

# **GEOPOLITICAL PROBLEMS OF NATO MEMBERS IN THE ARCTIC**

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## **ABSTRACT**

With the acceptance of climate change as a security threat, more than one security risk may emerge in the same region. The Arctic is one of the geographical areas where the effects of climate change are most tangible and the security environment is gradually decreasing. Security concerns in the Arctic have resulted in NATO expanding its territory to the Russian border. While Russia perceives this situation as insecurity, it also means the end of NATO's Northern expansion. With the Northern enlargement, four of the five Arctic countries became NATO members. However, the increase in the number of members in the Arctic does not mean that there will be no problems in this region. The disputed borders in the Arctic are very important for fisheries and important energy routes. In this study, both the problems among NATO members in the Arctic region and the disputes with Russia will be analysed from a geopolitical perspective. An answer will be sought to the question of how NATO enlargement in the Arctic will affect the geopolitical problems in the Arctic.

**Keywords: Arctic, Arctic Circle, NATO, Security, NATO Enlargement**

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\*\*Research Article, Received: 28.02.2024, Accepted: 19.04.2024.

In this article, Ethical Committee Approval is not needed.

## **ARKTİK BÖLGESİNDE NATO ÜYELERİNİN JEOPOLİTİK SORUNLARI**

### **ÖZ**

İklim değişikliğinin de bir güvenlik tehdidi olarak kabul edilmesi ile aynı bölgede birden fazla güvenlik riski ortaya çıkabilmektedir. İklim değişikliğinin en fazla hissedildiği ve güvenlik ortamının giderek azaldığı coğrafyalardan birisi Arktik'tir. Arktik'teki güvenlik endişeleri, NATO'nun Rusya sınırına kadar ulaşması ile sonuçlanmıştır. Bu durum Rusya tarafından güvensizlik olarak algılanırken, NATO'nun da Kuzey genişlemesinin sonu anlamına gelmektedir. Kuzey genişlemesi ile Arktik'teki beş ülkeden dördü NATO'ya üye oldu. Ancak Arktik'teki üye sayısının artması bu bölgede hiç sorun yaşanmayacağı anlamına gelmiyor. Arktik'teki tartışmalı sınırlar, balıkçılık ve önemli enerji yolları açısından oldukça önemlidir. Bu çalışmada, Arktik bölgesindeki NATO üyelerinin hem kendi aralarındaki sorunlar hem de Rusya ile tartışmalı olduğu sorunlar jeopolitik perspektiften incelenecektir. Arktik'teki NATO genişlemesi, Arktik'teki jeopolitik sorunları nasıl etkileyecek sorusuna cevap aranacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler: Arktik, Arktik Çemberi, NATO, Güvenlik, NATO Genişlemesi**

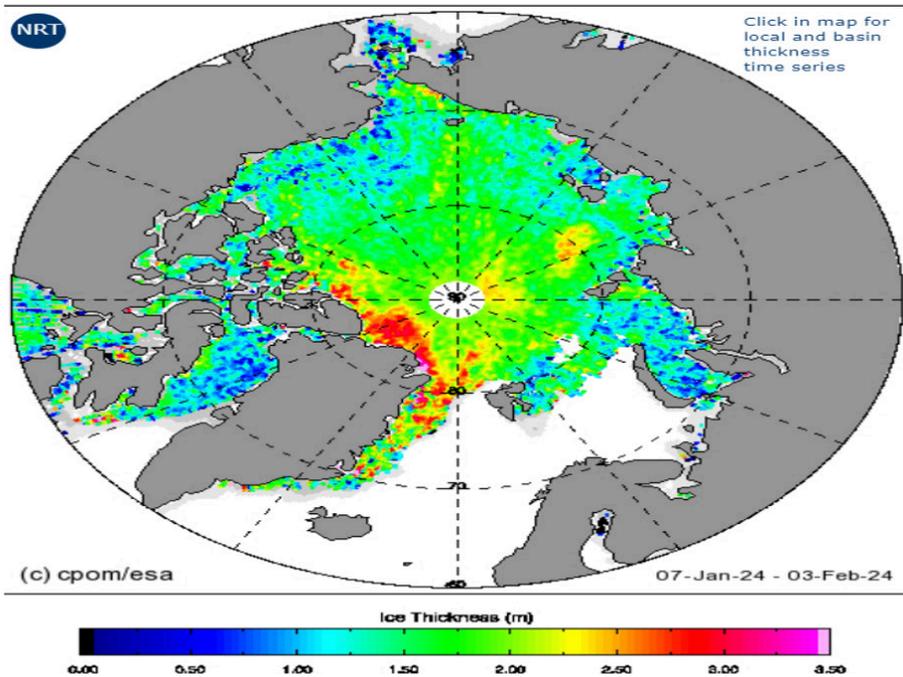
## **INTRODUCTION**

Geopolitics is a fundamental theory used in many academic disciplines, including International Relations. It traditionally examines the importance of physical space over the role of nation-states. Geopolitics focuses on strategic control over territorial spaces and the authority held by states. In the context of this concept, the Arctic has all the features of geography, economy, technology, power and science, and geopolitics.

Geopolitics is primarily concerned with the spatialisation of international politics as perceived and influenced by sovereign powers and hegemonic states. In this way, the complex above- and below-ground physical structure of the region can be explained in terms of international relations. Thanks to geopolitics, new global problems such as environmental degradation and climate change have become more understandable. Furthermore, geopolitics has provided valuable insights into the spatial dimensions of international relations, while the traditional emphasis on power politics has helped to unravel the complexities inherent in contemporary global issues.

A new geopolitical era is beginning in the world geography: Arctic ice blanket. We are talking about a geographical area where countries rich in economy and technology are closest to each other. While some researchers call this closeness a “new area of conflict”, others call it “cooperation and opportunity”. Although it is incorrect to call it a new area of conflict, the tension in the region is noticeably increasing. Glaciers, seen as an obstacle to transportation and underwater exploration before technological developments, are not a problem today.

Map 1. Arctic Sea Ice Thickness Maps



Source: Centre for Polar Observation and Modelling Data Portal, 2024

The thick ice layer of the Arctic region caused this region to be seen as uninhabitable. However, the region became more valuable as access to the glaciers became easier thanks to developing technology. We cannot explain this only with technology. Climate change is also important in the effectiveness of technology. As a result of glacial melting in the region, thick ice sheets can be easily overcome with new icebreakers. As seen in map 1, even the ice thickness in the most inaccessible parts of the Arctic region has decreased to 3.5 metres. A study by Blidberg, Corell and Westneat (1980) revealed that the highest ice depth in the Arctic Ocean is 50-55 ft (15-17 metres).

As a result of changing geopolitics, disputes in the Arctic region have diversified. These include border disputes, fishing boundaries, oil, gas and mineral resources in the region. As the Arctic ice melts, new shipping routes open up, facilitating the extraction of natural resources (Ekaterina, 2019). Moreover, this change reduces the need for the Suez and Panama canals as transport and trade routes and creates a safe alternative route. In particular, regional conflicts in the Red Sea have brought the Arctic to the

forefront as an important alternative. Another important issue is the impact of climate change on indigenous peoples in the Arctic (Weber, 2020). Rising sea levels as a result of melting glaciers threaten the livelihoods and habitats of the people living in the region.

When considered geographically, the Arctic region can be grouped in different forms: wider or narrower. Firstly, there are the main countries that form the basis of the Arctic region, known as the Arctic Five. These are; Canada, the United States of America, Norway, Denmark and Russia. Secondly, there are the eight Arctic states located on the North Pole line (with three states added to this group by the 1996 Ottawa Declaration). In addition to the Arctic Five, these are Iceland, Finland and Sweden. Thirdly, there are countries that do not have borders with Arctic states and have observer status (Weber, 2020). These countries are France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, the People's Republic of China, Poland, India, South Korea, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Among these countries, China is the country that makes its presence felt and invests the most in the region (Schönfeldt, 2017).

The reasons mentioned above lead to various consequences. Among these consequences, security has a multifaceted perspective. Increasing geopolitical activity in the region causes countries to change and develop their security policies. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine have increased geopolitical unrest in the region. The confrontation of Russia, which has the longest border to the Arctic region, with the West has increased the risks in the region. As a precaution against these risks, both the military deployments to the Polish border and the NATO membership of Finland and Sweden are the two most important outcomes in the Arctic. NATO enlargement is also a critical process for the Arctic region (Schönfeldt, 2017).

The global value of the Arctic region is increasing and relations between countries are becoming different. Yes, there is also a security movement against Russia in the region, but on the other hand, the increasing geopolitical value of the Arctic region is increasing competition among all countries. We can give several examples of this issue. The first example can be Disputes over Exhaustion Areas: Disputes over rights and boundaries over extraction areas of submarine resources (e.g., oil, natural gas) may increase among coastal states in the Arctic region. This could include countries such as Norway, Russia, Canada, the US (United States) and

Denmark (via Greenland). Another example of the safety of Sea Routes is the melting of glaciers in the Arctic Ocean, which has led northern sea routes to become more accessible. This could lead to an increase in ship traffic and disagreements among NATO members over the security and management of these passages. Another example is the increase in Military Presence and Regional Balances: The increase in military presence in the Arctic region may affect regional security balances. The fact that some NATO members become regional bases and increase their military presence may cause concern for other countries in the long term. Such problems could disrupt cooperation and balance among member states in NATO's Arctic region. Examining the problems these countries experience among themselves may shed light on potential problems that may arise in the future.

Arctic geopolitics is characterised by close relations between the environment and security. The globalisation of the Arctic and the balance of power are important in an environment where common interests support stability. As long as the common interests and cooperation of the countries continue, it is unlikely that minor disputes will escalate into war. However, we cannot ignore some problems. The globalisation of the Arctic points to a period in which the Arctic region plays an important role in world politics and international relations and changes in geopolitical paradigms are taking place. In order to better understand this period, we need to better analyse the relations between countries.

This article will analyse the increasing geopolitical risks in the Arctic region from the perspective of NATO expansion. Can cooperation between NATO countries and Russia prevent a possible war? The question will be answered by examining the geopolitical problems in the Arctic. This research aims to provide a different perspective by exploring not only the geopolitical problems with Russia but also the geopolitical problems of NATO member countries with each other.

## **NATO EXPANDING NORTHWARDS**

Climate change is causing the Arctic ice to melt and the glaciers to retreat, triggering the emergence of new shipping and trade routes. This situation increases the economic and strategic importance of the region. However, these developments also bring about environmental sensitivity and geopolitical tensions. These complex dynamics pose new and unforeseen risks, threatening collaboration.

European countries, trying to balance themselves against the hegemony of Germany and the Soviets, had also been trying to solve security-centred problems. Security integration was both difficult and an alternative. Therefore, it was more rational for many European states to establish a union instead of being at the mercy of the Soviets to ensure security. NATO and the European Union immediately filled the gap left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the membership of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in NATO in 2004, the new Russia felt NATO at its borders for the first time. If we look at it from the Kaliningrad perspective, we can also say that Poland's NATO membership dates back even earlier (1999).

**Map 2.** Arming the Arctic



**Source:** Bloomberg, 2023.

The process of expansion from an Arctic perspective dates back to the founding of NATO. In 1949, the US, Canada, Norway and Denmark, which were among the founding countries, connected security in the Arctic to NATO. As can be seen, all A5 countries, except Russia, are members of a security board in the region with NATO. Iceland is also in this process. In the context of the A8 countries, Finland and Sweden have taken part in the

Arctic as NATO members after a long time. Thus, NATO expansion has also reached Russia's northern borders (Güçyetmez, 2023).

When the policies of Arctic states are analysed, issues such as environmental protection and sustainability, economic interests, protection of border rights and entitlements, and recognition of sovereignty come to the fore in the Arctic. In terms of security, the emphasis is generally on environmental threats, climate change and the sustainability of natural resources. Common problems in the Arctic region are defined as border rights, economic security and military security. In this issue, Arctic countries tend to protect their borders with NATO cooperation. However, on the other hand, they want to maintain a policy without isolating Russia. Mutual relations with Russia are intense, especially in international trade transport and cooperation. Although they are seen as a threat to Russia in terms of security with NATO membership, Russia continues to cooperate both as a member of the Arctic Council and as a trade partner.

NATO's expansion in Northern Europe is an issue that needs to be evaluated from strategic, military and diplomatic perspectives. NATO expansion in Northern Europe could strengthen or weaken unity and coordination within the alliance. Some members support NATO in recruiting more members to provide a stronger deterrent against Russia's growing military threats. But others worry that this expansion could lead to divisions within the alliance. NATO expansion in Northern Europe could also lead to debates about how it will interact with the defence policies and security strategies of the European Union (EU). While some argue that the EU should develop a stronger defence identity and increase coordination with NATO, others worry that NATO could weaken the EU's role in defence. It is an important factor in the expansion process in Northern Europe. While enlargement can enable greater integration and cooperation within the alliance, it can also highlight differences and cause tension in relationships. Therefore, a balanced and comprehensive strategy, as well as diplomatic efforts, is required to achieve and maintain the unity of NATO.

## **GEOPOLITICAL ISSUES AMONG NATO MEMBERS IN THE ARCTIC CIRCLE**

International relations are based on the actors in the international system and the balances between them. These relations are based on concepts such as state sovereignty, international interests, balance of power, security and ideology. The reason for highlighting these basic concepts is to keep in

mind that each state will act in line with its own interests. The sovereignty of states within national borders is a principle that underlies international relations. In international relations, it is accepted that states endeavour to increase their power and protect their national interests. In this context, NATO can be recognized as an actor of power and security, but military imbalances between countries can make this situation untenable. When we look at the states in the Arctic region, the most powerful NATO country is the US. Therefore, we cannot talk about a balance in this region. This imbalance can cause insecurity among other countries. For this reason, it will be more solution-oriented to determine the problems between the countries in the Arctic region independently of each other.

Canada, Norway, Denmark and the United States, both NATO and Arctic countries, are in strategic competition over the Arctic's energy resources, sea routes and fishing potential.

Strategically located regions such as Greenland, which is connected to Denmark, have important resources in terms of both climate change impacts and geopolitics. In addition to its environmental resources, Greenland's strategic location could increase interactions and strategic competition between NATO members over Greenland. In addition, the border disputes between the United States and Canada, Norway's border problems in Svalbard, and Denmark's border problems with Canada are seen as geopolitical problems for the future. Therefore, it is useful to examine the problems in these regions in more detail.

## **THE UNITED STATES AND GEOPOLITICAL DISPUTES IN THE ARCTIC**

The United States of America is active in the Arctic region to protect its strategic interests and maintain its power in the region. The United States assesses the commercial and military advantages to be gained from the opening of sea routes and energy resources in the Arctic region.

Even though the United States has been in the spotlight for the last thirty years with its Middle East policies, it has also been active in the Arctic regions. Both as a country and through international institutions (UN, NATO, Arctic Council, etc.), it is in an active struggle in the North as well as in the South. The US was a founding member of the Arctic Council in 1996.

There are three main factors shaping America's Arctic policy: Firstly, climate change and environmental factors; secondly, transit routes and energy resources in the region; and thirdly, geopolitical factors and the power struggle with Russia. On the other hand, there are four main "Strategic Pillars and Guiding Principles". These are; Security, Climate Change and Environmental Protection, Sustainable Economic Development, International Cooperation and Governance (Güçyetmez, 2021).

It is known that the US has defined an updated vision for new operations in the Arctic region. In this context, it plans to respond to regional geopolitical competition, economic drivers and changes in the regional environment by using its military power. America has updated its current missions in the Arctic under the name of "Activities and Strategic Objectives Studies" (The White House, 2023) and decided to increase activities in the region because a significant part of the world's energy reserves are in this region according to Pentagon reports. The Arctic covers an area of about 21 million square kilometres, including the northernmost parts of three continents, the Arctic Ocean and parts of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. By comparison, the surface of the Arctic ice shelf during winter is almost the size of America. At such a strategic point, we can say that America took a strategic step exactly 140 years ago.

With the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, the United States made its presence felt in the region as a coastal Arctic neighbour. The United States purchased the colony for \$7.2 million, or 2 cents per acre (National Archives, 1867). The Russian Tsar sold Alaska for 11 million 520 thousand rubles. The motivator for this sale was Britain, the architect of America, which was created with its 13 colonies (Schönfeldt, 2017).

In 1867, a new problem emerged with this agreement. With the drawing of two geographical lines in the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Sea, which determined the sovereignty areas of Russia and America, the problems that have lasted until today began. In 1926, with the decree issued by the USSR, the western borders of the Soviets were regulated as the line dividing Ratmanova and Krusenstern islands in the Bering Sea (passing through 168° 49' 30" west longitude) (Fedorova, 2011: 381-392).

In 1976, both the US and the USSR found it appropriate to use the 1867 convention in the process of determining their economic zones. However, later on, a 15 thousand square mile dispute area arising from the methods used in the mapping while the countries were determining their territories

was formed. To resolve the dispute, an agreement was signed between the USSR and the US on 1 June 1990, accepting the "Baker-Shevardnadze Line" as the maritime boundary line between the two countries. The agreement was approved by the US on 16 September 1991, but Russia did not ratify the agreement despite signing it (Kříž and Chrást'anský, 2011: 117).

Competition over access to the Arctic region's energy resources affects US strategic interests in the region. The potential of oil, natural gas and other energy resources in the Arctic is critical to the United States' energy security strategy. However, it competes with other Arctic states for access to these resources. In particular, Russia's claims over control of Arctic energy resources could create a potential point of conflict with the United States.

The Arctic policy of the United States focuses on the competition with Russia. In 2007, the US Navy's modern strategy announced the internationalisation of Arctic maritime areas and the opening of new sea routes. The 2014-2030 US Navy Arctic Map report envisaged the creation of a special ice force in the Arctic. In 2018, the re-establishment of the Second Fleet was made as a move against Russia's Northern Fleet. The Blue Arctic strategy, published in 2021, emphasised the modernisation and increase of US power in the Arctic region. The US Arctic policy emphasises competition with Russia and takes steps towards building strong alliances against Russia (Raikov, 2022: 150).

The opening of sea-lanes in the Arctic has the potential to transform trade routes and strategic shipping lanes. The United States insists that Arctic Sea lanes remain in international waters and free passage is maintained. However, this may also affect relations with other states in the region. In particular, Russia's claims to control of the Northern Sea Route may limit the US's strategic influence in the region and lead to disputes over the security of sea-lanes.

Map 3. Bering Strait



Source: Freeworldmapnet, 2023.

The Bering Sea is between Russia and Alaska in the north of the Pacific Ocean. It is the third largest sea in the world with approximately 2.3 million km<sup>2</sup>, with the Bering Strait in the north and the Aleutian Islands in the south. In addition, the Bering Sea constitutes the exit of the maritime transport routes passing through the Arctic to the Pacific, which makes the region a strategic location. On the other hand, Alaska and the North Slope, the Beaufort Sea and the Chukchi Sea are known to contain valuable resources that have yet to be discovered. It is estimated that the US has found approximately 23.6 billion barrels of oil and 104.4 trillion cubic feet of natural gas on the outer continental shelf of the Beaufort and Chukchi seas (Green, 2016). More broadly, future offshore energy development in the Arctic area is critically important to sustain and extend America's energy revolution, one that has made the U.S. the world's No. 1 oil and natural gas producer (Green, 2016). Prudhoe Bay is the area where the greatest amount of oil is extracted in the region.

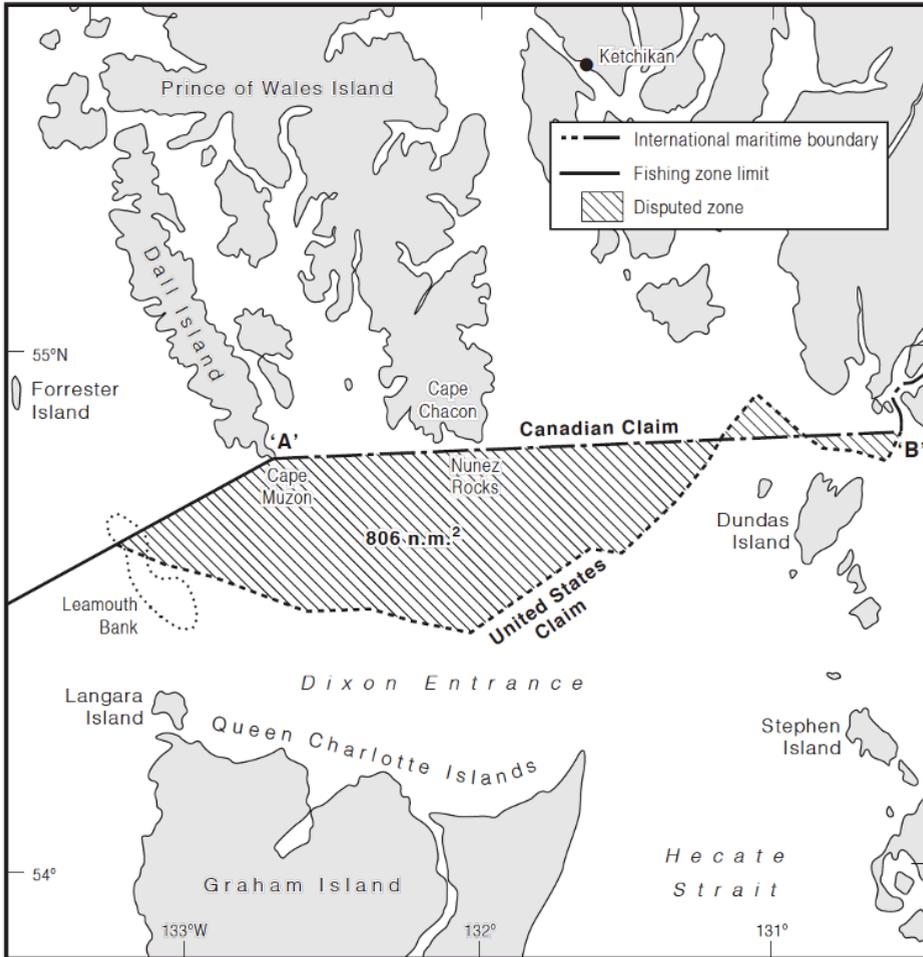
**Map 4.** Petroleum Reserve-Alaska and in the Offshore of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas

Source: American Petroleum Institute, 2016.

Although Canada is in the North of the United States, there is a controversy in the Dixon region. You can see this disputed geographical location in map 5. Located at the southernmost point of Alaska's panhandle, this area is part of the United States. South of Dixon is the Canadian archipelago of Haida Gwaii (Jacobs, 2021). The 1825 Treaty of St Petersburg established the current border between Alaska and Canada. This treaty, signed between Russia and Britain, created the first problems for their interests in the north-west of North America (Mazour, 1945: 303-310).

Russia determined  $54^{\circ} 40'$  north as the southern boundary of the American panhandle. (The treaty later gave rise to former President James K. Polk's campaign slogan: "Fifty-four forty or war!") (Jacobs, 2021). However, because the panhandle's terrain was inaccessible, the actual routing of this boundary could not be determined. Thus, when the Americans bought Alaska from the Russians in 1867, they inherited a conflict (Selkirk, 2019). The subject of this conflict has survived to the present day. This region is 80 km wide and 50 km long, with a total area of 806 square metres. 1.5 million people pass through this region every year and it is a productive fishing area. It is both a commercial and strategic transit point. This issue has been going on for more than a century for both Canada and America, as this route extending to the Arctic region has a global strategic importance by combining with the Northern Passage Route passing through the Arctic.

**Map 5.** Dixon Entry Border Claims Between the United States and Canada



Source: Frank, 2021

As a result, it is Russia that the United States sees as a potential rival in the Arctic. Having resolved its border disputes with Canada on paper, the United States is directly targeting Russia in both its regional doctrines and foreign policy. The dialogue between the United States and Russia ended in 2014. The United States has repeatedly said that it aims to remove Russia from the Arctic.

The United States and Russia share a maritime border along the Bering Strait and around the Arctic Ocean. Both sides benefited from continued cooperation and mutual cooperation in Arctic waters. Greater cooperation in the Arctic could protect the region by reducing the risk of potential

conflict between NATO countries and Russia, but mutual security problems in the region have created a security dilemma. This dilemma caused NATO to rely on Russia's borders.

Current tensions escalating into a military conflict and resulting in a global war can take place at any time. On the other hand, the economic and military-political dimensions of relations in the Arctic are likely to take precedence and international cooperation can play an important role. However, the war between Russia and Ukraine will directly affect Arctic policies. Therefore, both NATO enlargement and tensions in the war environment may turn into a hot conflict environment in the Arctic.

### **CANADA AND GEOPOLITICAL DISPUTES IN THE ARCTIC**

Canada's main foreign policy on the Arctic is Canada's Northern Strategy, adopted in 2009: "Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future", adopted in 2009. Canada is closely allied with its NATO partners to protect its security and economic interests in the Arctic. The United States and Denmark stand out among these allies because they border the Arctic. Canada recognises that it cannot ensure its security in such a vast area as the Arctic on its own due to financial and military difficulties, and therefore aims to leverage the military power of the United States. To modernise its military forces, Canada is building a military training centre at Resolute Bay and a deep-sea port at Nanisivik to strengthen its marine and coastal protected areas management units (CBC News, 2013).

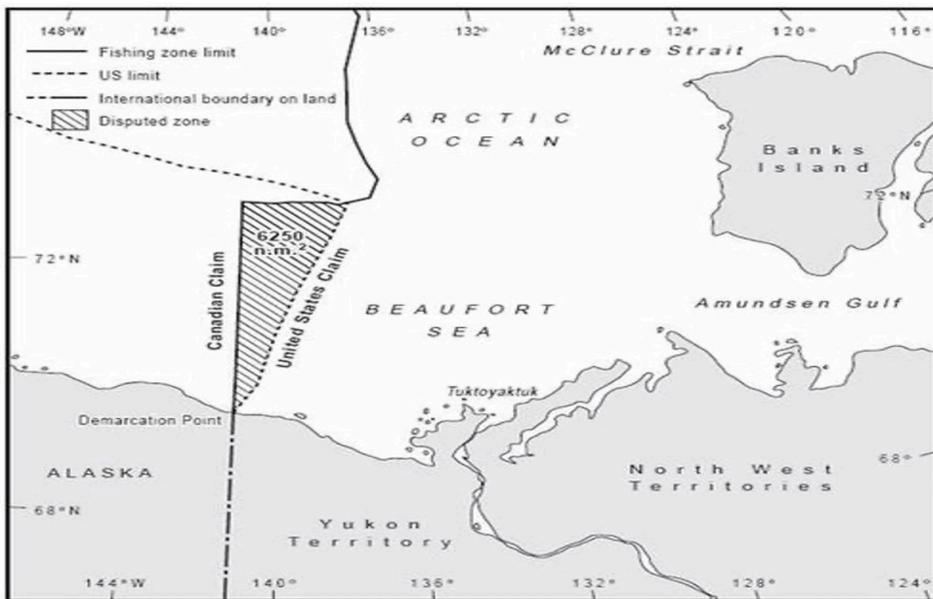
Canada is located in the northern part of the North American continent and ranks as the second-largest country in the world. Geographically, Canada's coastline along the Arctic Ocean adds to its increasing strategic importance in the region. Global warming and the melting of Arctic ice have opened up Arctic routes and facilitated easier access to natural resources. As a result, Canada and other Arctic nations are compelled to play a more active role in controlling the region and safeguarding their interests. Moreover, Canada's border sharing with the United States makes it strategically significant. Given that the U.S. possesses the world's most powerful economy and military strength, maintaining a strong relationship with Canada becomes crucial. The two countries share the longest international border in the world and collaborate closely in terms of trade and security.

A direct challenge to Canada's sovereignty in Arctic waters occurred in 1985. The United States sent an icebreaker into the Northwest Passage without notifying Canada or asking for permission. This political dispute

led to the signing of the 1988 Arctic Co-operation Agreement between the two countries. According to the agreement, the United States would not send any more icebreakers into the passage without Canada's authorisation, but in return, Canada would always grant access.

To shape its policies in the area, Canada has developed various documents and strategies, such as the "Northern Strategy," "Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy," and "Arctic and Northern Policy Framework," (Wilfrid, 2011: 219-240) aiming to legitimise its national identity and interests in the region. Canada focuses on supporting the social and economic development of the Arctic, enhancing gains for Northern indigenous peoples, and emphasizing sustainable use of the region (McDorman, 2009: 9-24).

**Map 6.** Where is the Beaufort Sea Boundary between the U.S. and Canada



Source: Kinah, 2010.

However, Canada faces challenges concerning border disputes and sovereignty rights in the Arctic region. Notably, significant actors like the US and the EU do not recognize Canada's sovereignty rights in the Arctic, particularly in the case of the Arctic Ocean and Beaufort Sea. The unauthorized use of the Arctic by American ships has caused unease for the Ottawa government. The Canadians think their Beaufort Sea boundary with the U.S. is a linear extension of the national boundaries on the adjacent

mainland - the U.S. thinks the boundary starts at a 90-degree angle to the shoreline. The map above shows the disputed area.

Additionally, disagreements persist between Canada and the US over the division of the Yukon-Alaska maritime boundary. Both countries are unwilling to relinquish territorial claims in the region due to their oil and gas reserves. Similarly, disputes continued between Canada and Denmark concerning the sovereignty of Hans Island and the division of the Lincoln Sea but on June 14, 2022, peace was brokered between two longstanding NATO allies, Canada and Denmark (Tsiouvalas, Endalew and Enyew, 2022).

Conflicts also exist over the Arctic continental shelf. Canada claims that its continental shelf extends beyond the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) by 1.7 million square kilometers, which may clash with the continental shelves claimed by other countries.

These situations illustrate that Canada's policies in the Arctic region are complex and sensitive. The country strives to manage border disputes and sovereignty rights to safeguard its national interests and sovereignty. However, such disputes with other countries and the international community impact the geopolitical relations in the region.

Canada's economy heavily relies on its natural resources. Utilizing the rich underground resources in the Arctic could be a significant contribution to the country's economy. The Canadian government aims to unlock the economic potential of the North and foster dynamic economic growth and trade. This will benefit Northern communities and the overall Canadian economy. To achieve this goal, Canada is investing in infrastructure, such as roads, ports, and airports, to improve transportation and connectivity in the North.

Canada has a long history of petroleum and gas development in the Arctic region. The first oil production in Canada's Arctic took place in 1920 in Norman Wells, Northwest Territories, and since then, over 226 million barrels of oil have been produced (Ieda, 2015: 2-5). However, onshore petroleum and gas activities in the Canadian Arctic did not intensify until the discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, in 1968. In parallel with the exploration of the Prudhoe Bay oil field in the late 1960s, Canada opened its first Arctic exploration well on Melville Island (Drake Point), Northwest Territories.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Canada made significant investments and licensing for petroleum and gas research. Notable among these are the exploration efforts in the Mackenzie Delta, Beaufort Sea, and Arctic islands. In the period between 1972 and 1989, a total of 86 wells were drilled in the Beaufort Sea. However, due to the challenging and harsh Arctic climate conditions, the exploration activities faced operational difficulties and were abandoned in the mid-1980s, especially with declining oil prices.

Despite the decline in interest in the 1980s, Canada continued to make petroleum and gas discoveries in the Arctic. The discovery of the Bent Horn oil field in the Sverdrup Basin in the mid-1980s became Canada's first offshore oil production source. However, due to significant commercial and operational challenges, the production from Bent Horn ceased in 1997.

In the 2000s, with increasing oil and gas prices, Canada expanded private and public incentives to access Arctic resources. Several companies received licenses for exploration in the Beaufort Sea and Mackenzie Delta regions. However, only a limited number of wells were drilled actively, and exploration faced challenges due to disputes over maritime boundaries between Canada, Denmark, and the United States (Ilhan, 2013: 309).

Canada's interest in Arctic energy resources has fluctuated over the years, influenced by market conditions and geopolitical factors. Nonetheless, Canada has continued to explore potential oil and gas reserves in the region, driven by the prospects of economic benefits and advancements in exploration technologies.

As a result, the strategic partnership between Canada and the Arctic countries is based on interests. Canada feels obliged to establish closer relations with both Denmark and the United States because of their positions. In addition, Canada and the United States, which have some border problems, do not carry this problem forward and prefer military and economic alliance. Especially Canada's need for military support is a major factor in this regard. For this reason, Canada is loyal to the NATO alliance, and tends to comply with the general decisions and emphasises with its foreign policy and commitment that it will do whatever the alliance requires in the future.

## **NORWAY AND GEOPOLITICAL DISPUTES IN THE ARCTIC**

Located in the west of the Scandinavian Peninsula, Norway borders the Skagerrak in the south of the North Sea, the Norwegian Sea in the west

and the Barents Sea in the north. Norway has land borders with Sweden to the east and with Russia and Finland to the northeast. Norway also has territories far from the mainland. These are Bear Island (Bouvetoy), Svalbat (Spitsbergen), Jan Mayen, as well as Bouvet Island and Peter I Island in Antarctica and Queen Maud's Land. The coastline of the mainland with its fjords is half the length of all the coastlines in the world. Glaciers in Norway have been forming since 500 BC. One-third of the Norwegian national territory lies north of the Arctic Circle. The Arctic region of Norway consists of the mainland counties of Finnmark, Nordland and Troms, with a population of about 464,000. At sea, it consists of the Lofoten Islands, Svalbard and Jan Mayen, which are close to the mainland.

Norway's comprehensive definition of its Arctic strategy and policies was first articulated in the "Norwegian Government High North Strategy," which was initially published in December 2006. This strategy document places a particular emphasis on Norway's presence in the Arctic, acquiring knowledge related to Arctic activities, strengthening cooperation with Russia, and increasing Russia's participation. It is framed within a long-term, predictable perspective, highlighting a focus on the Arctic. The Norwegian Government's High North Strategy was issued in 2007 by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the follow-up strategy *New Building Blocks in the North* was issued in 2009 (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007: 7). In the 2009 strategy document, Norway's Arctic position has been defined in a broader sense, encompassing both geographical and political aspects. The aim is to ensure that the Arctic remains a peaceful and stable region in accordance with international cooperation and the principles of international law.

The standout element in Norway's Northern policies is the prioritization of relations with Russia over other issues and disputes. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union posed a military security dilemma and concern for Norway, but in the 1990s, Russia received humanitarian aid from Norway. In the 2000s, the growth of Russia in military and economic terms led to internal debates in Norway about its Arctic policies and strategies. At a time when Russia was advancing militarily, economically, and politically, it became inevitable for Norway to continue providing financial support to Russia. However, it should not be overlooked that in the Arctic, Russia has become a potential market and collaboration opportunity for Norway, particularly in the development of the Shtokman oil and gas field. Russia has become a decisive driving force behind Norway's new Northern

policies. In Norway's relations with Russia, efforts to establish cooperation in the Barents Sea and initiatives aimed at accelerating economic growth in northern Norway are evident. Norway's declining oil and gas production in the North Sea has increased its interest in the continental shelf and EEZ areas in the Arctic Ocean. Nevertheless, environmental concerns may impose certain limitations on development efforts. Regarding the territorial dispute over the continental shelf in the Barents Sea between Norway and Russia, while hydrocarbon exploration activities were seen as the main driving force behind the agreement signed between the parties in 2010, the primary goal was more about Russia gaining support from Norway in extending its continental shelf beyond the 200-nautical-mile limit in the Arctic Ocean (Moe, 2013: 139). When we look at Norway's Arctic strategy documents, regional security and sustainable dialogue come to the fore.

The growing threat to Norway in the Arctic continues with Russia increasing its military deployment in the region and organising military exercises against Norway and NATO. Russia's measures against NATO expansion also seriously threaten Norway's security in the Arctic (Østhagen, 2022). This threat is related to both Norway's geographical location and its strategic allies. Norway occupies a strategic position in the Arctic and is central to NATO's defence strategy in Northern Europe. Russia's growing military presence in this region is a geopolitical threat to Norway's territorial integrity, as well as to other countries in the region.

How Norway responds to this threat is important for international relations and security policy. As a member of NATO, Norway, working with other members of the alliance, should address this threat and take the necessary steps to ensure security in the region. In the Arctic region, tensions between Norway and Russia continue over geography. In particular, there is a dispute over Spitsbergen Island in the Svalbard archipelago. The surveillance activities of China and Russia continue on this island, and the inclusion of Sweden and Finland in this region becomes a problem for Russia.

Spitsbergen is an important but often forgotten territory in international politics and is currently under Norwegian sovereignty. However, Russia's claims to this region are increasing tensions. The ambiguities of the Treaty governing the Svalbard archipelago and NATO's position raise concerns that Norway's sovereignty could be violated. The treaty signed in 1920 recognised Norway's sovereignty over Svalbard (Vázquez, 2022).

However, Russia criticises this treaty. The treaty recognises the right to carry out commercial activities on the island, and this includes activities such as mining.

**Map 7.** Svalbard Archipelago and Fishing Area



Source: CSIS, 2020.

As a result, NATO is aware of the strategic importance of Spitsbergen and believes that Russia could use the area to make moves against the alliance. However, while the risk of a direct conflict is low, there is potential for conflict due to the strategic importance of the area. In the future, uncertainties over the status of the region are likely to persist and this will increase the interest of countries in the Arctic region and further afield. The Svalbard archipelago may also be at the centre of conflicts in the future.

### **DENMARK AND GEOPOLITICAL DISPUTES IN THE ARCTIC**

Denmark, while not geographically located in the Arctic region, has a direct stake in Arctic matters due to its sovereignty over Greenland and the Faroe Islands. In 2011, Denmark introduced the "Kingdom of Denmark Strategy 2011-2020," which outlines its policies on Arctic issues. This strategy has been endorsed by the governments of the Faroe Islands and Greenland and emphasizes four key priorities: Preserving a secure and peaceful Arctic environment and promoting self-sustainable development and growth;

showing respect for the climate, environment, and nature of the Arctic and maintaining close cooperation with international partners (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2011-2020). Denmark also asserts claims to the extended continental shelf in the Arctic, particularly areas that could potentially stretch from Greenland to the North Pole, including the potential oil rich Lomonosov Ridge. Additionally, Denmark has interests in the "Banana Hole" region in the Norwegian Sea, which is also claimed by Norway and Iceland. In 2006, Denmark, on behalf of the Faroe Islands, reached a preliminary agreement with Iceland and Norway on determining the continental shelf boundaries in the region. Furthermore, border disputes persist between Canada and Denmark in areas such as Hans Island and the Lincoln Sea, as previously mentioned (Government.no).

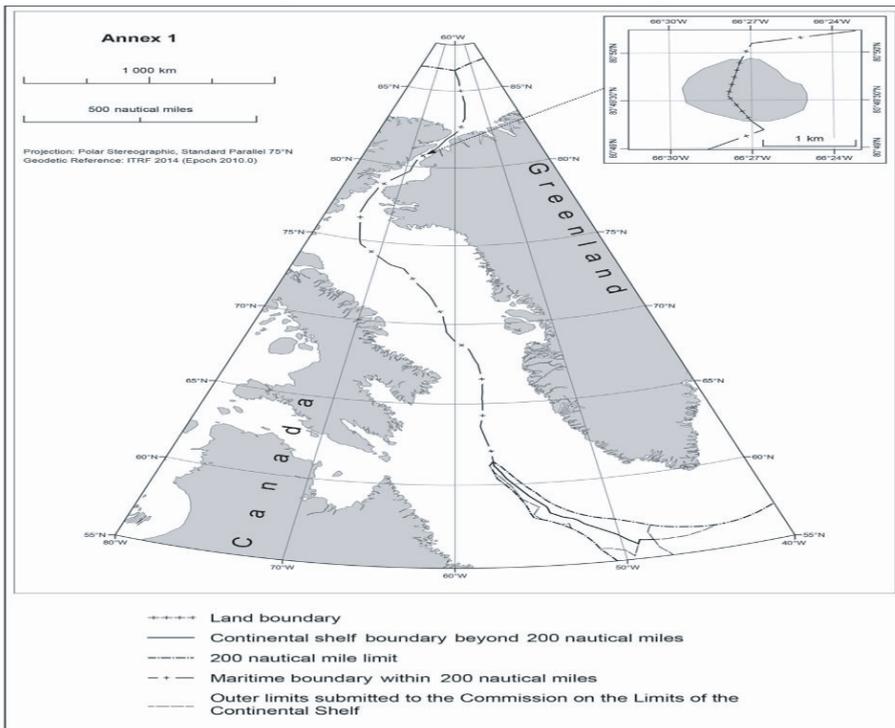
Denmark's strategy is centered on collaboration. It highlights the crucial role of international cooperation in harnessing the new opportunities presented by the changing Arctic region. By emphasizing the development of new binding rules and standards, such as a "Polar Code," for Arctic navigation and underscoring the significance of international law, the document underscores the importance of international cooperation. This document summarizes the country's key objectives in the region. The core strategy advocates for the management of the region based on international legal principles to ensure a peaceful, secure, and collaborative Arctic. Simultaneously, it places an emphasis on the importance of close cooperation with organizations like the Arctic Council and the Arctic Five for the development of the region while addressing climate and environmental issues. The ultimate goals of the strategy are quite diverse and two-fold. On one hand, it aims to strengthen Greenland's autonomous status, thereby positioning the Kingdom of Denmark as a prominent player in the international arena within the Arctic region. Simultaneously, the strategy serves as a roadmap for effectively responding to the evolving environmental conditions, geo-economic dynamics, and the growing global interest in the Arctic, presenting both challenges and opportunities. This strategy provides a framework for approaching both current and future Arctic issues and seeks to bolster the Kingdom of Denmark's role in this critical geography.

The last territorial dispute over sovereignty over the Arctic Circle was resolved at a diplomatic meeting in Ottawa on 14 June 2022 (Government of Canada, 2022). In particular, this agreement took place against a background in which both sides considered the integrity of traditional

territories important to Inuit communities (Government of Canada, 2022). In particular, the agreement aims to establish maritime boundaries in the Labrador Sea, the main focus of sovereignty claims between Canada and Denmark, and in the Lincoln Sea beyond the continental shelf.

In addition, as part of the agreement, the long-standing dispute over Hans Island (Tartupaluk) in northern Greenland is being resolved. The division of Tartupaluk into territorial waters and Greenland's maritime jurisdiction will clarify sovereignty, and use rights over the island and enable its inhabitants to continue their traditional activities (Tsiouvalas & Enyew). An important aspect of the agreement is the endeavour to provide a fair and acceptable solution regarding the demarcation of the boundary. The agreement between the parties was realized by considering the natural geographical features and establishing a fair demarcation line (Østhagen, 2023). The agreement also includes the establishment of a practical and workable border management regime to regulate tourism, trade and visitor traffic in the border areas. This is a step towards the resolution of potential disputes in the border areas and the effective management of borders.

**Map 8.** Canada-Denmark Boundary Agreed



*Source:* Global Affairs Canada, 2022

In conclusion, the 2022 Agreement brings an end to long-standing border disputes, strengthens diplomatic relations between Canada and Denmark, and increases stability in the region. The disputes between the two NATO member states have been resolved. Thus, they preserved both border security and stability in the region.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study analyses the emerging geopolitical issues in the Arctic Circle, examining the strategic importance of the region and the origins of conflicts of interest. The Arctic Circle plays an important role in the international arena due to its energy resources, sea routes and strategic location. However, this leads to various problems among NATO members.

Focusing on the country-centred problems described above, we have seen that the security of energy resources, valuable minerals and sea routes in the Arctic Circle is also an important issue. The security and control of sea routes poses a geopolitical challenge for NATO members. The borders of the routes and the transit routes between countries are still disputed. There are different views on whether these routes should be defined in international waters or should be under the sovereignty of specific countries. Therefore, rivalries between countries continue.

Cooperation and dialogue among NATO members are vital to resolve future geopolitical challenges. Especially after the tense relations with Russia, the dominance of NATO-centred thinking in the Arctic has overridden the individual policies of the countries. Due to geopolitical tensions in the region, Arctic countries are far from cooperating independently of NATO, taking into account their mutual interests. For this reason, NATO member Arctic countries endeavour to resolve border disputes and island issues on a legal basis. These problems will continue in this manner until the state of war with Russia disappears and tensions between the countries are suspended.

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