

FORUM: Special Political and Decolonization committee (GA4)

QUESTION OF: Addressing the conflict and geopolitical issues in the Arctic

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POSITION: Co-Chair

INTRODUCTION

Arctic, northernmost region of Earth, centered on the North Pole and characterized by distinctively polar conditions of climate, plant and animal life, and other physical features.¹ In recent years, the Arctic Circle has become an important symbol of the devastating impacts of climate change, but its role as a central focus site for geopolitical conflict deserves beyond economic motivations, nations such as the United States, Russia, and China are competing in the region to project military supremacy and seek more power.²



Figure 1: The map of the arctic³

Intra-regional cooperation on other issues has also flourished. The arctic council serves as the leading organization in terms of arctic affairs. It could be seen as an effort from the Arctic states to maintain the arctic issues domestically as the member states are only geographical arctic states. This sense of dominance is supported by the Law of the Sea and

¹ "Arctic." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 18 Aug. 2024, www.britannica.com/place/Arctic.

² Gross, Matthew. "Geopolitical Competition in the Arctic Circle." *Harvard International Review*, Harvard International Review, 2 Dec. 2020, hir.harvard.edu/the-arctic-circle/.

³ World, Beautiful. "The Arctic Circle Facts & Information - Beautiful World Travel Guide." *Facts & Information - Beautiful World Travel Guide*, 12 June 2018, www.beautifulworld.com/north-america/the-arctic-circle/.

specific agreements such as the illasant declaration signed under the auspices of the Arctic Council. However as the arctic becomes increasingly relevant to non arctic nations, this current status will inevitably change.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

Exclusive economic zone (EEZ), as defined under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an area of the ocean extending up to 200 nautical miles (370 km) immediately offshore from a country's land coast in which that country retains exclusive rights to the exploration and exploitation of natural resources.⁴

Continental Shelf

According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)the continental shelf that borders a country's shoreline is considered to be a continuation of the country's land territory. Coastal countries have exclusive rights to resources located within the continental shelf, which legally is defined as the seabed up to roughly 370 km (200 nautical miles) from shore or to the outer edge of the continental margin A country with a continental shelf that extends farther than 200 nautical miles from its shoreline has 10 years from the date it ratified UNCLOS to submit a claim on the part of the shelf that occurs beyond the 200-nautical-mile limit. In the first decade of the 21st century, several countries with Arctic coastlines made competing claims on the extended continental shelf regions within the Arctic Ocean.⁵

Polar Code

The International Maritime Organization's International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code) is mandatory under both the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL). The Polar Code covers the full range of design, construction, equipment, operational, training, search and rescue and environmental protection matters

⁴ "Exclusive Economic Zone." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 19 July 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/exclusive-economic-zone.

⁵ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "continental shelf". Encyclopedia Britannica, 19 Mar. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/science/continental-shelf>. Accessed 19 August 2024.

relevant to ships operating in the inhospitable waters surrounding the two poles. The Polar Code entered into force on 1 January 2017.⁶

Ilulissat declaration

The Ilulissat Declaration was signed on May 28, 2008, by the five Arctic coastal states: the United States, Russia, Canada, Norway, and Denmark. This declaration emphasizes the importance of cooperation among these nations to address the challenges posed by climate change in the Arctic, including the melting ice and its impact on ecosystems and local communities.⁷

Arctic Five

The Arctic five refers to the five states bordering the Arctic Ocean: Canada, The Kingdom of Denmark (through Greenland and the Faroese Islands), Norway, The Russian Federation and the United States of America.⁸

Northwest Passage and Northern Sea Route

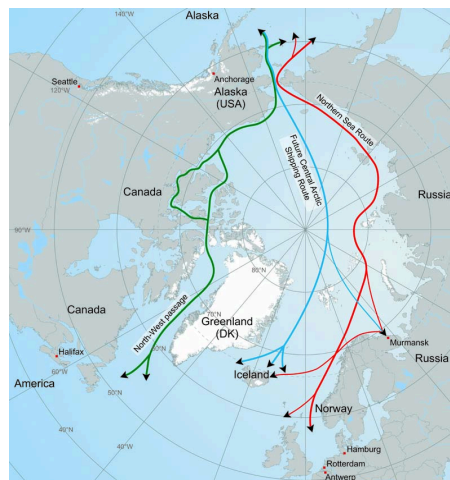


Figure 2: A picture of the Arctic showing the Northwest Passage and Northern Sea Route⁹

⁶ "International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code)." *International Maritime Organization*, www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Safety/Pages/polar-code.aspx . Accessed 19 Aug. 2024.

⁷ 2008 Ilulissat Declaration Arctic Ocean ..., cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2008-Ilulissat-Declaration.pdf. Accessed 19 Aug. 2024.

⁸ "Iceland." *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies*, 3 Mar. 2023, www.thearcticinstitute.org/country-backgrounders/iceland/ .

⁹ "Northwest Passage." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 16 July 2024, www.britannica.com/place/Northwest-Passage-trade-route.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Early exploration and claims

Although there have been several exploration attempts before, three main scientific explorations of the arctic started in the 18th century. The most symbolic expedition at the time was John Franklin's attempt to navigate the northwest passage which ended as a total disaster, both of the ships *Erebus* and *Terror* ended up trapped in the ice off King William Island in what is now Canada with non of the 129 crew members survived making it one of the most tragic and mysterious expeditions in the history of Arctic exploration. The wrecks of both ships were only discovered in the 21st century, *Erebus* in 2014 and *Terror* in 2016. Robert Pearly, an American explorer, has been widely accepted to be the first person to ever reach the north pole on April 6th 1909, however in recent years scholars question the credibility of Pearly's claims. The first undoubted visit to the north pole was achieved by air by Ronald Amundsen, a Norwegian explorer along with Italian aeronautical engineer Umberto Nobile and American explorer Lincoln Ellsworth in 1926 has flown over the north pole though an airship named Norge.

Cold war era

The Arctic, due to its unique geographical location, has been an area with relatively high geopolitical tension. Both the Soviet Union and the United States hold strong military presence within the region. The shortest distance between the US and the USSR was through the arctic, therefore making it ideal for both countries to deploy both conventional and nuclear missiles for potential strikes and counter strikes.

Distant Early Warning Line (DEW) system is a network of radar stations built across Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Iceland starting in the 1950s. The DEW Line stretched roughly 3,000 miles, consisting of 63 radar and communication stations. It serves the purpose of detecting soviet bombers and missiles crossing over the Arctic, and works as part of the early warning systems of Nato. With the advancement of missile technology and the shift from bomber based to missile-based threats, the DEW Line gradually became obsolete and was replaced by the North Warning System (NWS) in the 1980s.

Although there isn't a specific name or program for the military build up in the arctic regarding the soviet union, the USSR has built numerous military air bases, radar stations and naval bases within the arctic region. The Severomorsk Naval Base, constructed in 1951

operational until today, has been the headquarter of the soviet northern fleet, having large numbers of nuclear submarines carrying ballistic missiles operating in the arctic ocean forming a crucial part of the ussr's nuclear deterrence strategy.

Scientific advancements

The discovery of the Lomonosov ridge, and underwater mountain in the arctic by a soviet expedition in 1948 has a significant impact on territorial claims within the arctic, several nations claims the Lomonosov ridge is connected to thor continental shelf to claim parts of the arctic ocean as their own territorial water, these nations include Russia, Denmark(Greenland), and Canada.

The Operation IceBridge was a NASA led airborne mission from 2009-2021, which used aircraft equipped with radar lidar and other equipment to monitor the changes in arctic sea ice. It has provided high resolution images and valuable data regarding arctic ice dynamics through a long period of time, contributing to forecasting ice melting and sea level rise.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Canada

Canada has claimed the northwest passage as its internal waters, while other nations such as the United States and some European nations, mainly Denmark, see it as an international trade route as greenland also borders parts of the southwest passage (Greenland). On 23 May 2019, Canada submitted to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, in accordance with article 76, paragraph 8, of the Convention, information on the limits of its continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured in the Arctic Ocean.¹⁰

United States of America (USA) Due to the ownership of Alaska, the United States of America has been one of the eight Arctic nations and one of the five Arctic Ocean littoral countries. The U.S. views the Arctic as a region of growing strategic importance, especially

¹⁰ "Continental Shelf - Submission by the Canada." *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/submission_can1_84_2019.html. Accessed 19 Aug. 2024.

with the potential opening of new shipping routes, such as the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) is involved in multiple projects to assess the Arctic's potential for oil, natural gas, and gas hydrates. These include studies on the Alaska North Slope, which is rich in oil and gas deposits. The USGS is researching methane hydrates in permafrost regions, which could be an important future energy source. The U.S. is also exploring the development of offshore resources along Alaska's continental shelf.¹¹ However since the US hasn't signed UNCLOS it complicates the process of justifying such claims based on continental shelf.

Russia

Russia has made extensive claims to the Arctic seabed under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It argues that large areas, including the Lomonosov Ridge, are extensions of its continental shelf, giving it rights to vast swathes of the Arctic seabed. These claims overlap with those of Canada and Denmark, leading to ongoing disputes. Russia has submitted evidence to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) and continues to press its claims aggressively

Russia views the Northern Sea Route as an internal waterway, whereas the majority of the international community views it as an international passage. The recent escalation in Russia's level of control over the NSR is indicative of its ambitions in the Arctic and a warning sign of Russia's desire to monitor and control economic developments in the region.¹²

Russia enhances its presence in the arctic by conducting military drills and deployment of marine forces in the region. On April 11th 2023 Russian forces kicked off large-scale military maneuvers in the Arctic Sea, conducted by the Northern Fleet of Russia's Navy. The drills include some 1,800 soldiers, up to 15 ships and 40 aircraft. According to the Northern Fleet, the exercises aim to protect "the security of Russia's merchant marine and sea lanes such as the Northeast Passage."¹³

¹¹ *USGS Arctic Research | U.S. Geological Survey*, www.usgs.gov/regions/alaska/science/usgs-arctic-research. Accessed 19 Aug. 2024.

¹² Conley, Heather A., et al. "The Ice Curtain: Russia's Arctic Military Presence." CSIS, www.csis.org/analysis/ice-curtain-russias-arctic-military-presence. Accessed 19 Aug. 2024.

¹³ "Ukraine Updates: Russia Begins Military Drills in the Arctic – DW – 04/11/2023." *Dw.Com*, Deutsche Welle, 11 Apr. 2023, www.dw.com/en/ukraine-updates-russia-begins-military-drills-in-the-arctic/a-65276843 .

China

China, although not being an arctic state, has shown increasing interest in arctic affairs due to its strategic and economic significance. In its 2018 Arctic Policy White Paper, China self-identified as a "near-Arctic state." Despite being geographically distant, China justifies its involvement based on the global impacts of Arctic changes, including climate, shipping, and resource availability. This concept positions China as a legitimate stakeholder in Arctic affairs, despite opposition from Arctic states like Russia and the United States¹⁴

Seeing economic potential in the arctic, China is actively pursuing opportunities in the Arctic as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), branding it as the "Polar Silk Road." This involves investments in Arctic infrastructure, such as ports, shipping lanes, and energy projects. China views the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a strategic shipping route that could significantly reduce travel time between Asia and Europe.¹⁵

Arctic council

The Arctic Council being the primary regional intergovernmental organization was formally established on September 19th, 1996. The eight States have territories within the Arctic and thus have a say in regional affairs. Their national jurisdictions and international law govern the lands surrounding the Arctic Ocean and its waters. The eight arctic states are Canada, The Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, The Russian Federation, Sweden, The United States. Several agreements has been signed though the arctic council such as the Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic signed in Nuuk, Greenland May 12th, 2011 which delineates search and rescue zones within the arctic, clarifying the responsibility of each arctic states during aeronautical and maritime emergencies. Another example is the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic signed in Kiruna, Sweden May 15, 2013 which establishes a cooperation framework between the arctic states during oil spills in the arctic ocean.

¹⁴ "Continental Shelf under the U.N. Convention on the Law of Sea,1982 UNCLOS." *Legal Service India - Law, Lawyers and Legal Resources*, www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-1158-continental-shelf-under-the-u-n-convention-on-the-law-of-sea-1982-unclos.html . Accessed 19 Aug. 2024. 0

¹⁵ O'Rourke, Ronald, et al. *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*. Congressional Research Service, updated 7 Aug. 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/R41153> .

International Maritime Organization (IMO)

The International Maritime Organization is a United Nation agency responsible for measures to enhance safety and security of international shipping and to prevent pollution from ships. Its involvement in the legal field such as liability and compensation issues and the facilitation of international maritime traffic. The IMO was established through a convention adopted in Geneva on March 6, 1948, and it held its first meeting in January 1959.

Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC)

The Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) is a regional intergovernmental organization focused on promoting cooperation and development in the Barents Region, an area encompassing parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and northwest Russia. Established in 1993, BEAC facilitates collaboration between national governments, regional authorities, and indigenous peoples to address shared challenges such as environmental protection, economic development, infrastructure, health, and cultural exchange in this northern region. Such as the Barents Rescue Exercise Series which is coordinated by the BEAC to enhance international cooperation in emergency preparedness and response.

Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS)

The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (the Commission or CLCS) serves the purpose of facilitating the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in respect of the establishment of the outer limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured. The determination of whether this clause applies is based on the recommendation of the Commission. The Commission should make recommendations solely based on scientific evidence, its recommendations and actions shall not prejudice matters relating to the delimitation of boundaries between States with opposite or adjacent coasts.¹⁶

¹⁶ "Functions of the CLCS." *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/commission_purpose.htm#Purpose. Accessed 19 Aug. 2024.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
19th Sep. 1996	Formation of the Arctic Council in Ottawa Canada
20th Dec. 2001	Russia submits its first claim to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.
2ed Aug. 2007	Russian explorers plant a Russian flag on the seabed beneath the North Pole.
28th May 2008	Signing of the Ilulissat Declaration in Ilulissat, Greenland.
15th Sep. 2010	Russia and Norway sign the Barents Sea Treaty, resolving a 40-year maritime boundary dispute.
12th May 2011	Signing of the Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement in Nuuk, Greenland.
March 2014	Russia's annexation of Crimea heightens tensions, impacting Arctic cooperation.
26th Jan. 2017	China releases its first Arctic policy white paper, proposing a "Polar Silk Road."
25th Oct. - 7th Nov. 2018	NATO conducts its "Trident Juncture" exercise in Norway, its largest Arctic exercise since the Cold War.
20th May 2021	Arctic Council holds its ministerial meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, with Russia assuming the chairmanship.
3 March 2022	Western Arctic Council members suspend cooperation with Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

Adopted in 1982, UNCLOS establishes the legal framework for maritime activities, including determining territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs). The convention is crucial for resolving territorial disputes and resource claims in the Arctic, where multiple states assert overlapping claims.

Arctic states, including Russia, Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), and Norway, have used UNCLOS provisions to submit claims for extended continental shelves in the Arctic. The UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) reviews these claims and provides recommendations based on geological data.

The UNCLOS establishes the principle of "freedom of navigation" in international waters, which means that once the route within the arctic ocean has been defined as international, it means that it will be granted freedom of navigation providing a legal

framework for the route. The UNCLOS is crucial because it provides a commonly accepted legal justifications to claims, giving nations a legal way to justify their claims instead of action of military presents. While there remain differing interpretations of UNCLOS provisions regarding Arctic passages, the convention still provides a legal basis for negotiations and dialogue, promoting a cooperative approach to managing these strategically significant routes.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Barents Sea Treaty

The Barents Sea Treaty, signed on September 15, 2010, between Norway and Russia, putting a longstanding maritime boundary dispute that had persisted for nearly 40 years to an end. The dispute was primarily significant because the region is believed to be rich in natural resources, particularly oil and gas. The agreement divided the area almost equally between the two countries and included provisions for joint resource management, particularly regarding fisheries and hydrocarbon exploration. This treaty presented the possibility of solving this issue by multiple treaties between stakeholder nations.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Expansion of the Arctic Council Membership to Non-Arctic Nations

Allowing more states into the arctic council. The inclusion of non-Arctic actors in a transparent manner can also prevent conflicts and ensure that global stakeholders are involved. This inclusion would be done transparently to ensure that all stakeholders have a voice in the governance of the Arctic. By broadening the Council's membership, the decision-making process would be more inclusive, having a wider range of representation and global actors and thereby reducing the likelihood of conflicts over Arctic policies.

Resolution Defining Arctic Trade Routes as International Waters

Pass a resolution defining that both the Northwest passway and the Northern Sea Route are legally defined as international trade routes, at the same time grant the Arctic council regulatory power on all arctic routes which would offer a balanced compromise to address the interests of key Arctic states like Canada and Russia. By acknowledging these

routes as international waters, the resolution would ensure the free passage for commercial vessels, encouraging global trade and economic development. At the same time, giving the Arctic Council regulatory power over these routes would allow member states, particularly those directly affected.

Funding Collaborative Seabed Survey Projects

Fund projects and encourage cooperation between arctic states regarding seabed survey, possibly with the assistance of CLCS, by combining resources between Arctic nations could conduct comprehensive surveys that would help delineate continental shelf boundaries, identify potential resource deposits, and improve navigation safety. Such projects would facilitate the development of safe and efficient Arctic trade routes, unlocking their true economic potential by making them more accessible and reliable.

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