




Research Article - Araştırma Makalesi

## RUSSIA'S EXPANDING INFLUENCE IN THE ARCTIC: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NEW GREAT GAME IN THE NORTH POLE

**ABSTRACT** The undertaken research investigates the contemporary demonstration of the “Great Game” at the North Pole by considering Russia’s expanding pivot towards the region. Over the past two decades, the Arctic region has experienced significant changes in its geopolitical and ecological landscape as a result of climate change. The rising global temperatures and the rapid ice-melting in the region are opening up new opportunities for the great powers including Russia and North Atlantic Treaty Organization members for maritime trade and economic opportunities. Unlike the NATO neighbours, the Russian involvement in the Arctic region both in terms of military and economic investment is unprecedented. By employing a theoretical framework based on the Realist School of International Relations, specifically the theory of geopolitics, this study analyses the various dimensions of Russia's involvement in the Arctic. The research examines Russia's two major strategic objectives: balancing geopolitical competition with aspirations for cooperation and assessing its implications for economic, geopolitical, and security landscapes. By carrying out a comprehensive investigation of diplomatic initiatives, strategic manoeuvres and military presence of Russia, the study aims to explore the motivations behind its expansion to the Arctic region. Finally, the research investigates the consequences of the Russian rapid expansion towards the Arctic region for geopolitical affairs and regional stability by emphasizing the sustainable security architecture to prevent a geopolitical turf between Russia and its NATO neighbours.

**Keywords:** Great Game, Arctic Security, NATO, Russia, Sustainable Security Architecture (SSA), UNCLOS

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## **Introduction**

The term "Great Game" refers to a long-standing geopolitical phenomenon that dates back to the 19th century, when the Russian Empire and Imperial Britain engaged in a fierce competition for dominance over Eurasia (Parker, 2010). Although the Great Game concluded more than a century ago, the concept has continued to play a significant role in geopolitical discourse up to the present day. In recent times, a new geopolitical landscape has been unfolding in the ice-covered Arctic region, which may potentially serve as a fresh arena for Great Power rivalry (Gabrielson & Śliwa, 2014). The accelerating pace of climate change and the melting of Arctic ice have made the North Pole a focal point for major powers, including Russia, China, and NATO countries (Michel, 2011). As a result, Russia increasing involvement in the Arctic region by establishing military bases and aiming for dominance over the area may initiate a new chapter in the Great Game with NATO. The huge amount of untapped energy resources such as oil, and gas and its maritime significance make the Arctic Ocean a new geopolitical ground for the major powers (Depledge, 2020). Russia has been concentrating on enhancing its Arctic strategy since 2010 by initiating the Drifting Station North Pole-38 in October of that year and launching the nuclear icebreakers *Rossiya* and the research ship *Akademik Fyodorov* in July 2011 (Sergunin & Konyshchev, 2014). The increasing involvement of Russia in the form of significant investments in the LNG-1 and LNG-2 projects, as well as the development of three major ports in the Arctic ring, has attracted the attention of other Arctic coastal states, including those in the NATO alliance (Moe, 2020). Since 2010, Russian President Vladimir Putin made the development of the Arctic Sea maritime Sea Route a major objective of Russian Foreign Policy (Staun, 2017).

Russian pivot to the Arctic region is primarily shaped by two dominant international relations (IR) discourses, which serve as guiding foreign policy directions. First, there is a discourse rooted in realism and geopolitics, which prioritizes security and often exhibits a strong sense of patriotism (Godzimirski & Sergunin, 2020). This discourse involves exploring, winning, or conquering the Arctic and asserting power, including military power, to protect Russian national interests in the region. The second discourse emphasizes cooperation and collaboration with other Arctic states, while also acknowledging the region's environmental and economic potential (Wilhelmsen & Gjerde, 2017). However, the existing security framework concerning the Arctic Region failed to develop an environment of cooperation and consultation between Arctic states. Russian involvement in the Arctic region stands out among other Arctic states, and it could potentially put the security of the region at risk in the years to come (Keil, 2014).

In this respect, a new security architecture in the Arctic region is needed to avoid a future confrontation between Russia and the NATO bloc. Without the development of a sustainable security architecture for the Arctic region, it is possible that the region could become a new ground for the Great Game between Russia and the NATO alliance (Blunden, 2009). By focusing on the intricate geopolitical dimensions of Russia's involvement in the Arctic, this study aims to uncover the economic, geopolitical and security implications of its assertive policies in the region.

Previous studies have only focused on the security paradigms of the Arctic theatre, however, this research aims to investigate the nature of geopolitical competition between Russia and NATO through the lens of the New Great Game. The paper employs a realist perspective to investigate tactical moves, diplomatic endeavours, and the military presence of Russia in the Arctic, to evaluate the possible consequences for regional stability and global relations. Contemporary geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic region, characterized by intense security competition involving NATO, are viewed through the lens of offensive realism in explaining the bellicose actions of Russia in the region. Since offensive realism is associated with the structure analysis of international system and states that states often pursue competition and confrontation to maximize their self-interest, power and fear of other states. In the case of Arctic region, the expanding influence of Russia in the North Pole is primarily triggered by security, economic and geopolitical interests with an aim of status-seeking in the global affairs (Lagutina, 2019; Grajewski, 2017). However, various Arctic scholars like Andreas Østhagen (2019) viewed the Russian aggressive push towards the Arctic region from securitization and new International Relations (IR) constructs such as 'security regions' to explore the role geography in the determining the state behaviour. According to Østhagen, the expanding pivot of Russia towards the Arctic arises from the 'security regions' viewpoint since the Arctic basin shares borders with the NATO countries (Østhagen, 2019). However, as per the offensive realism, the competition among the major powers in the strategic theatre is not limited to regional security framework. It also involves intense competition for maximizing power, security dilemma, strategic advantage, and resource domination.

In this respect, the major purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive Russia's strategic manoeuvres, diplomatic efforts, and military presence in the Arctic, and to evaluate the potential consequences for regional stability and global relations. For this purpose, the study uses qualitative research method that includes the content analysis of diplomatic strategies, military strategies and existing literature on Arctic geopolitics. The content of the research is based on the existing scholarly works and primary sources like Kathlein Keil's (2014) 'Arctic

Security Matters and Alexander Sergunin's Russia in the Arctic: Hard Or Soft Power. The paper consists of four major sections that underscore the direction of the research. The first section briefly discusses the history of the North Pole ranging from major exploratory phases and the evolution of scientific research to the geopolitical evolution of the region. The second section explores the contemporary geopolitical landscape of the Arctic region, while also considering the implications of the increasing Russian presence in the region for the global political order. The third section briefly discusses the expansive Russia's expansive territorial claims in the Arctic Ocean within the framework of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of Seas and its implication for Arctic governance. Lastly, the paper examines the potential geopolitical conflict in the Arctic region, seen through the lens of Russian strategy to assert dominance, in a manner reminiscent of the historical "Great Game" between Russia, China, and NATO.

### **I. History of the North Pole: From exploration, Scientific research to Geopolitics**

The Arctic region is a huge geographical landmass, which is the northernmost area of the Earth, extending from the Nordic coasts to the northern regions of Scandinavia, Russia, Canada, Greenland, and the U.S. state of Alaska. The earliest exploration of the Arctic region dates back to the 330s BC when the Greek voyager Pytheas travelled from the north to modern-day Britain (Roller, 2005, p. 60). Although the region was not of great geographical importance to the European Empires due to its topography covered in ice, it became significant in the 15th century when explorers sought to find the Northwest passage to connect Europe and Asia directly. In the late 13th century and early 15th century, two prominent European explorers, John Cabot and Martin Frobisher took various voyages to find the Northwest Passage (Costa, 1880). First, in the late 13th century, John Cabot from Italy took two major voyages in search of the Northwest route but remained unsuccessful. However, his exploratory voyages did discover North America, which motivated other European explorers (Skelton, 2017, p. 20). Likewise, in the late fifteenth, English explorer Martin Frobisher initiated his Arctic discovery expedition to find the Northwest Passage. He took three major voyages across the North Pole between 1576 and 1578 to study the chokepoints and general topography of the Arctic zone. In 1576, it is believed that he discovered gold on Baffin Island during his initial expedition, thereby attracting the attention of European empires to the area (Wheatley, 2009). However, later his claims turned out to be false, but his expeditions were notable for their groundbreaking exploration of the Arctic region, which led to the British territorial claims to Canada.

The expeditions undertaken by John Cabot and Martin Frobisher in the Arctic during the Middle Ages were pivotal in the colonization of the region during the 19th and 20th centuries (Auger, 2018).

The significant pivot towards the Arctic region began during the 19th century, which was motivated by national pride, colonization, scientific curiosity and imperial competition (Wheatley, 2009). In 1845, British explorer Sir John Franklin took one of the largest expeditions towards the North Pole with a crew of 128 men aboard HMS Erebus and HMS Terror. HMS Erebus and HMS Terror, along with their crews, vanished without leaving any trace, thereby giving rise to the enigma surrounding the great voyage (Zorn, 2023, p. 25). This major event marked a significant turning point in Arctic exploration by triggering one of the largest search manoeuvres in history. Throughout the 20th century, various expeditions were taken by voyagers to trace the wreckage of HMS Erebus and HMS Terror, which contributed immensely to the scientific study of the North Pole (Têtuet al., 2019). The wrecks of the Erebus and Terror were discovered in 2014 and 2016, respectively, which provided some answers but left many questions unanswered about the final days of the crew.

From the historical standpoint, the beginning of the 20th century marked a pivotal moment in the Arctic region's exploration, with Scandinavians, the British, Americans, and the Soviets embarking on expeditions towards the North Pole (Depledge, 2020). Moreover, in the past, the Arctic region was commonly referred to as the final frontier of humanity that had yet to be managed or controlled. This perception prevailed until the middle of the 20th century (Osherenko & Young, 1989, p. 11). Initially the nature of the Arctic exploration competition between the Soviet Union, Scandinavians, the U.S. and Britain in the arctic was purely focused on Scientific research (Doel, et al., 2014). However, the race of scientific research turned into geopolitical competition, when Russia discovered the Tazovskoye Oil and Gas Condensate Field in 1962, marking its initial significant Arctic energy exploration. After a few years, in 1968, the U.S. made its first Arctic oil and gas discovery in the Prudhoe Bay field situated on the North Slope of Alaska coast (Toker, 2014). The geopolitical importance of the Arctic region rose to prominence after the Soviet discovery of the large proportions of gas reserves, which forced the Europeans and Americans to stimulate their exploration process.

On the contrary, the latter half of the 20th century was a pivotal moment in the story of Arctic exploration, as countries surrounding the Arctic, including the Soviet Union, the United States, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the United Kingdom, initiated offshore oil and gas exploration in the region (Depledge, 2020). After the Soviet discovery of a gas field at Tazovskoye, the U.S. also intensified its offshore oil and gas exploration by constructing artificial gravel islands on the Alaskan State waters (Toker, 2014). Likewise, Canada also followed suit at the beginning of the 1970s pursuing offshore oil and gas exploration in the Canadian Beaufort Sea on the coast of MacKenzie River.

In this regard, the Arctic region gained geopolitical significance in the 1960s due to the competition between the Western bloc and the Soviet Union over offshore gas and oil exploration (Marshall, 1986). Moreover, after the 1980s, the Soviet Union and its Western rivals during the Cold War began constructing major research stations often referred to as bases, which are largely distributed across northern polar parts of the Arctic. During the height of the Cold War in the early 1960s, the U.S. and the Soviet Union intensified the construction of secret military and intelligence stations in the Arctic region (Doel et al., 2014). Compared to the United States and other Western countries, the Soviet Union was more active in the construction of research centres, air bases and intelligence outposts in the Arctic due to its proximity to North America.

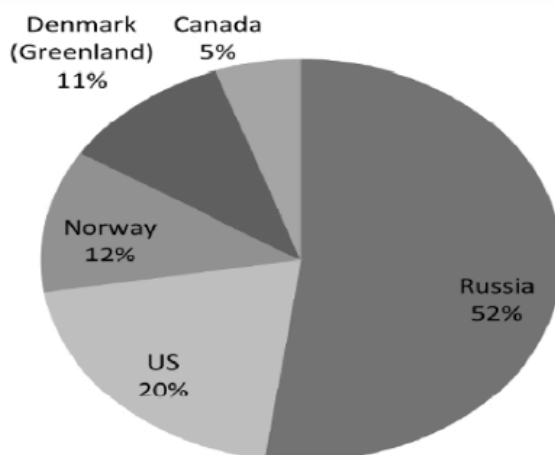
However, the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union shifted the geopolitical landscape of Arctic exploration. The breakup of the Soviet Union shifted the power dynamics on the world stage as Russia could not catch up with the superpower status due to economic and political bankruptcy in the 1990s (Hansen-Magnusson, 2019). The economic turmoil of the late 1990s drove post-Soviet Russia to shutter its foreign bases, including those in the Arctic, which remained closed for over a decade and a half. The Russian loss of focus in the Arctic region also led to the decline of Western interest towards the Arctic region despite its potential geopolitical imperative (Depledge, 2020). The geopolitics of the Arctic region remained the least discussed issue in mainstream global politics until 2007, despite its significance. In 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin reinitiated the Russian pivot to the Arctic region as a vision to restore Russian global power status. Nonetheless, exploring the Arctic strategic potential has remained a major geopolitical ambition of the former Soviet and New Russian political elites (Hansen-Magnusson, 2019). President Vladimir Putin is deeply invested in the Russian aspirations in the Arctic and endeavours to capitalize on the Arctic theme of human triumph over nature, which is a prominent aspect of contemporary Russian nationalism (Laruelle, 2013). Since Russia holds a significant portion of the Arctic coastline, which is over 53%, and the construction of offshore gas fields provides Russia with an advantage in the region, it is clear that Russia has a strong presence in the Arctic (Keil K., 2013). Moreover, since 2007, Russia has significantly revitalized its position in the Northern Polar region by establishing Northern Naval Fleet and Arctic military brigades along with the establishment of major military bases concentrated around Murmansk Oblast (Boulègue, 2019).

The Russian expanding influence in the Arctic region in the last decade and a half became a major geopolitical concern for NATO members such as the United States, Canada and other Arctic coastline states in Europe (Depledge & Kennedy-Pipe, 2018).

From the perspective of NATO, the Russian militarization of the Arctic region seeks to accomplish three goals. First, Russia by militarizing the Arctic region wants to augment homeland defence, particularly a frontline defence against foreign invasion in the wake of growing economic investments in the region (Depledge, 2020). Second, the Arctic region contains huge oil and gas reserves, which are essential for the economic future of Russia. Last, by expanding its presence in the Arctic region, Russia wants to revive its global power status by projecting its powers in the North Atlantic (Laruelle, 2014). Moreover, the United States and its NATO allies in Europe have a clear understanding of Russian grand strategy regarding Arctic domination, and they are also actively involved in the region. As a result of heightened tensions in the Arctic region attributed to NATO claims, Russia started closely collaborating with China, a non-Arctic country, to jointly invest in the Arctic development process (Tabachnik & Miller, 2020). Today China is a major economic and strategic partner of Russia in the Arctic geopolitical race because the development of the Arctic route is geopolitically and geoeconomically significant for the global economic domination by China (Rainwater, 2013). Hence, the growing expansion of the Russian pivot towards the Arctic region with a close partnership with China threatens the geostrategic interests of the NATO bloc, which ultimately altered the geopolitical landscape of the Arctic region (MacDonald, 2021). From a modern historical perspective, the current geopolitical power dynamics in the North Pole indicate the commencement of a New Great Game between the West and Russia in the Arctic.

### **I. Contemporary Geopolitics in the North Pole and Russian Arctic Policy**

Due to the climate, the Arctic ice is melting at a faster pace making the region more accessible to resources and economic opportunities (Ebinger & Zambetakis, 2009). According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the Arctic Oceans contain approximately 13% (90 billion barrels) of untapped oil reserves and 30% of undiscovered gas reserves of the world (EIA, 2012). The accessibility to the Arctic region might trigger competition between the great powers such as Russia and NATO, which ultimately will determine the future security prospects at the North Pole (Østhagen, 2019). So far, the Arctic ecosystem seems vulnerable due to the lack of sustainable security architecture and the expanding influence of Russia in the region (Pilyasov et al., 2015). As the largest Arctic coastal state, Russia holds 52% of the hydrocarbons in the Arctic, which makes it a major power in the region from the empirical estimation, and the distribution of estimated Arctic oil and gas resources among the five coastal states (Keil K., 2013) is illustrated below in Figure 1.



Note: This figure shows a rough estimate retrieved from Keil K., “The Role of Arctic Hydrocarbons for Future Energy Security”, NAPSNet Special Reports, January 07, 2013 <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/the-role-of-arctic-hydrocarbons-for-future-energy-security/>

Russia is significantly more active in the Arctic than other Coastal States, as evidenced by the approval of a \$300 billion incentive program in 2020 by the Russian government for the development of infrastructure, industrial zones, and oil and gas fields in the region. On the other hand, the total amount of investment by Western countries in the Arctic, including the U.S., Canada and Europe worth less than \$250 billion, which demonstrates the slow pace of the Western coastal states in the Arctic. The investments in Arctic energy projects are a fundamental part of Russian grand strategy towards Europe and the U.S. From the Russian viewpoint, investments in the Arctic are essential to reduce its dependency on Europe and boost its defence capabilities in the face of hostile NATO near its borders (Tabachnik & Miller, 2020).

The foreign policy strategies of the Coastal states on both sides of the Arctic Ocean are guided by a unique spatial logic that influences their actions in the context of an indistinct Arctic territory and takes into account the most recent developments in regional construction (Knecht & Keil, 2013). To fully comprehend the strategic importance of the Arctic region, it is necessary to view it through the prism of the intensifying geopolitical rivalries among the major powers, several of which are now actively engaging in the area (Depledge, 2020). Geopolitics is at the heart of the new great power competition for the spatial and economic domination of the Arctic region. The contemporary nature of power dynamics in the Arctic region can be distinguished in terms of the geopolitical interests of the individual Arctic coastline states. When Russia placed its flag on the North Pole in the summer of 2007, the Western mainstream media reacted with alarming headlines to draw the attention of the public.



The popular headlines included catchy phrases such as New Cold War, New Great Game, Arctic Meltdown and Arctic Land Grab referring to the Russian growing influence in the Arctic region coupled with the forthcoming confrontation with NATO (Antrim, 2010). Moreover, the narratives concerning the Russian expansion towards the North Pole were constructed upon geopolitical beliefs of the 20th century concerning Russian history dating from the imperial and Soviet times (Laruelle, 2012). The major objective of the construction of these narratives was aimed at refurbishing the geopolitical rivalry between the Eurasian heartland and the Western Maritime heartland (Antrim, 2010). The melting of ice in the Arctic region due to climate change has made it possible to access fishing and sea routes, attracting the attention of major powers such as Russia, NATO countries led by the U.S., and other nations (Ebinger & Zambetakis, 2009). This development opened a new geopolitical frontier for the possible confrontation between the Russian Federation and NATO countries.

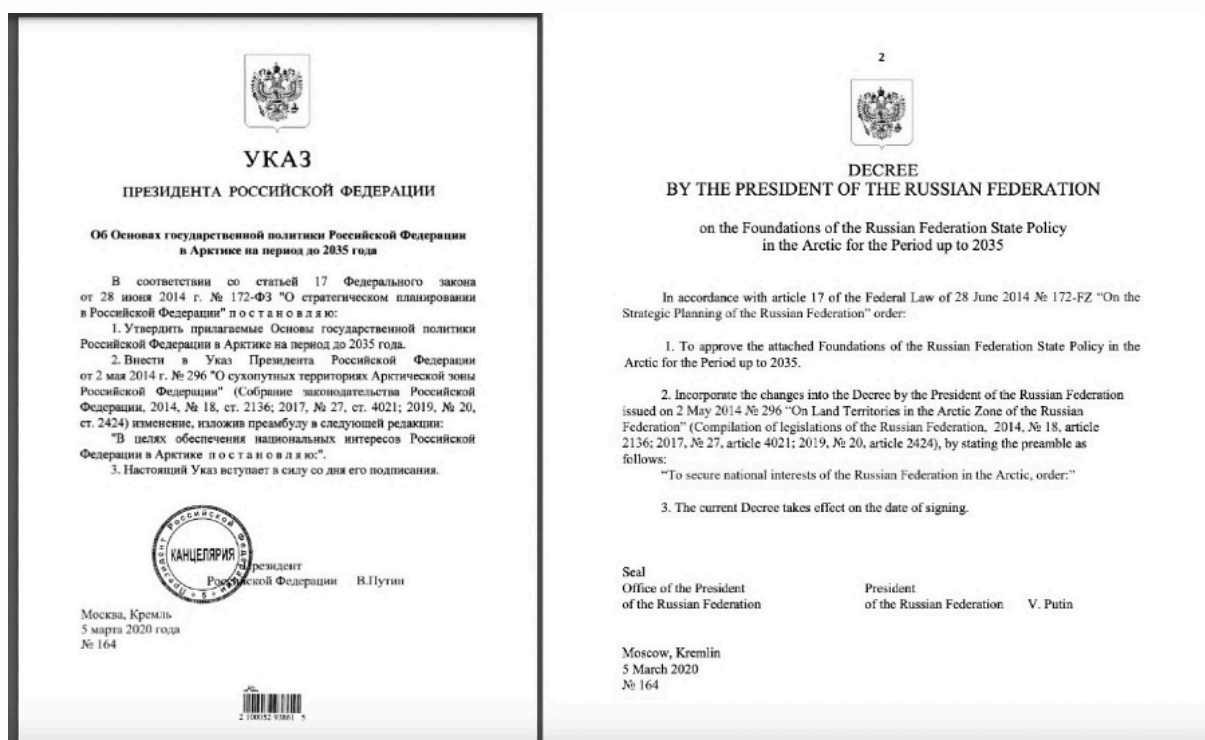
### **i. Russian Official Policy Towards the Arctic**

The Russian focus at the state level towards the Arctic officially began in 2006 that marked the beginning of the new geopolitical race in the region. Within two years, on September 28, 2008, the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev approved first state-level strategy consist of six pages towards the Arctic entitled 'The Foundations Of The Russian Federation's State Policy In The Arctic Until 2020 And Beyond'[1] (Medvedev, 2008). The six page document consists of six major sections outlining the Russia key focus in the Arctic that includes Russian national interests in the North pole: extraction of the resources in the Arctic; turning the NSR into a unified national transport corridor and line of communication; and maintaining the region as a zone of international cooperation (Arctic Portal , 2010). The document was amended and approved on February 20 2013 by Russian president Vladimir Putin under the New title "Strategy for Development of the Russian Federation's Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2020", which made the development of the Arctic region as fundamental component of national security strategy of the Russian Federation (Russian Government, 2013). The new Arctic strategy further emboldened Russian geopolitical and security maneuvers in the Arctic region. Under the new Arctic strategy on December 1 2014, the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command was established to enhance the Russian military presence in the Arctic (Tass, 2014). The establishment of the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command under the 2013 Arctic strategy clearly demonstrated the Russian military ambitions in the Arctic region.

[1] This document laid the foundation of Russia state-policy towards the Arctic region, which was revised in 2013 and finally in 2013 susequently by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

On the contrary another major turning point in the Russia state policy towards Arctic occurred on October 26 2020, when the Russian President approved the revised version of Russian Arctic Strategy under the new title “Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035” (Kremlin, 2020). The presidential decree No. 164 is displayed in the Figure 2 below, which details the Russian geopolitical, security and economic ambitions in the Arctic region by 2035. The new six page document contains updated Russian goals and objectives in the Arctic region reflecting current geopolitical, environmental, security and economic conditions in the region.

Figure 2 Russian Presidential Decree on Arctic Strategy 2035



Note: This Presidential Decree No.164 was adapted from “On the Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035”, Kremlin.ru, October 26, 2020 <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/64274>

Under the new revised strategy the core focus of Russian state strategy to develop the critical infrastructure ranging from highways, railways, industries and to new developed Northern Russia. Another key goal of the new strategy to improve the living standards of Russians living in the North pole. The document states “the government needs to improve the quality of life for people living in the North and members of indigenous communities, accelerate the region's economic development, take care of the environment, protect Russian national interests in the Arctic” (Arctic Russia, 2020).

However, the major Russian goal as mentioned in the document is the protection of Russian territorial integrity and sovereignty in the Arctic region by preserving the Arctic as the "area of peace". In this respect, the newly revised official strategy of the Russian Federation clearly demonstrates the assertiveness of Russian Pivot towards the Arctic both economic and security sphere.

### **i.Threat Matrix in the Arctic and NATO's response**

The maritime geopolitical overtures in the early 20th century began with the famous work *The Problem of Asia* by American Naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, which addressed possible confrontation between the Russian Empire and Western powers over trading passages across the Asian continent, from the Near East to China (Antrim, 2010). In his seminal work *The Problem of Asia* (1900), Mahan briefly mentioned the limitations of Russian naval power in dominating key maritime routes to the Asian continent, which believed gave an upper hand to Western maritime powers such as Great Britain and the United States (Mahan & Sachsman, 2003, p. 33). For instance, the naval presence of Russia in the Baltic Sea through Saint Peterburg faces the sea power of Nordic states across the Danish Strait and the Gulf of Finland. Similarly, in the Black Sea, the Naval fleet of Russia faces British and American Sea power in the Mediterranean across the Dardanelles and Strait of Gibraltar (Luzin et al., 1994). Likewise, in the Far East, the Russian naval presence in Vladivostok is facing competition from the Japanese Navy, which has made the outpost a limited challenge to Western interests in the region (Antrim, 2010). Several years later, British Geographer Halford Mackinder in his seminal work *The Geographical Pivot of History* pointed out the southwestern parts of imperial Russia as a key juncture between Europe and East Asia. According to Mackinder, Russia could dominate the major corridors between East Asia and Europe through steppes and plains in the Southwest, which was the central theatre during the Great Game of the 19th century (Hall, 1955).

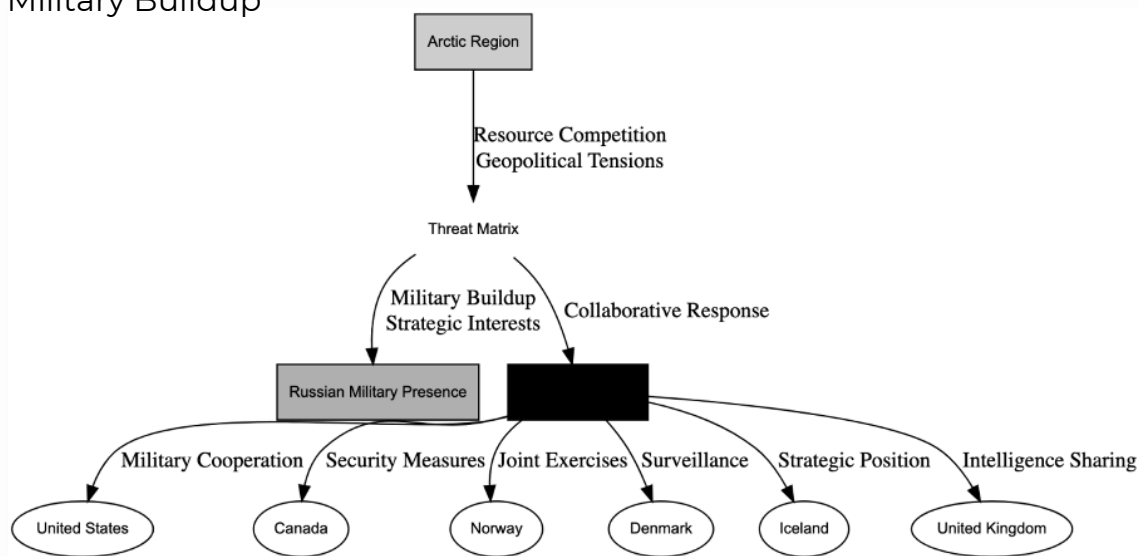
Both Mahan (1900) and Mackinder (1904) did not directly address the Russian naval potential in the Arctic, which was inaccessible for naval deployment during the early 20th century. However, in his groundbreaking geopolitical work, Mahan did mention the Debatable Lands, which divide Russia from Western Europe along the peripheries of Asia (Kikkert & Lackenbauer, 2020). Moreover, the Arctic coastline of Russia falls in the category of Debatable Lands coined by Alfred Thayer Mahan because the Arctic coastline of Russia extends from the Norwegian border on the Kola Peninsula to the eastern region of the Bering Strait (Antrim, 2011).

In 1933, the Soviet Union established its Northern Naval fleet based in the Kola region, which presently forms the largest portion of the Russian Navy (Luzin et al., 1994). Nonetheless, the geopolitical dynamics of the Arctic region altered during the second half of the 20th century when Arctic ice melting progressed at a rapid pace. The climate change-driven transformations in the Arctic allowed the Soviet Union, United States, Canada and Europeans to pursue offshore oil and gas exploration that brought the Arctic region to mainstream geopolitical discourse (Chaturvedi, 2020). In this respect, the contemporary Russian strategy towards the Arctic region can be traced back to the Soviet Union, which played a pivotal role in shaping the contemporary approach of Russia towards the North Pole by establishing the Northern Naval Fleet, military bases, intelligence outposts and research headquarter (Sergunin & Konyshchev, 2017). Moreover, to comprehend the current geopolitical situation of the world, it is crucial to take into account the latest wave of competition between Russia and the West, especially NATO, in the Arctic region.

On the other hand, the geopolitical theories pioneered by Mahan and Mackinder during the early 20th century play a crucial role in comprehending the contemporary geopolitical dynamics of the Arctic region. From the geopolitical standpoint of Mahan and Mackinder, the ongoing great power competition between Russia and the West at the North Pole is an apparent geopolitical reality of the 21st century (Chaturvedi, 2020). Moreover, the ongoing great power competition for resources in the Arctic is accompanied by shifting power dynamics, global security risks and regional stability at the North Pole. For instance, the expanding Russian pivot towards the Arctic Ocean especially its massive military presence in the Arctic zone jeopardizes the security dynamics of the region (Done, 2020) illustrated in Figure 2. In the past ten years, the Arctic Ocean has become a region of strategic importance, as it is of significant interest to NATO member countries, particularly the United States and its European allies (Wegge, 2020). Moreover, from the Russian perspective, the development of the Arctic Maritime route is essential for reviving the global prominence of Russia. Since 2010, Russian President Vladimir Putin has strengthened the position of Russia in the Arctic region by establishing military bases along with huge investments in the development of Arctic ports (Sergunin & Konyshchev, 2014). In contrast to the substantial Russian presence in the Arctic, the involvement of the other six coastal states, the majority of which are NATO members, is relatively insignificant. The huge untapped natural resources in the Arctic region are geopolitically important for both Russia and its Western neighbours (Antrim, 2010). The attempt by a single power to dominate the Arctic Ocean can result in a significant geopolitical conflict that could destabilize the entire region.

Unlike Russia there is no formal strategy of the NATO towards the Arctic region, however, since 2015 NATO became deeply concerned with the changing security architecture of the High North. The initial attention towards the changing Security landscape of the Arctic came from U.S. when President Obama signed the Executive Order entitled ‘Enhancing Coordination of National Efforts in the Arctic’ on January 21, 2015. The executive order entailed the new U.S. strategy towards the changing security landscape of the Arctic (White House , 2015). This executive order became the foundational document for the NATO to mitigate the security risks in the High North and develop a parallel strategy to address them. The first major compiled report concerning the security of the Arctic was prepared and presented in the NATO parliamentary Assembly on October 7, 2017. The title of the report was ‘NATO and the Security in the Arctic’ which briefly highlighted the evolving security landscape of the region especially the growing Russian presence in the Arctic and its close cooperation with China (NATO, 2017, p. 1).

Figure 3 The Security Ecosystem of the Arctic Region in the Wake of Russian Military Buildup



Note: This figure was retrieved from Isa real Cold War possible in the Arctic?Russia Direct, November 28, 2013, <https://www.russia-direct.org/content/real-cold-war-possible-arctic> “

Figure 3 illustrates that the threat matrix in the Arctic between Russia and NATO is complex stemming from the combination of geopolitical, economic, and security factors. Both parties are competing for control over the vast untapped resources in the region such as oil and natural gas, resulting in intensified rivalry. The NATO countries that share borders with the Arctic Ocean are far behind compared to Russia, when it comes to the development of the region (Wegge, 2020).

Since 2010, Russia has been at the forefront of expansion to the Arctic region by developing key ports, choke points, and maritime routes. Furthermore, Russian domination and excessive exploitation of resources in the region pose a threat to the interests of other coastal states, which have not given much consideration to the area (Piskunova, 2010). Hence, the threat matrix concerning the existing security system can be understood by considering the expanding influence of Russia in the North Pole through massive military buildups that could trigger a geopolitical turf between Russia and NATO countries in the coming years.

### **I. UNCLOS, Arctic Governance, and Russian Territorial Claims**

In the last decade and a half, governance in the Arctic has become a major theme of debate and discussion among the members of the Arctic Council and experts in international Law. The growing Russian expansion towards the Arctic region in the military and economic spheres became a major security concern for the members of the Arctic Council, which includes the United States, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (Ingimundarson, 2014). The Arctic Council was founded on September 19, 1996, as the leading intergovernmental forum for cooperation, interaction and promotion of regional stability in the Arctic region. Despite its global presence, the Arctic Council remained inactive for several years to address the rising challenges in the Arctic region (Young, 2010). However, in the past five years, the Arctic Council revitalized its activities due to emerging security challenges in the wake of growing Russian engagement in the region. The lack of a legal regime concerning the regulation of the Arctic basin has obligated the Arctic Council members to work on a common treaty (Molenaar, 2017) for two reasons. First, the rapid ice melting at the North Pole due to rising global temperatures has boosted the accessibility of the coastal states to develop offshore oil and gas fields (Young, 2010). Second, Russia has the largest coastline state in the Arctic including two and half million people living in its Arctic territories. Moreover, the growing Russian axis towards the Arctic region through militarization and infrastructure developments threatens the interests of other Arctic littoral states (Roberts, 2015). In this respect, the lack of legal regimes allows Russia to exploit and advance its geopolitical ambition without legal constraints.

International Law experts view the absence of a legal regime in the Arctic region as a major source of the forthcoming confrontation between Russia and other Arctic Council members, most of them are NATO members (Ingimundarson, 2014). Various legal discussions and conferences were organized between 2005 and 2008 by the Arctic Council members to work on the common Arctic Treaty. To form the basis for the common treaty, contrasts were drawn between the Arctic and the sophisticated legal framework that exists in Antarctica.

Hence, the discussions concerning the Arctic Treaty were prepared in the image of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty to develop a distinctive Arctic legal regime (Molenaar, 2017). The debate conclusively was brought to an end when the five Arctic littoral states—Russia, the U.S., Norway, Canada, and Denmark accepted a non-binding Ilulissat Declaration in May 2008. The Declaration urged the littoral states to consider the Law of Seas as a legal framework for the resolution of international legal issues in the Arctic (Rothwell, 2013). Moreover, the legal sections of the Declaration were espoused within the framework of UNCLOS to resolve the international legal challenges in the Arctic. The Declaration opens with an acknowledgement of the Arctic Ocean as the major threshold of contemporary global politics (Dodds, 2013).

Although the Ilulissat Declaration acknowledges that an extensive international legal framework could be applied to the Arctic Ocean, however, it does not directly give reference to any precise instrument of the UNCLOS (Rothwell, 2013). Therefore, the lack of any direct reference to the precise instruments of UNCLOS makes the application of the Ilulissat Declaration limited when it comes to legal regimes in the Arctic. Using this legal gap, the non-observability of UNCLOS in the Ilulissat Declaration allows the powerful littoral states in the Arctic such as Russia to violate the international legal regimes (Molenaar, 2017). Nevertheless, as per UNCLOS, the coastline state has the legal right to claim its maritime borders up to 200 nautical miles from its coastline, along with sovereign rights over the seabed and any resources that may be present beneath the surface (Lucia & Nickels, 2020). In addition, the UNCLOS also allows the coastline state to claim the Continental Shelf exceeding the 200 nautical miles maritime border rights (Dodds, 2013). Unlike the other coastal states, the Russian territorial claims regarding both the EEZ and the Continental Shelf in the Arctic pose a threat to the stability of the region (Piskunova, 2010). The Russian huge territorial claims in the Arctic cause disputes between Russia and other coastal states. Because to claim the Continental Shelf in the continental waters, the coastal states are obliged to submit proposals to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) within the framework of Article 76(8) and Article 3 of Annex II of the UNCLOS (Eklund & Watt, 2017).

On December 20, 2001, Russia, the nation with the most extensive coastline in the Arctic region, submitted a proposal under Article 76.8 of UNCLOS to the United Nations regarding its territorial claims in the Arctic, which was in contradiction with the precise instruments of the UNCLOS (Lucia & Nickels, 2020). The Russian territorial claims in the Arctic were disputed by the Kingdom of Denmark, which urged the UN to call on Russia for revision. Based on the disputed claims of Denmark, the UN urged Russia to revise its proposal concerning the extension of its Outer Limit of the Continental Shelf (OLCS) (Eklund & Watt, 2017).

The United Nations requested for a revised proposal under Paragraph 1 of the Article 75 of the UNCLOS (2001), which says;

*Subject to this Part, the outer limit lines of the exclusive economic zone and the lines of delimitation drawn in accordance with article 74 shall be shown on charts of a scale or scales adequate for ascertaining their position. Where appropriate, such limit lines or delimitation lines may be substituted by a list of geographical coordinates of points, specifying the geodetic datum (UNCLOS, 2001, p. 52).*

To uphold the UN recommendations, Russia submitted an updated version of its claims to the UN on August 3, 2015, expressing its sovereign rights over roughly 2 million square kilometres in the Arctic Ocean, which goes beyond the limits of the 200 nautical miles (Piskunova, 2010). However, the expansive territorial claims by Russia in the Arctic were again disputed by the four coastal states Denmark, the U.S., Norway and Canada, which duped the Russian claims as a violation of their sovereign rights in the Arctic Sea. The legal rebuttals from the other four Arctic coastal states pushed the UN to urge Russia to revise its proposal again (Roberts, 2015). Finally, on March 31, 2021, Russia submitted a revised proposal to the United Nations asserting its territorial rights in the Arctic. The revised proposal extends its territory all the way to the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of Canada and Greenland, increasing the area by approximately 705,000 square kilometres compared to the previous proposal (Eklund & Watt, 2017) as illustrated in Figure 4. The revised proposal claims Russian sovereign territorial rights in the Central Arctic Ocean with a major addition to the OLCS of Russia in the region.

**Figure 4 Russian Expansive Territorial Claims in the Arctic**

**Figure 1. Overlapping territorial claims in the Arctic**



Source: World Ocean Review, 6: 5 (2019).

Note: This map was adapted from “Polar Politics and Commerce”, World Ocean Review, 2019 <https://worldoceanreview.com/en/wor-6/polar-politics-and-commerce/the-arctic-and-antarctic-as-political-arenas/>



As illustrated in Figure 4, the Russian expansive territorial claims in the Arctic Ocean demonstrate the extension of its continental character articulating its sovereign rights over the EEZ under UNCLOS. According to UNCLOS, the maximum distance for maritime border extension to the EEZ is 350 nautical miles from the coastline territory of a country (Rothwell, 2013). Russia asserts that its continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean is almost 70% of the region, overlapping with the EEZs of other Arctic countries, including Denmark and Canada, as per the 2021 revised proposal. The Russian expansive territorial claims under the framework of UNCLOS became a major security concern for the other members of the Arctic Council, which dispute Russian claims (Lucia & Nickels, 2020).

The proposed Russian territorial claim in the Arctic violates Article 75 and Article 76 of the UNCLOS and Ilulissat Declaration. Among the Arctic Council members, Denmark and Canada are major disputants to Russia's expansive territorial claims (Koshkin, 2022). Denmark was the first Arctic littoral state, which objected 2001 proposal of Russia within the legal premise of Article 75 of the UNCLOS. According to Denmark, the territorial claim of Russia in the Arctic beyond 200 nautical miles violates Article 75 and Article 76 of the UNCLOS (Eklund & Watt, 2017) for two reasons. First, Based on Article 76 of the 1982 UNCLOS and its annexes, the coastal cannot extend the continental shelf without determining the area of the continental shelf. Hence, to determine the area of the Continental Shelf, a scientific inspection of the ocean floor is required, which is mentioned in the proposals of Russia (Çiftci & Ali, 2014, p. 9). Although, Russia revised its proposal twice in 2015 and 2021 respectively, but without carrying out the scientific examination of the ocean floor, which was objected to by Denmark, Norway and Canada under the precise instruments of the UNCLOS (Lucia & Nickels, 2020).

Despite the legal objection from the coastal states, Russia seems increasingly insistent and belligerent concerning its territorial claim in the Arctic. Second, Russia claims approximately 2 million square kilometres of area up to the central Arctic, which overlaps the EEZs of Denmark and Canada. Hence, under the legal framework of the UNCLOS, the expansive territorial claim of Russia in the Arctic violates the maritime borders of the other Arctic littoral states such as Denmark and Canada (Koshkin, 2022). Russia's efforts to modernize its Soviet-era military bases in the Arctic region, which are seen as a security threat by NATO, serve to bolster its extensive territorial claims (Boulègue, 2019). In the face of the deteriorating security situation in the Arctic Ocean, the Arctic Council is concerned with the emerging geopolitical rivalry between Russia and Arctic littoral states.

Arctic Council is the major inter-governmental body in the region with 8 members and fourteen observer states but, the resolutions of the Arctic Council are non-binding, which in turn restricts the efficiency of the organization (Ingimundarson, 2014). In this regard, the expansive territorial claim of Russia in the Arctic Ocean in the absence of UNCLOS arranged legal regime and jurisdictional limitation of the Arctic Council threaten the governance edifice of the North Pole.

**I. Russia and the New Great Game in the Arctic**

In terms of capabilities and territory, Russia is the greatest power in the Arctic Ocean. Despite major domestic challenges such as demographic decline, economic sanctions and lack of military modernization, Russia perceives its Arctic territorial strength as pivotal to its future great power status (Sergunin, 2016, p. 37). The standing of Russia as a major Arctic power can be assessed through various realms, including its domestic political landscape, foreign policy, economic prowess, and military might. Moreover, the growing Russian economic and military prowess in the Arctic region cannot be detached from the context of great power competition akin to the Great Game of the 19th century due to the probable disagreement with the NATO bloc over territorial claims (Piskunova, 2010). The recent studies concerning the growing Russian pivot to the Arctic Ocean aptly sum up the importance of the region for the Russian economic future. The vast untapped natural resources found in the Arctic seabed and the establishment of a trade route that links Europe and Asia are key to restoring the great power status of Russia (Boulègue, 2019). As American-based Russia-Eurasian expert Marlène Laruelle contends, “For Russia to maintain its status as one of the world’s largest producers of hydrocarbons it will have to depend increasingly on Arctic Resources” (Laruelle, 2009). Apart from the oil and gas reserves, the ice melting as a result of rising global temperatures has also opened up potential maritime trade opportunities in the Arctic region.

**Figure 5 Russia's Northern Sea Route versus the Existing Route**



However, the NSR became functional for maritime trade and fishing during the early days of the Soviet Union. After the break of the Soviet Union, Russia resurrected the Soviet legacy in the Arctic by formulating a comprehensive strategy that encompassed the restoration of military bases, the establishment of research headquarters, the development of Arctic ports, and the transformation of the NSR (Lagutina, 2019, p. 20). According Arctic Policy 2035 the development of NSR as a major functional alternative-maritime sea route to enhance competitive national transport line of the Russian Federation in the global market (Arctic Russia, 2020). Subsequently, the amplified assertive engagement of Russia with the Arctic Region ranging from expansive territorial claims, maritime trade cooperation with China, and increased militarization of the region could trigger a New Great Game between Russia and NATO (Boulègue, 2019). Furthermore, the U.S. and NATO bloc considers the substantial natural gas and oil reserves located beneath the Arctic Sea, which account for 30% of the undiscovered reserves in the world, to be of paramount importance in helping Europe dissuade itself from Russian oil and gas (Belkin, 2008).

Plausibly, the New Great Game in the Arctic, similar to the Old Great Game in the Eurasian heartland, is centred on the Eurasian plane of the North Pole and involves Russia, China and NATO as key players (Cerbu & Cioranu, 2020). At the beginning of the 20th century, American Naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan viewed Russia as a land power with inherent constraints, which hindered its capacity to effectively exert its power through the precarious "debatable lands" (Mahan & Sachsman, 2003, p. 83). However, Mahan did not mention geographical potential of Russia along the Arctic, which became the new geopolitical reality at the beginning of the 21st century. Additionally, compared to the NATO Arctic states, Russia is effectively engaged in the growth of its Arctic territories through streams of various development such as the construction of offshore oil and gas fields and the transformation of NSR into a functional maritime trade channel (Heininen, 2018). In recent years, China has uplifted its status in the Arctic theatre by calling itself a near Arctic state through mega joint ventures with Russia. For instance, in the past decade, China has invested roughly \$90 billion in Arctic energy and mineral projects, primarily in Russia (Rashmi, 2019, p. 13). In addition, the Russian NSR development initiative is currently a major part of China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China formally became the investment partner of Russia's mega Yamal LNG Project on September 5, 2013, by buying up to 20% stakes (Downs, et al., 2018: 24). The Chinese media celebrated growing partnership between China and Russia in the development of the Arctic region by calling it Win Win scenario for Russia and China.

In this respect, the formation of alliances within the Arctic region due to the close collaboration between a Eurasian power Russia and a major East Asian power China, on the one hand, and the cooperation between the United States and its NATO Arctic members, on the other, could potentially ignite a new competition akin to the Old Great Game (MacDonald, 2021). In the past decade, there has been mixed commentary in the West concerning the possibility of the New Great Game in the Arctic between Russia, China and the United States. Today, a renowned Arctic expert Emily Rauhala believes, the Arctic region appears to have already become a major geopolitical rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China. It is because, the rapid melting of Arctic ice and the possibility of greater access to resources in the region could ignite a scramble for Arctic resources among Russia, China, the United States, and other countries (Rauhala, 2023). On the other hand, there are contrary views, such as popular Arctic expert Martin Breum, who personally travelled to the North Pole, denying the possibility of the scenario of the New Great Game in the Arctic in the near future; they still do not rule out the possible great power competition there between Russia, China and NATO (Breum, 2019). Indeed, the Russian sprawling engagement in the Arctic region through a joint partnership with China has already been a great concern for the U.S. and its NATO allies in Europe, who perceive this as a great security and economic threat. Thus, it looks inevitable that existing power dynamics in the Arctic demonstrate that the region may become a geopolitical battleground between Russia, China, and NATO soon.

### **Conclusion**

The contemporary manifestation of the New Great Game in the Arctic Region can be characterized as the interplay of security, geopolitical and economic factors. Due to the rising global temperatures, the Arctic Ocean has become increasingly accessible for major Arctic powers such as Russia, the U.S., Canada and the Arctic states in Europe, which are competing for dominance in this strategically important region. The research has primarily sought to explore Russian assertiveness in the development of the Arctic region ranging from militarization of the region, development of ports, and upgradation of NSR to a close partnership with China. The research argues that the Russian growing engagement in the Arctic region has geostrategic implications for regional stability and international relations. The historical context of the North Pole in the first section shows that how the Arctic Ocean from the No-Man land for several centuries transformed into a major geopolitical theatre during the second half of the 20th century. The study explored the dual purpose of the growing Russian pivot towards the region emphasizing the implications of its presence for the global political order.

The major purpose of Russia's growing presence in the Arctic is linked with the prioritization of its security and national which is rooted in realism and geopolitics. Second, Russia also emphasizes cooperation and collaboration with other Arctic states to mutually exploit the vast untapped natural resources on the Arctic seabed. Moreover, the study contends that Russian diverse strategies, which extend across military, economic, diplomatic, and security domains are closely connected to the overall security ecosystem of the region. For that reason, the possibility of the New Great Game in the Arctic, triggered by the assertive engagement of Russia in the region, highlights its desire for dominance. These actions may result in heightened tensions in the Arctic area. The available research studies and reports demonstrate that the Arctic policies of Russia are cohesively aligned with its overarching national interests, indicating a deliberate approach to exploit the economic prospects and strengthen its geopolitical position in the region. The evolving Arctic landscape demands ongoing international attention and collaboration, as stakeholders grapple with reconciling resource exploitation, shifting power dynamics and regional security.

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