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The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Three Levels of Arctic Geopolitics

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The notion of geopolitical conflict in the Arctic continues to make media headlines. A decade ago, as climate change was altering the geography of the region, the resource potential of the North grabbed attention, and states (and companies) saw the chance to turn a profit. Today, this focus has shifted to concerns about the strategic positioning of, and increased tension between, NATO countries and Russia, with a dash of Chinese interests on top.

Introduction

Statements about conflict surrounding the Arctic is quite common. In May 2019, in a speech in conjunction with a meeting at the Arctic Council — the Arctic’s foremost cooperative mechanism — US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo lambasted both Russia and China for their “provocative actions” that are “part of a pattern of aggressive behavior”.¹ That October, France’s Minister of the Armed Forces even compared the Arctic to the Middle East.² Yet both the United States (as a member of the Arctic Council) and France (as an observer) are strong supporters of Arctic cooperative mechanisms, and repeatedly stress their desire to ensure that the circumpolar region remains insulated from troubles elsewhere.

Ideas of the Arctic as an arena for political competition and rivalry are therefore often juxtaposed with the view of the Arctic as a region of harmony and shared interests. Such regional approaches have led to Arctic security debates being dominated by ideas of “exceptionalism” — the notion that the Arctic is unique and separate from the (geo)political rivalries elsewhere in the world.³

There seems to be a confusing multitude of actors and layers of engagement in Arctic geopolitics. Numerous questions are left concerning the geopolitical characteristics of the Arctic, contradictory statements by Arctic states about the region, and how regional relations might evolve in the near future.

This article unpacks the notion of Arctic geopolitics by exploring the different, at times contradictory, political dynamics at play in the North. It explores three levels⁴ of inter-state relations: the regional (Arctic) level, the international system, and the level of bilateral relations. Labelling these levels as “good,” “bad” and “ugly” — an unabashed borrowing from Sergio Leone’s epic 1966 film — helps shed light on the distinctiveness of each and on how they interact.

The Good (Regional Relations)

Let us start with the good in the Arctic — the regional relations among Arctic states: Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States.

¹ "[Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus.](#)" Speech given by US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, Rovaniemi, Finland, May 6, 2019.

² French Ministry of Armed Forces, “France and the New Strategic Challenges in the Arctic” (Paris, 2019), https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/layout/set/print/content/download/565142/9742558/version/3/file/France+and+the+New+Strategic+Challenges+in+the+Arctic+-+DGRIS_2019.pdf

³ Elana Wilson Rowe, “Analyzing Frenemies: An Arctic Repertoire of Cooperation and Rivalry,” *Political Geography* 76, no. January (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102072>. *Political Geography* 76 (2020).

⁴ See, e.g., Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); J. D. Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics* 14, no. 01 (1961): 77–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009557>; Fakhreddin Soltani, “Levels of Analysis in International Relations and Regional Security Complex Theory,” *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 4, no. 4 (2014): 166–71.

As the Cold War's systemic overlay faded, regional interaction and cooperation in the North started to flourish. Several organizations, such as the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Northern Forum, emerged in the 1990s to tackle issues such as environmental degradation, regional and local development, and cultural and economic cross-border cooperation. Deliberately excluded were military security issues, a choice that enabled a plethora of cooperative arrangements to emerge between the countries in different constellations without getting bogged down in the security concerns at the time.

Whereas interaction among Arctic states increased during this period, and included Arctic indigenous peoples (as they gained more political visibility and an official voice), geopolitically, the region seemed to disappear from the radar of global power politics. This allowed the circumpolar countries to recognize the value of creating a political environment favorable to investments and economic development, giving rise to the idea of the Arctic's political dynamics as exceptional.

The region was thrown back onto the international agenda in the early 2000s due to the increasingly apparent effects of climate change. Arctic ice sheets were disappearing at an accelerated pace, which coincided with new prospects for offshore oil and gas exploration, as well as the opening of shipping lanes through sensitive areas such as the Northwest Passage.⁵

In the wake of this, environmental organizations and politicians outside the region led an outcry about the "lack of governance" in the Arctic.⁶ In response, top-level political representatives of the five Arctic coastal states (excluding Finland, Iceland and Sweden) met in Ilulissat, Greenland, in 2008, where they publicly declared the Arctic to be a "region of cooperation."⁷ They also affirmed their intention to work within established international arrangements and agreements, in particular, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an international agreement binding states in shared pursuit of order, cooperation and stability at sea.⁸

Since then, the Arctic states have repeated the mantra of cooperation, articulating the same sentiment in relatively streamlined Arctic policy and strategy documents. The deterioration in relations between Russia and its Arctic neighbours since 2014 — a result of Russian actions in eastern Ukraine and Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula — did not change this,⁹ although security and military concerns now occupy more space in Arctic discussions than ever.

⁵ Economist, "Not so Cool," *Economist*, February 14, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21641240-hype-over-arctic-recedes-along-summer-ice-not-so-cool>; Andreas Østhagen, "Arctic Oil and Gas: Hype or Reality?," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, April 9 (2013), <http://www.fletcherforum.org/2013/04/09/osthagen/>.

⁶ See Greenpeace's Save the Arctic Campaign: <https://www.peoplevssoil.org/en/savethearctic/>. For an analysis, see Alf Håkon Hoel, "Do We Need a New Legal Regime for the Arctic Ocean?," *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 24, no. 2 (2009): 443–56.

⁷ Heather Exner-Pirot, "New Directions for Governance in the Arctic Region," *Arctic Yearbook*, 2012.

⁸ Text available at: http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat_Declaration.pdf.

⁹ See Byers, "Crises and International Cooperation," op. cit.

Indeed, the foreign ministries of all Arctic Council members, including Russia, keep pro-actively emphasizing the “peaceful” and “cooperative” nature of regional politics.¹⁰ Here, Canada was actually an outlier in 2014, as former prime minister Stephen Harper took a rather strong position rhetorically against Russia also in the Arctic. Since 2015, however, the Trudeau government has made an effort to separate softer political issues in the Arctic such as science cooperation and pollution prevention, from the high politics surrounding condemnation for Russia’s actions closer to home.

Some also argue that low-level forms of regional interaction help ensure low tension in the North, despite not dealing with security matters.¹¹ The emergence of the Arctic Council as the primary forum for regional affairs in the Arctic plays into this setting.¹² The council, founded in Ottawa in 1996, serves as a platform from which its member states can portray themselves as working harmoniously toward common goals.¹³ Adding to its legitimacy, since the late 1990s an increasing number of actors have applied for and gained observer status on the council: initially France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom; and, more recently, China, India, Italy, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Switzerland.¹⁴



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The maritime exclusive economic zones in the Arctic. Map: Malte Humpert, The Arctic Institute.

¹⁰ Wilson Rowe, “Analyzing Frenemies: An Arctic Repertoire of Cooperation and Rivalry”; Lassi Heininen et al., “Arctic Policies and Strategies — Analysis, Synthesis, and Trends” (Laxenburg, Austria, 2020), http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/16175/1/ArcticReport_WEB_new.pdf.

¹¹ Kathrin Keil and Sebastian Knecht, *Governing Arctic Change: Global Perspectives*, *Governing Arctic Change: Global Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-50884-3>.

¹² Svein Vigeland Rottem, “The Arctic Council: Challenges and Recommendations,” in *Arctic Governance: Law and Politics. Volume 1*, ed. Svein Vigeland Rottem and Ida Folkestad Soltvedt (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 231–51.

¹³ Heather Exner-Pirot, “Arctic Council: The Evolving Role of Regions in Arctic Governance,” *Alaska Dispatch*, 2015, <http://www.adn.com/article/20150109/arctic-council-evolving-role-regions-arctic-governance>.

¹⁴ Rottem, “The Arctic Council: Challenges and Recommendations.” op. cit.

For reasons outlined above, Arctic states have more or less divided the region among themselves based on the law of the sea (UNCLOS). There is little to argue about when it comes to resources and boundaries, although limited disputes exist such as that over tiny, uninhabited Hans Island/Ø between Canada and Denmark, the maritime boundary in the Beaufort Sea between Canada and the United States, and the possibility of overlap between extended continental shelves in the Arctic Basin between Canada, Denmark and Russia.

Despite open territorial land grabs in other parts of the world, a race for Arctic resources or territory is therefore not likely to unfold in the foreseeable future. Geographically based conflicts — geopolitics — where Arctic or non-Arctic states claim a limited number of out-of-bounds offshore resources, many of which are likely to remain unexplored for the next few decades at least, are neither economically nor politically viable, and thus not an immediate cause for concern.

The Bad (Global Power Politics)

What happens *in* the Arctic, however, is not the same as international global politics *over* the Arctic. During the Cold War, the Arctic held a prominent place in the political and military standoffs between the two superpowers. It was important not because of interactions in the Arctic itself (although cat-and-mouse submarine games took place there), but because of its wider strategic role in the systemic competition between the United States and the USSR. The Arctic formed the buffer zone between these two superpower rivals, its airspace comprising the shortest distance for long-range bombers to reach one another's shores.

Following the easing of Cold War tensions, from the mid-2000s onwards, the Arctic regained strategic geopolitical importance. A repeat of Cold War dynamics saw Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, strengthen its military (and nuclear) prowess in order to reassert Russia's position at the top table of world politics. Given the country's geography and recent history, its obvious focus would be its Arctic lands and seas. In this terrain, Russia could pursue its policy of rebuilding its forces and expanding its defence and deterrence capabilities in an unobstructed manner.¹⁵

This build-up has happened not primarily because of changing political circumstances in the Arctic, but because of Russia's naturally (i.e., geographically) dominant position in the North and its long history of a strong naval presence, the Northern Fleet, on the Kola Peninsula.¹⁶ This is where Russia's strategic submarines are based, which are essential to the country's status as a major global nuclear power.¹⁷ Melting of the sea ice and increased resource extraction on the coast along the Northern Sea Route are

¹⁵ Paal S. Hilde, "Armed Forces and Security Challenges in the Arctic," in *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World*, ed. Rolf Tamnes and Kristine Offerdal (London: Routledge, 2014), 153–5.

¹⁶ Katarzyna Zysk, "Russia's Arctic Strategy: Ambitions and Restraints," in *The Fast-Changing Arctic: Rethinking Arctic Security for a Warmer World*, ed. Barry Scott Zellen (Calgary, AB: Calgary University Press, 2013), 281–96. *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Alexander Sergunin and Valery Konyshchev, "Russia in Search of Its Arctic Strategy: Between Hard and Soft Power?," *Polar Journal* 4, no. 1 (2014): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2014.913930>.

only some elements that have spurred Russia's military emphasis in its Arctic development efforts: Russia's north matters for the Kremlin's more general strategic plans and ambitions in world politics. Yet, as explained further in the next section, for Canada, the effects of these efforts are limited. It is the Nordic states that stand to bear the brunt of the emerging challenges.

Within these shifting geo-economic and geo-strategic dynamics, China has also emerged as a new Arctic actor, proclaiming itself as a "near-Arctic state."¹⁸ With Beijing's continuous efforts to assert influence, the Arctic has emerged as the latest arena where China's presence and interaction are components of an expansion of power — be it through scientific research or investments in Russia's fossil fuel industries.¹⁹ This has led to the Arctic becoming relevant in a global power competition between China and the United States. US Secretary of State Pompeo warned in 2019 that Beijing's Arctic activity risks creating a "new South China Sea."²⁰

The sudden realization by the White House that Greenland occupies a strategically significant position, and that the United States has a military base there — Thule — links to strategic concerns and fears over Chinese investments in Greenland. Although these concerns have failed to materialize on any great scale, the tweet by President Trump about buying Greenland was not a coincidence. The US Government's reopening of its consulate in Nuuk,²¹ Greenland's capital, demonstrates how the US position on China as a strategic rival in the Arctic does indeed have an impact, and yet another arena where systemic competition between the two countries is increasing.

While Arctic states continue to highlight cooperative traits in the region and positive regional affairs, politics between the great powers of China, Russia, the United States and (to some extent) the European Union, increasingly impacts on Arctic affairs. On the one hand, tensions between NATO and Russia have an Arctic/North Atlantic component, as seen with an increasing number of military exercises in the area since 2014. On the other hand, the Trump administration's decision to challenge China globally has also led to a tougher stance against China in the Arctic, at least rhetorically. This suggests the need to distinguish between intra-regional dynamics in the Arctic, and the spillover effect of events and power struggles elsewhere on Arctic issues.

¹⁸ Sanna Kopra, "China's Arctic Interests," *Arctic Yearbook* 2013 (2013): 1–16, <http://www.arcticyearbook.com/2013-articles/51-china-s-arctic-interests>.

¹⁹ For more on this, see Mia M. Bennett, "Arctic Law and Governance: The Role of China and Finland (2017)," *Jindal Global Law Review* 8, no. 1 (2017): 111–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41020-017-0038-y>; Kai Sun, "Beyond the Dragon and the Panda: Understanding China's Engagement in the Arctic," *Asia Policy* 18, no. 1 (2014): 46–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2014.0023>; Timo Koivurova and Sanna Kopra, eds., *Chinese Policy and Presence in the Arctic* (Leiden, NLD: Brill Nijhoff, 2020).

²⁰ *The Guardian*, "US Warns Beijing's Arctic Activity Risks Creating 'New South China Sea,'" *The Guardian*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/06/pompeo-arctic-activity-new-south-china-sea>.

²¹ See <https://dk.usembassy.gov/reopening-of-u-s-consulate-nuuk/>

The Ugly (Bilateral Relations)

There is one further political dynamic that requires examination: bilateral interactions between Arctic states. These relations are naturally informed by the regional and global dynamics already addressed. However, to unpack the issue of national security in the circumpolar region, we must also focus on how the Arctic states interact on a regular basis with each other. This is where things get ugly, both because some relations are more fraught than others, and because it is difficult to draw generalizing conclusions across the region.

Central here is the role the Arctic plays in considerations of national defence. This varies greatly amid the Arctic Eight, because each country prioritizes and deals with its northern areas differently.²² For Russia, with its vast Eurasian empire, the Arctic is integral to broader national defence considerations.²³ Even though these considerations are also linked to developments elsewhere, investments in military infrastructure in the Arctic have a direct regional impact, in particular for the much smaller countries in its western neighbourhood — Finland, Norway and Sweden.

Indeed, for these three Nordic countries, the Arctic is fundamental to national defence policy, precisely because this is where Russia — as a great power — invests considerably in its military capacity.²⁴ Especially Norway, a founding member of NATO and located on the alliance’s “northern flank”, is increasingly concerned with the expansive behaviour of the Russian military in the North Atlantic and Barents Sea.²⁵

The Arctic arguably does not play the same pivotal role in national security considerations in North America as in northern Europe.²⁶ Even while pitted against the Soviet Union across the Arctic Ocean and Bering Sea during the Cold War, Alaska and northern Canada were primarily locations for missile defence capabilities, surveillance infrastructure and a limited number of strategic forces.²⁷

Commentators have even argued that the most immediate concerns facing the Canadian Arctic today are not defence capabilities, but rather social and health conditions in northern communities, and their poor

²² Hilde, “Armed Forces and Security Challenges in the Arctic.” op. cit.

²³ Alexander Sergunin, “Four Dangerous Myths about Russia’s Plans for the Arctic,” *Russia Direct*, November 25, 2014, <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/four-dangerous-myths-about-russias-plans-arctic>.

²⁴ Leif Christian Jensen, “An Arctic ‘Marriage of Inconvenience’: Norway and the Othering of Russia,” *Polar Geography* 40, no. 2 (2017): 121–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2017.1308975>; Håkon Lunde Saxi, “Nordic Defence Cooperation after the Cold War,” *Oslo Files*, vol. March 2011 (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 2011).

²⁵ E.g. Paal Sigurd Hilde, “Forsvar Vår Dyd, Men Kom Oss Ikke for Nær. Norge Og Det Militære Samarbeidet i NATO [Defend Our Virtue, but Do Not Get Too Close. Norway and the Military Cooperation in NATO],” *Internasjonal Politikk* 77, no. 1 (2019): 60–70, <https://doi.org/10.23865/intpol.v77.1626>.

²⁶ Including Greenland, which is geographically part of North America but politically part of the Realm of Denmark.

²⁷ Andreas Østhagen, Greg L. Sharp, and Paal S. Hilde, “At Opposite Poles: Canada’s and Norway’s Approaches to Security in the Arctic,” *Polar Journal* 8, no. 1 (2018): 163–81.

rates of economic development.²⁸ This does not discount the need for Canada to be active in its Arctic domain and to have Arctic capabilities. However, this perspective differs from the crucial role that the Russian land border holds for Finnish and Norwegian (as well as NATO) security concerns.²⁹

The geographical dividing line falls between the European Arctic and the North American Arctic, in tandem with variations in climatic conditions. The north Norwegian and the northwest Russian coastlines are ice-free during winter. But ice — even though it is receding — remains a constant factor in the Alaskan, Canadian and Greenlandic Arctic. Due to the sheer size and inaccessibility of the region, the impact of security issues on either side of the dividing line is relatively low.

In conclusion, security and — essentially defence — dynamics in the Arctic remain anchored at the subregional and bilateral levels. Of these arrangements, the Barents Sea/European Arctic stand out. Here, bilateral relations between Russia and Norway are especially challenging in terms of security interactions and concerns. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Russian investments in Arctic troops and infrastructure have had little impact on the North American security outlook. Approaches by Russian bombers and fighter planes may cause alarm, but the direct threat to North American states in the Arctic — compared to that of its Nordic allies — is limited.³⁰ This is also why Canadian troops have been exercising in the Norwegian Arctic in recent years, and not vice versa.

However, bilateral dynamics like in the case of Norway and Russia are multifaceted, as the two states also engage in various types of cooperation, ranging from co-management of fish stocks to search-and-rescue operations and a border crossing regime.³¹ In 2010, Norway and Russia were able to resolve a longstanding maritime boundary dispute in the Barents Sea, partly in order to initiate joint petroleum ventures in the disputed area.³² These cooperative arrangements and agreements have not been revoked following the events of 2014,³³ a clear indication of the complexity bilateral relations in the Arctic.

Future Plot Twists

The central question in the Arctic is how much developments occurring at a regional level can be insulated from events and relations elsewhere. If the goal is to keep the Arctic as a separate, exceptional

²⁸ Wilfrid Greaves and Whitney P. Lackenbauer, “Re-Thinking Sovereignty and Security in the Arctic,” *OpenCanada*, March 23, 2016, <https://www.opencanada.org/features/re-thinking-sovereignty-and-security-arctic>.

²⁹ Østhagen, Sharp, and Hilde, “At Opposite Poles: Canada’s and Norway’s Approaches to Security in the Arctic.” op. cit.

³⁰ Ibid, p, 176.

³¹ From 2012, Norwegians and Russians living less than 30 kilometers from the border have been able to travel across the border without a visa.

³² Arild Moe, Daniel Fjærtøft, and Indra Øverland, “Space and Timing: Why Was the Barents Sea Delimitation Dispute Resolved in 2010?,” *Polar Geography* 34, no. 3 (2011): 145–62.

³³ Lars Rowe, “Fornuft Og Følelser: Norge Og Russland Etter Krim (Sense and Sensibility: Norway and Russia after Crimea),” *Nordisk Østforum* 32 (2018): 1–20; Andreas Østhagen, “High North, Low Politics Maritime Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic,” *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 7, no. 1 (2016): 83–100.

region of cooperation, the Arctic states have managed to do a relatively good job, despite setbacks due to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The most pressing regional challenge, however, is how to deal with, and talk about, Arctic-specific security concerns, which are often excluded from cooperative fora and venues. The debate on what mechanisms are best suited for further expanding security cooperation has been ongoing for a decade.³⁴ Some hold that the Arctic Council should acquire a security component,³⁵ whereas others look to the Arctic Coast Guard Forum or other more ad hoc venues.³⁶ The Northern Chiefs of Defense Conference and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable were initiatives established to this end in 2011/2012,³⁷ but fell apart after 2014.

The difficulties encountered in trying to establish an arena for security discussions indicate the high sensitivity to, and influences from, events and evolutions elsewhere. Russia, by far the largest country of the circumpolar region and the most ambitious in terms of military investments and activity, sets the parameters for much of the Arctic security trajectory. This is not likely to change, although exactly what the future Arctic security environment will look like depends on the West's response to Russian actions taking place predominantly in other regions of the world.

Any Arctic security dialogue is fragile and risks being overshadowed by the increasingly tense NATO–Russia relationship in Europe at large. Paradoxically, precisely what such an arena for dialogue is intended to achieve (i.e., preventing the spillover of tensions from other parts of the world into the Arctic) is the very reason why progress here is so difficult. A more pan-Arctic political role for NATO is, for the very same reason, difficult to imagine.

One starting point, however, would be to focus on practical forms of cooperation — implemented through mechanisms such as a code of conduct,³⁸ or an expansion of the Incidents at Sea cooperation that was put in place between the United States and the USSR in 1972, and subsequently Canada/Norway and the USSR in 1989/1990.³⁹

³⁴ Heather A. Conley et al., “A New Security Architecture for the Arctic: An American Perspective,” *CSIS Report*, vol. January 20 (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2012).

³⁵ Ragnhild Grønning, “Why Military Security Should Be Kept out of the Arctic Council,” *High North News*, June 7, 2016, <http://www.highnorthnews.com/op-ed-why-military-security-should-be-kept-out-of-the-arctic-council/>; Piotr Graczyk and Svein Vigeland Rottem, “The Arctic Council: Soft Actions, Hard Effects?,” in *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security*, ed. Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørv, Marc Lanteigne, and Horatio Sam-Aggrey (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020), 221–34.

³⁶ Mike Sfraga et al., “A Governance and Risk Inventory for a Changing Arctic: Background Paper for the Arctic Security Roundtable at the Munich Security Conference 2020” (Washington DC, 2020), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/governance-and-risk-inventory-changing-arctic>; Andreas Østhagen, “Arctic Coast Guards: Why Cooperate?,” in *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security*, ed. Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørv, Marc Lanteigne, and Horatio Godfrey Sam-Aggrey (London: Routledge, 2020), 283–94.

³⁷ Duncan Depledge et al., “Why We Need to Talk about Military Activity in the Arctic: Towards an Arctic Military Code of Conduct,” *Arctic Yearbook* 2019 (2019): <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2019>.

³⁸ Depledge et al.

³⁹ OSCE, “Journal of the 854th Plenary Meeting of the Forum for Security Co-Operation,” 2017, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/5/320231.pdf>.

Taking a wider look at global power politics and the Arctic, we can note that China's increasing global engagement and influence has — thus far — been rather subdued in the North. Beijing, for all its rhetoric about its interest in a Polar Silk Route, has used all the correct Arctic buzzwords about cooperation and restraint in tune with the preferences of the Arctic states.⁴⁰

The question is whether Chinese actions in the region are meant to challenge this presence subtly, by engaging it predominantly through means of soft power rather than through military might. At the same time, shifting power balances and Beijing's greater regional interest in new areas need not lead to tension and conflict. To the contrary, they might spur efforts to find ways of including China in regional fora, alleviating the (geo-economic) concerns of Arctic states.⁴¹

One simple, constructive and cost-free solution is for the incoming Biden administration to recognize the effects of increased military activity and bellicose rhetoric in the region, and to actively tone these down while also inviting other states, such as China, to a circumpolar dialogue on northern security concerns.

Conclusions

That the Arctic is important for the Arctic states is not new. Indeed, increasing attention has been paid for some time now to northern security challenges by Arctic actors (including Russia, the United States, and by proxy the European Union) and those with a growing interest in the Arctic, such as China. Yet the intensity of interests is novel. Regional collaborative schemes have expanded in response. The growing importance of the region within the international system is also becoming apparent.

This is, however, only partly linked to events in the Arctic (including climate change, ice melt, economic ventures and so forth). In large part it has to do with the strategic position of the Arctic between Asia, Europe and North America. On the bilateral level, we can note some intra-regional competition, as well as investments and cooperation. However, here it is difficult to generalize across the Arctic region, precisely because of the vastness and inaccessibility of the area itself, and the complex nature of relations within the three levels of Arctic geopolitics.

There are some paradoxical dynamics — explaining the mix of cooperation and tension, if not conflict — that are best understood through the threefold distinction presented here: international competition (why the United States is increasingly focusing on China in an Arctic context), regional interaction (why Arctic states still meet to sign new agreements hailing the cooperative spirit of the North) and bilateral relations (why some Arctic states, and not others, invest heavily in their Northern defence posture).

⁴⁰ State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy," Chinese Government, 2018, http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.

⁴¹ Bjørnar Sverdrup-Thygeson and Espen Mathy, "Norges Debatt Om Kinesiske Investeringer: Fra Velvillig Til Varsom (Norway's Debate about Chinese Investments: From Willing to Cautious)," *Internasjonal Politikk* 78, no. 1 (2020): 79–92.

What these nuances imply is that simplistic descriptions of Arctic geopolitics or a new Cold War in the Arctic today must be taken with a grain of salt.⁴² Political dynamics in the North are far too complex for these reductive descriptions. Recognizing this complexity should therefore encourage further studies of security politics in a region that has become an international focal point of examination and discussion.

Author's Note

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⁴² RT, “Cold War Games: NATO, Friendly Air Forces Brace for Large Arctic Drills,” *News*, May 25, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/261781-nato-drills-games-arctic/>; Julian E Barnes, “Cold War Echoes Under the Arctic Ice,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304679404579461630946609454>; Isabelle Mandraud, “Russia Prepares for Ice-Cold War with Show of Military Force in the Arctic,” *The Guardian* (Europe section, 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/21/russia-arctic-military-oil-gas-putin>. See also this excellent piece by Exner-Pirot: “How to Write an Arctic Story in 5 Easy Steps,” *Arctic Today*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.arctictoday.com/write-arctic-story-5-easy-steps/>.



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