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# RUSSIAN GEOSTRATEGY IN THE ARCTIC AMID NATO ENLARGEMENT TO INCLUDE FINLAND AND SWEDEN

*Abstract:*

This article investigates the transformation of Russian geostrategy in the Arctic following the accession of Finland (2023) and Sweden (2024) to NATO, developments that have fundamentally altered the strategic balance in Northern Europe. The analysis contends that NATO enlargement has accelerated the militarisation of Russian Arctic policy, shifting the region from limited cooperation to intensified strategic competition. Drawing on Russia's post-2020 Arctic policy documents, the study identifies a clear reorientation from economic priorities, such as resource extraction and development of the Northern Sea Route, toward military security, consolidation of the Northern Fleet, and expansion of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems across key Arctic territories. The article also examines how NATO's strengthened northern posture, including expanded Nordic defence cooperation, large-scale exercises, and the creation of new command structures, has heightened Moscow's perception of strategic encirclement. In addition to conventional military developments, the analysis highlights Russia's increasing reliance on grey-zone activities, such as GPS interference, cyber operations, and sabotage of seabed infrastructure, as integral tools for shaping the regional security environment. The study further assesses the evolving role of China in Russia's Arctic strategy, noting deepening economic and selective military cooperation, despite Moscow's reluctance to permit broad Chinese security involvement. The article concludes that the Arctic is experiencing a structural shift toward polycentric rivalry, characterized by increased risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation. The capacity of major actors to manage competition and establish de-escalation mechanisms will determine whether the region develops into a stable strategic theatre or becomes a potential flashpoint in future NATO–Russia.

*Key words:*
Arctic, Russia, NATO, Sweden, Finland, geostrategy, international security



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## INTRODUCTION

The Arctic region has emerged as a central arena of geopolitical rivalry in the early 21st century, where the interests of major powers intersect. Finland's accession to NATO in 2023 and Sweden's in 2024 have established new strategic dynamics in Northern Europe. The integration of Swedish and Finnish armed forces into NATO has altered the military balance in the Baltic Sea and adjacent Arctic regions. The ongoing rivalry between the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Alliance in the Arctic exemplifies broader trends of polycentrism within the international system. Russian intelligence assessments suggest that control over strategic locations in the polar region could prove decisive in potential armed conflicts. NATO strategic documents identify Russia as the principal security challenge to the Alliance, alongside terrorism. The conflict in Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated in February 2022, has extended to other domains of geopolitical competition, including the Arctic. The decisions by Finland and Sweden to pursue NATO membership in May 2022, followed by formal invitations in June 2022, directly reflect the intensification of tensions between Russia and the West, fundamentally altering the longstanding military neutrality of these states (Smirnov, 2023).

The geopolitical significance of the Arctic within the European security system has steadily increased since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Nordic countries have conducted exercises such as the *Nordic Response* manoeuvres to prepare allied forces for operations in polar environments. Concurrently, Moscow has continued to strengthen its military presence in the region by modernising bases and enhancing naval and air defence capabilities. This article examines Russia's strategic response to NATO's expansion in the Arctic, with particular emphasis on changes in Russian military doctrine, the shift in priorities from economic to military concerns, and potential scenarios for conflict escalation. The central hypothesis is that the NATO membership of Finland



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and Sweden has accelerated the militarisation of Russian Arctic policy, transforming the region from a space of international cooperation into a potential theatre of military confrontation. This militarisation is evident in both increased military activity and the revision of strategic assumptions to prioritise the defence of national interests amid intensifying geopolitical competition (Friis, 2025).

## THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN ARCTIC

The Russian Federation's policy documents relating to the Arctic region illustrate a fundamental shift in Moscow's priorities towards the polar region. An analysis of successive versions of Arctic strategies reveals a gradual shift in emphasis from economic to military considerations, reflecting broader geopolitical processes in the international system. In October 2020, a document entitled "Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period up to 2035" was adopted. This strategy developed the assumptions contained in the "Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic until 2035" from March 2020. The document defined the mechanisms for achieving strategic goals, considering economic and military dimensions. The 2020 strategy was a continuation of earlier Arctic concepts from 2008 and 2013, which formulated Russia's basic priorities in the region. Of particular importance is the February 2023 revision of the document, introduced by President Putin, which clearly indicates a change in strategic priorities. A key element of the modification was the removal of specific references to cooperation within the Arctic Council and a stronger emphasis on Russian national interests. The updated version highlights the importance of the shipbuilding complex's import independence and of developing infrastructure to support the Northern Sea Route. This strategic shift underscores Russia's intent to consolidate its economic and security posture in the Arctic, leveraging its resource wealth and the Northern Sea Route as critical geopolitical assets (Kluge & Paul, 2020; Staun, 2023).

The original concept of Russia's Arctic strategy focused on the region's raw materials and energy resources. The Russian Arctic was treated primarily as a „natural resource base" – the region supplies over 80% of Russia's natural gas and 17% of its oil. According to the 2020 strategy document, the continental shelf contains over 85.1 trillion cubic metres of gas and 17.3 billion tonnes of oil. The 2020 assumptions predicted a significant increase in the extraction and processing of raw materials, including liquefied natural gas production, from 8.6 million tonnes in 2018 to 91 million tonnes by 2035. There were also plans to increase the capacity of the Northern Sea Route from 31.5 million tonnes in 2019 to 130 million tonnes by 2035. The strategic documents from 2008 and 2013 were characterised by moderate rhetoric and did not focus on counterbalancing NATO's military potential. The 2020 strategy brought traditional military security back onto the Arctic agenda. The conflict in Ukraine after 2022 reinforced the military priority in Russian polar policy. This reorientation emphasises the Arctic's role as a vital geopolitical and geo-economic macro-region for Russia, particularly given its vast hydrocarbon reserves and the strategic importance of the Northern Sea Route for energy exports and national connectivity (Kirsanova et al., 2020; Sleptsov et al., 2021; Ulchenko et al., 2019).

The Arctic's position in the Russian Federation's national security priorities has been steadily rising. The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation placed the Arctic second among Moscow's strategic priorities, after relations with the post-Soviet states. This represents a significant change compared to the 1990s and 2000s, when Arctic issues did not feature on Russia's foreign policy agenda. The establishment of the Northern Strategic Command (in Russian: *Obyedinonnoye strategicheskoye komandovaniye "Sever"*) on 1 December 2014 was a key element in the militarisation of the Arctic. The command does not function as a military district in peacetime, suggesting an operational rather than a district-level disposition. The basis of the armed forces in the Arctic is the Northern Fleet, which underpins Russia's nuclear deterrent capability. It is the most powerful of the four Russian fleets, with the largest number of icebreakers and submarines. It



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comprises about 40 warships, including one aircraft carrier and over 40 submarines, some of which carry ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads. The year 2019 saw a further strengthening of the management of the Arctic region through the appointment of new members to the State Commission for the Development of the Arctic and the extension of its jurisdiction, as well as the creation of the Ministry of the Russian Federation for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic. The Kremlin sees control over the Arctic as a marker of superpower status. NATO's expansion into the Arctic is interpreted as a fundamental threat to Russian strategic interests, which strengthens Moscow's determination to militarise the region (Wódka, 2017).

## BALANCE OF POWER IN THE ARCTIC AFTER 2022

The start of the second phase of the war in Ukraine and Finland's, followed by Sweden's, accession to the North Atlantic Alliance, have led to a strategic reconfiguration of the Northern European security system. The decision to admit two new countries created new parameters for geopolitical rivalry and transformed the defence architecture of the Arctic region. Finland's accession to NATO on 4 April 2023 doubled the length of the Alliance's direct border with the Russian Federation, adding 1,340 kilometres. Finland's geographical location, only 180 km from St Petersburg, created new strategic conditions for the Russian centre of power. Despite its relatively small demographic potential of just over 5 million inhabitants, Finland has significant military potential, including 900,000 trained reservists and the capacity to mobilise 280,000 soldiers. Its accession to NATO strategically complicates Russian defence operations in the Baltic Sea region, especially regarding the security of the Baltic Fleet base in Kronstadt and access to Kaliningrad (Friis, 2025).

Sweden, despite not being a direct neighbour of Russia, brought significant defensive capabilities to the Alliance when it joined on 7 March 2024, particularly through its control of the strategically located island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. Control over this geographical point is important for securing

airspace and communication routes in the region. Both Nordic countries cooperate in the joint defence of the strategic Åland Islands. From the Russian Federation's geopolitical perspective, NATO's expansion means closing the Alliance's „defensive gap" along the northern transport route, limiting Russia's room for manoeuvre in the event of a direct confrontation. The expansion of NATO to include the two Nordic countries was the Alliance's strategic response not only to the intensification of the war in Ukraine, but also to the strengthening of Russian defence structures, the reconstruction of the Leningrad Military District and the reinforcement of Russia's presence in the Arctic (Ack et al., 2024; Mattelaer, 2018).

The Nordic Defence Cooperation, comprising Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, gained new geopolitical significance following Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO. The fundamental objective of this cooperation remains to strengthen the national defence capabilities of the participating countries and to develop joint operational solutions. In 2024, the defence ministers of the Nordic countries adopted a new vision for NORDEFCO until 2030, given that all Nordic countries are full members of NATO. This document emphasises credible deterrence and defence capabilities through the development of interoperability in armed conflict situations. The priority of Nordic defence cooperation is to ensure that the armed forces of the five countries can conduct joint operations as an autonomous group and in coordination with other allies. At the same time, the establishment of the Multi Corps Land Component Command and the deployment of Forward Land Forces on Finnish territory were approved. This initiative aims to increase the cohesion and defence capabilities of the region, thereby strengthening NATO's strategic posture in the face of growing security challenges (Friis & Tamnes, 2024; Mattelaer, 2018).

The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has significantly increased the Alliance's presence in the Arctic region. Currently, seven of the eight traditional Arctic states (members of the Arctic Council) are part of NATO structures, which Moscow interprets as a "hostile encirclement". NATO ships repeatedly patrol the waters of the Barents Sea near the bases of the Russian Northern Fleet and key nuclear-armed



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submarine facilities. A NATO task force operates in Arctic and High North waters, demonstrating the Alliance's commitment to the collective security of this strategic region. These operations are coordinated by ships and aircraft assigned to NATO Standing Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1) as part of maritime presence operations (Mattelaer, 2018).

The Svalbard archipelago is of geostrategic importance as a potential flashpoint for geopolitical tensions. The Spitsbergen Treaty grants Norway "full and absolute" sovereignty over the archipelago but imposes significant restrictions on its exercise by prohibiting the construction of military fortifications or naval bases. Norway emphasises that Svalbard is covered by NATO protection under Article 5 but treats the practical defence of the archipelago as a national responsibility to avoid provoking Russia. The new policies of Stockholm and Helsinki have fundamentally transformed the security architecture in Northern Europe. NATO has gained a compact and unified space in the north, strengthening the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture in the Northern European region. At the same time, these changes have created new strategic challenges for the Russian Federation, which perceives NATO's expansion in the Arctic as a direct threat to its geopolitical interests. In response to these strategic changes, Russia has redefined its approach to the Arctic, focusing on economic, political and security dimensions (Thatcher, 2024).

The Kingdom of Norway is implementing significant modernisation projects as part of the strengthening of NATO's northern flank. The reactivation of the Bardufoss air base in June 2024, after four decades of inactivity, is an important element in expanding operational capabilities. The facility has been equipped with modernised mountain hangars and infrastructure to support F-35 fighter jets, enhancing the country's power-projection capabilities in the north. The base in Bodø is also gaining strategic importance, with the establishment of a third Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) to coordinate activities in the Nordic region. The Reitan mountain facility is to serve as a command centre for air operations in the Far North, working in cooperation with the Norwegian Joint Headquarters. The reactivation programme also included the Andøya air base, which was scheduled to

close in 2016. The decision to bring it back into service in 2023 was based on the need to strengthen surveillance and defence capabilities in the polar region. The Setermoen garrison, Norway's largest military base, is currently being expanded under the Supplementary Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United States (Åtland et al., 2024).

Iceland is implementing a project to expand the NATO fuel depot in Helguvík, including the construction of a 390-metre quay and storage facilities with a capacity of 25,000 cubic metres. The investment, estimated at ISK 10 billion, is scheduled for completion in 2029. The NATO Secretary General emphasised Iceland's strategic importance as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier", pointing to its location at the intersection of major routes connecting the Arctic, the Atlantic and Europe. Control of the GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-UK) gap remains crucial for securing communications between North America and Europe. The Nordic Response exercises are an evolution of the earlier Cold Response manoeuvres, adapted to the new geopolitical conditions following the accession of Finland and Sweden. The manoeuvres, conducted in March 2024, brought together more than 20,000 soldiers from 13 countries, operating in the northern areas of Norway, Finland and Sweden. The participants included approximately 8,000 Norwegian, 4,100 Finnish, and 4,500 Swedish soldiers. Other participating countries included the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain and Italy. The exercise programme included, among other things, maritime operations involving more than 50 vessels of various types, including submarines, frigates, corvettes and landing craft; air operations involving over 100 aircraft platforms, including fighter jets, transport aircraft and helicopters; and land operations using artillery systems, armoured vehicles and tracked equipment. The Nordic Response manoeuvres were part of the broader Steadfast Defender 2024 exercises, which ran from January to June 2024 and involved 90,000 soldiers from 31 NATO member states and Sweden. The scenario involved invoking Article 5 in response to a simulated attack by an equivalent adversary (Morgan, 2018).

The Nordic countries have taken initiatives to strengthen operational cooperation in the Arctic region. In June 2024, Norway, Finland and Sweden announced the creation of a trilateral military transport corridor through the Far North. At the same time, the Multi Corps Land Component Command and Forward Land Forces were established in Finland. Cooperation on Arctic technology included an agreement among the United States, Finland, and Canada to construct icebreakers and develop other polar capabilities through knowledge and resource exchanges. Norway hosts the NATO Winter Operations Centre, providing training for Alliance troops, including US Marines, in Arctic operations. Finland has established NATO Forward Land Forces, a multinational unit stationed above the Arctic Circle, comprising soldiers from Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. The NATO Multi Corps Land Component Command is a permanent command responsible for coordinating land-based deterrence activities in the Arctic part of Europe. The programme to strengthen reconnaissance capabilities includes Norway's fleet of P-8A maritime reconnaissance aircraft and the development of unmanned systems adapted to Arctic operations. Norway's 113 per cent increase in defence spending from 2022 reflects the region's priority in NATO's security strategy (Stensrud & Østhagen, 2024).

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF RUSSIA'S MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE ARCTIC

NATO's expansion into the Arctic region has intensified Russian defence activities in the Far North. The Kremlin interprets the strengthening of the Alliance's presence as a violation of the existing strategic balance, particularly in the context of Finland and Sweden's membership, which has brought NATO structures closer to key Russian military facilities in the region. A key element of Russia's Arctic defence concept is the deployment of anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) systems around strategic locations. In December 2015, the Novaya Zemlya archipelago received two long-range



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S-400 anti-aircraft complexes, alongside the installation of a similar system in the port of Tiksi in Yakutia. Franz Josef Land, the New Siberian Islands and Severnaya Zemlya were equipped with S-300 systems. Facilities in the region are protected by mobile Pantsir-S1 air defence systems, armed with Igla-S missile launchers and Djigit automatic cannons. New Earth also has Bastion-P complexes with P-800 Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles. The Rogachevo airbase, a key node in the Russian defence network in the archipelago, received S-300 systems in 2014-2015, along with the modernisation of its radar infrastructure. In 2023, these complexes were replaced with modern S-400 systems, which achieved full operational readiness in September. Moscow has announced the further deployment of S-300 and S-400 systems in the Russian Arctic, creating an integrated anti-aircraft dome over the region. The system is designed to protect against air attacks, including tactical aviation, manoeuvrable missiles and ballistic missiles. The main task of the Northern Fleet remains to maintain strategic nuclear forces in constant combat readiness and to protect infrastructure on the Kola Peninsula and strategic submarine bases (Baev, 2019).

Russia's missile potential in the Arctic has been strengthened by the introduction of new systems on the Kola Peninsula. In 2019, the Severomorsk base received its first vehicles with Pantsir-S missile complexes. The Northern Fleet assessed that this system provides the most effective air defence for military facilities in the complex terrain of the strategic peninsula, guaranteeing the destruction of air targets, including small ones. The Pechenga region, located several kilometres from the Norwegian border, received demonstration Tor-M2DT missile systems in 2023. The complex, based on DT-30PM tracked vehicles, operates at temperatures as low as 50 degrees Celsius. The system achieved operational readiness in Pechenga at the end of 2019. Tor-M2DT provides protection up to 16 km against flying objects, including drones and enemy missiles. The modernisation of military infrastructure over the last decade has covered about a dozen existing Arctic bases and airfields, including the Rogachevo facility on Novaya Zemlya. In addition, three new bases have been built in strategic locations or on the sites of destroyed Cold War

installations. Projects implemented according to the standard "Arctic Trefoil" consist of central residential and administrative buildings with a triangular architecture (Inzhutov et al., 2019).

The operations of the Russian Northern Fleet cover the Arctic Ocean, the North Atlantic and the strategic GIUK-N zone (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom-Norway), as well as monitoring activity on the Northern Sea Route. This potential comprises nuclear submarines armed with missiles and torpedoes, anti-ship and anti-submarine aircraft, and surface ships equipped with anti-aircraft and anti-submarine capabilities. Moscow is returning to its Cold War defence concept, particularly the bastion strategy of securing strategic territory to maintain freedom of action. The implementation of this concept includes extending control over the deep waters between Svalbard and Norway and securing the maritime space towards the GIUK-N gap. The highly capable Sierra II-class submarines, among the most advanced Russian strike vessels, play a key role (Wegge, 2020).

The nuclear potential deployed in the Arctic space is a key element of Russia's strategic doctrine towards NATO's expansion in the Far North. The nuclear component is particularly important as an instrument balancing the Alliance's conventional superiority and the ultimate guarantor of the security of the Russian power centre. The Northern Strategic Command concentrates about two-thirds of Russia's sea-based nuclear capabilities, with the remainder belonging to the Pacific Fleet. The primary task of the Northern Joint Strategic Command remains to secure the Kola Peninsula, where strategic submarines, the foundation of Russia's deterrence capability, are stationed (Martz, 2020).

The nuclear arsenal modernisation programme includes the systematic expansion of the Arctic submarine fleet. Currently, there are seven ballistic missile submarines and five cruise missile submarines, with more under construction. Despite the reduction in the number of ballistic missile submarines from 48 in 1990 to 12 in 2024, sea-launched missiles still account for one-third of strategic nuclear delivery systems. The maritime plan presented by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in November 2023 identifies the modernisation of the SSBN fleet as a strategic priority for 2019-2025. At the

same time, conceptual work is already underway on the fifth generation of Russian ballistic missile submarines (Stefanick, 2025).

The traditional Russian concept of bastion defence involves protecting maritime nuclear resources by establishing a controlled zone in the Barents Sea and towards the Norwegian Sea and the GIUK gap. This strategy is based on anti-access capabilities at sea and in the air to protect ballistic missile submarines. Changing geographical and military conditions, combined with technological developments, are limiting the effectiveness of this strategy in northern Europe. Following the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002, Russia has been seeking to develop new strategic nuclear systems capable of overcoming missile defence systems. Among the new capabilities is Poseidon, an intercontinental nuclear-powered torpedo with a nuclear warhead, launched from specialised submarines. The development of such systems calls into question the feasibility of the classic bastion strategy (Klimov, 2022).

## RUSSIAN NON-MILITARY ACTIVITIES AS AN INSTRUMENT OF ARCTIC POLICY

Moscow is pursuing a multidimensional strategy of influence in the Arctic that goes beyond the conventional framework of military confrontation. These activities, referred to in the literature as „grey zone" operations, are an important element of Russia's concept of power projection, allowing it to weaken its opponents while maintaining the possibility of credible denial. Since 2017, the Russian Federation has been conducting systematic operations against GPS satellite navigation systems in northern Scandinavia, which have intensified since 2022. These incidents correlate with periods of intensified military exercises, both Russian and allied. Cases of interference during the Zapad-2017 manoeuvres, NATO's Trident Juncture operation and the British Clockwork exercises have been documented. In 2023, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially accused the Russian centre of power of "almost continuous jamming or falsification of GPS

signals", which directly affects the safety of civilian transport, including medical rescue helicopters. In July 2023, incidents were reported in the Spitsbergen archipelago in which manipulated navigation signals misled the crews of rescue aircraft. Norwegian technical services identified cases of spoofing – an advanced form of GPS signal manipulation which, unlike simple jamming, can confuse pilots as to the actual position of the aircraft. This phenomenon occurs at altitudes of up to 4,000 feet. Measurements carried out by the Norwegian authorities confirmed that the interfering signals originated from the territory of the Russian Federation (Lo et al., 2025).

Seabed communication infrastructure has been the target of numerous unexplained incidents. In January 2022, a few weeks before the start of the second phase of the war in Ukraine, a fibre-optic cable connecting the Svalbard archipelago with mainland Norway was damaged, with Russian trawlers observed in the incident. Damage to both cables connecting the archipelago to the mainland would result in the loss of communication with the strategic K-SAT satellite ground station. In April 2021, a 4.3-kilometre section of submarine cable off the coast of Norway disappeared, with no determination of the causes or identification of the perpetrators. In October 2023, the Baltic connector pipeline connecting Finland and Estonia was destroyed, which is interpreted as Russian sabotage in response to Finland's accession to NATO (Schaller, 2024).

Since February 2022, there has been a significant increase in cyber activity targeting Arctic countries. In March 2022, a cyber-attack paralysed Greenland's government network, while in May, a similar attack on the healthcare system limited access to medical services. Icelandic websites were the target of a series of DDoS attacks in April 2022, which were linked to the country's planned increase in defence spending. By March 2023, the director of Iceland's cybersecurity team, CERT-IS, had recorded a sixfold increase in suspicious scanning activity in the local cyberspace. In addition, the energy sector is particularly vulnerable. The 2022 attack on the Colonial Pipeline by the Russian group Darkside resulted in the first-ever complete shutdown of the

infrastructure, which supplies 45% of the petrol and jet fuel on the East Coast of the United States. In Europe, a cyberattack on the KSAT satellite network, which SvalSat is the central hub for, led to the shutdown of 5,800 wind turbines in Germany (Mittal, 2024).

## THE CHINESE FACTOR IN RUSSIA'S ARCTIC STRATEGY

Cooperation between China and the Russian Federation in the Arctic reflects broader processes of shaping a multipolar international system. Moscow's isolation after 2022, due to sanctions imposed by Western countries, has created new geopolitical conditions in which Beijing has become a key partner in pursuing Russian strategic interests in the polar region. The 2024 agreement between Rosatom and the Chinese Ministry of Transport on developing shipping along the Northern Sea Route is part of Beijing's broader economic strategy. The agreement establishes an institutional framework for cooperation on Arctic transport routes. For the Chinese centre of power, the NSR is a component of the "Polar Silk Road", enabling the distance between Asian and European markets to be shortened. The establishment of a joint coordinating body under the leadership of Rosatom Director Alexei Likhachev and Chinese Minister of Transport Liu Wei testifies to the institutionalisation of this cooperation. The increase in container traffic to 280,000 tonnes across 17 voyages in 2024 underscores the practical importance of this route to Chinese trade interests (Palu & Hilmola, 2023).

Chinese companies are participating in strategic extraction projects in the Russian Arctic. As part of the Yamal LNG project, China National Petroleum Corporation controls a 20% stake, while the Chinese Silk Road Fund holds another 9.9%. The Arctic LNG 2 project has a similar ownership structure, with CNPC and China National Offshore Oil Corporation holding a 20% stake together. However, Moscow remains cautious about Chinese capital involvement, seeking to avoid excessive dependence on a single partner. The search for alternative sources of financing, including in India, reflects Russia's strategy to diversify its partners and maintain



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decision-making autonomy in the Arctic region (Kosowska & Kosowski, 2024).

Military cooperation between the two centres of power has expanded into areas previously under Russian monopoly, particularly in the sphere of military operations. The first joint patrols of strategic bombers near the coast of Alaska in July 2024 and coast guard exercises in September of the same year in the Russian Arctic signal a new stage of defence cooperation. However, Moscow remains reluctant to allow a broader presence of Chinese naval forces in the region. Russia sees itself as the guardian of access to Arctic waters, and an uncontrolled Chinese presence could antagonise the Kremlin's interests. The 2020 case of Professor Mitko, who was arrested for passing information about submarine hydroacoustic to China, illustrates the continuing tensions in this area of cooperation (Hauksdóttir & Þórhallsson, 2025).

## POTENTIAL SCENARIOS FOR ESCALATION IN THE ARCTIC

An analysis of military activities in the Arctic region identifies several potential tensions between the Russian power centre and NATO structures. The ongoing militarisation of the polar region increases the likelihood of unintended incidents that, in certain circumstances, could escalate regional conflicts. The Kingdom of Norway, which shares a 198-kilometre land border with the Russian Federation in the Arctic region, is particularly vulnerable to destabilisation. NATO naval units are intensifying their patrols in the deep waters of the Barents Sea, moving near Russian Northern Fleet bases and key strategic installations. The continuation of such operations without establishing de-escalation mechanisms may lead to maritime incidents with the potential to escalate into direct armed confrontation. An additional risk factor is the possibility of "horizontal escalation" – the transfer of tensions from other theatres of operation, such as the Baltic Sea, to the Arctic (Buitrago, 2019).

The Russian Federation conducts regular Grom exercises, during which all components of its strategic nuclear forces in the Arctic region are tested. The United States

conducts parallel Global Thunder manoeuvres, involving the American nuclear triad. NATO continues its Steadfast Noon exercise programme, simulating the use of nuclear weapons in the European theatre. The intensification of such activities, particularly in the context of testing new weapons systems such as the *Poseidon* torpedo and the *Burevestnik* cruise missile, increases the risk of misjudging the opponent's intentions (Favaro & Williams, 2023).

Russian anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems deployed along the Northern Sea Route provide Moscow with significant capabilities to control international transit. A complete closure of the NSR would cause losses to the Russian economy, but a more likely scenario is selective access restrictions for specific countries and companies. Such action, despite violating the principles of non-discrimination under UNCLOS, could be implemented under existing Russian regulations requiring special permits to enter the NSR (Liu & Solski, 2022).

## CONCLUSIONS

The membership of Finland and Sweden in the North Atlantic Alliance has created a new geopolitical configuration in the Arctic, confirming the hypothesis of an acceleration in the militarisation of Russian polar policy. Moscow's response to NATO's expansion illustrates the classic mechanisms of power balancing in the international system, in line with the principles of the realist paradigm in international relations. The Russian Federation's strategic documents for 2022-2023 reflect a fundamental reorientation of the Kremlin's priorities in the Arctic region. The shift away from economic cooperation goals towards national security imperatives signals a return to geopolitical thinking about space control and the balance of power. The Northern Fleet, as an instrument of power projection and a guarantor of strategic nuclear deterrence, has gained a central position in Russia's Arctic security concept. The systematic expansion of anti-access systems around the Novaya Zemlya archipelago and the intensification of activities in the grey zone represent a multidimensional strategy to

counterbalance NATO's expansion. Moscow is pursuing a bastion defence concept, seeking to establish a controlled security zone around key strategic installation. At the same time, asymmetric activities – from GPS signal manipulation to cyber operations – illustrate the desire to weaken the enemy's capabilities while maintaining plausible deniability (López-Rodríguez et al., 2023).

The alliance with the People's Republic of China is evolving into a strategic partnership amid Russia's international isolation. Joint patrols of strategic bombers, coordination of activities within the Northern Sea Route and investments in energy infrastructure point to the formation of an alternative balance of power in the polar region. This development confirms the thesis that the international system is moving towards a polycentric balance of power. The Arctic is evolving into a new theatre of geopolitical rivalry, where the risk of unintended escalation is steadily increasing. The intensification of NATO maritime patrols near Russian strategic bases, combined with the expansion of military infrastructure on both sides, creates conditions conducive to incidents that could lead to wider confrontations (Åtland et al., 2022).

An analysis of processes in the Arctic region confirms the thesis that this region is transforming from a space of cooperation into a theatre of strategic competition. NATO's expansion northwards, while strengthening the security of its member states, paradoxically contributes to the escalation of militarisation through the reactions of the Russian power centre. The future security arrangement in the polar region will be determined by the ability of the main actors to manage strategic competition within a framework of controlled rivalry, avoiding thresholds that lead to open military confrontation (Knutsen & Pettersen, 2024).

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