



Forum: The Security Council

Topic: Question of Addressing the Militarization of the Arctic

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## Introduction

The past decades have seen an increased interest in the international community in the Arctic Circle. Due to more ice melting as a side effect of global warming, areas previously inaccessible can now be feasibly used. It also opens the door to extracting resources from the very resource-rich land. This change has brought the region greater scientific interest, petroleum extraction, and military attention. As a result, many nations are trying to expand their dominance over sections of the Arctic so as to safeguard their strategic, environmental, and financial concerns, especially the eight Arctic states (Russia, the USA, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland). These aforementioned Arctic states, indigenous organizations, and observer countries comprise the Arctic Council as the main Arctic-governing body. Nonetheless, Indigenous groups have no formal powers to vote as decisions are made by the member states, exclusive of the non-voters.

With more and more competition surrounding the region, militarization is ramping up and leaving indigenous populations and habitats behind. Indigenous people are often excluded when decisions concerning their lands and livelihoods are made. Simultaneously, the Arctic's fragile ecosystems are threatened due to climate destabilization augmented by industrial development and militarization. Failing to solve this issue risks permanently displacing indigenous communities and wrecking a whole ecosystem. Moreover, rapid militarization has begun, as the Arctic lacks many of the protections that the Antarctic does. NATO has begun to run drills in the Arctic, and Russia has reported building or reinstating old military bases. With modern submarines being almost undetectable and the material prizes for gaining control of the Arctic so great, it is vital that a peaceful solution is found.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Colonization

The action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area.

### Sovereignty

The right and authority a state or nation has to rule itself, without any outside intervention.

### Indigenous Peoples

Defined as a group of people who are descendants of the original inhabitants of a specific land, thus having a strong connection with their traditions, beliefs, and land.

### Demilitarization

Reducing a military's presence and/or capabilities in a specific region.

### Multilateral Governance

A form of decision-making that involves many different people who are in a position of authority within a nation/state.

### Climate Destabilization

Rapid and unpredictable harmful changes to the environment.

### UN Peacekeeping Mission

A UN-backed operation that sends troops, experts, and observers to conflict zones to maintain peace, monitor human rights, and protect vulnerable populations.

## Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ)

An area in the sea, generally extending about 200 nautical miles from the coast, where the country has exclusive rights and sovereignty.

## General Overview

### The Cold War Era

Indigenous peoples like the Inuit, Saami, Nenets, Chukchi, and many others have lived sustainably in the Arctic for centuries. Nevertheless, in the contemporary geopolitical picture, the Arctic has changed its former position of a remote periphery to the strategic centre. Two significant events have contributed to this change: firstly, the end of the Cold War and the impact of climate change. The changes have led to growing access to Arctic resources as well as new technologies being developed, making Arctic militarization possible.

The Arctic region had an evident military significance during the Cold War to both the United States and the Soviet Union, especially as a destination for nuclear submarines or a site for early warning radar stations. Despite the high tensions between the two superpowers, the level of active conflict wasn't very high in the Arctic. As a whole, the Arctic was thought of as a frontier to showcase the potential of positive US-USSR relations, with a high point in Arctic diplomacy coming with the signing of the Declaration on the Protection of the Arctic Environment in June of 1991. However, it was but a few months before the breakdown of the USSR in December 1991. This agreement affirmed that the Arctic regions ought to be treated as an environmentally sensitive area.

### Post-Cold War Opportunity

But that changed in the wake of the breakdown of the Soviet Union when economic factors started to outweigh environmental and diplomatic ones. In 2008, the US Geological Survey issued a groundbreaking report assessing, find that there were an estimated 90 billion barrels of undiscovered oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids in the Arctic. This forms about 13% of the total oil estimated to not be

discovered yet in the world, 30 per cent of natural gas not yet discovered, and 20 per cent of natural gas liquids. Climate change is making such resources more available. Since 1979, September ice extent (the annual minimum) in the Arctic decreased by more than 40 percent, with multi-year ice decreasing even more rapidly. This has introduced new shipping routes such as the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage, which have reduced the travel time between Asia and Europe to as much as 40 percent in some cases.

The Arctic states, the United States, Canada, Russia, Denmark (through Greenland), Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland have quickly built up their local infrastructure. An example is Russia has reopened over 50 of the former Soviet bases in the Arctic, such as Nagurskoye air base on Franz Josef Land. This base has long runways, radar facilities, and fast deployment units. The Northern fleet has also been stationed in Murmansk by Russia to put more modern S-400 missile weapons and enhance its nuclear submarine force. To counter this, the United States has ramped up activity with its airbases in Alaska and has started again with icebreaker construction after a period of decades of neglect. NATO members like Norway conduct frequent mass exercises with foreign forces involving thousands of troops. The Exercise Cold Response, which involved 30,000 forces from 27 countries in 2022. Canada and the United Kingdom have increased surveillance by aircraft and submarines in the Arctic too.

Indigenous peoples have, however, in most cases, been the victims of these developments. Indigenous communities are often left out of the decision-making process, although they represent the very first stewards of the Arctic lands. Although there are six Indigenous groups that are permanent members of the Arctic Council, they do not participate in its voting. The existence of this inequality is all the more deleterious because the livelihoods of Indigenous people, their fishing, hunting, and reindeer herding are under direct threat at the hands of rising temperatures, industrial waste products, as well as forces of oil exploration. An example is that oil spillage in Arctic is exceptionally tricky to control due to the harsh conditions, frozen ice and poor accessibility. According to a report by the National Research Council of Canada in 2016, there is no suitable method that can be used to comprehensively clean up oil spills in icy waters.

Moreover, hydraulic fracking and offshore drilling are methods of oil and gas extraction that will pollute the sources of fresh water. In the regions such as Nunavut in Canada and Yamal Peninsula in Russia, the indigenous communities have complained of elevated respiratory diseases, pollution of water, and changes in the migration of animals. Arctic Human Development Report (2015) reveals that Indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic are more likely to experience low life expectancy, high mortality rate at an early age due to suicide, and have access to fewer educational and health services than the national populace.

The trend of militarization is not the only trend. Research and development in the fields of science, economic investment, and the actions of the private sector have exploded. The Arctic is also estimated to contain one trillion dollars worth of rare-earth minerals, uranium, gold, and zinc. The Chinese state-owned firms have funded the infrastructure in Greenland and the Russian Arctic to be a part of the so-called Polar Silk Road. China has been expanding its influence in the region as it can take the form of an observer in the Arctic Council and bilateral agreements in 2018; China has positioned itself as a Near-Arctic State.

Climate change remains the most significant underlying factor shaping the future of the region. The Arctic is warming approximately four times faster than the global average, a phenomenon known as Arctic amplification. The loss of permafrost is destabilizing infrastructure, while wildfires, rising sea levels, and methane releases from thawing ground pose long-term threats not just to the Arctic, but to the global climate system. Furthermore, the Arctic Ocean is predicted to be largely ice-free in the summer as early as 2035, which would dramatically escalate commercial activity and territorial claims.

The United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Arctic Council, among other governance frameworks, are meant to regulate the territorial disputes, the environment, along with the consultation of indigenous peoples. But UNCLOS does not include methods of enforcement, and the United States is not a signatory to it, and the Arctic Council is run by consensus and does not engage in military matters at all. This creates a legal gap in such

important permits as movement of submarines, deployment of missiles and militarization of Exclusive Economic Zones.

## Issues Caused by the Russo-Ukrainian War

After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022, tensions in the Arctic have been mounting. With growing distrust towards Russia two Arctic states being Finland and Sweden both joined NATO. Moreover, more drills in the Arctic have been held by NATO to ensure readiness against any potential threats.

It has also affected the Arctic Council, as many nations have suspended formal communication, bringing the Arctic Council to a “standstill”. Delaying progress on any potential issues.

Therefore, it could be concluded that the Arctic region is getting more disputed over overlapping issues of environment, military, and human rights. This is both due to the convergence of economic ambition, climate breakdown, and geopolitical competition that have developed very rapidly, and pressure globally needs to be activated. Unless there are better legal safeguards and equal presence to voices representing Indigenous peoples, the Arctic, moreover, will be a global hotspot and an example of unsuccessful control of environmental and social protection. Even the UK and Canada have joined in surveillance missions and submarine patrols.

## Major Parties Involved

### The Eight Arctic Member States

The UN has recognized eight member states of the Arctic regions, since the nations recognized are those that hold significant land in any Arctic region of the planet and are a part of the Arctic Council. The member states are: Canada, the USA, Russia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

### Arctic Council

The Arctic Council is a committee formally founded in 1996, which is the leading international forum for discussing Arctic issues. Consisting of the eight Arctic member states, indigenous peoples’ organizations, and temporary observers.

## Observer nations

Observer nations are non-Arctic states that have been granted official observer status in the Arctic Council. While they cannot vote, they participate in discussions, contribute to working groups, and pursue their own interests in shipping, research, and environmental monitoring.

## Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme

The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) is an internal organization founded in 1991 as a part of the Arctic Council to act as a working group, with its main function being to advise the governments of the eight Arctic member states on environment-related issues being faced, such as pollution. AMAP works closely with the government representatives of the eight member nations, as well as many indigenous groups such as the Arctic Indigenous Peoples

## Arctic Economic Council (EAC)

The Arctic Economic Council (EAC) is an independent international business membership organization that represents companies that work in the Arctic regions. The EAC pushes for sustainable economic development in the Arctic, and as the only regional business organization in the Arctic, it has members from all eight Arctic states.

## Timeline

Date	Event
1920 / February	The Svalbard Treaty was signed recognizing Norway's sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago.

- 1954 / August                      The United States begins operation of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, a radar system across the Arctic built to detect Soviet bombers.
- 1958 / September                The USS Nautilus becomes the first submarine to cross the North Pole underwater.
- 1962 / October                    During the Cuban Missile Crisis, US nuclear submarines patrolled under Arctic ice as part of the nuclear readiness posture.
- The Soviet submarine K-129 is lost near Arctic waters and later partially recovered by the CIA's secret "Project Azorian." Revealing Soviet military secrets.
- 1968 / January                    Canada launches Operation NORPLOY to assert military presence on Ellesmere Island. This reinforced Canadian sovereignty claims and increased defense posturing in the High Arctic.
- 1971 / June
- 1982 / December                The UN issues a convention establishing legal frameworks on territorial claims within the Arctic Circle, known as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and establishes exclusive economic zones (EEZs).
- 1983 / September                Soviet missile systems misinterpret NATO Arctic drills as a nuclear strike. Known as the Stanislav-Petrov false alarm incident.
- 1991 / June                        The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) was launched under the Arctic Council, focusing on environmental data and pollution.

1996 / September	The Arctic Council is established to help protect Indigenous rights and preserve international cooperation.
1997 / March	The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) is formed to review EEZ claims using scientific data. Allowing for some nations to claim territory beyond the previous convention of 200 nautical miles.
2007 / August	The UN adopts the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), affirming Indigenous land and governance rights.
2008 / July	A US Geological Survey report published claims the Arctic holds 13% of undiscovered oil and 30% of natural gas.
2008 / November	Indigenous protests begin across Canada and Greenland, demanding participation in governance. These were often ignored, further marginalizing Indigenous voices.
2014 / March	Russia reopens Soviet-era Arctic bases, including Nagurskoye. This marked the beginning of a new phase of Arctic remilitarization.
2018 / October	The Arctic Council debates giving Indigenous groups voting rights, but the proposal is rejected.
2019 / January	China declares itself a “Near Arctic State” and proposes the Arctic Silk Road. This marked a shift toward Chinese economic involvement in Arctic infrastructure.
2020 / September	Melting ice allows the first full commercial Northern Sea Route transit by a non-Russian LNG carrier. This opened new trade routes and increased infrastructure development.
2022 / February	Russia, NATO, and China launch joint Arctic military drills. This alarmed Indigenous communities and environmental groups due to regional escalation.
2024 / April	Canada, Denmark, and Russia submit overlapping claims for extended EEZs to the UN CLCS. Finland also joins NATO.

## Attempts to Solve the Issue

### 1. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) –1982

The United Nations held a convention in 1982 that aimed to restrict military presence in the waters, creating EEZs that prevent any military ships from entering other nations' sovereign waters. Yet, it has caused some issues due to not being clear enough about overlapping territorial claims.

### 2. Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) –1997

Since nations wanted more freedom in their ocean land, not having to spend millions on stealth submarines, nations started making claims for extended EEZs in their favor. In turn, the UN created a system that would review these claims, judging them based on a set of criteria and then reporting to the nations their findings, allowing or refusing such claims based on those findings.

### 3. Indigenous Rights (UNDRIP) – 2007

The United Nations established a declaration of indigenous peoples' rights globally, also focusing on arctic indigenous peoples groups. This declaration preserves their rights to participate in decision-making and have the right to vote in many councils, protecting the peoples' land and traditions. This inevitably failed since there were no measures taken to enforce it under international law.

### 4. Declaration on the Protection of the Arctic Environment

This agreement, signed by the 8 Arctic states in June 1991, aimed to protect the Arctic's environment through cooperation in studying and measuring the environment. While it was hailed as a success, its efficacy fell apart in part due to the dissolution of the USSR and rising tensions after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

## Possible solutions

### 1- Arctic Demilitarization Agreement

A possible solution is to sign a new supranational treaty to demilitarize the Arctic. This can be done through trust-building measures to decrease surveillance in the region, as well as limiting what types of military weapons can operate to protect the local environment.

### 2- Reforming the Arctic Council to give Indigenous Groups the right to vote.

This solution aims to reform the Arctic Council's rules and policies, which state that only the eight Arctic states are allowed to vote. The solution aims to give voting rights to Indigenous groups, preserving their culture and rights within the Arctic Circle. This would more importantly lead to the democratization of the Arctic Council, reflecting the best mutual interests, as well as balancing the powers within the council, and making the role of military power in the region weaker.

### 3- UN Peacekeeping Programme for the Preservation of Indigenous Peoples' Rights.

The creation of a specialized UN peacekeeping and observation mission focused on protecting the cultural, territorial, and political rights of Indigenous peoples across the Arctic. The mission would support and help provide healthcare, education, and the basic necessities of abused indigenous people within the Arctic Circle.

## Guiding Questions

- 1- Which Indigenous communities have been affected, and how have their rights been violated or ignored?
- 2- What legal protections exist for Arctic Indigenous peoples under international law?
- 3- What international bodies are best positioned to enforce Indigenous protections?
- 4- How can resource extraction be regulated to protect Indigenous lands and ecosystems?
- 5- What are the security risks of increased military presence in the Arctic, and how do they affect local populations?
- 6- What role could a UN peacekeeping or monitoring mission play in protecting Indigenous rights in the Arctic?
- 7- How can Indigenous peoples be given formal political power in Arctic governance?
- 8- How can the Arctic Council be reformed to include non-state actors like Indigenous organizations with voting power?
- 9- What economic models would ensure Arctic development benefits Indigenous communities directly?
- 10- How can international courts (like the ICJ) be used to settle Arctic Indigenous disputes?
- 11- How can demilitarization agreements reduce geopolitical tensions while protecting Indigenous communities?
- 12- How have Arctic colonization efforts impacted Indigenous youth, education, and health outcomes?

## Appendix

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