

Preventing the militarization of the Arctic region

Background

The Arctic region has always been seen as a zone of low military tension, where cooperation prevailed despite other geopolitical rivalries. During the Cold War, the Arctic held a strategic importance due to its localization between two superpowers that had used the Arctic for nuclear deterrence and submarine operations, while other Arctic states largely avoided direct military confrontation there. In the post-Cold War period, cooperation was institutionalized through mechanisms such as the Arctic Council, created in 1996 to promote dialogue among Arctic states. However, the Council's mandate explicitly excludes military security matters, leaving disarmament and arms control issues largely unaddressed.

In recent decades, the Arctic has achieved a strong strategic significance made possible by technological advances and reduced ice coverage caused by global warming, which have increased accessibility to maritime routes and access to natural resources. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Arctic sea ice is declining at a striking rate, unintentionally easing military mobility and presence in the region. As a result, Arctic and non-Arctic states have expanded military infrastructure, conducted large-scale exercises, and increased air and naval patrols in the region.

The militarization of the Arctic raises serious concerns regarding arms races, escalation risks, and the potential deployment of nuclear weaponry. The Arctic remains strategically important for nuclear deterrence, particularly due to the presence of ballistic missile submarines and early-warning systems. The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) has repeatedly emphasized that regions of increasing strategic competition without arms control frameworks face big risks of miscalculation and conflict.

Several Arctic states have upgraded or reopened military bases, strengthened missile defense systems, and enhanced submarine and aerial capabilities. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports that Russia has significantly expanded its Arctic military infrastructure, while NATO members have increased joint exercises and force readiness in response to perceived security threats. These developments have contributed to a growing security dilemma, in which defensive measures by one state are perceived as offensive threats by others.

While legal mechanisms regulate territorial claims and civil cooperation, they do not prevent the expansion of military capabilities. This gap highlights the need for discussions on arms control, confidence-building measures, and strategic restraint in order to prevent the Arctic from becoming a new point of military rivalry.

UN involvement

The United Nations remains largely confined to a regulatory and normative role. It does not possess a dedicated mandate to address military security in the Arctic, nor does it exercise direct oversight over defense activities in the region. Instead, its contributions lie solely in establishing legal principles and facilitating peaceful dispute resolution through international law.

The most significant UN instrument applicable to the topic is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which governs maritime jurisdiction by defining territorial waters, Exclusive Economic Zones, and procedures for continental shelf claims. Under this framework, Arctic coastal states may submit claims to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, which assesses their scientific validity. While this process reduces the likelihood of open conflict over maritime boundaries, it is limited strictly to legal and technical questions and does not address military deployments or strategic competition.

Beyond maritime law, Arctic governance largely occurs outside the UN system. The Arctic Council, despite consisting exclusively of UN member states, operates independently, and excludes military security from its agenda. This separation leaves no permanent forum within the UN structure dedicated to Arctic arms control nor reducing the risks that the militarization of the Arctic poses.

Although the UN Security Council (UNSC) holds primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, it has not adopted any specific resolutions addressing Arctic militarization. As a result, discussions of security dynamics in the region remain fragmented and reactive. The absence of a clear UN mechanism to address military escalation underlines a structural gap between the UN's legal authority and the evolving strategic realities of the Arctic.

The UN currently lacks both the mandate and enforcement tools necessary to manage the region's security challenges. While international law offers stability in territorial and civil matters, it remains insufficient in preventing the Arctic from becoming a new point of military rivalry.

Useful links

The Arctic Institute- Militarization of the Nordic Arctic: Demographic, Economic and Environmental Implications:

[Institute-https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/militarization-nordic-arctic-demographic-economic-environmental-implications/](https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/militarization-nordic-arctic-demographic-economic-environmental-implications/)

CSIS-Addressing Arctic vulnerabilities:

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/addressing-arctic-vulnerabilities>

The Arctic Institute-NATO in the arctic:

[Arctic:https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-the-arctic-institutes-nato-series-2024-2025/](https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-the-arctic-institutes-nato-series-2024-2025/)

UNIDIR-Securing the Seas: A Comprehensive Assessment of Global Maritime Security:

<https://unidir.org/publication/securing-the-seas-a-comprehensive-assessment-of-global-maritime-security/>

European Parliament on Arctic Militarization:

<https://2eu.brussels/en/defencecyber/european-parliament-warns-about-militarization-of-the-arctic-and-calls-for-a-security-strategy-for-the-region>

Questions to consider

1. Can your country be directly involved in militarizing the Arctic region?
2. Is your country in any way affected by the indirect exploitation of global warming in the Arctic?
3. How can the United Nations engage major Arctic states in measures to prevent militarization, while respecting their sovereignty and legitimate security interests?
4. What steps can the UN take to encourage cooperation instead of conflict in the Arctic?
5. Are the maritime routes that may be used to deliver goods to your country in any danger? If yes, can the UN somehow secure them?

Possible Debate Questions

1. Should the United Nations develop a confidence-building or arms-control framework specifically for the Arctic region?
2. Should the Arctic be considered for partial demilitarization or nuclear-weapon-free arrangements?
3. What responsibilities do non-Arctic states have in preventing the militarization of the High North?
4. How does increased military presence in the Arctic affect the safety and livelihoods of local and Indigenous communities?
5. How does increased strategic competition in the Arctic affect global security and stability?

Sources

<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-the-arctic-institutes-nato-series-2024-2025/>

https://www.thesunprogram.com/research-platform-feed/ipcc-intergovernmental-panel-on-climate-change?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22228028095&gbraid=0AAACU23rMrM2nUNjJihtRROQT3vKmk&gclid=Cj0KCQiAgbnKBhDgARIsAGCDdlejji h3L0sjNpQ1RSJ-44RzRQzjhjc6bSBWhPhWUdNVc8s6pvYsn8saAo9cEALw_wcB

<https://www.sipri.org/publications/2016/sipri-background-papers/military-capabilities-arctic>

[Institute-https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/militarization-nordic-arctic-demographic-economic-environmental-implications/](https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/militarization-nordic-arctic-demographic-economic-environmental-implications/)

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[Arctic-https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-the-arctic-institutes-nato-series-2024-2025/](https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-the-arctic-institutes-nato-series-2024-2025/)

<https://unidir.org/publication/securing-the-seas-a-comprehensive-assessment-of-global-maritime-security/>

<https://2eu.brussels/en/defencecyber/european-parliament-warns-about-militarization-of-the-arctic-and-calls-for-a-security-strategy-for-the-region>

