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Source: own elaboration on FP

Emerging Arctic: Navigating the Nexus of Security and Logistics

by Andrea Vento

The Arctic is no longer an immutable expanse of ice, but rather a space where diminishing ice cover translates into heightened human activity and burgeoning infrastructure, thereby increasing systemic vulnerability. The progressive opening of the Northern Sea Route (NSR)—alongside the Northeast, Northwest, and Transpolar passages—has already reconfigured maritime linkages between Asia and Europe, albeit at a more measured and realistic pace. The NSR has established itself primarily as an

energy corridor for the exportation of Russian LNG toward Europe and Asia increasingly, influencing directly European ports and markets.

The impending European embargo on Russian LNG imports will necessitate a comprehensive redesign of routes, fleets, and logistical hubs, carrying the attendant risk of intensified traffic along Norwegian coastlines and the proliferation of opaque “shadow” fleets. Moreover, the waning accessibility of data regarding Russian NSR permits complicates the monitoring of actual movements, particularly in vicinities housing critical infrastructure. The damage sustained in 2024 by the undersea cable between Finland and Estonia, caused by an Indian convenience flag vessel in transit to the Mediterranean, serves as an emblematic cautionary tale: it reveals how a profound reliance on undersea cables, pipelines, and sensors is tethered to a marked exposure to risk, even of an “accidental” nature.

The surge in transits through straits and maritime choke points proximal to sensitive assets renders the management of underwater vulnerability a cornerstone of any strategy for freedom of navigation in the Far North. From this perspective, the Arctic is an invisible tapestry of infrastructure sustaining global connectivity, yet one that remains exceedingly difficult to protect with credible effectiveness.

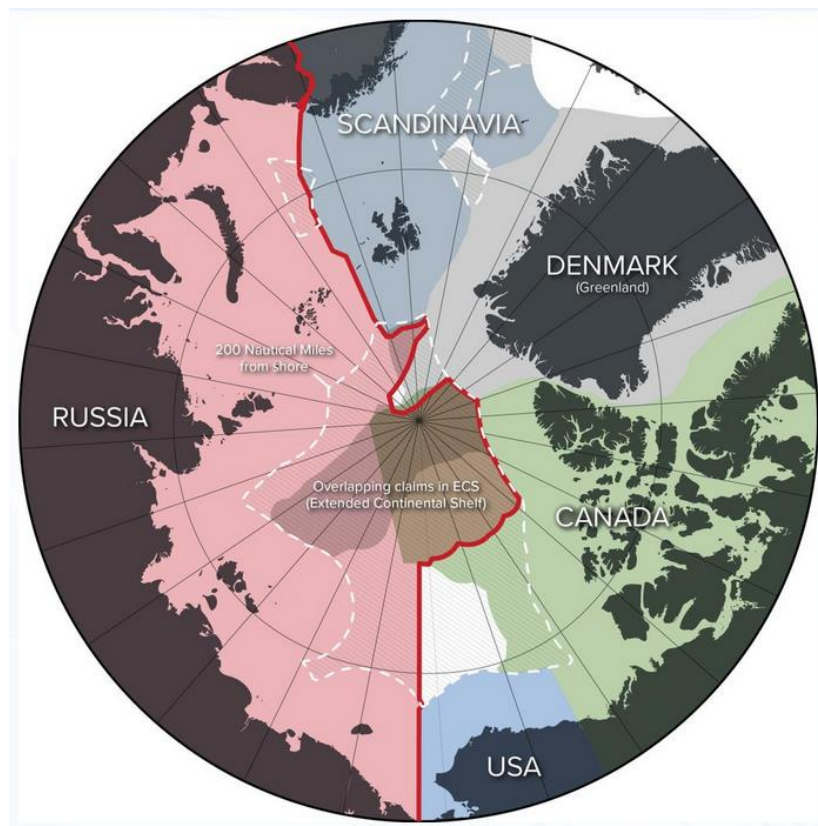
Unfortunately the erstwhile adage “High North, low tension” no longer aptly describes a region where scientific cooperation and diplomatic dialogue once tempered the impulses of power politics. Today, the Arctic is a much more brittle space, where strategic tensions, economic imperatives, and climatic shifts coalesce. The presence of seven NATO member states among the Arctic nations, juxtaposed against an isolated yet geographically inescapable Russia, exacerbates asymmetry without ensuring stability, at least until the war in Ukraine goes on.

Moreover, the Arctic Ocean is characterised by a “plural” nature: there exist multiple Arctic zones (from the Barents Sea to the North Atlantic and the Bering Strait), each possessing its own operational dynamics, yet all inextricably linked by routes, cables and flows. On a geoeconomic level, the region is integrated into the trend of “re-globalization,” wherein global value chains become regionalized without necessarily fracturing. In this context, the Arctic and the Mediterranean are not competing spheres but rather two nodes of a unified European North-South strategic platform, encompassing energy, data, commerce, and maritime security. To perceive the new Arctic routes as a zero-sum game at the expense of the Mediterranean is counterproductive since what is needed is an integrated architecture wherein undersea cables, energy corridors, and maritime lanes, from the North Atlantic to the *Mare Nostrum*, contribute to the collective resilience of the European system.

Russia's rules and NATO

In this already complex scenario, the Russian Federation has defined the Northern Sea Route as a maritime complex encompassing internal waters, territorial seas, contiguous zones, and exclusive economic zones (EEZ), extending requirements for permits, pilotage, and icebreaker escort far beyond the traditional 12-mile limit. The legal basis invoked is Article 234 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which allows coastal states to adopt non-discriminatory laws in “ice-covered areas” of their EEZ to prevent pollution and safeguard a highly sensitive environment.

The problem is that UNCLOS does not explicitly define what constitutes areas “covered by ice for most of the year,” nor how climatic variability should influence the application of the norm. Recent years have witnessed seasons of protracted navigability (i.e. 88 days of clear passage recorded in 2020), alternating with colder summers where ice continued to pose formidable operational challenges. Incidents such as the difficulties encountered by a tanker in August 2023, due to sudden wind-driven ice shifts, confirm that the environment remains inherently perilous.



Source: Ocean Learning Hub, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI).

In this milieu, Article 234 continues to provide a legal foundation for environmental and security measures. However, the translation of this article into stringent national requirements (such as the mandatory use of Russian ice pilots or state-owned icebreakers), becomes contentious when such

measures significantly infringe upon the freedom of navigation. For user states like Japan, interested in reducing transit times and costs in trade with Europe, the NSR represents both a nascent opportunity and a formidable risk. Following the aggression against Ukraine, Tokyo has redefined Russia as a potential long-term threat, while continuing to engage in selective scientific cooperation and maintaining a vigilant watch over Russian activities in the North.

While Japan has concerns more in the longer term, NATO has to answer short-term risks. During the Cold War, the Alliance forged much of its credibility upon the Arctic seabed, following the introduction of Soviet Delta-class submarines equipped with intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities. The protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the Atlantic and nuclear deterrence made Arctic submarine operations a pillar of Euro-Atlantic strategy.

After the 1991 Rome Summit, NATO progressively broadened its scope of action to include environmental, energy, and human security. During the era of “Arctic exceptionalism”, the Alliance maintained a discreet profile in the North, acting more as a political umbrella than an operational protagonist, while Arctic states continued to be primary responders. Today, the convergence of renewed great-power competition, the centrality of critical infrastructure, and the relevance of Arctic routes brings the maritime and underwater dimensions of NATO back to the fore. However, due to longstanding US military planning inertia in the region compared to the constant Soviet and Russian investment in the region, the Alliance is less prepared, after decades of prioritizing other theatres.

The re-election of US President Donald Trump, with the correlated recalibration of the American presence in European affairs, necessitates an alliance that is more “Europe-driven,” in which the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy assume an increased role, even in the Far North. Thus the Arctic (the only region where North America, Europe, and Asia physically intersect) becomes a testing ground for the future balance between the United States and Euro-Asian actors, as well as for the very endurance of the Euro-Atlantic architecture. Major European countries should better co-ordinate their Arctic strategies and interests, in order to create the mentioned integrated architecture from the North Atlantic to the *Mare Nostrum*, able to contribute to the collective resilience of the European-Atlantic.

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