

**Forum:** Disarmament Commission

**Issue:** Preventing the Weaponization of the Arctic Circle

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## Introduction

The weaponization of the Arctic Circle is an emerging geopolitical and environmental issue as melting ice unlocks new shipping routes, natural resources, and strategic military positions. Nations competing to secure influence in the Arctic region are expanding their military presence, conducting controversial operations, and developing infrastructure in the region, raising tensions and the risk of conflict. The fragile Arctic ecosystem and the rights of indigenous communities further complicate the situation. While agreements like the Arctic Council do exist, they lack binding security provisions. Preventing the weaponization of the Arctic requires communication and regulations that ensure the region remains a zone of peace and sustainable development.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Arctic Circle

The Arctic is the northernmost region of Earth. It contains major reserves of oil and natural gas as well as large quantities of minerals including iron ore, copper, nickel, zinc phosphates and diamonds. At present, eight countries exercise sovereignty over the lands within the Arctic Circle: Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, the United States (Alaska), Canada, Denmark (Greenland), and Iceland.

### Weaponization

The act of making something suitable for use as a weapon.

### Militarization

The action or process of equipping or supplying a place, organization, etc. with soldiers and other military resources.

### Sustainable Development

Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

## Background

### Geostrategic Importance of the Arctic Circle

The Arctic presents deep strategic ambiguity: it has a history of peaceful cooperation and great-power competition, often occurring in parallel. This applies particularly to European Arctic, the area known as the “High North,” stretching from the North Atlantic to the Barents Sea. Rich in resources but also a strategically important point of access to other parts of the northern hemisphere, it has always been of particular significance for Russia and the US-led West.

The polar regions are losing ice, and their oceans are changing rapidly. The consequences of this polar transition extend to the whole planet and are affecting people in multiple ways. A study by the Institute of Geological Studies in the U.S. reported that the Arctic region may contain approximately 13% of the world’s oil resources to be discovered, and 30% of global undiscovered gas resources. Global warming also frees the waters of the Arctic region from the influence of ice every year, allowing gradually the opening of new maritime navigation routes as well as the shortening of the distance between two destinations. Furthermore, new fishing opportunities represent an economic resource for all Arctic and non-Arctic countries. For many years, thick ice has halted fishing or regional fisheries, and organizations have kept commercial fishing in Arctic waters to a minimum. But over the next thirty years, the Arctic will be crucial to reviving countries’ economies in fisheries. For these simple yet extremely profitable reasons of resource access and navigation control, countries are highly incentivized to secure influence in the Arctic region.

### Environmental Consequences

#### *Oil and Gas Drilling*

Oil and gas drilling, though profitable, contributes to climate change and threatens wildlife and communities. In January 2022, the Biden administration revoked an executive order instigated by Donald Trump in 2017 that attempted to open up US Arctic waters to new drilling activities. The court’s decision to uphold the ban on oil and gas leasing in the Arctic Ocean is a significant effort to environmental protection in the Arctic.

Unfortunately, the international capability to respond to emergencies and oil spills as severely limited. Broken ice and other severe weather conditions in the Arctic would make any large oil spill or well blowout catastrophic for the life in the area. To list some specific examples, expansion of oil and gas drilling could be damaging for polar bears. Not only would direct contact with spilled oil kill them, but an invisible threat could persist for years, as toxic substances lingering in ice or seawater may have an impact on the entire Arctic ecosystem. The use of underwater seismic testing could also affect communication between beluga whales, other cetaceans and pinnipeds. As part of the United Nations’ objectives, as elaborated upon in its Sustainable Development Goals agenda (SDGs), countries should cooperate to operate in the environment in a responsible and sustainable

manner. Especially considered the relatively untouched character of the Arctic region as well as its unique host of wildlife, delegates should work to balance benefiting from the Arctic's resources and location with protecting the Arctic from unnecessary environmental harm.

### **Military Emissions**

Much of the impact of military emissions in the Arctic remains unknown because of a loophole in the Paris Climate Agreement which exempts governments from reporting their military's emissions. This is harmful and warrants more cooperation for transparency. Dr. Neta Crawford, co-director of Brown University's Costs of War Project, explained that roughly 30 percent of the military's emissions come from "installation emissions," meaning the energy use of military bases and other installations. The other 70 percent comes from "operational emissions," or the energy use of all training, missions, transport, and other activities. Crawford elaborated that aircraft in particular contribute to the 70 percent of operational emissions. This is notable given that the U.S. Air Force reportedly has the largest presence of any military branch in the Arctic. Compared to geopolitical tensions between superpowers, climate change is a rapidly escalating *global* phenomenon that strikes at the most vulnerable. As delegates draft resolutions, it is therefore highly recommended to consider the environmental impacts of Arctic operations and hold countries accountable for irresponsible operations.

## **Major Parties Involved**

### **Russia**

Russia has an intense interest in the sustainable development of the Arctic's resources: of all littoral states, it has the most at stake in terms of population and territory. The Russian Arctic's contribution to the Russian GDP is at least prior to the Russian war against Ukraine estimated between 12% and 15% and accounts for approximately 20% of its exports, of which oil is 80% and gas 20% of its total production, and the prospects of considerably more export of oil and gas are equally unparalleled to any of the other Arctic states. In this perspective, the Russian militarization of the Russian Arctic is as much about protecting and supporting its economic activities as it is simultaneously a militarization to increase and bolster its forward posture.

Russia intends to reconcile environmental protection and economic development, a strategy that is not self-evident; the exploitation of the "northern sea route" (NSR) increases the risk of ecological disasters, as does the melting of permafrost, which covers 65% of Russian territory. The Russian authorities have made the development of the Arctic a priority; they are investing considerable resources in industry and infrastructure, but they are increasingly concerned about the negative effects of global warming. According to a study in these regions, 40% of roads and buildings have already suffered damage, which led the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources to announce the establishment of a system for monitoring the evolution of permafrost.



**Figure 1:** Satellite image of Russian military base in the Arctic (Stratfor)

## NATO

Although NATO has historically lacked a formal position on the Arctic, after the start of the Ukraine War in 2022, the Arctic region has become a larger security focus for the alliance. With the rise of Finland and Sweden into NATO, the Alliance's presence in the Arctic has increased significantly and has been accompanied by large-scale military exercises, such as Northern Response 2024, the largest NATO exercise in decades, which involved 13 NATO countries and 20,000 troops. It is expected, according to Russian sources, that the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO will be a burden and a source of trouble for each of them in exchange for benefits of questionable content and feasibility, while this accession will be a reason for the U.S. to strengthen its positions in the Arctic region.



**Figure 2:** Map locating NATO and Russia's military bases in the Arctic, 2025. Military bases on this map include naval, air force and ground force bases.

## United States

The United States' relatively recent 2009 Arctic Region Policy shifted away from the apathetic post-Cold War US Arctic strategy, recognizing the Arctic as an emerging critical region and identifying two focal points characterizing American interest in the region: energy and security. On energy, the 2009 policy aimed to increase US oil independence by accessing Alaskan oil deposits. While it received support from energy independence advocates, it was also met with resistance from environmentalists, thus hindering implementation. On security, the 2022 National Strategy now prioritizes American people and sovereign territory and rights, committing to enhance capabilities through infrastructure improvements, including an expanded icebreaker fleet, and strengthening cooperation with Arctic allies against Russian aggression.

## Arctic Council

Established in 1996, the Arctic Council is the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic Indigenous Peoples and other Arctic inhabitants on

common Arctic issues, in particular on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic. The Northern regions of the Arctic States are home to more than four million people, whose health and well-being is on the top of the Arctic Council's agenda. The Ottawa Declaration defines these states as Members of the Arctic Council: Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, the United States (Alaska), Canada, Denmark (Greenland), and Iceland. The eight States have territories within the Arctic and thus carry the role of stewards of the region. Their national jurisdictions and international law govern the lands surrounding the Arctic Ocean and its waters.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is considered a turning point in Arctic relations. At the time the war broke out, Russia had been chairing the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum that promotes cooperation and coordination between the Arctic States, Arctic Indigenous Peoples and other Arctic inhabitants, covering a range of issues - crucially, *excluding military security*. Seven of the eight Arctic Council members (all but Russia) promptly decided to boycott meetings over the war and only met again in 2023 to oversee the handover of the chairmanship to Norway. Without Russia, which is so large that its northern border makes up 53 percent of the Arctic coastline, the Arctic Council faces criticism over its international legitimacy, as it can no longer claim to be separate from geopolitical conflicts. In 2024, Russia then suspended annual payments to the organization until the council's full activities involving all members resumed

## Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

### International agreements

There is a lack of explicit United Nations resolutions targeting weaponization of the Arctic; for that reason, this issue at hand is especially in need of addressing. Most international agreements regarding activities in the Arctic were established in the Arctic Council, which is limited in nature. Arctic Council agreements both exclude the numerous non-member countries and have not addressed issues regarding military security. Considering how countries such as China (self-deeming a semi-Arctic nation), Japan, several European countries, etc. demonstrate increasing interest in Arctic-related operations, the Disarmament Commission will give these countries a unique opportunity to make an impact while simultaneously directing international discussion to the underdiscussed topic of weaponization and militarization.

With that said, on three occasions, the Arctic States have negotiated legally binding agreements under the auspices of the Arctic Council. These aim at enhancing international cooperation on issues related to maritime search and rescue, marine oil pollution, and Arctic scientific cooperation respectively:

- Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic (signed 2011)
- Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic (signed 2013)



- Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation  
(signed 2017)

From time to time, the Arctic Council or its subsidiary bodies also develop relationships with external organizations to further Arctic cooperation.

## Possible Solutions

### 1. Establishing arms control and demilitarization mechanisms.

One of the most urgent priorities is to prevent the deployment, testing, or stockpiling of weapons in the Arctic region. Current international law lacks explicit provisions banning such activities north of the Arctic Circle, and the Arctic Council does not cover demilitarization in its agenda.

Possible directions for solutions:

- Creating an Arctic non-weaponization treaty: Propose a binding multilateral treaty modeled after the Antarctic Treaty (1959) that prohibits the placement of offensive weapons, nuclear testing, or the construction of military bases in the Arctic.
- Negotiating an Arctic weapon-free zone: Encourage Arctic states to establish a zone where certain weapons or military presence are banned, following the precedent of existing weapons-free zones.
- Prohibiting dual-use infrastructure: Mandate clear differentiation between civilian and military facilities, ensuring that ports, airfields, and research stations are used strictly for peaceful purposes. This may require an agreement on the definition and classification of dual-use infrastructure as well as methods to hold states accountable.
- Moratorium on weapons testing: Introduce a UN-backed moratorium on the testing of new weapons systems, including missile launches and hypersonic trials, within or above the Arctic region.
- Restricting transit of armed vessels: Encourage states to agree that ships carrying nuclear or advanced weaponry must notify the Arctic Council before transiting Arctic waters or refrain from doing so altogether.

### 2. Enhancing military transparency and communication.

Much of the tension in the Arctic stems from uncertainty about states' military intentions.

Misunderstandings and accidents could quickly escalate without transparency or communication protocols.

Possible directions for solutions:

- Mandatory military activity reporting: Require Arctic states to submit annual reports to a UN or Arctic Council registry detailing troop deployments, exercises, and new installations in the Arctic.
- Notification and verification systems: Develop a joint verification mechanism under UN oversight to monitor compliance with demilitarization commitments through satellite data and inspection missions.
- Communication platform for Arctic military communication: Establish a direct line of communication

among defense ministries of Arctic states to manage incidents, reduce miscalculations, and promote de-escalation.

- Observer access to military exercises: Allow neutral observers of the Arctic Council or UN representatives to attend Arctic military exercises to promote transparency and confidence.
- Confidence-building exercises: Replace large-scale military drills with cooperative operations, such as joint search-and-rescue missions or disaster relief simulations.

### 3. Environmental protection and sustainable development.

Environmental degradation in the Arctic not only endangers biodiversity but also heightens political competition over resources. Preventing weaponization requires recognizing the environment as a foundation for peace rather than rivalry.

Possible directions for solutions:

- Establishing the Arctic as a protected peace zone: Encourage delegates to consider frameworks that classify parts of the Arctic Ocean as a global environmental heritage area under UN protection, banning extractive and military activities.
- Integrating environmental impact assessments (EIAs): Mandate EIAs before any new infrastructure or shipping route is developed, particularly projects with potential dual-use (civilian and military) functions.
- Promoting renewable energy research: Support cooperative research on sustainable energy alternatives in Arctic regions to reduce dependence on fossil fuel exploration, which often drives geopolitical tension.
- Developing Arctic environmental emergency protocols: Strengthen international preparedness and coordination for responding to oil spills, accidents, or military-related environmental hazards.



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