



The Arctic Cold War

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Abstract

The Russia–Ukraine armed conflict, which began on 24 February 2022, has profoundly altered the global strategic environment and has significantly impacted the geopolitics and governance of the Arctic region. With the suspension of Arctic Council activities under Russia’s chairmanship and the growing alignment of Arctic states with NATO, the Arctic is increasingly emerging as a zone of strategic rivalry. The prospect of Finland and Sweden joining NATO further consolidates NATO’s dominance in Arctic governance, thereby marginalizing Russia within a forum originally designed for cooperation. Simultaneously, the United States has articulated a renewed Arctic strategy emphasizing military preparedness, force modernization, and countering Russian and Chinese activities, while Russia continues to expand and modernize its Arctic military infrastructure and conduct large-scale exercises. The involvement of China as a self-declared “near-Arctic state” adds another layer of complexity to the evolving power competition. As the Ukraine war intensifies militarization, nuclear signaling, and geopolitical polarization, its spillover effects are increasingly visible in the Arctic, a region rich in energy resources and strategic sea routes. The growing militarization of the Arctic thus signals a potential shift from cooperation to confrontation, raising concerns about regional stability and the future of the international order.

Keywords: Arctic geopolitics, russia–ukraine conflict, arctic council, NATO, militarization, U.S. arctic strategy, russian Arctic military, china and the arctic, energy security, nuclear deterrence

Introduction

The US and Russia are boosting military presence around North Pole. It is widely accepted among the IR Experts that after Ukraine, Arctic could be the Next ‘Battleground [1],’ In fact, Russia-Ukraine conflict’s heat has deeply affected the international world order on the one hand and on the other the governance of Arctic Council which governs the Arctic region by the Arctic States. The armed conflict has been continued started on 24 February,2022. The seven countries of the Arctic Council including U.S. has suspended its activities under Russia who is presently Chair of the Council. The six of them are NATO member and the rest Sweden has applied for NATO membership.

NATO Dominance in The Arctic Council

The Chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Bauer attended the Arctic Circle Assembly meet on 14-15 October,2022 in Iceland. He expressed that Alliance; land and Sweden join NATO Alliance; seven of the eight members of the Arctic Council will be NATO Allies. Then, obviously, NATO’s role in the Arctic region will be more strengthened [2]. to remind, the Pentagon informed on 07 October 2022 that it established an Arctic Strategy and Global Resilience Office led by Iris Ferguson as deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Arctic. She will oversee several elements of the White House’s Arctic strategy, such as coordinating with U.S. security partners and force modernization of U.S. forces [3].

The Geo-Politics of the arctic is growing Polarised

The Russia-Ukraine armed conflict has polarized the power players. The EU-U.S. and NATO alliance are defending Ukraine by regular supplying of arms to Ukraine. India is maintaining the neutral status and appealed for peace many times. Due to this long-drawn battle, the militarisation of Ukraine and the adjoining region are increasing. The threat

of World War III is also discussed. The threat of use of nuclear weapons has made the political environment nervous. The geo-politics of the Arctic region have also been seriously jeopardized. The Arctic has huge energy storage for natural gas, oil, hydrocarbons etc. Russia is by far the largest Arctic state based on size, population, and military forces stationed in the region [4]. It is, therefore, said that the Arctic is next battleground after Ukraine. The U.S. and Russia, two biggest nuclear power and the China, emerging world power are engaged in war like preparations.

U.S. Militarization

On 07 October,2022, The U.S. released its ten years vision on The National Strategy for the Arctic Region [5] of the U.S. which considers about increasing strategic competition in the Arctic. The document is of the opinion that Russia’s invasion in Ukraine and the Chinese advances in the Arctic region have compelled the U.S. to increase its military presence to counter this threat. The Chinese think itself “near Arctic” country and ambitious to build “Polar Silk Road” through the Arctic [6].

The U.S. document revealed that over the last decade, the China has doubled its investments, with a focus on critical mineral extraction; expanded its scientific activities; and used these scientific engagements to conduct dual-use research with intelligence or military applications in the Arctic.

The document also acknowledges that Russia has reopened and modernized hundreds of Soviet-era military bases in the region in the last ten years. The new strategy highlights that Moscow is “deploying new coastal and air defense missile systems and upgraded submarines; and increasing military exercises and raining operations with a new combatant command equivalent for the Arctic.” In response the document declare that the U.S. will increase its military capability in the region. It is significant to note that the U.S.

keeps more than 22,000 active-duty troops in Alaska and has a base in Greenland ^[7].

To remind, in September 2022, the Under Secretary of the US Army, Gabe Camarillo had announced that the first American hypersonic weapon in addition to 24 new systems would continue to be deployed as planned in 2023 under massive modernization plan ^[8].

The US army has declared on 24 October, 2022 at the annual AUSA (Association of the United States Army) Meeting to replace Shadow 200 is the smallest of the Shadow family of unmanned aircraft systems developed by AAI. It is in operational service with the US Army and US Marine Corps ^[9].

The U.S. State Department released plans on 27 October, 2022 to better track weapons supplied to Ukraine. The U.S. has expressed its necessity so that Russian forces could capture and use them to plan an attack by Ukrainian forces ^[10].

The Nuclear Posture Review, also released on 27 October 2022 gives special importance to raise robust nuclear command, control and communications through satellites and cyberspace so that the U.S. army can contain Russia and China who are also big nuclear power ^[11].

Defense News reported on 28 October 2022 that The U.S. Air Force is planning to replace the two squadrons of F-15C Eagle fighters it has stationed at Kadena Air Base in Japan. The Biden administration released an 80-page unclassified National Defense Strategy on 27 October 2022 aimed at China and Russia. The document views China strategic competitor, and Russia as an "acute threat" capable of cyber and missile attacks on the U.S ^[12].

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Defence News reported on 26 October, 2022 that the Pentagon, the headquarter of the United States Department of Defense, is launching a project of multi billion dollars to set up a joint All Domain Command and Control Centre named JADC2 who will connect all components -Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Space Force- of the U.S. military, from sensor to shooter ^[14].

Russian Militarization

Russia sees its vast Arctic territory as a vital strategic interest and has been building up its military capabilities in the region for years. Russia has established in early days of 2022 a new "Arctic command" and four new Arctic brigades, renovate airfields and deep-water ports ^[15].

In September 2022, Russian organized a big military drill named UMKA-2022 in Chukchi Sea an eastern stretch of the Arctic Ocean that separates Russia from the U.S. State of Alaska. In this exercise, Russian nuclear-powered submarines - the Omsk and Novosibirsk - fired anti-ship cruise missiles from the Chukchi Sea, hitting targets at 400 kilometers (250 miles) ^[16].

Despite military engagement in Ukraine, Russia also conducted combat military exercise on 01-07 September, 2022 at seven places at a time in the Russian Far East named VOSTOK-2022 in which about 50,000 troops, 5000 units of weapons and military equipment's, 140 aircrafts, 60 warships, military boats-vessels took part. It is significant to note that Russian forces are used to conduct mock attacking exercises on the Nordic region even during NATO exercises ^[17].

President Putin himself observed the exercise. Notably, the army contingents of Azerbaijan, Algeria, Armenia, Belarus, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Laos, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Syria, and Tajikistan also participated in this military drill ^[18].

Arms aid to Ukraine

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on 27 October 2022 informed the Pentagon that the U.S. is sending Ukraine a new \$275 million package of weapons and other aid ^[19]. Such aid will increase rounds of ammunition for weapons systems of Ukraine, including for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, known as HIMARS, which Ukraine has been successfully using in its counteroffensive against Russia.

To remind, U.S. Army Security Assistance Command's Commanding General, Brig. Gen. Brad Nicholson had announced on 19 October, 2022 that USASAC had supplied the delivery of \$2 billion in weapons, training and materiel since the beginning of the Russia invasion in Ukraine. The delivery includes hundreds of thousands of items like anti-armour systems, unmanned aerial systems, artillery, rocket systems, armored personnel carriers and other wheeled and track vehicles, body armour, munitions, medical supplies and protective equipment. The USASAC cares U.S. foreign military sales and security assistance programmes ^[20].

The White House, official office of the U.S. President, clearly warned Russia on 27 October 2022 that the U.S. will give appropriate response if Western commercial satellites become target by Russia ^[21]. The Russia had threatened to destroy such satellites if they involve in Ukraine. Significantly, Russia launched Sputnik 1 in 1957 the first manmade satellite, into space and in 1961 put the first man in outer space, has a significant offensive space capability like the U.S. and China ^[22]. To remind, in 2021, Russia had launched an anti-satellite missile to destroy one of its own satellites ^[23].

The Russia-Ukraine crisis has affected the world financial order and has initiated war on gas and oil between Russia and the West including the U.S. The armed conflicts have also militarily activated Ukraine-Russia borders. Belarus, for example, is a landlocked country in Eastern Europe. It is bordered by Russia to the east and northeast, Ukraine to the south, Poland to the west, and Lithuania and Latvia to the northwest.

Importantly, The Belarusian Defense Ministry announced on 17 October, 2022 that about 9,000 Russian troops are moving at the Belarus-Ukraine border with about 170 tanks, nearly 200 armoured combat vehicles and up to 100 guns and mortars with a caliber of more than 100 mm which will take several days ^[24]. The air support for the joint regional force had also begun arriving in Belarus.

On 28 October, 2022, Russia has announced the deployment of reinforcements to northeastern Ukraine ^[25]. According to BBC report on 29 October, 2022 President Volodymyr Zelensky said that Russia has launched more than 30 drone attacks on Ukraine in just two days ^[26]. Thus, Russia-Ukraine armed conflict has influenced the basic infrastructure of the world order.

NATO Chief Jens Stoltenberg conveyed on 11 October, 2022 that the Western military alliance will conduct as planned its annual routine one week nuclear deterrent exercises named "Steadfast Noon" scheduled to be held in the last week of October 2022 in spite of rising tensions

with Russia over the war in Ukraine [27]. The exercise started on 18 October 2022 in which the Fighter jets, nuclear-capable long-range bombers, refueling tankers—about 60 aircraft in all, from 14 nations are rehearsing [28]. This drill, are held annually. In this exercise, the fighter jets capable of carrying nuclear warheads are used to take part.

Russia rehearsed its response to a nuclear attack on 28 October, 2022 in an exercise named 'Grom' or 'Thunder' [29] involving nuclear submarines, strategic bombers and ballistic missiles at a time when tensions are high over a 'dirty bomb' allegation it has made against Ukraine [30].

A dirty bomb uses explosives to scatter radioactive waste to sow terror. Such weapons don't have the devastating destruction of a nuclear explosion but could expose broad areas to radioactive contamination that could last for years.

Vladimir Putin watches over the drills joined by his security chiefs in a virtual meeting

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is holding its own annual nuclear drills, involving U.S. B-52 bombers, 14 countries and up to 60 aircraft [31].

Conclusion

The longer conflict in Ukraine, higher tensions in international politics. But neither side are seen to be ready for diplomacy and establish peace. Both sides want security assurances and alleging others to jeopardize it. The U.S., and the western countries are arming the Ukraine to counter the Russian offence. The Russian forces have captured about 20 percent of area of Ukraine. The conflict has reached a stage where the nuclear threat is delivered. It is assumed that this conflict is basically originated by the power competition in the Arctic region who has rich energy resources. It is, therefore, perceived that this conflict may spread to the Arctic region which local countries are NATO members and are not ready to work under Russian leadership. In the age of globalization and inter-dependent world the current increasing of militarization of the Arctic region is revealing nervous and confusing signals and that worry the world.

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