissed by NATO member Norway. Russia is currently remilitarising regions that were simply decommissioned after the Cold War had come to an end[58]; this can be explained in terms of willingness to maintain and affirm its sovereignty not only on the mainland but on Economic Exclusive Zones (EEZ) and continental sea shelves of the Arctic Ocean and adjacent seas[59].

The country's Arctic policy has been defined "evolutionary and largely consistent", focusing on security issues and sustainable socioeconomic development[60]. This multidimensional, multi-vectoral yet pragmatic strategy is aimed at asserting sovereignty, protecting economic interests, and demonstrate a great power status[61]. Several observers are thus expecting Moscow to behave in a predictable, pragmatic fashion rather than aggressively or spontaneously[62], to balance international cooperation with security needs. Only time will tell if recent events produced a shift in this attitude.

Due to the remoteness of Alaska, the US has long been slow to de-

[57] L.E. FLAKE, *Contextualizing and Disarming Russia's Arctic Security Posture*, cit.

[58] T. HUNTER, *Russian Arctic Policy, Petroleum Resources Development and the EU: Cooperation or Coming Confrontation?* in N. LIU, E.A. KIRK, T. HENRIKSEN (eds.), "The European Union and the Arctic", Leiden, Brill, 2017.

[59] A. SERGUNIN, *Le anime artiche della Russia*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019.

[60] M. LAGUTINA, *Russia's Arctic policies: concepts, domestic and international priorities*, in "The Polar Journal", n. 1, 2021, pp. 118-135, p. 132. For a more extensive analysis of Russia's Arctic policy documents, see G. FONDAHL, A.A. ESPIRITU A. IVANOVA, *Russia's Arctic Regions and Policies* in K.S. COATES, C. HOLROYD (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

[61] V. KONYSHEV, A SERGUNIN, *Is Russia a revisionist military power in the Arctic?* in "Defense & Security Analysis", n. 4, 2014, pp. 323-335.

[62] A. SERGUNIN V. KONYSHEV, *Russia in search of its Arctic strategy: between hard and soft power?* in "The Polar Journal", n. 1, 2014, pp. 69-87.

velop clear and coherent policies in the Arctic[63]. Yet climate change and the recent assertion of Russian sovereignty in the Arctic spurred Washington to emphasize the importance of the region for national security in some of its latest policy documents; in these documents, Washington has put more emphasis than usual on *Realpolitik* and international cooperation[64]. As of today, Alaska is vital to the US on several fronts, none of which concerns the Arctic; the forty-ninth state looks toward the Pacific rather than toward the Arctic Ocean, and south of its borders rather than north[65]. Moreover, the American approach to the Arctic is mostly geostrategically focused, to the exclusion of operational and tactical considerations[66]. The challenges presented by an increasing Chinese activism in the region[67] or by a shared maritime border with Russia in the Bering Strait, an emerging maritime chokepoint[68], cannot be overlooked. Yet Washington is the only power in the region to be free from the need to chase the riches of the Arctic; the US are – in sum – able to play a role in the region without necessarily being absorbed by it. The American reluctance to call itself an "Arctic power" could play to Washington's advantage.

If the US does not see themselves as an Arctic nation, the same cannot be said of Canada. Canada developed a unique, enduring defence cooperation with Washington, but the Arctic region is commonly seen as a potential source of tensions between the two partners, which have different approaches to the area[69]. Even if the narrative sketching a scenario of growing mistrust among the two allies due to diverging northern policies might be simplistic, the difference in their approach to Arctic affairs

63 S. Haycox, *Arctic Policy of the United States: An Historical Survey*, in K.S. Coates, C. Holroyd (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

64 S. Haycox, *Arctic Policy of the United States: An Historical Survey*, cit.

65 D. Fabbri, *Alaska, il non Artico americano*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019.

66 T.J. Bouffard, L.L. Rodman, *U.S. Arctic security strategies: balancing strategic and operational dimensions*, in "The Polar Journal", n. 1, 2021, pp. 160-187.

67 W.A. Berbrick, *Un'intesa con la Russia per l'America senza polo*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019.

68 R. Pincus, *The History of USA-Russia Relations in the Bering Strait*, in K.S. Coates, C. Holroyd (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

69 W. Lackenbauer, R. Huebert, *Premier partners: Canada, the United States and Arctic security*, in "Canadian Foreign Policy Journal", n. 3, 2014, pp. 320-333.

is striking. Canada constantly emphasizes its sovereignty in the region, making a 'strategic use of its Arctic identity'[70]: the defence of the Arctic holds a symbolic value for Ottawa, not just a practical one[71]. As a result, Canada is traditionally unhappy with excessive NATO (and American) presence in the region; if the alliance became recognised as an actor with legitimate Arctic interests, it would be harder for Ottawa to maintain the argumentation of its own special territorial and maritime rights and obligations[72]. Moreover, and related to this, Canada has developed a focus on non-conventional threats in the region: Ottawa's traditional Arctic security policy is in fact local rather than geopolitical[73].

Despite some similarities between the two countries, Norway's approach to security and national defence has historically been opposite to the Canadian one, because of different views of the Atlantic alliance and of the dissimilarity of their geographic locations[74]. Norway's proximity to Russia is the main determinant of Oslo's cautious, pragmatic approach[75]. Yet the increased tensions between Washington and Moscow over the last years produced an evolution in the Norwegian northern engagement, and Oslo had to mitigate its so-called 'high North, low tension' approach[76].

According to a 1920 treaty, the archipelago of Svalbard is under a limited form of Norwegian sovereignty[77] and Russia has a longstanding

[70] I.A. MEDBY, *L'uso strategico dell'identità artica*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019.

[71] A. LAJEUNESSE, P.W. LACKENBAUER, *Per il Canada l'Artico è un mare di opportunità*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019.

[72] L. ODGAARD, *Russia's Arctic Designs and* NATO, in "Survival", n. 4, 2022, pp. 89-104, p. 92.

[73] A. LAJEUNESSE, P.W. LACKENBAUER, *Per il Canada l'Artico è un mare di opportunità*, cit.

[74] A. ØSTHAGEN, G.L. SHARP, P.S. HILDE, *At Opposite Poles: Canada's and Norway's approaches to security in the Arctic* in "The Polar Journal", n. 1, 2018, pp. 163–181. See also D. C. BURKE, J. RAHBEK-CLEMMENSEN, *Debating the Arctic during the Ukraine Crisis – comparing Arctic state identities and media discourses in Canada and Norway*, in "The Polar Journal", n. 2, 2017, pp. 391-409.

[75] J. BINGEN, *L'amicizia tra Russia e Norvegia e chi la minaccia*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019.

[76] A. ØSTHAGEN, *Norway's Arctic policy: still high North, low tension?*, in "The Polar Journal", n. 1, 2021, pp. 75-94.

[77] A. GRYDEHØJ, *Informal diplomacy in Norway's Svalbard policy: the intersection of local community development and Arctic international relations*, in "Global Change, Peace & Security", n. 1, 2014, pp. 41-54.

presence in the islands[78]. Norway has traditionally observed a policy of adherence to the Svalbard treaty, constantly reaffirming its sovereignty over the archipelago and attempting to marginalize Russian influence. Yet the recent tensions between Moscow and the West have limited the room for Oslo's manoeuvres, and the political and military exposition of the archipelago will only grow due to the current international situation[79].

Under a self-government system since 2008, with Denmark still in control of its foreign and security policy, Greenland is constantly testing its foreign policy and self-determination action space in order to increase its freedom of action towards Copenhagen; with this aim, Greenland has been recently increasing its engagement as a direct partner to the US[80], to which the control of the island is of the utmost strategic importance in case of conflict. Even if foreign relations are under Danish control, many aspects of domestic policy are relevant to Greenland's relations with other states[81]. The island currently combines an American military presence with trade relations with China and Russia. Due to its strategic importance for the protection of the American northern flank, it is safe to say that, in case a major conflict broke out, Washington would seize the island before China and Russia could do so, and there is no reason to think the possible (yet still distant) independence of Greenland would change this scenario[82].

2.2 *Finland, Iceland, Sweden*

Three of the eight permanent members of the AC are not Arctic coastal states. Nevertheless, those countries have significant interests in the region, and the intensity of circumpolar internationalism has remarkably

78 S. Haycox, *Arctic Policy of the United States: An Historical Survey*, cit.

79 J.K. Wither, *Svalbard: NATO's Arctic Achilles Heel*, in "The RUSI Journal", n. 5, 2018, pp. 28-37.

80 S. Olsvig, *Greenland's ambiguous action space: testing internal and external limitations between US and Danish Arctic interests*, in "The Polar Journal", n. 2, 2022, pp. 215-239.

81 A. Grydehøj, *Government, Policies, and Priorities in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland): Roads to Independence*, in K.S. Coates, C. Holroyd, (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics" cit..

82 D. Fabbri, *Groenlandia o della finzione artica*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019.

grown in recent years. Since much of the European North is environmentally sub-Arctic, countries like Finland and Sweden cannot ignore what happens above the Arctic circle. The situation of Iceland is different.

Finland published in 2013 an "assertive"[83] Arctic development strategy, followed by updates in 2016 and 2017. A new and updated document was issued in 2021[84]. Helsinki plans to capitalize on EU funding and program support, and to actively engage in international initiatives, affirming its expertise with the region. Other key points of the Finnish strategy in the high North are to tackle environmental protection challenges, to address the needs of its Northern peoples, and to channel investments in research and education.

Sweden adopted, in 2011 and 2020[85] more cautious documents compared to Finland, putting emphasis on climate change, stressing its role within the AC, and making commitments to regional integration and general Artic cooperation. It is difficult to predict the point at which the relations of these countries with Russia will deteriorate after the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the events that followed, namely the 'freezing' of the AC and Helsinki and Stockholm's applications to join NATO interrupting their traditional neutral policies.

After the US unilaterally decided to leave their military outpost in Iceland in 2006, Reykjavik has constantly been trying to draw NATO's attention to Iceland by prioritizing the North within the alliance and by pursuing bilateral cooperation with several partners[86]. The Arctic security discourses promoted by the Icelandic government were based on future scenarios rather than current threat perceptions, but – contrary to what happened in World War II – Iceland will likely be at the margins of a future great power game in the Arctic. Iceland defines itself as 'Arctic coastal state', yet "the Arctic Five have not shown any signs that they will recognize Iceland as a coastal state in the sense of inviting its representatives to its meetings as an equal member"[87]. Since 2014,

[83] K.S. COATES, C. HOLROYD, *Europe's North: The Arctic Policies of Sweden, Norway, and Finland*, in K.S. COATES, C. HOLROYD (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

[84] *Finland's Strategy for Arctic Policy*, 2021, available online.

[85] *Sweden's strategy for the Arctic region*, 2020, available online.

[86] V. INGIMUNDARSON *Iceland's post-American security policy, Russian geopolitics and the Arctic question*, in "The RUSI Journal", n. 4, 2009, pp. 74-80, p. 77.

[87] K. DODDS, V. INGIMUNDARSON, *Territorial nationalism and Arctic geopolitics: Iceland as an Arctic coastal state*, in "The Polar Journal", n. 1, 2012, pp. 21-37, p. 35.

a new NATO focus on Iceland has been observed; this is good news for Reykjavik, as the Icelandic preparedness to face risk scenarios relies upon international collaboration within the alliance and international fora[88], and Arctic activism will not be enough to mitigate Iceland's strategic dependence on Washington. The island remains a useful outpost for the US to control the Northern Atlantic; Russia and China are undoubtedly aware of that, and they have so far decided not to try to step up their economic cooperation with Reykjavik[89].

2.3 *Non-Arctic Actors*

Countries without borders in the region have the most to lose or gain from the new, economically accessible Arctic. Many Asian countries will experience a competitive disadvantage if they do not have as much access to the Arctic Ocean as they currently have to the other ocean trade routes[90], while European powers cannot overlook what happens in a relatively close, increasingly animated Arctic North. It is not by coincidence that all the actors discussed in this section have recently affirmed their interest in the region by obtaining the status of 'permanent observers' to the AC.

The United Kingdom (UK) has recently shifted its Arctic policy focus from climate change and commercial and scientific activities[91] to hard security threats[92] and adopted its first 'Arctic Defence Strategy' in 2022[93]. The document stated a will to step up British military presence in NATO's Northern flank and stressed the importance of the 'Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom' gap (GIUK), where Russian activity has been constantly increasing over the last decade[94]. A major issue is how this new posture

88 V. Ingimundarson, *Iceland as an Arctic State*, in K.S. Coates, C. Holroyd (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

89 F. Petroni, *Di ghiaccio e di fuoco: geopolitica d'Islanda*, in "Limes", n. 1, 2019.

90 G. Backus, *Arctic 2030: What are the consequences of climate change? The US response*, cit., p. 10.

91 D. Depledge, *Emerging UK Arctic policy*, in "International Affairs", n. 6, 2013, pp. 1445–1457, p. 1447.

92 D. Depledge, K. Dodds, C. Kennedy-Pipe, *The UK's Defence Arctic Strategy*, in "The RUSI Journal", n. 1, 2019, pp. 28-39.

93 *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North*, Ministry of Defence, 2022.

94 G. Vàzquez Orbacieta, The *Resurgence of the GIUK Gap's Strategic Importance*, "Opinion Paper IEEE", Vol. 49, 2023.

will affect relations with the EU in the region after Brexit. London, which sees itself as "not an Arctic state, but […] the region's closest neighbour"[95], still needs to cooperate with the Union and with its member states[96], as it fears to be sidelined in the internalization of the Arctic.

The role that the EU can play in the Arctic is indeed circumscribed. The space for direct action in the region is limited, because of the relatively peaceful situation that does not require security operations nor a concrete presence. It has been argued that Brussels' role should focus on participating in relevant meetings in the region and encouraging local and regional business through programs applicable to EU members and partners in the region.[97]. Despite the high-level rhetoric, the 2021 EU's updated Arctic policy[98] seems to point into this direction.

China is one of the three vertices of the "new Arctic strategic triangle environment"[99], and is cooperating with Russia in the economic, political, and military domains[100]. Yet the Sino-Russian Arctic entente should not be overstated[101], and the two should be treated by the US and their allies as distinct challenges[102], simply part of what has been defined a "pragmatic strategic partnership"[103]. In its general effort to project itself as a truly global actor, Beijing's interest in the Artic is primarily of economic nature, as it has been investing into projects related to natural resources (fossil fuels and raw materials) and potential shipping lanes. Yet China has also engaged in scientific research[104] and diplomatic activities (AC permanent observer status) in the region. These projects have been pur-

[95] *Our friends in the North: UK strategy towards the Arctic*, House of Lords, 2023.

[96] D. Depledge, K. Dodds, *Londra è tornata nel profondo nord*, in Limes", n. 1, 2019.

[97] A. Østhagen, *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: What Role for the EU?* in "European View", n. 2, 2017, pp. 239-249.

[98] *A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic*, European Commission, 2021, available online.

[99] R. Pincus, *Three-Way Power Dynamics in the Arctic*, cit., p. 40.

[100] R. Pincus, *Three-Way Power Dynamics in the Arctic*, cit..

[101] G. Cuscito, *L'Artico è vicino ma non sarà della Cina*, in "Limes", n, 2019.

[102] A.P. MacDonald, *China-Russian cooperation in the Arctic: A cause for concern for the Western Arctic States?*, in "Canadian Foreign Policy Journal", n. 2, 2021 pp. 194-210.

[103] T. Røseth, *Russia's China Policy in the Arctic*, in "Strategic Analysis", n. 6, 2014, pp. 841-859.

[104] For more on the importance of science diplomacy for Asian countries (China, India, Japan, South Korea, Singapore) in the Arctic, see M. Lanteigne, *Walking the walk: science diplomacy and identity-building in Asia-Arctic relations*, in "Jindal Global Law Review", vol. 8, 2017, pp. 87-101.

sued so far while avoiding presenting itself as a revisionist force in the Arctic and without commenting regional hard security issues[105]. Beijing has nonetheless defined itself a "near-Arctic state"[106], thus seeing itself as a major stakeholder in the region and demanding that the Arctic be declared a global 'commons', making its resources accessible to all.

Like China, "Japan sees the Arctic less as a strategically crucial point from the traditional security perspective, but more from the viewpoint of economic security and development"[107], and maintains a low-profile, non-Arctic actor position while emphasizing its past contributions to Arctic research, its climate change concerns and its interest in developing and using new international shipping routes.

Despite its equatorial location, Singapore deserves a mention as it crafted a different identity as an Arctic stakeholder compared to its Asian-Pacific neighbours, whose primary interest was the security of resource access. The island nation puts the focus on the impact that rising sea levels might have on its security, while being aware that the potential introduction of new sea transit routes in the far north may eventually divert traffic away from Singapore, undermining the main source of its economic prosperity[108].

3. *From riches to regulation: arctic economic activities and multilateralism in the Region*

3.1.*Economic activities*

3.1.1 *Oil and gas*

All the Arctic coastal states are currently investing in the extraction of the region's hydrocarbon riches[109], albeit in different propor-

[105] M. Lanteigne, *Inside, Outside, Upside Down? Non-Arctic States in Emerging Arctic Security Discourses*, in K. Spohr *et al*. (eds.), "The Arctic and World Order", cit., p. 388.

[106] *China's Arctic Policy*, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018.

[107] A. Tonami, *The Arctic policy of China and Japan: multilayered economic and strategic motivations*, in "The Polar Journal", n. 1, 2014, pp. 105-126, p. 105.

[108] M. Lanteigne, *Inside, Outside, Upside Down? Non-Arctic States in Emerging Arctic Security Discourses*, cit., p. 392.

[109] S.R. Dadwal, *Arctic: The Next Great Game in Energy Geopolitics?*, in "Strategic Analysis", n. 6, 2014, pp. 812-824, p. 814 and ff.

tions[110]. As mentioned above, a geopolitical rush for Arctic resources is unlikely, and it has been argued that political conflict is more likely to occur inside Arctic petroleum states rather than among them; hydrocarbon development could in fact be a driver for regional cooperation, due to the mutual interest in the settlement of boundary disputes and in the development of regulatory regimes[111]. Yet some potential sources of controversy remain, the most significant of them being indeed the current lack of regulation[112].

Hydrocarbon development in the region will surely be more relevant in ten to fifteen years from now and will depend on market conditions (since the price for oil and gas extraction in the Arctic is higher than in other regions) as well as on the development and speed of climate change[113]. Current projects cannot however be overlooked: the most discussed is the Russian Yamal LNG Plant Project, which see substantial Chinese participation[114] and is connected to the development of new trade routes in the Arctic, that will be now discussed.

3.1.2 *Trade routes*

There are currently two routes in the Arctic: the Northwest Passage (NWP) on the North of Canada and South of Greenland, and the Northern Sea Route (NSR), on the coast of Northern Russia and Europe. The Transpolar Sea Route (TSR), crossing the centre of the Arctic Ocean, will be fully navigable in the future, when there is no sea ice[115]. Among these

[110] K. Keil, *The Arctic: A new region of conflict? The case of oil and gas*, in "Cooperation and Conflict", n. 2, 2014, pp. 162-190.

[111] D.H. Claes, A. Moe, *Arctic petroleum resources in a regional and global perspective*, in K.S. Coates, C. Holroyd (eds.), "The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Politics", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

[112] K. Keil, *Spreading Oil, Spreading Conflict? Institutions Regulating Arctic Oil and Gas Activities*, in "The International Spectator", n. 1, pp. 85-110 p. 107.

[113] Ø. Harsem, A. Eide, K. Hee, *Factors influencing future oil and gas prospects in the Arctic*, in "Energy Policy", vol. 39, 2011, pp. 8037-8045.

[114] E. Wishnick, *The 'Power of Siberia': No Longer a Pipedream*, Policy Memo, PONARS Eurasia, 2014.

[115] B. Coelho Jaeger, L. Chrystello Pederneiras, *Arctic geoeconomy and new trade routes: Sino-Russian logistics projects and strategic investments in the region*, in "Revista da Escola de Guerra Naval", n. 3, 2022, pp. 643-681, p. 659.

routes, the NSR is considered the one with the highest potential for shipping – a bulk carrier traveling from Norway to China would save 18 days, hundreds of tons of fuel and between 180 and 300 thousand euros compared to the Suez-Malacca route[116].

Yet the expected increase in traffic on these routes over the next decades would exacerbate several vulnerabilities in the region[117]. Some of the most relevant issues are the lack of intermediate markets on the NSR, the difficulty of forecasting the fuel consumption of the vessels, and the presence of additional costs (e.g. insurance rates, icebreakers) that would counterbalance the Suez toll fees[118].

Multiple authors discussed the close cooperation between China and Russia in the region. Beijing seeks influence and control over a remunerative trade route (the Chinese control 30% of the Russian port of Sabetta, where Yamal LNG is located). Moscow, on the other hand, wants to portray itself as some sort of 'gatekeeper' of the Arctic[119] – if the NSR were to become a major commercial route over the next decades, then Russia would become a maritime power for the first time in history. It is therefore no surprise that security perceptions play a major role in the Kremlin's NSR plans[120].

If China is willing to establish a firmer presence along the NSR, then it needs to step up cooperation with Nordic countries[121]. Yet there is no evidence that policymakers in Beijing give high priority to Arctic, and Chinese interest in the region has been defined as "real but cautious"[122]. Similarly, Chinese shipping firms have shown only limited interest in

[116] *Arctic geoeconomy and new trade routes: Sino-Russian logistics projects and strategic investments in the region*, cit., p. 664.

[117] T.C. Stevenson *et al.*, *An examination of trans-Arctic vessel routing in the Central Arctic Ocean*, in "Marine Policy", vol. 100, 2019, pp. 83-89.

[118] I. Makarova *et al.*, *Economic and environmental aspects of the development possibilities for the northern sea route* in "Transportation Research Procedia", v 57, 2021, pp. 347-355.

[119] B. Coelho Jaeger, L. Chrystello Pederneiras, *Arctic geoeconomy and new trade routes: Sino-Russian logistics projects and strategic investments in the region*, cit., p. 672.

[120] A. Sergunin, G. Hoogensen Gjør, *The Politics of Russian Arctic shipping: evolving security and geopolitical factors*, in "The Polar Journal", n. 2, 2020, pp. 251-272.

[121] M. Tüter, *China's Polar Silk Road: Opportunities and Challenges for Nordic Arctic*, in "International Journal of Politics and Security", n. 3, 2022, pp. 299-326.

[122] A. Moe, O.S. Stokke, *China and Arctic Shipping: Policies, Interests and Engagement*, in "China in World and Regional Politics", vol. 24, 2019, pp. 257-278, p. 270.

the Arctic so far[123]. In fact, an analysis of current shipping trends shows how commerce in the high North is still dominated by Russian domestic shipping, with European companies investing more than Asian ones[124].

3.1.3 *Fishery management*

Potential for sub-Arctic fish species to move into the Arctic has been proven[125]; this might cause major environmental problems related to fish bycatch. Even though more than half of the 58 commercial species living in the Arctic have low resilience to climate change[126], "the total effects of climate change on fish stocks is probably going to be of less importance than the effects of fisheries policies and their enforcement"[127]. Hence, international cooperation is key to preserve fish stocks and the Arctic ecosystem. The fact that the 1975 Joint Russian-Norwegian Fisheries Commission, that manages the most important shared fish stocks of Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea[128] is still working despite the recent international turmoil is significant.

The relevance of fisheries is also proven by the adoption in 2018 of the International Agreement to Prevent Unregulated Fishing in the High Seas of the Central Arctic Ocean. Under this agreement which entered into force in 2021 among the Arctic five, China, Iceland, Japan, South Korea, and the UK, the parties commit themselves to not allowing their vessels to fish in Central Arctic Ocean waters until sixteen years after the entry into force of the treaty; furthermore, a Joint Program of Scientific Research and Monitoring is instituted to assess the impact of the expansion northwards of fish stocks and to take further decisions on the management of fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean[129].

[123] L. Huang *et al.*, *Is China's interest for the Arctic driven by Arctic shipping potential?*, in "Asian Geographer", n. 1, pp. 59-71.

[124] B. Gunnarson, *Recent ship traffic and developing shipping trends on the Northern Sea Route–Policy implications for future arctic shipping*, in "Marine Policy", vol. 124, 2021.

[125] A.B. Hollowed, *Potential movement of fish and shellfish stocks from the sub-Arctic to the Arctic Ocean*, in "Fisheries Oceanography", n. 5, 2013, pp. 355-370.

[126] *Fisheries Management and the Arctic in the Context of Climate Change*, European Parliament, 2015, available online.

[127] *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment*, Arctic Council, 2015, available online.

[128] *Fisheries Management and the Arctic in the Context of Climate Change*, cit., p. 62.

[129] A.H. Hoel, *The Geopolitics of Fish in the Arctic*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs Policy Brief, n. 11, 2020.

3.2 *Multilateralism and Arctic governance*

Multilateral cooperation based on soft law has been dominant in the Arctic since the end of the Cold war, and the "complex interdependence"[130] between regional actors has been useful to handle crises up to 2022, as Russia relations with the West in the Arctic were isolated from developments elsewhere.

The Arctic council is a high-level intergovernmental forum of the eight Arctic countries, convening twice a year from 1996 to 2022, when the Council's works were paused after the full-scale Russian war on Ukraine started. The body consists of representatives from its member countries but also from six indigenous organizations as "permanent participants"[131]. "The Council was in large part a consequence of rapid changes in the natural rather than the geopolitical environment"[132], as it can be considered the successor of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), and its impact is limited by its inability to address military matters.

A mix of 'great' and 'middle' powers, with some of the latter (Canada, Finland) playing leading roles[133], its inability to adopt binding documents has not stopped other states from wanting to join the AC, with thirteen non-Arctic powers currently enjoying 'permanent observer' status[134]. In spite of the limitations related to its structure, narrow mandate, and inconsistent funding, there are no plans to transform it in a formal international organization with assessed contribution. Despite the existence of several other recently established fora, such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR), The Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF), or the regionally focused Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), the need

[130] M. Byers, *Crises and international cooperation: an Arctic case study*, in "International Relations", n. 4, 2017, pp. 375–402.

[131] H. Conley, J. Kraut, *Enhanced Multilateral Cooperation within an International Governance Structure*, in "U.S. Strategic Interests in the Arctic", CSIS report, 2010.

[132] M. Beeson, J. Hewitt, *Does Multilateralism still Matter? ASEAN and the Arctic Council in Comparative Perspective*, in "Global Policy", vol, 13, 2022, pp. 208-218.

[133] M. Beeson, J. Hewitt, *Does Multilateralism still Matter? ASEAN and the Arctic Council in Comparative Perspective*, cit.

[134] More on AC observer states and their expectations in M. Laintegne, *Inside, Outside, Upside Down? Non-Arctic States in Emerging Arctic Security Discourses* in K. Spohr *et al.* (eds.), "The Arctic and World Order", cit., p. 382; and A. Chater, *Explaining non-Arctic states in the Arctic Council*, in "Strategic Analysis", n. 3, 2016, pp. 173-184.

for a platform to discuss military security matters and cooperation has been pointed out by both policymakers and scholars[135].

As mentioned above, Arctic cooperation is currently based on soft law[136] and conferences[137], with few exceptions, the most remarkable being UNCLOS[138] and the International Maritime Organization, that adopted the legally binding Polar Code in 2011[139]. If Arctic nations are going to increase their resort to binding agreements anytime soon, this would probably be because of climate change, as happened with the Central Arctic Ocean fisheries agreement.

Conclusions

The objective of this article was to give an overarching depiction of the Arctic geopolitical landscape, concentrating on the main actors involved in the region and on the current state of Arctic affairs.

As numerous authors observed, despite the recent trend of militarization, the increasingly conflictual interstate relations in the region, and the emergence of new soft security threats, major Arctic players still stand to gain from cooperation rather than from confrontation among the interested parties and political adversaries.

While climate change plays a role in the security and geopolitical strategies of Arctic players, it is unlikely to be the primary determinant of their actions in a region that has increased in importance but remains semi-peripheral. Consequently, the actions of regional actors will probably continue to be driven by their broader strategic interests, as has been the case over the past decades.

[135] D. ZANDEE *et al*., *Arctic governance* in "The Future of Arctic Security", Clingdael Institute report, 2020.

[136] T. KOIVUROVA, *Increasing relevance of treaties: the case of the Arctic*, in "AJIL Unbound", vol. 108, 2014, pp. 52-56.

[137] B. STEINVEG, *The role of conferences within Arctic governance*, in "Polar Geography", n. 1, 2020, pp. 37-54.

[138] N. SINGIL, *Evaluation of the Arctic within the Framework of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, in "Public and Private International Law Bulletin", n. 2, 2020, pp. 1023-1051.

[139] L. ODGAARD, K.C. LAVELLE, *The Arctic Council, the International Maritime Organization, and the Polar Code*, in "Environment and Security", n. 3-4, 2023, pp. 103-120.

The region's strategic significance has increased along its accessibility and will likely continue to do so. However, the Arctic will persist as a means, not an end, within the strategies of global powers, who are still interested in maintaining it as a fundamentally peaceful region. As highlighted above, unconventional threats have recently escalated both in number and severity, but the Arctic remains more plausible as a secondary theatre in a conflict between major powers, with its epicentre elsewhere, rather than being the primary focal point of such a conflict.

Riassunto - Il presente lavoro si propone di offrire una visione completa delle principali questioni legate ai cambiamenti geopolitici nella regione Artica, insieme ad una panoramica della letteratura scientifica riguardante tali problematiche. Dopo un'analisi storica, la ricerca si focalizza sull'evoluzione della sicurezza artica, esaminando la presunta militarizzazione e l'impatto del cambiamento climatico. Successivamente, si esplorano le principali potenze coinvolte ed i loro interessi e strategie nella regione. Infine, ci si concentra sulle imprese economiche e sul multilateralismo nella zona, entrambi influenzati da eventi recenti e cambiamenti climatici.