

CHAIR REPORT

Committee: Disarmament and International Security, First General Assembly

Topic: The Question of Preventing the Militarization of Arctic Shipping Corridors

Name: Channatalyn Mok

Position: Head Chair

Introduction

Climate change has brought upon unprecedented changes to the Arctic as the sea ice rapidly melts, leading to a disruption in ecosystems, exposure of unexploited resources, and the opening of new shipping routes. What once was a frozen fortress had now become a highly desirable and pivotal location for strategic commercial activities.

Arctic and non-Arctic states have similarly shown interest in using the newly formed shipping routes for shorter distances in maritime activities, cuts in transportation costs, the extraction of untapped resources and vigorous assertions of sovereignty. This has been perceived as a step towards strengthening ties between Europe, Asia and North America. However, as the accessibility of these shipping routes becomes more feasible with climate change, nations have increasingly interpreted it as an intensified competition for socio-economic influence, tactical advantage, and territorial control in the Arctic.

With nations continuing to seek power and authority in a rapidly shifting Arctic, this topic encourages delegates to examine whether socio-economic interests are the sole contribution to the militarization of the Arctic shipping routes, and discuss ways to properly utilize them, while protecting national sovereignty, international law, and the security of the indigenous communities and wildlife in the Arctic.

Key Terms

Militarization

The enhanced and increased presence of militaries for geopolitical and political reasons.

The Northern Sea Route (NSR)

A shipping route in the Arctic, which crosses along Russia's Arctic Coast.

The Northwest Passage (NWP)

A shipping route in the Arctic, which crosses along the Canadian Arctic Archipelago.

Transpolar Sea Route (TSR)

An emerging shipping route in the central Arctic.

Freedom of Navigation

A key principle in international law, codified under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); it allows for vessels from all sovereign states to travel freely through maritime zones such as the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

Polar Silk Road

An addition to China's Belt-and-Road initiative, it primarily functioned as a strategic framework to develop shipping routes and resource-extraction infrastructure in the Arctic.

Dual-use Infrastructure

Infrastructure such as ports, airfields, roads, and systems, which are designed and used for two purposes: to serve civilization and to carry out military activity.

Nuclear-powered Icebreakers

Heavy Russian vessels with nuclear reactors that power propellers to break through sea ice in polar waters.

Nuclear Deterrence

A military strategy where nations threaten to use nuclear weapons as a defense mechanism to prevent other nations from launching a nuclear attack on them.

Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

Measures taken to prevent and address conflicts, and build mutual trust between states, by focusing on information transparency and communication; it can range from informal to formal, unilateral to multilateral, military to political, etc.

Background Information

Historically, the Arctic was a region defined by internal, territorial and resource accommodation claims; but once the Cold War began, it transformed into a heavily militarized zone with a vital appeal for utility. Because the Arctic was considered to be a checkpoint for a shorter route between the United States and the Soviet Union, it held plantations of long range bombs, nuclear weapons and other military weapons beneath its ice caps as a result of the conflict. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the 1996 Ottawa Declaration established the Arctic Council to foster regional cooperation and incorporate international frameworks, such as the UN treaties aimed at protecting its sea and landscape.

Climate change had also emerged as a crucial and notorious threat to the Arctic. The melted sea ice opened 3 new shipping corridors – the NSR, the NWP, and the TSR – providing more opportunities for efficient maritime travel and activities. However, rather than states perceiving this as a step towards strengthening ties and integrated interests, it has sparked a heightened sense of strategic competition for domination. A major instance is Russia and the NSR; Russia has enforced strict regulations over the route by starting up military systems and bases from the Soviet Union Era, which brought upon concerns over the security of the indigenous communities, habitats, and shared boundaries among neighbouring Arctic states. In early 2022, Russia's President Vladimir Putin met with China's President Xi Jin Ping to discuss the progress of the Polar Silk Road. Although the Polar Silk Road was seen as a framework for enhanced cooperation, Western nations have raised concerns over its dual-use infrastructure, which puts the communities at risk, considering the close proximity to the military activities.

With the implication that the Arctic Council cannot legally and explicitly act against any form of militarization in the region, preventing geopolitical tensions from rising has gotten more difficult, even with chartered frameworks.

Major Countries and/or Organizations Involved

Russia

Russia currently stands with the largest military presence in the High North of the Arctic. It has the longest coastline along the Arctic, and they are actively focused on utilizing the NSR. Russia is also the country to build and operate Nuclear-powered Icebreakers and nuclear deterrence, seemingly showcased as a threat towards other Arctic states. Additionally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 had caused severe consequences for the Arctic Council's security and defense measures. Russia's dominance has turned the Arctic into a competitive zone of colliding interests between nations, and the potential of it leading to an armed conflict.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

As Russia and China increase cooperation in the Arctic, NATO is currently increasing their military presence as a defensive provision in the North of the Arctic with the establishment of the “Arctic Sentry”, which is a multi-domain defensive military operation. Furthermore, NATO also administers a number of other operations such as the Joint Force Command Norfolk to secure strategic sea lines of communication, the Combined Air Operations Centre in Norway to monitor the airspace in the High North, and the Forward Land Forces in Finland to contribute to defend across the Eastern and Northern planks. These operations have helped expand NATO’s capacity and ability to secure the Arctic region, especially in Nordic states.

China

China has shown immense interest in the development of the shipping routes through the Polar Silk Road. China also considers itself to be a “near-Arctic state” and is dedicated to utilizing its dual-use infrastructure and research vessels for cooperative Arctic activities with Russia. China’s increasing presence and support in these matters suggests that Russia’s dominance will continuously raise concerns for the NATO Arctic members.

United States

The United States also considers itself to be an Arctic state through Alaska and is the most prominent endorser of the Freedom of Navigation. The U.S believes that the NSR and the NWP are both international straits, open to all nations’ vessels. Driven by this belief, the nation has intensified its strategic interest in pursuing Greenland, because of its geographic benefits.

Canada

Canada is the Arctic state that controls the NWP and believes that it passes through its own sovereign territory. Canada has regulations for maritime safety and co-established the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), a defense operation against threats towards North America, with the United States. However, with the escalated tension from Russia’s strategies which may affect NORAD’s ability to detect any oncoming threats, Canada is profoundly working to invest in more military operations, as well as extending dual-use infrastructure such as the runway in Inuvik.

The Nordic States (Norway, Iceland, Denmark (Greenland), Sweden, Finland)

With its roles as Arctic states and fully NATO members, the Nordic states’ affiliation with the Alliance has helped build a stronger defense unit against Russia’s ventures. These states are mostly focused on overseeing naval infrastructure and surveillance for NATO’s defense operations.

International Maritime Organization (IMO)

The International Maritime Organization regulates frameworks relevant to protecting the Arctic environment, maritime safety, and shipping operations. Their international code for ships operating in polar waters, the Polar Code, is essential to the security of ships operating in the Arctic seas.

Arctic Council

The Arctic Council is an intergovernmental organization consisting of the 8 Arctic states - Russia, Canada, the United States (Alaska), Denmark (Greenland), Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland. This organization focuses closely on mandating frameworks for cooperation and security in the Arctic, but they cannot directly prevent the militarization from occurring. The Arctic Council subsequently suspended its cooperation with Russia in Arctic issues, following the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine War.

Timeline of Events

<i>Date</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>16 November 1994</i>	<i>The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was established, setting regulations and frameworks on maritime activities</i>
<i>19 September 1996</i>	<i>The Arctic Council was formed in Ottawa, Canada, with 8 member states - Russia, Canada, the United States, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Norway</i>
<i>2 August 2007</i>	<i>Following the Arktika 2007 expedition, Russia sent two submarines to plant a titanium flag and collect sediment samples from the North Pole seabed to determine whether their territorial claims were true</i>
<i>28 May 2008</i>	<i>Representatives of the five coastal states bordering the Arctic Ocean - Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States - signed and adopted the Ilulissat Declaration</i>
<i>3 March 2022</i>	<i>Amidst the Russia-Ukraine War, the Arctic Council members declared that they will pause participation in all meetings and further activities, as Russia is the council Chair</i>

2023-2024	<i>Sweden and Finland joins NATO, leaving Russia remaining as the only non-NATO member in the Arctic Council</i>
11 February 2026	<i>NATO establishes the Arctic Sentry, a multi-domain military operation used to strengthen their presence in the North of the Arctic, as a defense against Russia's increased dominance</i>
6 June 2026	<i>NATO establishes the Forward Land Forces Finland (FLF), a multi-national military operation used to further increase their presence in the North of the Arctic, following the establishment of the Combined Air Operations Centre in Norway (CAOC)</i>
Present	<i>The Arctic is still facing severe changes to its physical landscape, and nations are racing towards the expansion and domination of its resources and shipping routes</i>

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- ***UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS):** A legally-binding international agreement with a comprehensive outline of laws, in regards to the use of seas and oceans. This treaty oversees areas such as navigation, territorial boundaries, maritime jurisdiction, passage of vessels, and resource management.*
- ***The Polar Code:** Enforced on the 1st of January 2017 by the International Maritime Organization, the Polar Code administers a range of maritime activities and concerns - operations such as licensing ships in the Arctic and Antarctica, search and rescue, and maintaining eco-systems.*
- ***Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA):** Aligned with the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement and the Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the agreement intends to prevent unregulated commercial fishing in high seas that are not authorized by any country and can only do so if they follow international laws.*
- ***The Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) :** A declaration to protect the Arctic environment through a number of frameworks such as sustainable development in the North without implying ecological or cultural impacts on the indigenous communities living in the Arctic and the landscape.*

- ***The Ilulissat Declaration 2008:*** *An international, legal framework signed by the 5 nations bordering the Arctic Ocean, to address the prominent changes occurring in the Arctic – melting sea ice, livelihoods of habitats and indigenous communities, and the exploitation of resources.*

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

There have been numerous multilateral efforts and frameworks made on maritime safety in the Arctic, but the militarization of it has never been explicitly addressed. When the Arctic Council was established, its mandate strictly stated that the council cannot involve or resolve matters in military defense or offense. Some important frameworks that were adopted by the Arctic Council and its members include the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the IMO's Polar Code.

UNCLOS ensured maritime boundaries were met, innocent passages through straits weren't contested, and other environmentally-targeted provisions. Similarly, the IMO's Polar Code focused on environmental safety and standard navigational provisions for vessels. However, following broader geopolitical conflicts, most notably the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022, the Arctic Council suspended its activities, leaving the Arctic matters with no profound governing body to oversee it.

Possible Solutions

Considering that there are no explicit frameworks against the current Arctic militarization, delegates can and are highly encouraged to propose frameworks that are strictly dedicated to the regional demilitarization and revisit ones that need to be emphasized. Because there hasn't been an escalation in geopolitical tensions that could lead to an armed conflict between the actors, the implementation of Confidence-Building Measures can be viable. Implementing this can further enhance communication between the states to reduce uncertainty and increase transparency over the sovereign rights of the shipping routes and the operations of jurisdictional maritime travel.

Furthermore, with principles such as the Freedom of Navigation, it positively ensures that global routes are accessible. However, there is a high chance of stimulating misunderstandings, especially if coastal Arctic states view foreign vessels passing through the routes as threats to sovereignty. Therefore, it's also important to formulate feasible frameworks for vessel operations in the Arctic sea, a clearly established consensus for commercial naval deployments and addressing transparency in dual-use infrastructure to avoid putting the communities' security at risk.

Another prominent solution is to reinforce and strengthen the adoption of UNCLOS, as its provisions on innocent passage and transit passage in international straits without territorial conflict played an essential role in Arctic security. Finally, it is indispensable that there is a continued engagement and discussions between states to maintain diplomacy and reach a mutually acceptable resolution.

Works Cited

Provide all resources used to write this report in MLA latest format.

“Arctic Security”. *NATO*, 24 Jul. 2026.

<https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/arctic-security>

“Arctic Security Under Threat: Urgent needs in a changing geopolitical and environmental landscape”. *Senate of Canada*, n.d.

<https://sencanada.ca/en/info-page/parl-44-1/sect-arctic-defence/>

Evans, Jen. “The History and Future of the Arctic State Conflict: The Arctic Institute Conflict Series”. *The Arctic Institute*. 25 May, 2021.

<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/the-history-and-future-of-arctic-state-conflict-the-arctic-institute-conflict-series/>

Heggstad, Ingrid Solid. “How Climate Change Amplifies Arctic Tensions, but does not drive it”. *The Arctic Institute*, 19 Feb. 2026.

<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/climate-change-amplifies-arctic-tensions-drive/>

“How the Russia-Ukraine War Challenges Arctic Governance”. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 10 May. 2022.

<https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-russia-ukraine-war-challenges-arctic-governance>

“International Agreements”. *Arctic Portal*, n.d.

<https://arcticportal.org/arctic-governance/international-agreements>

“International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code)”. *International Maritime Organization*, n.d.

<https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/safety/pages/polar-code.aspx>

Gricius, Gabriella. “Geopolitical Implications of New Arctic Shipping Lanes”. *The Arctic Institute*, 18 Mar. 2021.

<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/geopolitical-implications-arctic-shipping-lanes/>

Lamazhapov, Erdem, Stensdal, Iselin and Heggelund, Gørild. “China’s Polar Silk Road: Long Game or Failed Strategy?”. *The Arctic Institute*, 14 Nov. 2023.

<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-polar-silk-road-long-game-failed-strategy/>

Nesheiwat, Julia “Why the Arctic matters to the United States”. *Atlantic Council*. 25 Feb. 2026.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/why-the-arctic-matters-to-the-united-states/>

Olech, Aleksander and Kisiel, Karolina. “Russian military presence in the Arctic: interests, infrastructure and capabilities [PART 1]”. *Leading Defence News Hub*, 10 Aug. 2026.

<https://defence24.com/geopolitics/russian-military-presence-in-the-arctic-interests-infrastructure-and-capabilities-part-1>

Parfitt, Tom. “Russia plants flag on North Pole seabed”. *The Guardian*, 2 Aug. 2007.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/02/russia.arctic>

“Why The World’s Superpowers Are Racing To Control The Arctic – BBC World Service”.

Youtube, 27 Sep. 2025. <https://youtu.be/TkRmrPQDPFw?si=DEfmECOj3ikW9XH6>

