

Russian and U.S. Security Policy in the Arctic Region

Mishel Nikolaevna Bychkova

Diplomatic Academy of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia.

**Corresponding Author Email: mshlby@yandex.ru*

Abstract

The Arctic region has, in the early twenty-first century, evolved from a zone of peace and cooperation into one of the principal theaters of global geopolitical competition. This transformation has been driven by climate change, expanding access to natural resources, and the growing strategic importance of maritime transport corridors. The article examines the security policies of the Russian Federation and the United States in the Arctic, with particular attention to their legal approaches, strategic doctrines, military capabilities, and interpretations of the Northern Sea Route. The study argues that the principal asymmetry in the region lies in the contrast between Russia's geographical and infrastructural advantages and the United States' reliance on alliance-based capabilities and technological power. It concludes that the Arctic is likely to remain a space of controlled but intensifying rivalry, shaped by militarization, legal disputes, and the broader dynamics of great-power competition.

Keywords: Arctic region, Russia, United States, security policy, Northern Sea Route, militarization, international law, NATO

Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, the Arctic has undergone a profound transformation in both geopolitical significance and strategic function. Once largely perceived as a peripheral space of scientific cooperation, environmental dialogue, and limited interstate interaction, the region is increasingly becoming one of the central arenas of great-power competition. This transformation is driven by several mutually reinforcing factors: the acceleration of climate change and the reduction of sea ice, the growing accessibility of natural resources, the prospective development of trans-Arctic maritime routes, and the increasing military and strategic value of the High North.

The Arctic is no longer merely a remote geographic region or a reservoir of untapped natural wealth. It has become a complex strategic space in which economic interests, legal claims, military planning, environmental concerns, and global power shifts intersect. The weakening of traditional cooperative mechanisms, combined with the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West after 2014 and especially after 2022, has further intensified the securitization of Arctic politics. As a result, the region is increasingly interpreted not only through the logic of sustainable development and international governance, but also through the categories of deterrence, sovereignty, military presence, and control over critical infrastructure.

The Russian Federation and the United States occupy central positions in this process. Russia, as the largest Arctic coastal state, possesses extensive geographical, infrastructural, and military advantages in the region. Its Arctic policy is closely connected with the protection of sovereignty, the development of the

Northern Sea Route, access to natural resources, and the functioning of strategic nuclear deterrence. The United States, by contrast, has a more limited direct Arctic geography but compensates for this through its alliance network, technological capabilities, global naval power, and the integration of the Arctic into NATO's broader strategic planning. These differences create a structural asymmetry between the two actors and shape the character of their regional rivalry.

At the same time, Russian and American approaches to the Arctic are not limited to military competition alone. They also reflect fundamentally different interpretations of international law, maritime governance, freedom of navigation, and the legal status of key transport corridors. For Russia, the Arctic is closely associated with sovereign rights, coastal-state jurisdiction, and historically grounded claims over the Northern Sea Route. For the United States, the region is increasingly viewed through the prism of open access, freedom of navigation, and the prevention of any single power's dominant control over emerging Arctic routes. These divergent legal and strategic positions make the Arctic a persistent zone of tension in contemporary international relations.

The relevance of this study is determined by the fact that Arctic security is becoming an increasingly important component of global strategic stability. The expansion of military infrastructure, the modernization of Arctic doctrines, the growing role of NATO in the High North, and the deepening of Russia–China cooperation all indicate that the region is moving from a model of limited cooperation toward one of controlled but intensifying rivalry. Under these conditions, a comparative analysis of Russian and U.S. security policies in the Arctic is necessary for understanding both the current dynamics of regional militarization and the possible trajectories of future conflict or cooperation.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the security policies of the Russian Federation and the United States in the Arctic region, identify the main points of convergence and divergence between them, and assess the structural asymmetries that shape their interaction. The article focuses on four interrelated dimensions: the legal and geopolitical status of the Arctic, the evolution of Russian Arctic strategy, the transformation of U.S. Arctic policy, and the comparative balance of capabilities and interests between the two states. Particular attention is paid to the Northern Sea Route, military infrastructure, alliance politics, and the growing influence of Russia–China cooperation on the regional balance of power.

The central argument of the article is that the Arctic is likely to remain a space of increasing strategic competition, but not necessarily of direct military confrontation. The rivalry between Russia and the United States is shaped by a combination of legal uncertainty, resource competition, military asymmetry, alliance dynamics, and broader geopolitical confrontation. While the probability of large-scale conflict in the region remains limited, the risk of incidents, misperceptions, and unintended escalation is growing. Therefore, the Arctic should be understood as one of the key regions in which the future configuration of great-power relations will be tested.

1. The Arctic as a Strategic Axis of Contemporary World Politics

A fundamental problem shaping the increasingly competitive character of Arctic politics is the absence of a comprehensive, universally accepted, and institutionally consolidated international legal regime for the region. Unlike Antarctica, whose governance is framed by a specific treaty system, the Arctic remains regulated through a fragmented combination of general norms of international law, national legislation, bilateral arrangements, and sector-specific agreements. This legal fragmentation creates space for divergent interpretations of sovereignty, jurisdiction, resource rights, and freedom of navigation. As a result, legal uncertainty becomes not merely a technical issue, but an important structural factor intensifying geopolitical rivalry among Arctic and non-Arctic actors.

In international law and political practice, two conceptually different, and in many respects incompatible, approaches to Arctic territorial delimitation can be identified. The first is the principle of polar sectors. According to this approach, each Arctic coastal state may claim a sector extending from its northern coastline toward the North Pole, within which it possesses priority rights to explore, administer, and develop the territory and resources located there, including, in certain interpretations, areas beyond 200 nautical miles. Historically, this principle has been especially important for Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union. The formal establishment of the boundaries of the Soviet “polar sector” was reflected in the Resolution of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR of April 15, 1926, which declared lands and islands located in the Arctic Ocean within the defined sector as territory of the USSR ([Declaration on the lands and islands located in the Arctic Ocean as territory of the USSR, 1926](#)).

For the Russian Federation, the sectoral approach remains the most advantageous from both a legal and strategic perspective. It provides a basis for asserting long-term rights over vast Arctic spaces that are significant not only because of their geographical scale, but also because of their economic and military-strategic value. These areas contain considerable hydrocarbon reserves, biological resources, and potentially critical transport corridors, including routes connected with the development of the Northern Sea Route. Thus, the polar sector

principle allows Moscow to frame its Arctic presence as historically grounded, legally justified, and directly linked to national security and economic development interests (Gitsu & Gitsu, 2018).

The second approach is the concept of the “internationalization” of the Arctic, which is actively promoted by the United States and a number of Western states. Within this logic, the Arctic is not viewed primarily as a space divided into privileged national sectors, but rather as a region where the principles of freedom of navigation, open access, and shared international use should prevail. This interpretation is particularly beneficial to the United States. It guarantees broad operational freedom for the U.S. Navy and commercial fleet, facilitates access to Arctic resources and maritime routes, and creates political and legal opportunities to limit the consolidation of Russia’s dominant regional position.

At the same time, the American position contains a significant legal paradox. The United States continues to rely on many provisions of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as reflecting customary international law, yet it has still not ratified the Convention itself. This allows Washington to preserve a high degree of strategic flexibility: it can invoke the norms that serve its interests while avoiding the full range of treaty-based obligations and institutional procedures associated with formal participation in the Convention (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982). In this context, the U.S. position on the Arctic legal order is shaped not only by legal reasoning, but also by broader geopolitical calculations.

This contradiction became especially visible in December 2023, when the U.S. Department of State unilaterally declared the outer limits of the American continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles. The move provoked criticism from Moscow, which rejected the legitimacy of these claims and argued that they were incompatible with established procedures of international law (On the non-recognition by the Russian Federation of the outer limits of the U.S. continental shelf established unilaterally, 2023). From the Russian perspective, the unilateral nature of the American declaration undermines the legal mechanisms intended to regulate continental shelf claims and demonstrates the selective character of Washington’s approach to international legal norms. Consequently, the dispute over the continental shelf is not only a legal disagreement, but also an expression of a broader geopolitical conflict over the future rules of Arctic governance.

A key factor determining the intensity of this rivalry is the enormous resource potential of the Arctic. The region is widely regarded as one of the world’s most important reserves of untapped natural wealth. According to estimates cited in the literature, the Arctic contains approximately 22% of global oil reserves and 23% of global natural gas reserves (Lazareva, 2024). These figures explain why questions of sovereignty, jurisdiction, and access to the continental shelf have acquired such strategic significance. Control over Arctic hydrocarbon resources may influence long-term energy security, export potential, and the position of states in global energy markets.

However, the importance of the Arctic is not limited to oil and gas. The region also contains substantial deposits of strategically significant minerals. It is estimated to hold up to 40% of global palladium reserves, 20% of diamond reserves, 15% of platinum reserves, as well as considerable volumes of cobalt, nickel, and rare earth metals (Lazareva, 2024). These resources are essential for high-technology industries, military production, renewable energy systems, and the global transition toward advanced industrial and digital economies. Therefore, the Arctic is increasingly perceived not only as an energy frontier, but also as a critical mineral base with direct implications for technological sovereignty and national security.

As a result, competition for control over Arctic resources inevitably contributes to the militarization of the region. The struggle is not limited to economic extraction; it also involves the protection of infrastructure, the securing of maritime routes, the demonstration of sovereignty, and the ability to project power in extreme northern conditions. Legal ambiguity, resource abundance, and strategic geography reinforce one another, transforming the Arctic into a space where economic interests, legal claims, and military planning are closely intertwined. In this sense, the militarization of the Arctic should be understood not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a consequence of the broader structural contradictions embedded in the region’s legal and geopolitical order.

2. Russian Federation Security Policy in the Arctic

Russia’s strategic policy in the Arctic has undergone a gradual but significant transformation, moving from a predominantly resource-oriented model toward a broader framework that combines economic development, comprehensive security, sovereignty protection, and long-term sustainable governance. In the early post-Soviet period, the Arctic was viewed primarily through the prism of resource extraction and economic potential. However, as international competition in the region intensified, and as the military-political environment around Russia became more confrontational, Moscow’s Arctic policy acquired a more explicitly strategic and security-oriented character.

The first major strategic document in this area, The Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2020 and Beyond adopted in 2008, placed primary emphasis on the use of the Arctic as a strategic resource base for the country’s socio-economic development (On the Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2020 and Beyond, 2008). In this document,

the Arctic was conceptualized above all as a territory of economic opportunity: a space containing hydrocarbons, biological resources, minerals, and transport potential. The logic of state policy was therefore closely connected with the development of natural resources, the expansion of infrastructure, and the strengthening of Russia's economic presence in the region.

In the current strategic documents, however, this emphasis has been substantially broadened. The Presidential Decree of March 5, 2020 No. 164, On the Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035, and the Presidential Decree of October 26, 2020 No. 645, On the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security up to 2035, give priority not only to economic development, but also to ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation ([Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 164, 2020](#); [Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 645, 2020](#)). This shift demonstrates that the Arctic is no longer regarded solely as a resource frontier. It is increasingly understood as a strategically important space whose control is directly connected with the protection of national interests, territorial security, and Russia's position in the international system.

Such a transformation indicates the conversion of the Arctic into a potential strategic foothold for Russia. Control over the region is linked not only to access to natural resources, but also to the protection of maritime communications, the development of military infrastructure, the functioning of strategic deterrence, and the ability to respond to external pressure in the High North. In this sense, the Arctic has become one of the key spatial dimensions of Russian national security policy. Its significance is determined simultaneously by economic, military, geopolitical, and symbolic factors ([Kazanin, 2022](#)).

This securitized understanding of the Arctic is also reflected in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. The document explicitly formulates the objective of neutralizing the course toward the militarization of the region pursued by NATO countries led by the United States ([Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2023](#)). From the Russian perspective, the growing activity of NATO states in the Arctic, the expansion of military exercises, and the strengthening of Western military infrastructure near Russia's northern borders are interpreted as direct challenges to regional stability. Consequently, Moscow frames its own military and infrastructural activity in the Arctic as a defensive response intended to preserve strategic balance and prevent the erosion of its security position.

Russia currently retains the strongest military position in the Arctic. The core of its military presence remains the Kola Peninsula, where the Northern Fleet is stationed. This region is of exceptional strategic importance because it serves as the main base for a significant part of Russia's naval nuclear forces. The Northern Fleet carries approximately two-thirds of the country's strategic second-strike nuclear potential, including seven nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. Therefore, the Arctic zone is not only a conventional military theater, but also an integral element of Russia's strategic nuclear deterrence system. The security of this region is directly connected with the survivability of Russia's nuclear triad and its ability to maintain a credible deterrent capability.

Another important component of Russia's Arctic strategy is the development of its icebreaker fleet. In January 2025, President Vladimir Putin emphasized that Russia is intensifying the development of this fleet, which is already the largest in the world. According to available information, it comprises 42 icebreakers, including 8 nuclear-powered and 34 diesel-electric vessels. The icebreaker fleet has a dual strategic function. On the one hand, it supports commercial navigation, resource extraction, and the development of the Northern Sea Route. On the other hand, it strengthens Russia's ability to maintain a permanent physical presence in the Arctic and to ensure access to remote northern territories under extreme climatic conditions. Construction is currently underway on a new nuclear-powered icebreaker which, according to available information, is expected to become the most powerful in the world and to enter service by 2030.

Alongside the development of its fleet, Russia is systematically expanding military infrastructure throughout the Arctic zone. This includes the modernization and construction of military bases, aviation training grounds, radar systems, air defense facilities, and missile defense components. Such infrastructure allows Russia to monitor the air and maritime space of the Arctic more effectively, protect critical facilities, and ensure the operational mobility of its armed forces in the region. The creation of this infrastructure reflects a long-term strategy aimed at consolidating Russia's presence in the High North and reducing the vulnerability of its northern borders. In this context, the Arctic zone is regarded as an integral component of Russia's strategic nuclear deterrence and broader national defense system ([Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024](#)).

A proper understanding of Russia's Arctic policy also requires close attention to the status of the Northern Sea Route. The NSR occupies a central place in Russian strategic thinking because it combines economic, legal, logistical, and security dimensions. Russia considers the main straits along the route to be historically established internal waters and therefore subject to its jurisdiction. In defending this position, Moscow also relies on Article 234 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which grants coastal states the right to adopt and enforce special regulations for navigation in ice-covered waters where severe climatic conditions create risks to the marine environment ([United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982](#)).

For Russia, this legal argument is essential because it supports enhanced regulatory control over navigation along the Northern Sea Route. Such control includes requirements concerning pilotage, icebreaker assistance, environmental protection, notification procedures, and the movement of foreign vessels. Western states, especially the United States, tend to interpret parts of the route through the prism of freedom of navigation and international maritime transit. As a result, the legal status of the NSR becomes one of the central points of disagreement between Russia and the West in the Arctic.

In the 2020 strategic documents, the Northern Sea Route is defined as a national transport communication competitive in the global market. This wording is significant because it reflects a shift in Russian policy. The NSR is no longer viewed only as a domestic transport artery connecting remote northern territories with the rest of the country. It is increasingly presented as a future international logistics corridor capable of linking Europe and Asia and competing with traditional maritime routes. Thus, the development of the NSR serves several objectives at once: strengthening Russia's sovereignty in the Arctic, supporting the economic development of the northern regions, expanding export infrastructure, and increasing Russia's role in global transportation networks.

At the same time, the implementation of Russia's Arctic projects has come under growing external economic pressure. After 2022, Western sanctions significantly complicated the development of major infrastructure and energy projects in the region, including Arctic LNG 2. These restrictions affected access to financing, advanced technologies, shipping services, and specialized equipment necessary for large-scale Arctic extraction and liquefied natural gas production. According to the cited study, the declared objective of U.S. policy was not simply to limit the project, but to terminate it altogether (Lazareva, 2024). This demonstrates that economic instruments have become an important part of geopolitical competition in the Arctic.

Therefore, Russia's contemporary Arctic policy cannot be reduced either to resource development or to military expansion alone. It represents a complex strategy in which economic modernization, transport connectivity, legal sovereignty, military security, and resistance to external pressure are closely interconnected. The Arctic is simultaneously a resource base, a strategic defense perimeter, a logistical corridor, and a space of international legal contestation. The transformation of Russian Arctic policy from a resource-oriented model to a comprehensive security and development model reflects the broader evolution of the international environment, in which the Arctic has become one of the key arenas of geopolitical rivalry.

3. United States Security Policy in the Arctic

U.S. interest in Arctic security has undergone a substantial transformation over the past two decades. Initially, American policy toward the Arctic was shaped primarily by environmental, scientific, and economic considerations. However, as the region became more accessible due to climate change, and as strategic rivalry with Russia and China intensified, the Arctic gradually acquired a more pronounced military and geopolitical significance in U.S. strategic thinking. Thus, the evolution of American Arctic policy reflects not only changes in the physical environment of the region, but also broader shifts in the international security order.

A study based on thematic analysis of 918 official policy documents and reports prepared by American think tanks between 2005 and 2025 identifies three characteristic stages in the evolution of U.S. Arctic priorities: environmental protection, energy resource development, and geopolitical competition (Liu, 2025). At the first stage, the Arctic was largely interpreted through the lens of climate change, environmental vulnerability, and the need for international scientific cooperation. At the second stage, attention shifted toward the region's economic potential, especially its hydrocarbon resources, maritime routes, and infrastructure opportunities. At the third and current stage, the Arctic is increasingly viewed as a space of strategic rivalry, where military presence, alliance coordination, deterrence, and control over critical transport corridors have become central policy concerns.

According to the same study, the conflict in Ukraine and the deepening of Russia–China cooperation in the Arctic have accelerated this transformation. Against this background, the United States has steadily strengthened security cooperation with its allies and expanded its military presence in the region (Liu, 2025). For Washington, the Arctic is no longer a peripheral or secondary theater. It is increasingly perceived as an area where the strategic interests of the United States, Russia, China, and NATO intersect. This has led to a more active American policy aimed at maintaining freedom of navigation, protecting northern approaches to North America, supporting allied defense capabilities, and preventing the emergence of a regional order dominated by Moscow.

A key document in this process was the 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR). The strategy is structured around four main pillars: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international governance (National Strategy for the Arctic Region, 2022). This structure demonstrates that the United States continues to present its Arctic policy as multidimensional, combining military, ecological, economic, and diplomatic priorities. Nevertheless, the security pillar occupies a particularly important place, because it directly links the Arctic to the broader system of U.S. national defense and alliance policy.

In the security dimension, the 2022 strategy openly identifies Russia as the principal threat and declares the intention to strengthen deterrence capabilities in the Arctic together with NATO allies ([National Strategy for the Arctic Region, 2022](#)). This approach reflects the growing perception in Washington that Russian military activity in the High North is not merely regional in character, but forms part of a wider strategy aimed at protecting Russia's nuclear deterrent, controlling maritime routes, and strengthening its position in a strategically sensitive area. Consequently, U.S. Arctic policy is increasingly connected with NATO planning, transatlantic security, and the containment of Russian power projection.

In July 2024, the U.S. Department of Defense published the 2024 Arctic Strategy, which replaced the analogous 2019 document ([Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024](#)). The principal novelty of the new strategy lies in its broader threat assessment. Unlike earlier approaches that focused primarily on Russia, the 2024 document identifies both Russia and China as strategic challenges to U.S. interests in the Arctic. Russia is viewed as the dominant military actor in the region, while China's growing political, economic, scientific, and infrastructural presence is increasingly interpreted as a long-term strategic problem ([Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024](#)).

The inclusion of China in the U.S. Arctic threat assessment is especially significant. Although China is not an Arctic coastal state, it has declared itself a "near-Arctic state" and has sought to participate in regional economic and logistical projects, including those connected with the Northern Sea Route. From the American perspective, China's Arctic activity is not independent from broader patterns of Sino-Russian cooperation. Instead, Washington increasingly views Beijing's presence in the region as part of a wider strategic alignment with Moscow. This interpretation reinforces the perception that the Arctic may become not only a zone of Russia–West competition, but also an important dimension of the broader confrontation between the United States and the Russia–China partnership.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has further changed the strategic balance in the region. Their membership has de facto transformed NATO into the dominant military force in the Arctic region, especially in Northern Europe and the Baltic-Arctic strategic space. Washington uses this new configuration to strengthen allied coordination, improve access to northern infrastructure, expand military mobility, and increase the alliance's ability to operate close to Russia's northwestern borders ([Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024](#)). From the U.S. point of view, NATO enlargement creates new opportunities for deterrence and forward presence. From the Russian perspective, however, it represents an additional factor contributing to the militarization of the Arctic and the deterioration of regional security.

Despite these ambitious strategic declarations, the United States continues to lag significantly behind Russia in military-technical and infrastructural terms in the Arctic. At the turn of 2024–2025, the U.S. Coast Guard possessed only two aging icebreakers, while Russia maintained a much larger and more capable icebreaker fleet ([Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024](#)). This imbalance has serious practical consequences. Icebreakers are essential not only for commercial navigation and emergency response, but also for maintaining regular state presence, supporting military mobility, conducting scientific missions, and ensuring access to remote Arctic areas. The limited American icebreaker fleet therefore restricts Washington's ability to project influence in the region on a continuous basis.

Another structural weakness is the lack of adequate port infrastructure in Alaska. At the same period, Alaska had no deep-water port capable of receiving large-displacement vessels ([Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024](#)). This creates logistical constraints for the deployment and support of large naval platforms, complicates military operations in the High North, and limits the effectiveness of the U.S. Arctic presence. In comparison with Russia's extensive network of Arctic bases, ports, airfields, and support facilities, American infrastructure remains underdeveloped and geographically limited.

The NORAD system, the integrated aerospace defense arrangement of the United States and Canada, also faces serious modernization challenges. Originally designed during the Cold War to detect and respond to Soviet air and missile threats, the system has become substantially outdated in the context of new technological developments. The emergence of Russian hypersonic weapons, long-range precision strike systems, and advanced missile capabilities has raised doubts about NORAD's adequacy in its current form ([Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024](#)). As a result, the modernization of northern aerospace defense has become one of the key tasks of U.S. and Canadian security policy in the Arctic.

At the same time, U.S. military construction in the region is accelerating. The 2024 Arctic Strategy envisages the systematic expansion of military infrastructure in Alaska by 2030 ([2024 Arctic Strategy, 2024](#)). This includes improvements to bases, airfields, communications systems, surveillance capabilities, and logistical facilities needed to support operations in extreme northern conditions. The objective is not only to compensate for existing infrastructural weaknesses, but also to create a more resilient and flexible military posture capable of responding to future crises in the Arctic.

The submarine component also plays an important role in U.S. Arctic capabilities. According to the cited literature, approximately 70 U.S. submarines are capable of conducting under-ice operations ([Lazareva, 2024](#)). This gives the United States a significant military instrument in the Arctic, even despite its limitations in surface infrastructure and icebreaker capacity. Under-ice submarine operations are particularly important because they

allow for stealth, strategic mobility, intelligence collection, and nuclear deterrence in a region where surface navigation remains difficult and seasonally constrained. Therefore, while the United States lags behind Russia in some visible Arctic capabilities, it retains serious advantages in certain advanced naval domains.

Bilateral security cooperation agreements concluded with Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark in 2023–2024 further strengthen the U.S. position in the region. These agreements allow Washington to deploy personnel, military equipment, and weapons in these countries on a permanent or long-term basis (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024). Such arrangements deepen the military integration of the Nordic countries with the United States and expand the operational geography of American forces in Northern Europe. They also create a network of forward positions that can support NATO activities in the Arctic and adjacent regions.

Particular significance in recent U.S. strategic assessments is attached to the changing role of the Arctic in intelligence analysis. In the 2025 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, the region is considered primarily as one area of potential Russia–China interaction and as a zone where Russian interests are constrained by the resource and military costs associated with the war in Ukraine (Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, 2025). In other words, the Arctic appears in the 2025 assessment mainly as part of a broader discussion of Russian and Chinese behavior, rather than as a fully separate strategic theater.

In the 2026 assessment, however, the Arctic is singled out as an independent section. Russia is defined as the principal challenge to the United States in the region, while China is presented as a secondary but gradually strengthening actor operating mainly through partnership with Moscow and through projects connected with the Northern Sea Route (Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, 2026). This structural change in the document is important because it indicates the growing significance of the Arctic in U.S. strategic planning. The region is no longer treated merely as a secondary extension of other geopolitical conflicts. Instead, it is increasingly recognized as an autonomous space of future military, logistical, and resource competition.

According to ATA-2026, Russia controls about half of the Arctic coastline and views the region as an integral component of its economic well-being and national security. This assessment corresponds to the broader American understanding of Russia's Arctic strategy: Moscow is seen as seeking to preserve military superiority, protect the Northern Sea Route, secure access to natural resources, and maintain the strategic depth necessary for nuclear deterrence. At the same time, the document notes that the war in Ukraine limits Moscow's ability to fully realize its Arctic ambitions, especially because of financial, technological, and military pressures. However, these limitations do not halt Russia's military build-up in the region.

Thus, the evolution of U.S. Arctic policy demonstrates a clear movement from environmental and economic priorities toward a more security-centered approach. The Arctic is increasingly integrated into American strategic thinking as a region where deterrence, alliance politics, military infrastructure, great-power rivalry, and control over future transport routes intersect. For the United States, the principal challenge remains Russia's entrenched military and geographic position, while China represents a long-term and gradually expanding strategic factor. As a result, U.S. policy in the Arctic is becoming more active, alliance-based, and militarized, reflecting the broader transformation of the region into one of the key arenas of twenty-first-century geopolitical competition.

4. Comparative Analysis: Points of Convergence, Divergence, and Asymmetry

The comparative analysis of Russian and U.S. approaches to the Arctic reveals a complex combination of convergence, divergence, and structural asymmetry. Both states recognize the Arctic as a region of growing strategic importance, where questions of security, sovereignty, resource access, transport connectivity, and military presence are becoming increasingly interconnected. At the same time, their positions differ substantially in terms of geography, legal interpretation, institutional instruments, and the practical means through which they seek to advance their interests. These differences make the Arctic not only a space of competition between two great powers, but also an arena in which broader changes in the international order are reflected.

The principal asymmetry between Russia and the United States lies in the fact that Russia possesses objective geographical, naval, and infrastructural superiority in the region, whereas the United States relies primarily on a broad alliance network and superior financial, technological, and military-industrial capabilities. Russia is the largest Arctic coastal state, controls an extensive Arctic coastline, and has developed a dense system of military, transport, and energy infrastructure in its northern territories. This gives Moscow a significant advantage in terms of permanent presence, operational experience, logistical access, and the ability to maintain control over key Arctic spaces.

By contrast, the United States has a more limited direct territorial position in the Arctic, concentrated primarily in Alaska. Its infrastructure in the region remains less developed, and its icebreaker capabilities are significantly weaker than those of Russia. However, Washington compensates for these limitations through its global military reach, advanced technologies, intelligence capabilities, submarine fleet, and, most importantly, its alliance system. The United States does not act in the Arctic as an isolated actor; rather, it operates through NATO, bilateral defense agreements, and close cooperation with Nordic states. This allows Washington to

project influence into the Arctic indirectly, by integrating the region into the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

According to a number of Russian scholars, NATO's aggregate military potential in the Arctic significantly exceeds that of Russia. In purely quantitative and technological terms, the alliance possesses far greater combined military, economic, and industrial resources. Nevertheless, this superiority is constrained by serious functional limitations. These include the small number of icebreakers available to Western states, insufficient operational experience in extreme Arctic conditions, dependence on limited infrastructure, and incomplete satellite communication coverage in the region (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024). Therefore, NATO's overall superiority does not automatically translate into practical dominance in the Arctic environment. The region's severe climate, logistical complexity, and geographic remoteness reduce the effectiveness of conventional indicators of military power.

This creates an important distinction between potential power and operational power. NATO may possess greater aggregate resources, but Russia has a more developed regional posture. Moscow's advantage is rooted in proximity, specialization, and accumulated experience. Its military units, icebreaker fleet, airfields, ports, and support facilities are adapted to Arctic conditions to a degree that most NATO capabilities are not. Consequently, the balance of power in the Arctic cannot be assessed solely through general comparisons of defense spending or total military capacity. It must be understood through the lens of regional readiness, infrastructure, mobility, and the ability to sustain operations in harsh northern conditions.

At the same time, the United States has effectively incorporated the Arctic into NATO's area of responsibility. Although a formal declaration to that effect by the alliance itself remains largely a matter of procedure, the practical integration of the Arctic into NATO planning is already underway (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024). The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has significantly expanded the alliance's northern dimension and strengthened its presence in the European Arctic. As a result, the Arctic is increasingly connected with the security of the North Atlantic, the Baltic Sea region, and Northern Europe. This development changes the strategic environment for Russia, since its Arctic policy can no longer be framed primarily as a bilateral rivalry with the United States.

Russia is therefore compelled to respond not only to U.S. activity, but also to the widening scope of potential conflict with the entire NATO alliance. This is especially important because the Arctic is directly connected with Russia's strategic nuclear deterrence system. Facilities on the Kola Peninsula bear the main burden of this deterrent capability, including the basing and protection of the Northern Fleet and its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. From Moscow's perspective, any strengthening of NATO's military presence in the High North may create risks to the survivability of these forces. Consequently, the militarization of the Arctic is perceived by Russia not merely as a regional challenge, but as a potential threat to the foundations of strategic stability.

The divergence between Russia and the United States is also visible in their legal and political interpretations of the Arctic order. Russia emphasizes sovereignty, coastal state jurisdiction, historical rights, and enhanced control over navigation along the Northern Sea Route. The United States, by contrast, stresses freedom of navigation, open access, and the international character of maritime routes. These competing interpretations are not simply legal disagreements. They reflect different geopolitical interests: Russia seeks to preserve control over its Arctic approaches and resource base, while the United States seeks to prevent any single state from establishing exclusive dominance over emerging transport corridors and maritime spaces.

Nevertheless, there are also certain points of convergence. Both Russia and the United States recognize the growing importance of the Arctic as a region affected by climate change, infrastructure development, resource competition, and new maritime opportunities. Both states also understand that the Arctic environment creates specific risks requiring search and rescue capabilities, environmental protection mechanisms, and some degree of international coordination. In principle, areas such as emergency response, prevention of ecological disasters, scientific research, and maritime safety could remain potential fields for cooperation. However, the deterioration of broader Russia–West relations has sharply reduced the political space for such cooperation.

Particular attention should also be paid to the dynamics of Russia–China cooperation, which is exerting a growing influence on the regional balance of power. Beijing presents itself as a “near-Arctic state” and promotes the concept of the Polar Silk Road within the broader Belt and Road Initiative. Although China lacks Arctic coastline and formal coastal-state rights in the region, it seeks to expand its role through investment, scientific research, shipping projects, and partnership with Russia. For Beijing, the Arctic is important as a potential source of resources, a future logistics corridor, and a space where it can increase its influence in global governance.

Russia, in turn, has involved China in Arctic cooperation, including joint patrol operations (Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, 2026). This cooperation is partly driven by shared opposition to U.S. dominance and partly by Russia's need for alternative economic and technological partners under conditions of Western sanctions. Chinese participation can help Russia develop energy projects, maritime infrastructure, and transport routes, including those linked to the Northern Sea Route. However, this cooperation

also contains elements of asymmetry, since China's economic power and long-term strategic ambitions may gradually increase Beijing's influence over Arctic development.

This Russia–China interaction is generating increasing concern in Washington. According to the cited analysis, in July 2024 Russian and Chinese bombers entered Alaska's Air Defense Identification Zone during a joint patrol for the first time, marking the eighth such patrol since 2019 (Liu, 2025). The event was significant not only as a military episode, but also as a political signal. It demonstrated that Russia–China cooperation in the Arctic and adjacent northern regions is no longer limited to economic or diplomatic dimensions. It is increasingly acquiring a security and military component, which the United States interprets as evidence of a broader strategic alignment between Moscow and Beijing.

At the same time, the degree of Russia–China convergence should not be overstated. Their interests in the Arctic overlap, but they are not identical. Russia seeks to preserve its status as the dominant Arctic coastal power and to maintain sovereign control over the Northern Sea Route and adjacent territories. China, by contrast, is interested in greater access, international participation, and the development of Arctic routes as part of global logistics networks. Thus, cooperation between Moscow and Beijing is pragmatic and situational rather than fully institutionalized or alliance-based. It strengthens Russia's position vis-à-vis the West, but it may also create long-term dependencies and strategic uncertainties for Moscow.

Overall, the comparative picture demonstrates that the Arctic balance is shaped by several layers of asymmetry. Russia has geographical depth, regional infrastructure, an icebreaker fleet, and direct military presence. The United States has global reach, advanced technologies, financial capacity, and a powerful alliance system. NATO as a whole possesses superior aggregate potential, but still faces practical constraints in Arctic operations. China is not a coastal Arctic power, yet its economic and political presence increasingly affects regional dynamics. These overlapping asymmetries make the Arctic a particularly unstable strategic environment, where legal disputes, military planning, resource competition, and alliance politics reinforce one another.

Thus, the Arctic rivalry between Russia and the United States cannot be reduced to a simple bilateral confrontation. It is increasingly embedded in a wider geopolitical triangle involving NATO and China, as well as in the broader crisis of the international security order. The region combines the characteristics of a resource frontier, a strategic military theater, a legal gray zone, and a future transport corridor. This combination explains why the Arctic is becoming one of the most important spaces of twenty-first-century geopolitical competition.

Conclusions and Forecast

Militarization has become a structural trend in the Arctic. Both powers increasingly view the region through the prism of national security and continue to expand military infrastructure. The erosion of international legal mechanisms, reinforced by the U.S. refusal to ratify UNCLOS and by the active use of sanctions, reduces opportunities for negotiated solutions and increases the risk of unintended escalation.

The functional gap between declared U.S. ambitions and its actual military capabilities in the Arctic is gradually narrowing, but it remains substantial. This creates incentives for accelerated construction of new infrastructure, including icebreakers, ports, and satellite systems, which in turn further intensifies competition.

The emergence of the U.S.–Russia–China strategic triangle in the Arctic adds a qualitatively new dimension to regional security. According to ATA-2026, Russia and China are expanding their presence in the region in response to what they perceive as growing U.S. influence. Washington still views China as a secondary but increasingly important actor. If Russia–China cooperation in the Arctic continues to deepen, the United States may face the need for a conceptual revision of its strategy—from a model of bilateral containment of Russia to one of managing multipolar competition.

In the short term, up to 2030, one should expect the continuation of a cold-war trend in the Arctic: an increase in military exercises, further aggravation of legal disputes over the Northern Sea Route, and accelerated military build-up by all major actors alongside a decline in institutional cooperation. The probability of a large-scale direct conflict remains low, but the risk of incidents and unintended escalation is increasing. In the medium term, the decisive factor will be the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine: normalization of Russia–West relations could create conditions for the partial restoration of Arctic cooperation, particularly in environmental protection and scientific research, whereas the continuation of confrontation will reinforce the trend toward the final division of the region into competing blocs.

References

- 2024 Arctic Strategy. (2024). U.S. Department of Defense. Washington, DC: DoD. <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Jul/22/2003507411/-1/-1/0/DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY-2024.PDF>
- Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community. (2025, March). Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Washington, DC: ODNI. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf>
- Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community. (2026, March). Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Washington, DC: ODNI.
- Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. (2023). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/5047630
- Declaration on the lands and islands located in the Arctic Ocean as territory of the USSR. (1926, April 15). <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/901761796>
- Gitsu, M. A., & Gitsu, V. D. (2018). International legal regime of the Arctic (conceptual confrontation). *State and Law*, (6), 45–58.
- Kazanin, M. V. (2022). Implementation of state Arctic policy: Priorities and strategies.
- Konyshchev, V. N., & Sergunin, A. A. (2024a). On the new U.S. military strategy in the Arctic. *Arctic and North*, (57), 226–243.
- Konyshchev, V. N., & Sergunin, A. A. (2024b). Military security in the Arctic: New threats to Russia. *Moscow University Bulletin. Series 25*, 16(3), 127–152.
- Lazareva, Yu. A. (2024). The problem of interstate relations between the Russian Federation and the United States in the Northern Hemisphere. Moscow: Moscow State Linguistic University.
- Liu, P. (2025). Main directions of Arctic policy in U.S. think tank reports. *Regionology*, 33(4), 615–633.
- National Strategy for the Arctic Region. (2022, October). The White House. Washington, DC: The White House. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/National-Strategy-for-the-Arctic-Region.pdf>
- On the Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2020 and Beyond. (2008). Government of the Russian Federation. <http://government.ru/info/18359/>
- On the non-recognition by the Russian Federation of the outer limits of the U.S. continental shelf established unilaterally. (2023). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1940717/
- Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 164. (2020, March 5). On the Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035. <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/45255>
- Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 645. (2020, October 26). On the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security up to 2035. <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/45972>
- United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. (1982). United Nations. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_r.pdf