

NEW COLD WARS IN THE HIGH NORTH? RUSSIA AND THE PROGRESSIVE MILITARIZATION OF THE ARCTIC

ARMANDO MARQUES GUEDES

amarquesguedes@gmail.com

Full Professor (ret.), NOVA School of Law, UNL, where he was elected Director of the Faculty's research center (CEDIS, Portugal). Holds a Bachelors' in Government at ISCSP, University of Lisbon, a BSc and an MPhil at the LSE, London, a Diplôme de l'École at EHESS, Paris, all in Social Anthropology, and a PhD at FCSH, UNL. Aggregation in Law, NSL, UNL. Was Portuguese Cultural Counsellor at the Portuguese Embassy in Luanda, Angola, and later President of the Portuguese Diplomatic Institute, Portuguese MFA. Was also founder and President of the Board of the Portuguese Society of International Law (SPDI).

ISIDRO DE MORAIS PEREIRA

isidromoraispereira@gmail.com

Major General Portuguese Army (ret, Portugal). Has a Masters's Degree in Military Sciences. Currently, a Doctoral Student at ISCSP/University of Lisbon. With national and international military background to include NATO positions and operations. Served as Sub-Director at the Joint Command and Staff College (IESM). And was Defense Attaché in Washington D.C., USA and in Ottawa, Canada. ORCID: 0009-0006-0650-1107

Abstract

We consider the Arctic Basin as an emerging focal point patent in the political and strategic conjuncture in the global framework. If observed in a "quasi-equidistant azimuthal projection", this basin borders five riparian States, although it includes many others that interact with these five. A formal international organization, the Arctic Council, was created to try to regulate the multiple interests that converge on it. International law has not been sufficient to carry it out, if only because security matters are not part of its purview. On the other hand, the mere fact that it is an area related to a maritime basin, which bears many of the traits of "a lake", raises unexpected difficulties, and is often poorly understood, in terms of the emergence of its centrality. Unlike other "area studies" that we know better, we often tend to have little awareness of its growing importance. In this study, I try to define relational moments in the growing tensions that make this region a crucial region. It should be noted that, in this regional area, cooperation and competition links are growing more and more evident. Of the five riparian states (Denmark-Greenland, Canada, USA-Alaska, Russian Federation, and Norway), four belong to the Atlantic Alliance, as well as the accession of Finland and Sweden (both since their inception full members of an Arctic Council which has no security competences) into the Atlantic Alliance in the High North, which shall tilt the balance by leaving Russia as the sole non-NATO in that region. In the current situation, tensions are becoming more acute due to the convergence of many other states that are aligning with the previous ones. I will argue, as it seems obvious to us, the regional rising tensions and the militarization associated with them, take place in moments and phases linked to intervals of a Russia that regards itself as ever-expanding, and its potential northern surpassing by China. The purpose of this work is to demonstrate that most facets of this temporal iteration in the adversarial tension processes have guided the recent historical evolution regarding the militarization of this basin. Albeit its' variable geometry, clearly, the Wider Arctic Basin justifies its treatment in terms of an Area subject to a geopolitical analysis.

Keywords

Arctic Basin, Russian Federation, Polar Silk Road, expansionism, militarization, tensions.



Resumo

A Bacia do Ártico pode ser hoje considerada como um ponto focal emergente na conjuntura política e estratégica patente no quadro global. Se observado numa “projeção azimutal quási-equidistante”, esta bacia confina com cinco Estados ribeirinhos, embora inclua muitos outros que com estes cinco interagem. Uma organização internacional formal, o Conselho do Ártico, foi criada para tentar regular os múltiplos interesses que sobre ela convergem. O Direito Internacional não tem sido suficiente para a levar a cabo, entre outras razões porque o Conselho não tem competências no âmbito da segurança e defesa. Por outro lado, o mero facto de se tratar de uma área relativa a uma bacia marítima com muitas das características de “um lago”, cria dificuldades inesperadas, e muitas vezes mal conhecidas no que à emergência da sua centralidade diz respeito. Ao contrário de outras regiões do globo, tendemos por isso a ter pouca consciência da sua importância crescente. É de notar que, nesta área regional de geometria variável, crescem ligações de cooperação e competição cada vez mais evidentes. Dos cinco Estados ribeirinhos (Dinamarca-Gronelândia, Canadá, EUA-Alasca, Federação Russa e Noruega), quatro pertencem à Aliança Atlântica, bem como a adesão da Finlândia e da Suécia, à Aliança Atlântica (ambas desde a sua criação membros de pleno direito do Conselho do Ártico), uma entidade sem competências no domínio da segurança. O que poderá desequilibrar o equilíbrio ao deixar a Rússia como o único país dessa região não pertencente à NATO. Na conjuntura atual as tensões agudizam-se por via da convergência de muitos outros Estados que com os anteriores se vão alinhando. Argumentaremos, por nos parecer evidente, que as crescentes tensões e a militarização regional a elas associada têm lugar em momentos e fases ligados a intervalos de uma Rússia que se quer ver como em constante expansão, e a potencial ultrapassagem pela China a norte. A finalidade deste artigo é demonstrar as principais dimensões desta iteração temporal nos processos de tensão aguda que têm pautado a evolução histórica recente no que toca à militarização desta bacia. Embora a sua geometria seja variável, manifestamente a Bacia Alargada do Ártico justifica o seu tratamento como um todo coerente sob o ponto de vista geopolítico.

Palavras-chave

Bacia do Ártico, Federação Russa, Rota Polar da Seda, expansionismo, militarização, tensões.

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ISIDRO DE MORAIS PEREIRA

Introduction

The relevance and the topicality of this article are both essentially anchored on the growing importance that the Russian Federation has been attaching to this region of the globe in political, economic, strategic, military, and geopolitical terms. This is likely to lead to conflicts of interest with all the five other states bordering the Arctic Basin plus two who do not – namely Sweden and Finland, given that they are NATO Member-States; Sweden is still waiting for adhesion, but it appears to be well on its way to join the Alliance. On the other hand, the motivation that led us to address this issue is intrinsically related to the growing importance that has been attributed to this entire basin. This goes beyond the riches that its maritime subsoil contains, from hydrocarbons to many others, and also given the marked melting of the polar ice cap, which opens up a new and much shorter trade route – the so-called Northern Maritime Route between the Far East and the entire consuming West, which, although seasonal, almost cuts the distance to be traveled in half, with all the advantages that this offers.

Indeed, most of the questions we raise here are framed by the increasing accessibility that ongoing climate change makes possible and signifies – focusing in particular on the seasonal opening of the Northern Sea Route. This core issue is linked to a sheer politico-geographical reality: the Arctic Basin brings together an unspecified group of Atlantic Alliance member states, all standing in close proximity to the Russian Federation, which depicts the region as a potential stage, or perhaps better an arena, for conflicts of various kinds. Among them, as we shall emphasize, the rise of at least potential tensions between China and Russia, as well as between the former and the North Atlantic states, the so-called West, is apparent

We have strived to scrutinize what follows under the light of a few pivotal objectives: (i) to list the various moments of the increasingly expressive militarization that Russia has been carrying out, (especially in the periods when it has not been involved in military operations in its *near abroad*) and which are reflected above all in the conduct of joint military exercises that are spiraling – and on the consequent responses to these exercises carried out jointly with many other states concerned with the Arctic, both before and



after the announcement in 2022 of the possible accession of Finland and Sweden to the Atlantic Alliance; (ii) to highlight, if not specifically the evolution of the territorial claims that the littoral states have institutionally presented in organizations such as the Arctic Council and at the United Nations within the framework of the Montego Bay Accords (which in themselves would fit into another article), as well as the underlying political-strategic tensions associated with this legal framework; (iii) to highlight the growing difficulties and operational limits being experienced both in the Arctic Council and in the UN, especially those that have come to light since 2022 and as a result of the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and by the recent NATO's enlargement at its north; (iv) lastly, we try to touch on a few of the more complex and surreptitious issues relating to the position taken by a China whose interest has been both manifest and cautious – engaged, as it is, in a process we believe could result in Beijing's already expressed attempt to create "a Northern Road and Belt"; one which would allow it, if it takes place, more direct access to the North Atlantic – with the foreseeable resistance which the Middle Kingdom may then have to strive. All these points raise further specific questions that we attempt to at least frame.

In order to do this always in most of its manifold contexts as we look at the accelerated processes of militarization of this increasingly ever more vital area of study, without neglecting the importance of hydrocarbons and other natural resources in the region often referred to as the *High North*. We will articulate them with the policies of the different states interested in them, with an eye on their eventual attempts to fashion and transform extant International Organizations, especially the Arctic Council and NATO. We will do so in some detail with regard to their wider frameworks, namely by considering the limitations of this Council and the Atlantic Alliance – since the former, the Council programmatically does not take into account the security dimensions that have been emerging in this area; whilst the latter, NATO, sees them as central. Here goes how the central questions we are asking here unfold: how far do the growing initiatives of the Russian Federation, supported by China, continue focusing on the political, economic, strategic, military, and geopolitical domains; and, also, on whether or not they will churn out a Russian hegemonic position in this part of the world in the short or medium term.

From a theoretical point of view, we cast our perspective within a framework that International Relations theory usually labels as liberal institutionalist. Our theoretical framework is focused on the importance we attach to a few pertinent extant international organizations, both formal and informal, while also considering both international law and the so-called *rule of law*. Our position is thus similar to that of all the Arctic Basin states – with the exception of a Russia which has been asserting itself as a revisionist power, in the context of an expansionist 'offensive realism' that we deem as rather unique up North. Furthermore, we emphasize that our perspective will be mostly restricted to political, politico-diplomatic, and geopolitical issues – without looking too hard to other perhaps relevant dimensions which we believe could be better dissected in articles rather than this one, given the economy of the short text we are now putting forth.



1. Between ambition and reality

In approaching the Arctic and its delimitation, we focus on the maritime basin itself, as well as on its geographical extensions, its accesses and obstacles, and its neighborhoods, both near and far. Given our purpose in this work, however, it is important to begin with one of the frameworks that we consider to be the largest – the institutional one, in this case, the so-called Arctic Council, the most important international organization that has focused on this polar region. And NATO, which has been increasingly important for almost two years now.

From an overall perspective, it can be said that the Russian Federation's 2020-2023 chairmanship of the Arctic Council has had unreasonable ambitions from the very outset¹. As we will be able to comment in detail throughout, Russia's pretensions in the Arctic region have increasingly alerted the West, especially as climate change has opened up, and continues to open up, previously unviable opportunities in the region, both in terms of navigation and the exploitation of its many riches. As might be expected given the expansionist affectations it has displayed throughout its history, Moscow is looking with the necessary caution at what it perceives (or pragmatically claims to read) as a challenge from the United States and NATO to its "natural historical ambitions" in this region². The Russian government's narrative about the "Western invasion" has become much louder and more assertive in recent years. That was due to its military posture and its economic and infrastructural projects, especially given the role taken on by NATO (and to a much

¹ A brief preliminary note. Our general framework underlines and dismantles, step by step, what Moscow has proposed, in an idealized manner and with a supposed foreknowledge in the appropriate drawing up of Russian priorities in the text they entitled *Russian Chairmanship 2021-2023*, published by *The Arctic Institute*. For more realism, see the article published by Nurman Aliyev (2021), "Russia's Arctic Council Chairmanship in 2021-2023", published in Germany by the *Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung* in March of that year. It is also worth looking at the excellent article by Chen Chuan (2023), "China-Russia Arctic Cooperation in the Context of a Divided Arctic", *The Arctic Institute*, in its *Centre for Circumpolar Security Studies*, 4 April. Unfortunately, albeit as might be expected, "pragmatic" opportunism is also emerging on many of the sides aligned with it and, perhaps more interestingly, even from some of the "Allies" of the so-called Wider West who oppose it. This should come as no surprise, as it is the norm in all conflicts. Inverting a Clausewitzian expression, we consider that often "politics is also an extension of war by other means".

² Russian interest in the Arctic is rooted in historically well-known strains that can be traced back to the 16th century with the conquest of Siberia, driven by the uninterrupted search for more resources and safe trade routes. Russia's current stance in the Arctic should be regarded as a component of its wider confrontation with the West, where Europe can be seen as a privileged stage. The Kremlin's disputes in the Arctic and its frightening narratives are leveraged by multiple factors: preparations for an unlikely but potentially catastrophic eventuality of a new generalized war on the European Continent, the need to secure its retaliatory nuclear capabilities (most of which are located around the Kola Peninsula in Severomorsk, the HQs of the Northern Fleet, just below Murmansk, close to the northern border of Norway, in Kirkenes, Finnmark), and the incessant search for more resources to finance the huge expenses involved in the maintenance and development of a war capability that is at least reminiscent of the military power of the former USSR. The clear stance of confrontation and the constant competition with the West does not seem to show any signs of diminishing. Quite the opposite in fact. Of course, the pretensions of great powers and the commercial interests of powerful bureaucratic elites will have to be taken into account. On this last point, we can only emphasize the non-linearity of the positions taken by *all* the parties involved. Since pretensions and interests are not confined to Russia, of course.



lesser extent the European Union) since the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022³.

Finland's proposed entry into the Atlantic Alliance in 2023, and Sweden's possible accession to the latter, were perceived by the Kremlin as an added threat to its aims. As expected, both the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Kremlin spokeswoman reacted on 30 November 2022:

"Russia's foreign ministry said on Wednesday that Sweden and Finland joining NATO could accelerate the militarization of the Arctic region. Responding to a question about how the two countries joining the alliance would affect the Arctic Council – an intergovernmental group which promotes cooperation in the Arctic – spokeswoman Maria Zakharova noted that Russia would be the only non-NATO member of the group”.

She added that *"(i)t cannot be ignored that once these countries join the alliance, all member states of the Arctic Council apart from Russia will be members of the North Atlantic bloc,"* as she put it. She stated too that *"(t)his could lead to increased militarisation of the Arctic region but in turn, it would mean a significant increase in tensions over high latitude security risks"*⁴. A point that we shall address in some detail below.

It will certainly be important to know whether Moscow will succeed in achieving her aims. Moscow's naval, nuclear, and even conventional power in north-west Russia is increasingly susceptible to NATO's long-range precision vectors. It is not yet clear whether the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along Russia's northern coast will translate into a crucial shipping route between Europe and Asia. Nor whether the commercial projects that are intrinsically linked to it are in fact bearable, in view of the very high costs and the vast logistical complexity potentially limiting their operation, which is partly conditioned by the extreme weather imperatives faced. There is no doubt that this poses many difficulties, given the limits imposed by limited infrastructure, the increased commercial competition from other countries, uncertainty as concerns the sustained demand for hydrocarbons since the world moves towards green technologies, And also the very possibility of additional Western sanctions⁵.

Indeed, these are all points to which we shall return, as it is to precisely these types of questions that our study aims to provide some answers – ones that we believe are

³ For more historical detail, it is useful to read and analyze the extensive and cautious report provided by Eugene Rumer, *et al.* (2021), *Russia in Arctic. Implications for the United States and NATO*, published by *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

⁴ Reuters, (Nov. 30, 2022), "Russia says Sweden and Finland joining NATO could accelerate militarisation of Arctic region", *Arctic Today. Business Journal*. For a forward-looking stance that expresses less conjunctural concern, see Bekkevold, Jo Inge and Paul Siguld Hilde (Jul. 28, 2023), "Europe's Northern Flank Is More Stable Than You Think", *Foreign Policy*, which we will discuss below.

⁵ This is without even going into the possibility of reversing the process of the polar ice cap shrinking if the process of decarbonizing the planet accelerates markedly. We will see where it takes us, i.e., if the COPs make progress as regards the mass production of green hydrogen, on the production of electricity from photovoltaic technologies and, perhaps, with the development of increasingly safe nuclear power stations.



plausible, and ones that we support in what concerns many of the decisions taken in various international *fora*.

2. The Arctic Council and the prospects of a gradual robustness offered to the "Peoples of the Arctic"

For formal reasons, we will begin with the role of the Arctic Council, focusing on the Russian Federation's last Presidency of the Council, which lasted from 11 May 2020 to 11 May 2023. The Russian Presidency pledged to continue establishing the Arctic Council as the main instrument for international co-operation in this region, allegedly by improving its efforts. The stated intentions aimed to promote the effectiveness of Working Groups and of areas of expertise, as well as the Secretariat's, and to outline mechanisms for financing the Council's activities. The expectation was of thus fostering the promotion of deliberations and recommendations by stimulating dialogue and greater interaction with the increasingly numerous Observer States. All this in order to provide adequate involvement in the Council's general activities. It should be stressed that this Council, as it stands, does not have *any* competencies in the area of security and defense.

When Norway took over the chairmanship of the Arctic Council on 12 May 2023, she set out to intensify the Arctic Council's collaboration, in general, that is, with its Economic Council, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum and with its' University. Among the priorities of the Russian Presidency a place was held, *ab initio*, for the promotion of international scientific co-operation; in particular with regard to the possibility of conducting a Council scientific expedition that would cover in-depth studies of the Arctic Ocean as a whole. What was at stake was "sustainability", expressed in general terms by a Kremlin that was well aware of the fact that we emphasized, that the Arctic Council had and has no powers whatsoever in terms of security⁶.

In truth, none of this actually peaked in any meaningful sense, given the constraints imposed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Sustainable progress, in essence aimed at embodying the "development of the Arctic region" – an objective naturally partly guided by the quality of its human capital – quickly fizzled out. The intentions did seem good and sensible. The focus of the Russian Presidency, which lasted from 2020 to 2023, was (or was intended to be) on increasing sustainability, on measures to adjust to climate change, on improving the well-being, health, education, quality of life of the Arctic inhabitants, and the resilience and viability of their communities, including that of the "indigenous peoples"⁷. As well as on guaranteeing socio-

⁶ As is the case with the Antarctic Treaty, and unlike the Black Sea. In fact, the international organization that oversees the Black Sea is the BSEC (*Black Sea Economic Cooperation*), which includes a subsidiary entity called the *International Centre for Black Sea Security* (ICBSS), based in Athens, and created there in order to (i) minimize centrality by placing its headquarters in a state linked to the Black Sea, but not bordering it, and (ii) at the same time guarantee some exemption. The formula did not work: after the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 and its partition, the ICBSS was reduced by Moscow to an entity merely concerned with ecology, regional economy and the creation of roads and railways around it. As concerns the Arctic, in this regard, it is apposite to carefully analyze a report proposed by Michael Paul and Göran Swistek (2022), "Russia in the Arctic. Development Plans, Military Potential, and Conflict Prevention", *SWP, Research Paper 3*, published in Berlin.

⁷ The indigenous peoples of the Arctic include, for example, the Saami who live in the circumpolar areas of Finland, Sweden, Norway and the north-west of the Russian Federation. Added to these are the Nenets,



environmental sustainability and, in turn, as an outcome, generating a greater economic development of the region. The promotion of scientific, educational and cultural exchanges, tourism and contacts between peoples and regions would also be high on its agenda. In the approved document, special attention was paid to "preserving the linguistic and cultural heritage of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic", as well as to "cross-border youth co-operation"⁸.

We shall see if the seeds planted last, given the unpredictability of the war on Ukraine unleashed by Putin's Russia, and taking into account the crumbling of these resulting cooperation plans that were stopped early on.

3. Russia and the invasion of Ukraine: consequences for the United States, NATO – and, less centrally, the EU

Russia's concept of its security requirements and, on the other hand, NATO's commitments to mutual defense and deterrence have resulted in a stalemate and even some very visible tension on the Alliance's northern flank – given that its forces operate in too close a proximity. It should be noted that the Arctic, when viewed from an azimuthal projection, has many of the characteristics of "a lake". It is, in fact, a circular area, flanked by five states and with only two outlets. The image of a "lake" for this basin seems useful for reaching a better understanding of the political and military dynamics here at play. One of them borders the North Atlantic and forms a strait, a *chokepoint*, a bottleneck that has been nicknamed GIUK (an acronym for *Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom*). The other, the Bering Strait, is very narrow, less than one hundred kilometers long, linking the Arctic Sea to the north Pacific. The littoral states are therefore much closer to each other than it at first might seem – seen from above, they stand, so to speak, *all spread across a round and not very large "pond"*. This great proximity between a couple of major powers and a set of very rich ones has rather interestingly led to growing tensions. It is clear that both competition and cooperation are evident up in the High North.

As tempting as it is to view the Arctic through the prism of competition between Great Powers – which would undoubtedly fit in with Russia's quest for recognition as a great power – there is little to suggest that there is anything substantially different about its military posture. Instead, the Kremlin is announcing a return to a new posture that clearly takes us back to the days of a Cold War focused on the old tasks of preserving the sanctuaries of its fleet of ballistic missile submarines and now cruise missiles too; as well as the necessary military operations taking place in the North Atlantic – posed in a preventive posture, accounting for the tragedy of the possible outbreak of a generalized

Khanty, Evenk and Chukchi also in Russia, and the Aleut, Yupik and Inuit (Iñupiat) in Alaska, the Inuit (Inuvialuit) in Canada and the Inuit (Kalaallit) in Greenland. The Inuit were the people who for centuries were nicknamed the Eskimos. In Russia alone, there are 4 million people living on this northern edge of the Federation, one million of whom are indigenous peoples.

⁸ With Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions that have made many forms of cooperation impossible, little or none of this has been achieved. Existing cooperation has been limited to collaboration centered on search and rescue efforts and on fishing activities in the Basin. We shall see if Norway, now at the helm of the Arctic Council, will be more successful in these areas.



war in Europe, in some ways repeating the precautions it took during the Cold War. But a meaningful balance does not seem very likely: no matter how loud she is, Russia is resuming its northern military missions with far fewer resources and facing a much more complex and sophisticated panoply of rival capabilities than during the Soviet Union.

In truth, Russia's contemporary actions in the Arctic, namely its aggressive rhetorical stance combined with its long-standing territorial claims, have done very little to change the face of its diplomatic position with regard to the other Arctic states, only alienating and antagonizing them in an ever-growing accentuated aggressive posture. Its only partner of choice as relates to its scientific research and economic demands for the Arctic, has increasingly been China. A China that, with Moscow's consent, appears to be keen on asserting itself as "a state close to the Arctic" – a claim and status rejected outright by the United States of America, naturally viewed with strangeness and fear by the other states bordering this glacial ocean⁹.

In an ideal world, in terms of diplomacy – although Russia may not be very receptive to bilateral or multilateral niceties – the United States of America, the European Union and NATO should ideally raise and encourage topics of cooperation where there is a clear convergence of interests. She should, as well, be proposing the implementation of transit rules similar to those that existed during most of the long years of the Cold War, in order to reduce tensions – avoiding or managing crises that may arise or, at the very least, trying to mitigate potential risks of conflict triggered by fortuitous accidents or even simple miscalculations. Thus, ideally, aiming at promoting a much-needed deterrence, through which the US and NATO would gain by making a serious commitment to improve their defense mechanisms in order to deter Russia from conflating its aircraft, military and commercial vessels in and around the Arctic. And to ensure that the Alliance continues to be able to maintain the capacity to carry out its military reinforcement plans for the northern and eastern flanks. Unfortunately, since the invasion of Ukraine, this has not been as effective as it could otherwise have been. None of the sides, the US/NATO and the Russian Federation, is relenting.

It would be good, however, that this was not the case. In seeking not to hand over the Arctic Basin to Russia, the Alliance will have to remain aligned with the obvious objectives of continuing to manage the competition with the Russian Federation through a judicious and strategic combination of joint de-escalation actions. That would entail making a series of adjustments that display a resolute commitment on the one hand and some moderation on the other. That would mean having Washington and the Alliance improving and demonstrating real defense and deterrence capabilities – without, however, taking unnecessary risks in the face of some actions of mere rhetorical defiance on Moscow's part. To this end, a high level of cohesion, interoperability and the capacity for a dialogue that is tenuous at times but always indispensable as parts try to attain a stable balance between the determination to show willingness to use force. And, at the same time, via a constant willingness to negotiate on precise and fair terms, promoting the peaceful coexistence of all stakeholders. Unambiguously and without concessions, of course,

⁹ A point emphasized by Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolski, Paul Stronski (2021), *ibid*.



which would require clearly conveying to Russia where the interests, objectives and red lines of the Allies – both those of the European Union and, above all, those of NATO.

The Russian Federation would also have to do the same, and we do not think this is by any means a foregone conclusion. It should always be borne in mind that both the US, its Allies and Russia have been in these unusual situations of an apparent quasi-*rapprochement* before. And they somehow managed to survive even when subjected to stout strains¹⁰.

4. Moscow's political and economic angles in the development of the part of the Arctic that it claims as its own

Despite the plans of the Russian government and large corporations to attract foreign investors in order to facilitate the realization of their plans for the economic exploitation of the Arctic, the prospects of success are far from certain. The current climate has not at all favored it since at least 2007. Oil and gas, which have always been the focus of attention of these plans, are being unearthed in large quantities in other regions that are more accessible and less hostile in terms of climatic condition¹¹. Russia's track record in carrying out ambitious programs, even those personally sponsored by Vladimir Putin, is far from a good bet. Large corporations with close ties to the Russian executive, such as Rosatom, Gazprom or Rosneft, can be substantially subsidized by the Kremlin. However, many projects that need direct political leverage remain without available funding, and so much of what had been projected remains unrealized.

Although, as we shall see, the conjuncture is quickly changing. Russia's own ambition to expand its exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Asian markets – even with regard to a China that in recent years has grown closer to Moscow – faces a high degree of uncertainty, a point we shall expand on later below. Thus far, the combination of the high cost of LNG, the cyclical *timings* and challenging conditions of the Northern Route. So the risk of further US sanctions and the tough and inflexible stance of Chinese state negotiators are significant challenges that need to be overcome in order to turn some of Russia's ambition into a concrete reality.

Most of the reasons for this are easy to understand. The size, scale, emptiness and conditions of Russia's Arctic regions do represent a challenge of gigantic dimensions for the goal of developing an entire support infrastructure that could otherwise be the engine

¹⁰ To get an idea of the scale of the tensions that existed before the invasion of Ukraine and the announced accessions of Finland and Sweden to NATO, see the much-cited article/commentary by a University of Calgary professor, Rob Huebert (2019), "A new Cold War in the Arctic?! The old one never ended!", *Arctic Year Book 2019*. Below, we will discuss some of the potential changes that have taken place since these fundamental changes, especially with regard to the Alliance.

¹¹ It should be noted that the melting of ice in the *High North*, as in Antarctica, far exceeds the amount and speed of the rest of the planet. It should also be emphasized that 1/3 of the expected new hydrocarbon deposits will be located in the Arctic. The data was estimated in 2008 by the US Geological Survey (2008), *Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle*, USG Department of the Interior, US Geological Survey. According to the USGS prospective survey, *the sum of the mean estimates for each province indicates that 90 billion barrels of oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids may remain to be found in the Arctic, of which approximately 84 percent is expected to occur in offshore areas*". These numbers still stand.



of a truly flourishing political and economic activity in these inhospitable parts. So far, however, the Northern Maritime Route faces an uncertain future in terms of the role it could play – that of becoming an important transport link between Europe and Asia, idealized by those who love the Russian Arctic. However, the insurance premiums for maritime operations in polar waters are still extremely high. As, indeed, are all the available means for securely breaking the ice¹². But since the unexpected speed of the seasonal melting of the polar ice cap has changed circumstances, so things could change... It should be emphasized that the possibility of crossing the Northern Maritime Route (NMR) has many advantages, especially from a commercial point of view, as it drastically reduces the distances to be traveled in summer. The traditional route through the Suez Canal from the port of Yokohama in Japan to Rotterdam in the Netherlands is 11,200 nautical miles, while traveling via the Northern Route reduces the trip to a mere 6,500 nautical miles, almost halving the distance to link both¹³. A difference that makes all the difference.

It should be stressed, however, that until the early 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Federation had to put aside the possibility of raising a second military brigade specially prepared for operations in the Arctic, even though she wanted to do that so as to improve its northern coastal defense. Now, given its current dire economic woes, it is hard to fathom Moscow can still less afford to carry out any such reinforcement, unless a decision is taken to switch into a war economy. Given the ongoing hardships, the Kremlin faces such an enhancement of its northernmost forces will not be easy – given that at the same time, as concerns its Navy, the Northern Fleet in its latest iteration does face other pretty significant limitations. Above all with regard to the number and operability of icebreakers and other ships capable of navigating in waters where significant ice floes abound, and the high demands of its troop transport capacities aerial refueling and the operability of patrol aircraft in this other frontline. In other words, if the new Russian Northern Fleet must be increasingly strengthened in order to be able to carry out the wide range of missions and essential operations it needs, clearly requires major investments to correct the current limitations for its full operability. Given the current circumstances, this will certainly not be easy to achieve, given that Russia is already economically overstretched.

Ultimately, even if Moscow feels it imperative to increase her ability to succeed in dominating and taking control in an Arctic open conflict with NATO, guaranteeing that will be hardly unfeasible. If worse comes to worse, no matter how much the Kremlin feels that a full military sovereignty and control over control of her Arctic is a crucial or even existential, issue, it is unlikely it will be able to guarantee its capacity to fulfil those aspirations.

¹² One example will suffice: in 2020, 331 ships travelled along part of the Route, but only 62 completed the entire journey, carrying only 26 million tons - a figure far below Moscow's stated goal of promoting the transport of 80 million tons by 2024. Eugene Rumer, et al. (2021), *op cit*. For a detailed overview of these issues, it is useful to read the paper presented at the General Officer Promotion Course by then Colonel Eduardo Mendes Ferrão (2013), now a full General, *A abertura da rota do Ártico (Northern Passage). Political, Diplomatic and Commercial Implications*, a work that was then published as a book by the Portuguese Military University Institute.

¹³ A far greater reduction than that offered by the Panama Canal, which only reduces the journey from Rotterdam to Seattle, in the United States, from 9,000 to 7,000 nautical miles if you travel along the other polar pathway, the Northwest Route, which is also now traversable during a part of the year.



5. The first stages of the militarization of the Arctic by the Russian Federation

In what concerns the topic of Russian militarization of the Arctic, we will confine ourselves here to merely describing a series of steps indicative of the early stages of the Putin period. These are stages that are evolved quickly, that are different among them, complex, and in many ways still in gestation. We shall try to draw a brief sketch, while simply endeavoring to lightly, in general terms and obviously following a chronological order.

At first, certainly as a rejoinder to considerations tied to the new and wide-spanning security doctrines embraced by Vladimir Putin after the two Chechen Wars, on 2 August 2007, in an operation dubbed *Arktika 2007*, two mini-submarines deposited a titanium Russian flag in the sediment of the Lomonosov Shelf. A rich shelf which Moscow claimed was an extension of its continental shelf and that therefore, according to the Montego Bay agreements, a part of its own maritime territory. Symbolically, on each of the two bathyscaphes that went to the seabed included in its "crew" a member of the State Duma, the parliament of the Russian Federation. The images of both the two crafts and the titanium Russian flag were made available by the Kremlin to the world and led to understandable widespread criticisms.

A second harsher retort was bound to rise, given that the Kremlin added to its symbolic gesture. Canada's reaction came quickly, with *Operation Nanook* – a military exercise that took place in the state of Nunavut, Canada's largest state, near Greenland, and involved military, air and naval forces, including Ottawa's Coast Guard and part of its Navy, and a nuclear-powered submarine. An exercise that also included land forces, in the latter case involving forces of various kinds, from the regular Army to its *National Guard*, to reservist troops and the *Canadian Rangers*. These 2008 military exercises were the largest in Canada's history. Since then, Canada has repeated these exercises every year, since then with the participation of other states, namely the US and Greenland (Denmark). Canada's polar coast is the second largest in the Arctic "lake", Russia's being the first.

Truly, 2008 was truly an *annus horribilis*. On 8 August of that very year, the Russian Federation invaded Georgia "in response to Georgian attacks on Russian *peacekeepers* stationed in South Ossetia"¹⁴, causing their deaths. A "five-day war" ensued, leading to the occupation and unilateral "declaration of independence" of two Georgian regions, North Ossetia and Abkhazia. Many analysts, both Western and Russian, saw Putin's actions as a response to the North Atlantic Council, which met at a NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania, from 2 to 4 April of the same year – and on 3 April it was stated that, on an unspecified date, both Georgia and Ukraine would join the Atlantic Alliance under an *Open-Door Policy* approved at the time by the Alliance's Heads of State and Government. At the same time lapse an invitation was sent to Albania and Croatia to begin the necessary steps for "rapid" membership of this Organization¹⁵. Through the

¹⁴ Armando Marques Guedes (2009), *A Guerra dos Cinco Dias. The invasion of Georgia by the Russian Federation*, Preface, IESM.

¹⁵ NATO/OTAN (2008), *NATO invites Albania and Croatia to accession talks*, Washington.



MAP (*Membership Action Plan*), the latter two would join the then 26 member states of the defensive security organization, NATO.

The dies had been cast. From then onwards, Canadian-led Arctic exercises, became larger and more multinational, namely including the United States of America and Denmark. Soon after, from the spring of 2009 onward, once the situation had stabilized in Georgia in the face of a notorious inability of NATO and European Union member states to react effectively to the invasion, the Russian Federation began sending troops to the Arctic. This meant rehabilitating old Soviet bases, creating new land, sea and air bases in the region and starting to build ships and icebreakers suited to local climatic conditions. These first and second processes of accelerated Russian militarization largely continued until 2013¹⁶.

After a brief hiatus in 2014, occupied as it was with the invasion and occupation of Donbas and Crimea, the process was restarted in earnest in 2015. The *Vostok 2018*, *Vostok 2019* and *Vostok 2022* exercises stand out for their unusual scale – both in quantitative terms and in terms of co-opting China and Mongolia, which took part, as well as several others. It is also worth mentioning that in the central and eastern Siberian regions, in 2019, a major exercise, entitled "Centre 2019" (in Russian "Tzenter") took place. These "war games" included Russia, China and India held joint anti-terrorism exercises with Pakistan and four Central Asian republics, and they involved 128,000 troops from seven of these eight countries. These games were conducted under Russian auspices from September 16 to September 21, 2019, and then they included 600 aircraft and around 450 field artillery systems¹⁷.

A fourth process of militarization of the *High North* took place, with a series of peaks that would continue until 2020-2021. New troop deployments, new bases in the Arctic Basin and joint military exercises of various kinds in the region. Worth highlighting here is NATO's large-scale joint exercise, *Trident Juncture 2018*, whose host country was Norway. Around 50,000 military personnel from NATO states and partners took part, along with 250 aircraft, 65 ships and 10,000 vehicles of all kinds. The exercise took place in northern Norway, the Baltic and the north Atlantic, from 25 October to 7 November 2018. It involved all forces and, innovatively, included a *cyber* dimension¹⁸.

In the chronological period that followed, largely given the emergence of the pandemic and its virulence, both unexpected events. If they did not put a stop to the process, they

¹⁶ It should be emphasized that all but two of the European Union's member states are members of the Arctic Council: Norway and Canada; and all are members of the Atlantic Alliance. For a prescient reading of the EU's role, I suggest the article by Sandra Balão (2015), "Globalisation, the Geopolitics of the European Union Arctic Strategy and [some of] the New Challenges for the 21st Century". September 2015. The most recent article by Ionela Ciolan (2022), "The EU's geopolitical awakening in the Arctic", published by the European Union, confirmed, not alluding to the paper the Portuguese academic, Sandra Balão, had presented seven years earlier.

¹⁷ In this case, it is useful to consult the work of Mathieu Boulège (2018), "Russia's Vostok Exercises were both Serious Planning and a Show", *Chatam House*. The title of the article spells it all. It remains to be added that 300,000 Russian troops took part, joined by 30,000 Chinese and thousands of infantrymen from Mongolia. Turkey was invited by Moscow to take part, but from Ankara, Erdogan, "*politely*" according to Boulège, declined.

¹⁸ NATO/OTAN (2018), *Trident Juncture 2018. It is happening in the air, on land, at sea and in cyberspace*. The mutual defense alliance's message was loud and clear: under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, "we will defend our populations and territories", and "we will protect our partners, with whom we will work".



surely least slowed it down. In 2022, when Russia was acting militarily elsewhere, Putin, unlike before, nevertheless made a point of carrying out strong symbolic expressions, which took place, in the first instance, from May 2020 on, as soon as he took over the three-year presidency of the Arctic Council. Followed, in a second phase, by conventional and unconventional shows of force in its *High North* – from Vladivostok to the Kola Peninsula, via the island of Novaya Zemlya where the Kremlin had once (as the USSR) maintained intense military activities. In the last couple of years, this has included the stationing of nuclear submarines in the Arctic¹⁹.

Not surprisingly, in 2022 Norway led equally but larger NATO military exercises, dubbed *Cold Response*, in its north, involving 27 countries, with the stated aim of "*helping Allies and partners practice together so they can be prepared for any situation*"²⁰.

6. Latest steps in Russian militarization of the Arctic

The level of mutual accusations and warnings between the US, NATO and even the EU, on the one hand, and Russia on the other, concerning the threat they pose to each other, seems to have given rise to a "security dilemma" that is difficult to attune and calibrate. We may be facing a kind of spiral that certainly does not exclude risks associated with possible uncontrolled escalations that we must always take them into account, even if we consider them unlikely. Let us hope no catastrophic incidents arise, in an already precarious set of conjunctures.

Focusing on the Atlantic Alliance, we must ensure the intrinsic commitment of NATO members to their own security and Moscow's acrimonious view of its own demands in this polar area, standing ready for a situation of potential conflict along our northernmost flank, now that we can count with Finland and Sweden up north. Threats, mostly veiled, are being made by the Kremlin in these last few months of 2023, namely by Moscow's revocation of its ratification of the *Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty* (CTBT), signed in 1996. In fact, a week after this revocation, on November 5, 2023, the Russian Federation actually tested and heavily publicized the launch of a strategic cruise missile in the White Sea, released from a submarine stationed to the western coast of its own large island of Novaya Zemlya and from there successfully targeting its own Kamchatka region, 6,000 kilometers away²¹. Pure *posturing*, with some affinities with what North Korea has been doing for years.

¹⁹ Wall, Colin and Njord Wegge (2023), "The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War", *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, Washington, 25 January.

²⁰ The land, naval and air exercises took place in March and April 2022 and involved around 30,000 military personnel from 27 countries, including Portugal. See NATO/OTAN (Mar. 7, 2022), "Exercise Cold Response 2022–NATO and partner forces face the freeze in Norway".

²¹ Associated Press (Nov. 5, 2023), "Russia says it test-fired an intercontinental ballistic missile from a new nuclear submarine", *Politico*. According to *Politico*, "(t)he Emperor Alexander III is one of the new Borei-class nuclear submarines that carry 16 Bulava missiles each and are intended to serve as the core naval component of the nation's nuclear forces in the coming decades. According to the Defense Ministry, launching a ballistic missile is the final test for the vessel, after which a decision should be made on its induction into the fleet. The Russian navy currently has three Borei-class submarines in service, one more is finishing tests and three others are under construction, the Defense Ministry said". It is hard to consider this without due concern.



Following up on what we signaled above, it should be emphasized that any direct military conflict in the Arctic region would possibly not be limited to the region alone. And that could mean severe impacts on both parties. All the actors engaged there have an obvious interest in preventing a potentially devastating outcome, as a result of escalation whether it is intentional or not. The level of risk is likely to increase as the opposing forces continue to operate in force from their respective areas. Past experience does not bode well for this. As has been the case in recent years, in a much leaner bipolar international order, even when faced with the possibility of escalation, none of the parties showed any willingness to back down or were prepared to make any compromises until the very last moments²².

True, today much seems to have changed. Russia is facing the West in very peculiar circumstances and from a position that we could characterize as one of cyclical weakness. Its economy is stagnating and tending to decline, its population is also shrinking at a rapid pace, and the Federation finds itself increasingly isolated in political and diplomatic terms in Europe and, therefore, also among the states bordering the Arctic. Especially since Vladimir Putin came to power the Kremlin has been rebuilding and somewhat modernizing its military capabilities after a long phase of corruption, neglect and consequent decline. Thus, even Russia's clearly specified national priorities are faced with severe budgetary constraints and numerous technological challenges. Woes that are now accentuated by the Wider West external application of economic, financial, and technological sanctions as a result of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine. As we stressed, in the years to come, Russia's posture in the Arctic will most likely be affected by concerns about the Kremlin's real ability to stand up to a surprisingly cohesive West, perhaps especially after the announcement of Finland's entry and Sweden's expected entry, into the Atlantic Alliance²³.

Faced with this position of identified weaknesses and growing regional and global risks, instead of considering the region as the next stage of the competition with the Russian Federation, the United States and the other NATO members could take advantage of this moment of strategic fragility in the Arctic to opt – hopefully – for a dual-track strategy of diplomacy and deterrence. It is always easier to impose conditions on weaker adversaries, whether strategically or otherwise. But being prepared for some kind of surprise, in the form of a Russian threat that may be greater than expected, should always be an integral part of good strategic and operational planning. The reason is clear. Murphy's Law: planning for the adversary's most likely possibility, while always guarding

²² NATO's aim is to preserve the necessary credibility of its commitment to the "defensive mutual defense" clause reflected in its famous Article 5. For the Russian Federation, its "main adversary" has come too close to the borders and areas of influence of the "Motherland", so what it says is at stake is guaranteeing geopolitical and economic security requirements, which it feels are rightfully its. The growing tensions in no way reflect the result of possible misunderstandings. The actions of each of the parties are intentional and reflect nothing more than clearly conflicting interests.

²³ See, for example, the article published last year by Iris Thatcher (Aug. 8, 2022), "Seven to one: The impact of Finnish and Swedish NATO membership on Arctic security", *Institute for the Study of Diplomacy*, in which she wrote that "their membership will help NATO develop a strategy for the Arctic. Until now, NATO has largely avoided engagement in the far north, despite the rise of Russian and Chinese activity. Some reasons that explain this include the sheer diversity of member state interest in executing a coherent NATO strategy for the Arctic and the absence of an explicit military threat within the region. Norway has brought an Arctic dimension to the alliance (...) suggesting that NATO will shift its focus in the future towards the Arctic". As we shall show, this is underway, with annual joint military exercises and other developments.



against the most dangerous one, is an integral part of the basic principles of effective political and strategic planning.

However, in this particular case of the Arctic and in the current circumstances, by trying to pursue the pure and hard objective of triumphing in a deliberate ever-harsher competition of Great Powers, Russia, perhaps with some support from China, will most likely be a disrupter of other priority activities – whether for the Wider West, NATO or the US. The Atlantic Alliance must act with restraint, realism and moderation in protecting its core interests in the Arctic. This is already underway. The West's care is seen, for example, in the careful administration and management of its competition with Russia, in order to try to avoid consequences that lead to imbalances and with (sometimes excessive) care about crossing any "red lines", especially since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

These points were made early on in an article by Christian Perez, published in the prestigious *Foreign Policy*. According to him, Russia's supremacy of what we call the "Arctic Lake", Russia's acceleration of their militarization processes, and China's actions that could benefit Russia – namely by bringing in the huge investments that the Middle Kingdom has been making in Greenland and Iceland – were generally pointed out as being problematic. We do believe we can, and should, go further. In fact, although the disparities in the correlation of forces between the NATO states in the Arctic and the Russian Federation are large and favorable to NATO, they are becoming less so at this regional level. As Perez emphasized,

"(t)oday, the Arctic is the only region where Russia has military and strategic supremacy, and as the ongoing crisis in Ukraine escalates, it brings with it increased risk for conflict in the Arctic. Since 2014, Russia has built over 475 new structures across its Arctic military strongholds and has conducted extensive military exercises, most recently in January 2022"²⁴.

This military leap was followed by several exercises led by the Russian Federation, that took place in mid-April 2023, namely the *Arctic Rescue Exercise*, in which 13 states took part, with a total of 39 observers, from, for example, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia²⁵. It was trailed by an exercise that the Kremlin called *Secure Arctic 2023*²⁶. It included 16 scenarios and took place in 9 Russian Arctic regions, from Murmansk in the west to Chukotka in eastern Siberia. More than 60,000 military personnel were engaged in training activities, according to information from the *Russian Emergency Ministry* (Emercom). Interestingly, the training exercises ended on 12 May 2023, just two weeks after Russia completed its two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council. Again, a clear message was sent to us by Moscow.

²⁴ Perez, Christian (2022), "How Russia's Future with NATO will Impact the Arctic. Three critical ways the crisis in Ukraine will determine the region's future", *Foreign Policy*.

²⁵ Atle Staalesen (Apr. 11, 2023), "Russia's big Arctic rescue exercise was attended by observers from Iran and Saudi Arabia", *The Barents Observer*.

²⁶ Thomas Nilsen (Sept. 19, 2023), "Russia kicks off trans-Arctic navy exercise", *The Barents Observer*.



Worse still, Moscow made sure it did not stop there: on 19 September 2023, it launched the Finval-2023 exercises, with operations by its forces and troops (involving 1,800 soldiers, "15 warships, submarines, support vessels, aircraft and coastal units are involved as the Northern Fleet starts an exercise that stretches all along Russia's Arctic, from the Barents Sea in the West to the East Siberian Sea")²⁷. A new message. As we noted, the aforementioned missile launch, which covered the 6,000 kilometers from the White Sea to Kamchatka, took place in the first week of this very November. As stressed above, this amounted to another performative step in the narrative that the Federation is composing in multiple domains – not only in the Arctic but also in all the many theatres in which it is now once again involved. Complementary figures and disparities of this kind do not spell anything good for the future of this enormous area. With this in mind, and given Russia's posture in the Arctic, it seems imperative that the United States, NATO, the members of the Arctic Council and the *Arctic 7* base any plans on realistic analyses and clear assessments of the postures we want to uphold and maintain in the High North.

In fact, for the Kremlin, as seductive as it is to look at the Arctic through the prism of rivalry between the Great Powers – which would undoubtedly fit in with the Russian Federation's current yearnings for renewed recognition as a great power – there is very little to suggest that its military posture 'up there' can actually, once everything is well thought out, continue to prove feasible. We do not think it can. In fact, it signals a return to a variant of the traditional Cold War-era posture focused on long-standing tasks, such as protecting the sanctuaries of its fleet of ballistic and/or cruise missile submarines in operations carried out in the North Atlantic in the event of a war in Europe. There has been a clear change, and it is one that does not benefit Moscow. The Russian military has been happy to resume their missions of old, but now with patent fewer resources and facing a much wider range of adversary capabilities than they did during the Cold War²⁷.

Will the fact that Russia is opening up other fronts, mobilizing allies as unlikely as they are dangerous spell intractable risks? It is surely too early to advance an answer. However, although the rigid stalemate continued after the invasion of Ukraine and what followed from it, perhaps some kind of cooperation between Russia and the other seven Arctic states, especially in more practical areas devoid of harsh political dimensions, could be desirable and may even seem possible. Let us see if that is possible. That includes fronts such as combating climate change, search and rescue operations, and even some co-operative scientific research activities. In an ideal world, such areas of cooperation could and should be opened up, as they translate into issues of common interest, such as navigational safety, environmental protection, safeguarding fish stocks and even simple incident management. Unfortunately, hardly any of that has happened. While it is

²⁷ A side comment seems apposite here. Vladimir Putin clearly failed to grasp, and thus to predict, the outcome of his messianic expansionist dreams. Not wanting to delve into details, it is manifest the Russian President did not expect his Ukrainian 'war of choice' would result in a major series of domestic disasters, not only militarily but also economically and reputationally – veering towards a potential national fragmentation that could be tragic, albeit we repute this as not too likely, particularly after the rather strange 'Wagner Group event', that threatened his rule. Internationally, the now evermore indigent Federation counts with only a handful of supporters, in spite of Putin's attempts at swaping an international order that, ultimately, became more solid.



certain that it would be good for the NATO allies to find potential diplomatic ways to contain the impasse, we should manage things firmly and doing so while taking a firm stance so that rules of conduct emerge that aim to mitigate the risks of crises or incidents, so as not to lead to a potentially disastrous escalation that would hurt us all. Looking back, in the case of the Arctic, our position has been very carefully calibrated. This has been achieved without much fuss on the part of an Enlarged West that has been letting Russia spend resources on its High North that we know Moscow does not really have. So far, this has apparently produced some good results. But our careful management has also raised some risks.

Indeed, some impasse has been created with the abandonment of the eight-state model (the *Arctic 8*) and with the much-welcomed entry of Finland and the expected entry of Sweden into the Atlantic Alliance in the short term. It should be noted however that following Norway's assumption of the Arctic Council on 11 May 2023, the climate for cooperation remains icy²⁸.

7. China's presence on some of the new Arctic stages. A prospective scenario and its potential effects

It is surely worth remembering that for almost three decades the Arctic Council has been held up as a good example of cooperation in the post-Cold War period. The five littoral Member-States, including Russia and the United States, worked together on research into climate change and social development throughout the ecologically sensitive region. Now, almost two years on, the Council members have stopped working with Russia, partly as a result of its invasion of Ukraine and having to deal with Moscow's also reactive stance towards NATO enlargements east and north and what this could mean for the Kremlin. With Norway currently chairing an almost inert Council²⁹, experts will certainly be wondering whether the viability of this polar consultation group is at risk if it is unable to continue multidomain cooperation with a country (the Russian Federation) that effectively controls more than half of the coastline (53%) of the Arctic Ice Ocean³⁰.

²⁸ To quote what Colin Ward and Njord Weggei (2023) prudently wrote at the end of their very rich article on Russia's ambitions and limits in the Arctic: "*it is probably too early to give an accurate and comprehensive estimate of the future Russian warfighting capability in the Arctic, given the impact of the Ukraine war. It would be prudent, however, given what is known and what is coming to light, to revisit assumptions that guided prewar analysis, campaign modelling, and wargaming concerning the region. Indeed, U.S. military doctrine is explicit that assumptions should be constantly reconsidered in light of new information, and NATO doctrine echoes this. As NATO's new Supreme Allied Commander Europe starts crafting the alliance's new regional defence plans, there is an opportunity to consider some of these preliminary findings in High North scenarios. In the meantime, the old saying, sometimes attributed to Winston Churchill, that 'Russia is never as strong as she looks; Russia is never as weak as she looks', it might be a prudent approach for the West with respect to its security and defence planning in the Arctic*".

²⁹ Many authors and organizations have had doubts about the future of the Council. See, for example, Brett Simpson (May 31, 2023), "The Rise and Sudden Fall of the Arctic Council", *Foreign Policy*, who quickly argued that "(w)ith Russia no longer involved, it's hard to see what Arctic politics can still accomplish".

³⁰ Until the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022, the increase in geopolitical tensions did not prevent the Arctic states from collaborating under the auspices of the Arctic Council. With the war in Ukraine continuing, the future of co-operation in this politico-geographical area seems to be jeopardized. On March 3, 2022, the *Arctic 7* issued a joint statement announcing the suspension of cooperation with Russia in this forum. Russia seems not to have taken much notice of the isolation to which it has been condemned by the other seven Arctic countries, concentrating on its own internal Arctic affairs, seeking to co-operate with



An Arctic Council that remains inoperative risks spawning harmful consequences for the ecological environment of our north polar region, and for its 4 million inhabitants who are struggling with the effects of the disappearance of sea ice and the growing interest of non-Arctic countries in the mineral resources that still exist in an inhospitable region. Summing up, the work of the wider Council, the so-called *Arctic 8*, has produced some binding agreements in the past, mostly related to environmental protection and preservation. As we mentioned, it was also a forum that provided a voice for the indigenous peoples of the region. However, it has never been a forum for security issues, since it has no jurisdictional competencies in this area, nor is it plausible that it now shall. As an outcome of the interruption of cooperation with Moscow, around a third of the Council's 130 projects have stalled. Worse still, new projects cannot continue and those that remain cannot be renewed. The scientific communities working on both sides. (the Western and the Russian) have simply stopped sharing new knowledge about climate change, for example. Or on cooperation for possible search and rescue missions or even ecological disasters, such as oil spills. All, in good truth, has been discontinued.

The fact that the Russian Federation finds itself excluded and isolated by the other seven Arctic states (the *Arctic 7*) forces her to look, often desperately, for non-Western partners, in order to successfully accomplish her plans in the region. Moscow has tended to turn to Beijing. But the Russian and Chinese differences of perspective are striking, something Moscow does not seem to want to recognize: in Russia's wishful eyes China appears to be a privileged partner above all because of the volume of investment it could mobilize. For China, collaboration with Russia in *any* field appears to be seen as both an opportunity and a challenge. Xi Jin Ping will have to manage this issue very carefully to avoid seeing China equally ostracized by all the other states (to repeat, the *Arctic 7*) of this inland "quasi-lagoon". The fall is already happening, as Beijing has loudly responded positively to Moscow's invitation to deepen a strong bilateral cooperation in the Arctic. Surely that sounded good. Beijing thus not only strengthened its energy cooperation with Russia but it has also opened the door for deeper forms of cooperation in new areas, such as navigation on the Northern Maritime Route. It is well worth highlighting here a geopolitical decision by China that goes back a long way, namely the creation, drawn up in 2017 and formalized in 2018, of what Beijing decided in a *White Paper* to call the *Polar Silk Road*³¹.

As one might expect, the academic, the diplomatic, and political worlds quickly reacted. The following year, in February 2019, Maud Descamps, in a European Union publication,

China and inviting it to participate in Russian Arctic development projects, something we shall return to here. Hilde-Gunn Bye (8 March 2022), "Russian Invasion of Ukraine. Joint Declaration from Arctic States: Pausing Arctic Council Meetings", *High North News*. As we repeatedly emphasized, the situation is today hardly straightforward.

³¹ Xinhua (Jan. 21, 2018), "China publishes Arctic policy, eyeing vision of Polar Silk Road", *Xinhuanet, Beijing*. According to the official Xinhua article, "Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou shows a white paper on China's Arctic policy during a press conference in Beijing, capital of China, Jan. 26, 2018. China published a white paper on its Arctic policy Friday, pledging cooperative governance and elaborating a vision of "Polar Silk Road". The document states at the outset that "China, as a responsible major country, is ready to cooperate with all relevant parties to seize the historic opportunity in the development of the Arctic, to address the challenges brought by the changes in the region", according to the *White Paper* promulgated by its State Council Information Office. To read the original text of the *White Paper*, see the English translation, published by *The State Council of the People's Republic of China*.



put up an article, in *Focus Asia. Perspective and Analysis*, entitled "The Ice Silk Road: is China a 'Near Arctic State'?", which "explores the economic and political impact surrounding potential new trade routes that could open-up in the Arctic region given the rapid pace of melting polar ice-caps". It is a generic and also a rich paper, which provides an analysis according to which what is actually at stake are "the measures taken by China to ascertain greater access to the region and reap the financial benefits of this new frontier". Maud Descamps' text was critical and realistic, when she noted, for example, that

"Beijing is gearing up to further its presence in the Arctic by promoting the Transpolar Sea Route, a passage that would make use over the shorter route past the Arctic circle for commercial and civilian purposes. However, most of the Chinese vessels which to date are able to operate in high north, all of which are ice breakers, belong to the People's Liberation Army navy (PLA-N) while there is only one ship operated under the aegis of the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC)".

The author concluded that "(t)he further development of channels between Europe and Asia via the Arctic is an open question that is linked to geopolitics, sovereignty, sustainability and reciprocity"³².

From this lucid and careful standpoint, it seems to become almost inevitable that many other decisions would follow, both in Europe and North America. Little by little, the tone has changed in a West in which there have been some (few) dissonances within the framework of growing cohesion. One of many examples came in February 2023, when three American authors, James McBride, Noah Berman and Andrew Chatzky, published a more in-depth article in *Foreign Affairs*, entitled "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative"³³. In their well thought-through article the authors advanced as a central argument that "China's colossal infrastructure investments may usher in a new era of trade and growth for economies in Asia and beyond. But skeptics worry that China is laying a debt trap for borrowing governments". The focal point of their criticism were China's methodic policies of indebtedness. Without focusing specifically on the *Polar Silk Road*, the three authors lucidly emphasised that

"(a)s Russia's relationship with the West has deteriorated, however, President Vladimir Putin has pledged to link his Eurasian vision with the BRI. Some experts are sceptical of such an alliance, which they argue would be economically asymmetrical. Russia's economy and its total trade volume are

³² Descamps' text was critical and realistic, noting, for example, that "Beijing is gearing up to further its presence in the Arctic by promoting the Transpolar Sea Route, a passage that would make use over the shorter route past the Arctic circle for commercial and civilian purposes. However, most of the Chinese vessels which to date are able to operate in high north, all of which are ice breakers, belong to the People's Liberation Army navy (PLA-N) while there is only one ship operated under the aegis of the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC)". The author concludes by arguing that "(t)he further development of channels between Europe and Asia via the Arctic is an open question that is linked to geopolitics, sovereignty, sustainability and reciprocity".

³³ McBride, James, Noah Berman and Andrew, Chatzky (Feb. 2, 2023) "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative", *Foreign Affairs*, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington.



both roughly one-eighth the size of China's – a gulf that the BRI could widen in the coming years". What's more, they called for a robust European intervention, raising the following question: "An Opportunity for the EU to Pitch In?".

That is not all, when it comes to the potentially deeper collusion in a Russia-China connection that is still not entirely clear, either for Europe or for North America. Nor, we believe, will it be for China and Russia. As regards the suspension of the Arctic Council, China has also publicly stated that it would not recognize the Arctic Council without Russia³⁴. A classic – as taking advantage of the ongoing confrontation between Russia and the other seven Arctic countries, within the larger framework of *Arctic 8*, China senses and seizes the opportunity to more easily set in motion new cooperation projects at a much easier bilateral level. And there with various focuses and apparently, at least for now, many without major obstacles, albeit with some convenient opacity, as is typical of the always complex relationships between "allies". For Beijing, deepening Arctic cooperation with Russia favors its own interests as concerns its economy, energy security and political influence in the region. Perhaps the question, on the one hand, is the following; how long can last the good times of Sino-Russian cooperation, promoted by short-term external conflicts? On the other hand, the deepening of China-Russia cooperation is taking place against the backdrop of an ever-greater division of the other actors' designs with a potentially ever-greater agency in the Arctic, whether it is as co-operation or as competition.

The deeper China's cooperation with Russia, the more probable that that will become a matter likely to engender misunderstandings and surveillance from the remaining Arctic countries. And this reading, in turn, will most surely lead to the creation of a climate of mistrust towards Beijing by other regional or global states and even trigger tensions and even confrontations between China and the Arctic 7 states.

In the current situation, the recent rapprochement between China, or the China-Russia pair, with states like Iran or North Korea, to give just two examples, could have

³⁴ On this issue, see another article by A. Staalesen, (2022) "Chinese shippers shun Russian Arctic waters", *The Barents Observer*, 22 August. Since 2022, China and the Chinese state shipping company COSCO have refused to use the Northern Route, although they continue to operate in other Russian regions. Since 22 August 2022, the Russian state-owned Rosatom, which grants permits for the Route, has seen 869 ships pass through, all of them Russian. China's COSCO has not made any requests to use the Northern Route since the invasion of Ukraine. According to "*Russian Arctic expert Mikhail Grigoriev says international shipping companies now carefully steer clear of Russia*". "*The feeling among international shippers and traders is that everything that goes through Russia now is like acid*," wrote Mr Grigoriev. According to Elizabeth Buchanan, in an article published on March 18, 2022, the British renowned *Royal United Services Institute* (RUSI) stated that the conflict could jeopardize "*the existing rules-based Arctic order*". See also, for a reading more focused on a generic perspective of the potential impact of the ongoing conflict, the *Royal United Services Institute* article, this one by Elizabeth Buchanan (Mar. 11, 2022), entitled "Ukraine War and the Future of the Arctic", RUSI. The most recent and already cited article by Colin Wall and Njord Wegge (Jan. 25, 2023), the former American and the latter a Norwegian professor at the *Norwegian Military Academy*. The positions they take and map out in detail hold very interesting *nuances*, particularly Russia's military evolution in the Arctic, both logistical and operational coming as they do from almost a year after Putin's attack on Ukraine.



consequences and provoke reactions the extent of which we cannot yet foresee or ascertain very clearly.

8. What are the future dynamics emerging in this region?

The impact of Russia's war in Ukraine has clearly damaged peaceful coexistence and cooperation in the Arctic region. The member states of the *Arctic 7* group refused to cooperate with the Russian Federation, openly and understandably confronting and marginalizing the Kremlin. In order to overcome this situation, Russia, lacking the means to act alone, found itself – and continues to find itself – needing to look at China as its partner of choice for pursuing her projects in this large area of the *High North*. Although China has generally been cautious, the Russian Federation's eagerness to co-operate with Beijing in this region seems to be generating a possible opportunity for (re)approchement between the two states.

But only partially and not always favorably for Moscow. It should be noted, for example, that Beijing needs to continue being extremely vigilant and cautious about the possibility of deepening any Chinese cooperation projects with Russia. The reason for this is simple to equate. Both the conjuncture and the correlation of forces between these two states are today very different from what they were in the past. In what specifically concerns the High North, these *rapprochements*, however good they may seem to Moscow, could negatively and irreversibly affect China's relations with the other states (the *Arctic 7*) linked to this new regional conjuncture, especially after their reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

A couple of examples demonstrate this fully, we believe. It is an indisputable fact that since end February 2022 and until the 11th of May 2023, Russia did not allow ships from states in the Wider West to pass through the Northern Route. The Kremlin did, however, authorize the passage of Chinese ships, some of them commercial VLCCs (*Very Large Container Carriers*), along with a growing number of ice-brakers built by Moscow, and other military and/or *dual use* vessels. But, surely out of prudence and possibly to at least some surprise in Moscow, China decided not to do so, at least until 2023, when transit resumed³⁵.

What is more, as we have pointed out, Russia has organized large-scale joint military exercises on the Northern Sea Route, such as the famous *Vostok (East) 2018, 2019 and 2022* joint Russian military exercises; or the 2023 also joint exercise which took place in

³⁵ Malte Humpert (Oct. 9, 2023), "Chinese Container Ship Completes First Round Trip Voyage Across Arctic", *High North News*. As Humpert wrote, "(a) Chinese container ship has completed a three-months round trip voyage from the Baltic Sea to China and back. It is the first step in establishing regular, albeit small-scale, container liner service utilising Russia's Northern Sea Route." The first commercial ship to pass through the Route was a Danish Maersk vessel, in 2018. In this case, as the author notes, not only did the ship do the round tour, with a return trip, but also, "the NewNew Polar Bear's roundtrip voyage is the first of its kind establishing regular service, rather than experimental or ad-hoc container ship voyages such as Maersk's 2018 voyage with the *Venta Maersk* (...) A NewNew Shipping Line entered the Arctic with five container vessels this summer with service along the full route between China and St. Petersburg. The ships are the 2,741 TEU *Xin Xin Hai 1*, the 2,741 TEU *Xin Tian 1* and the 3,534-TEU *NewNew Star*. These three container ships made their way to St Petersburg, thus entering the Baltic via the Danish Sea; the remaining two stayed in Arkhangelsk, near the Kola Peninsula.



the Sea of Japan rather than the Arctic. In of these, there Russia has been keen on demonstrations of new equipment, some sharing of technology took place, and some interoperability between the participating forces has been warranted. Most crucially, despite the delays caused, on the one hand by the pandemic and on the other by Moscow's focus on Ukraine, commercial and military cooperation with China has not completely stalled. However, Russia is now facing a complex, difficult and unparalleled situation in its Arctic, and not only in the Arctic Basin in general.

The Kremlin is currently subject to multiple sanctions imposed by the United States and by the other NATO states, by the European Union ones, and also by a dozen or so others that have joined these. At the same time, all of these countries' support for Ukraine is putting a general increasing amount of pressure on Russia, both internally and externally. At the same time, all official links and contacts between the *Arctic 7* and Russia were swiftly canceled after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For example, all the Member-States of the "Nordic Council of Ministers" quickly announced the cessation of pretty much any sort of regional co-operation between the Nordic countries and the Russian Federation. Greenland stopped exchanging fishing quotas with Russia; Norway followed the European Council and joined the sanctions of restrictive measures against Russia, as planned, Moscow ceased to chair the Arctic Council *on* the planned date of 11 May 2023³⁶.

What is the larger picture and what will be the final outcome? We cannot rule out the prospect of China wanting to repeat step by step, complementing what it is doing in south-eastern Eurasia – along the former 'soft belly' of the USSR. In other words, in the Central Asian arc – a new *One Road, One Belt*, which will allow it privileged access to the Indian Ocean and the South Atlantic, where it already has a *pied à terre* from Myanmar to Sri Lanka, from Djibouti to Tanzania, South Africa and Angola, to name but a few. It should also be noted that on the other side of the Atlantic Basin, partners ranging from Brazil to a huge number of states on both the east and west coasts of South America, not forgetting the many more states in the Caribbean did so too.

Nevertheless, crucially, this time, China, after a lull, has carefully restarted links with Russia in what concerns the High North. What we could perhaps call a *Northern One Road, One Belt* in order to enter, and to regularly access, via by this route, a prosperous North Atlantic, in which stand face to face the two largest economic blocs on the planet: the European Union (plus the United Kingdom), as well as the northern part of the New World – namely Canada, the United States of America, and an increasingly prosperous Mexico. What will come of this is still unknown, but we can speculate about a prospect that we think is at least credible. As we noted above, the hypothesis of this Northern Route is not new, having been called a *Polar Silk Road* by Beijing in the 2018 *White Paper* published in Beijing, to which we referred above. In the West, the expression "*Polar Silk*

³⁶ Edvardsen, Astri (May 12, 2023), "Russia: "The Risk of Weakening the Arctic Council Should Not Be Underestimated"", *High North News* Only Norway took part in the handover; the other Council states spoke *online*, digitally with the Russians and Norwegians present in the Russian city of Salekhard. The impact was immediate. As Russian Ambassador Nicolay Korshunov steadfastly stated, "*The future of the council and cooperation within this format under Norwegian chairmanship appears uncertain*".



Road" has been used, at least since 2021, in a literal translation from the original Mandarin³⁷.

In an interesting summary, after writing about the cooperation China has with Moscow and the common interests that the two states share, the aforementioned Anu Sharma formulated the following series of considerations, which we make our own:

*"through various economic and commercial commitments, China has taken constructive diplomatic steps to cultivate relations with the Arctic Council that will facilitate Chinese interests. China has entered into joint ventures with Russian gas companies, in addition to building an embassy in Iceland and financing the Kouvola-Xi'an train in Finland. China has also warmed relations with Norway and Greenland through various investments. This inflow of investments will, in turn, help Greenland to lessen its reliance on Denmark. Moreover, all this has helped China to increase its foothold in Arctic nations"*³⁸.

Studies like these have gained a particular academic weight, given the lucidity with which they unveil the correlation of forces between China and Russia. It is worth emphasizing this by quoting the words of a Chinese academic from Peking University, Chuan Chen, in a recent article he published in April 2023 in the journal of *The Arctic Institute*, based in Washington DC. Words that we also make our own. In a well-founded and scathing view, Chuan lucidly stated the following in his article:

"China should ensure that its collaboration with Russia does not harm its relationship with other Arctic states. At present, Russia is excluded and isolated by the seven other Arctic states (Arctic 7) in the Arctic, and Russia's Arctic strategy has also been hindered. To realise its Arctic plans, Russia desperately needs non-Western partners to jointly develop the Arctic. Therefore, Russia sees China as a suitable option. For China, collaboration with Russia is both an opportunity and a challenge, and China needs to handle it carefully to avoid being ostracised by other countries in the Arctic".

In other words, Beijing wants to ensure good ties with the *Arctic 7*, even if it has to do so without Moscow³⁹.

Which is hardly surprising, if we pause and ponder for a moment. China and Russia are, in fact, two very different states. Although China considers itself "a quasi-Arctic state", the truth is that it quite clearly is not. It does not take long to fathom and comprehend that the Russian Federation and China have very divergent interests, commitments,

³⁷ The academic study published by the US military's *Air University* (AU) a couple of years ago, created for the academic support of the relatively new *Air and Space Forces* that the US decided to establish as a fourth branch of its Armed Forces, will do for everyone: Anu Sharma (Oct. 25, 2021), "China's Polar Silk Road: Implications for the Arctic Region", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*. Sharma is an Indian academic and journalist from Jaipur now working with the United States from New Delhi.

³⁸ *Idem, op. cit.*

³⁹ Chuan Chen (Apr. 4, 2023), "China-Russia Arctic Cooperation in the Context of a Divided Arctic", *The Arctic Institute*, Centre for Circumpolar Security Studies, Washington DC.



visions of the future, stakes and types of alliances, histories, economies and demographics that are quite different from each other, as well as quite dissimilar concepts of sovereignty and political and geopolitical projects. In terms of their generic capacities and their respective cultural broths. It is therefore difficult to glimpse the "eternal friendship and alliance" that they profess to have for each other. It is plain to see, once we combine the two readings quoted and which we share in the broadest sense, it would be difficult to discern more clearly the Middle Kingdom's tacit appetite for articulation/penetration in the North Atlantic via the route provided by Moscow, literally "flanking" a Russia under pressure as a result of the sanctions imposed on it by the West in response to the invasion of Ukraine.

If the economic situation continues as it is, the Kremlin will never have access to the North Atlantic markets that China is trying to penetrate. But if, and only if, the states in North America and Europe (the latter, for the time being, less averse to collaborating with China) consent it. One hypothesis, however, seems at least partly predictable: we are facing a new reality where, as in the case of the southern *One Road, One Belt*, Moscow will only be able to participate as a second fiddle in the northern *Polar Silk Road*.

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