

A scenic photograph of an Arctic landscape. In the foreground, a body of water reflects the bright blue sky. In the background, dark, snow-dusted mountains rise against the horizon. A thin, dark vertical line, possibly a mast or antenna, is visible on the right side of the frame. The sky is a vibrant blue with some wispy white clouds.

The Future **ARCTIC ORDER**

Shaped by Unipolarity, Bipolarity or Multipolarity?

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There are two misleading narratives circulating about the Arctic in international politics that cloud the view of the region today. The first is that the Arctic is removed from international politics. This narrative became prevalent after the Ukraine crisis in 2014, when some observers expressed surprise at the continuing circumpolar cooperation between Russia and the seven other Arctic states while relations involving Russia, the European Union and NATO and their member states sharply deteriorated. The second is that the Arctic became a part of international politics nearly 15 years ago, when climate change emerged as a major concern and when Russia planted its flag on the seabed of the North Pole. To the contrary, the Arctic has reflected developments in the international political, economic, technological and security systems for centuries.

Finland's flag flies aboard the Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica as it arrives in Nuuk, Greenland.

Today, the Arctic reflects the end of the United States' post-Cold War unipolarity and hegemony, which the U.S. is seeking to extend under a "rules-based order." Russia has consistently, since the 1990s, sought to shape a multipolar order to balance U.S. unipolarity and maximize Russia's ability to maneuver in the region. In addition, China's economic growth is now a fundamental force shaping the international system and order, and as such brings emerging Sino-American bipolarity to the Arctic.

THE ARCTIC IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Here, we will draw upon the concepts of the international system that emphasize the distribution of power among the strongest states — unipolarity, bipolarity or multipolarity — and that are often associated with Kenneth Waltz's seminal 1979 book, *Theory of International Politics*. Historically, the international system was multipolar and centered on European great powers, including Russia, and later the U.S. and Japan. This multipolar international system ended with World War II, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union emerged relatively more powerful than the old European great powers and Japan, which were devastated by the war. The two superpowers competed on a global scale, creating a bipolar international system. The U.S. won the socioeconomic competition at the core of the Cold War, and the Soviet Union disintegrated. The U.S. victory and Soviet defeat in the Cold War created a unipolar international system, since the U.S. was so much more powerful than other great powers, which were mostly its allies anyway.

However, history does not end, as was otherwise suggested by Professor Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, which contemplated the conclusion of history with the Western liberal victory in the Cold War. History very much continued and with two developments of particular importance for the Arctic: the return of Russia as a great power and the emergence of China as one of the largest economies in the world.

Professor John Mearsheimer in his 2019 article, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," published in the journal *International Security*, sets out a framework of the relationship between the international system and order, and regional orders, which is especially useful for looking at the effects of bipolarity and unipolarity on the Arctic. Mearsheimer explains how, in a bipolar international system, the two superpowers are forced into a life-and-death security competition, as were the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and as such can be expected for the U.S. and China. The U.S. and the Soviet Union, by necessity, had to cooperate on managing nuclear mutual deterrence and arms control but had little other interaction. Today and in the future, the U.S. and China must cooperate on a range of issues such as trade and economic policy, cyber and space governance, climate change, biosafety and public health.

Mearsheimer explains how the polarity of the system affects the international order, which is key to understanding the Arctic. Under bipolarity, two superpowers are forced to focus on security and little else. Under unipolarity, the sole superpower has wide leeway to pursue its ideological agenda. Here, the U.S. was able to pursue a global liberal institutionalist agenda after winning the Cold War, which was also the case in the Arctic. With emerging Sino-American bipolarity, Mearsheimer predicts, the bipolar global security competition will force the two superpowers to (again) form bounded regional orders of allies and client states, which seems to be taking place in the Arctic now. The Arctic order of circumpolar cooperation (Russia, Nordics, North America) and in the Barents region and around the Bering Strait is a product of the post-Cold War U.S. unipolarity and hegemony. Associate Professor Dr. Birthe Hansen of the University of Copenhagen theorized unipolarity in her 2011 book, *Unipolarity and World Politics: A Theory and its Implications*. Hansen introduced concepts for understanding unipolarity that make the post-Cold War Arctic stand out more clearly.

ARCTIC HISTORY

Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago, became an integrated part of the European whale oil economy in the 1600s, with intense Dutch, English, French and Danish/Norwegian competition that included armed confrontations. The Russian Arctic, including the present U.S. state of Alaska, was colonized and incorporated into the czarist state during Russia's transcontinental expansion.

The Napoleonic Wars deeply affected the North Atlantic. The attacks on the Danish-Norwegian fleet at Copenhagen in 1801 and 1807 meant that Denmark-Norway lost de facto control of its North Atlantic territories, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland. British-French naval forces also fought Russia in the White Sea during the Crimean War.

World War I also affected the North Atlantic deeply, leading to Icelandic independence from Denmark in 1918. The Romanovs established the port of Murmansk in Russia's northwest in 1916 to maintain contact by sea with their Western allies. When the czar fell and Russia became engulfed in civil war, Western forces also intervened in the Russian Arctic. U.S. Army units occupied Arkhangelsk (1918-1919) and fought the Red Army to keep caches of Western supplies from falling into Bolshevik hands. The U.S. Army's Polar Bear Expedition to the Russian Arctic illustrates well its vulnerability to outside intervention.

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest campaign of World War II, with extensive fighting over the convoys to Murmansk. The U.S. established an unprecedented infrastructure in Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Iceland. Germany and the Soviet Union fought extremely hard on the Litsa and Alakurtti fronts between Norway, Finland and the Soviet Union.



A Russian nuclear submarine crew participates in a drill in 2020 that included the launch of a ballistic missile in the Russian Barents Sea.

U.S.-SOVIET BIPOLARITY

During the Cold War, the Arctic closely reflected the bipolar order, as explained by Mearsheimer. The two competing superpowers created regionally bounded orders of allies and clients, and the Western Arctic was divided among NATO allies, the U.S., Canada, Denmark, Iceland and Norway. The Nordic NATO states cooperated closely with nonaligned Sweden and Finland, which contributed to the “Nordic balance” with Nordic NATO members limiting foreign military presence and reducing Soviet pressure on the region, especially Finland. The Western Arctic and the Soviet Arctic were separate. The Nordic Arctic and the Soviet Arctic were divided by the Iron Curtain. An “Ice Curtain” had similarly descended in the Bering Strait, separating Indigenous peoples in Alaska and Chukotka, who were tied by family and kinship and used to moving across the narrow strait.

The Arctic was exceptionally militarized during the Cold War, reflecting bipolarity and advances in technology with nuclear weapons, mutual deterrence, long-range flight, intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The geography of the shortest flight paths for airplanes and missiles between the U.S. and the Soviet Union made the Arctic the heart of mutual deterrence.

The U.S. created an infrastructure of distant early warning, intelligence and surveillance from Alaska, via Canada and Greenland, to Iceland, northern Norway and the United Kingdom. The Soviet Union built a similar infrastructure from the Kola Peninsula to Chukotka in the Soviet Far East. George Lindsey provides a good introduction and overview of the strategic geography, strategy and technology of the Cold War Arctic in his 1989 Adelphi paper, *Strategic Stability in the Arctic*, from the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

This extreme militarization brought activity and infrastructure, but it also had severe human security consequences. Indigenous peoples were displaced. Military activity led to radioactive and chemical pollution across the Arctic. Military operations carry the risk of accidents, such as the 1968 crash of a U.S. B-52 carrying four hydrogen bombs near Thule, Greenland, or the 1989 loss of the Soviet submarine K-278 Komsomolets with a nuclear reactor and two nuclear warhead torpedoes in the Barents Sea. As Mearsheimer points out, the U.S. and Soviet superpowers cooperated — by necessity for survival — on mutual deterrence and nuclear arms control. Arctic Cold War affairs were overwhelmingly tied to mutual deterrence. There was very little circumpolar cooperation. The 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears, involving the Soviet Union, Norway, Denmark, Canada and the U.S. was an exception. Another rare exception was the Joint Norwegian-Soviet Fisheries Commission from

1976, co-managing the important and valuable common cod stock in the Barents Sea. This joint fisheries management was a rare successful environmental cooperation across the Iron Curtain.

As the Cold War shaped the Arctic, the end of the Cold War was also to some extent announced in the Arctic. In 1987, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev gave a key speech in Murmansk, where he called for changing the Arctic from a zone of nuclear competition threatening humanity to a zone of peace, scientific cooperation and environmental protection.

international relations theory. The post-Cold War Arctic was Fukuyama's *End of History* with the triumph of liberal values. Therefore, it is understandable that the Western academic and policy professional be tempted to see an inevitable path of progress (for the liberal theory inclined) to the current Arctic order of circumpolar, liberal cooperation. Here it is important to keep in mind how the Arctic historically has reflected the international system, still does today, and is likely to do so in the future.

The backdrop to the circumpolar, liberal Arctic of the post-Cold War era was U.S. unipolarity and hegemony,



Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, left, and then-Minister for the Development of the Far East and Arctic Alexander Kozlov visit a bridge in 2020 that crosses the Amur River on the border between Russia and China in the Amur region of Russia.

U.S. UNIPOLARITY AND THE LIBERAL, CIRCUMPOLAR ARCTIC

The end of the Cold War and dissolution of the Soviet Union shaped the Arctic enormously. It left the U.S. as the sole superpower and hegemon and expanded liberal institutions globally. The excessive militarization was reduced with sharp decreases in U.S. and its allies' national military forces from Alaska to the Nordic Arctic. On the Russian side, the dissolution of the Soviet Union plunged post-Soviet societies, including the Russian Arctic, into deep socioeconomic crises. The Russian state withdrew from the Arctic with sharp drops in social, economic, health and other services for local and Indigenous communities. It is difficult to judge whether the welfare losses in the Russian Arctic have been compensated by later development. The end of the Cold War made possible the extensive circumpolar and regional Arctic cooperation that we take for granted today.

The post-Cold War Arctic was a golden age of circumpolar and regional cooperation on issues such as environmental protection, research cooperation, Indigenous peoples' rights, people-to-people cooperation and similar liberal topics — liberal in the nonmilitary-security sense of

which we suggest shaped this Arctic order, although it may not be obvious. Here, Hansen's theorization of unipolarity is useful. The circumpolar, liberal Arctic order was founded by the Finnish 1989 Rovaniemi Process, leading to the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy adopted in 1991 by the environmental ministers of the eight Arctic states. This process grew out of Finland, a small Nordic state bordering the Soviet Union, closely observing how *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies and the end of bipolarity gave it room to maneuver in foreign and security policy by means of Arctic environmental cooperation. Norway, Russia's other small Nordic neighbor, in 1993 launched the Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation agreement that included Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Russia, Norway, Sweden and the EU, with the U.S. and Canada as observers. This regional cooperation, at the state level as well as extensive regional and local levels, focuses on a broad liberal agenda that includes the environment, education, Indigenous peoples and people-to-people cooperation. Canada played the Finnish initiative forward in 1996, establishing the Arctic Council with the Ottawa Declaration involving the eight Arctic states.

It is tempting in the West to see this circumpolar Arctic

order as a natural, liberal “end of history” for the Arctic. That view is deceiving because it reflects contingent international structural conditions, U.S. unipolarity and liberal hegemony. There has also been discourse about an absent U.S. in this post-Cold War Arctic. This reflects a misconception of U.S. involvement in the region and the different positions and roles of the U.S., the smaller Nordic states and Canada. Here, Hansen’s theorization of unipolarity is useful, although she did not apply it to the Arctic. The sole superpower, the U.S., behaved as a superpower in the Arctic after the Cold War, focusing on its strategic interests, primarily in ballistic missile defense and space security, which is clear from the extensive U.S. investments in Alaska, and radar systems at Thule Air Base in Greenland and in Vardø on the Norwegian coast overlooking the Barents Sea. Advances in U.S. climate science and other polar science reflected the U.S. as a science superpower. But the U.S. could outsource its liberal agenda in the Arctic to eager Nordic states and Canada.

According to Hansen’s argument, under unipolarity there is no meaningful security competition between states because of the overwhelming relative power of the sole superpower. That was also clear in the post-Cold War Arctic. Smaller states no longer have the option to choose between superpowers, which leaves them with two choices: flocking to the side of the sole superpower or free-riding. The Nordics and Canada flocked around the U.S. concerning the Arctic order, and the U.S. was able to outsource its liberal order (as suggested by Mearsheimer) to the eager Nordic states and Canada, creating the illusion of an absent U.S. In one key instance, the U.S. intervened against the order-building of the Nordics and Canada by imposing the Ottawa Declaration footnote that excludes military security questions from the Arctic Council. This reflects the superpower’s understanding that Arctic security is fundamentally driven by nuclear deterrence — and increasingly space security — and that those issues should be left to the U.S. and Russia and, to a lesser extent, other nuclear nations and space nations. Canada and the Nordics have no seat at that table, although they house key U.S. infrastructure.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia was marked by a deep socioeconomic crisis that did not allow it to engage much in the Arctic outside of its own zone. The Arctic zone is very important to Russia for defense, economic development and infrastructure. Russia’s strategic nuclear deterrent is centered in the Arctic. The Russian Arctic holds important energy and other natural resources for public and private economic development. The Northern Sea Route is a key national transportation artery for extracting these natural resources and for developing both the Russian Arctic and the Far East. Russia has therefore emphasized ensuring strategic stability and developing its natural resources and the Northern Sea Route. These key Russian interests benefited from circumpolar Arctic cooperation, which Russia continues to contribute to and participate in. Russia remains an active participant

in the Arctic Council, the Arctic Economic Council and extensive people-to-people cooperation, especially in the Barents region. However, domestic Russian developments and limits on nongovernmental organizations and foreign agent legislation have adversely affected the people-to-people cooperation. The circumpolar Arctic order, as mentioned earlier, is contingent on the wider international order, which is changing.

U.S. NOSTALGIA FOR UNIPOLARITY AND RUSSIAN DREAMS OF MULTIPOLARITY

As the larger international system changes, the Arctic changes with it. Two changes of particular importance are Russia’s return as a great power and China’s emergence as an economic power. Russia has socioeconomically reemerged from the depths of its post-Soviet crisis, much aided by higher energy and commodities prices, which provide a different material basis for its foreign and security policy. President Vladimir Putin has consolidated political and economic power in Russia, and the country is acting as a great power in its vicinity. U.S. unipolarity can be an uncomfortable place for powers not closely aligned with it. Russia saw that in the 1990s, leading Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov to call in 1999 for multipolarity based on a strategic triangle of Russia, China and India to balance the U.S. Multipolarity is an obvious interest for Russia as the great power successor to the Soviet superpower. But dreaming about multipolarity does not change the realities of the relative size of national economies, which are becoming decidedly Sino-American bipolar.

The great change to the international system at the global level is the historically unprecedented economic growth of China since the Open Door policy of Deng Xiaoping. China has risen from an impoverished developing country to be one of the world’s two largest national economies, together with the U.S. The EU’s economy is on par with the U.S. and China, but it lacks sufficient integration to act as a third superpower. The world economy is returning to its historical long-term state with East and South Asia as the largest parts of the world economy. China no longer seems to see the U.S.-led world order as credible and advantageous and seeks to reshape it to reflect its own interests. What does an emerging Sino-American bipolar international system imply for the future Arctic order?

U.S. discourse and grand strategy seem, on the one hand, nostalgic for an infinite extension of unipolar hegemony couched as a “rules-based order.” On the other hand, the U.S. is ushering in Sino-American bipolarity. Namely, it is emphasizing Chinese and Russian “assertiveness” and “aggression” together with marshaling other states for balance, especially against China in the Indo-Pacific region and in the Arctic. U.S. grand strategy seems determined to preserve its post-Cold War unipolar predominance and liberal hegemony globally and in the Arctic. This determination seems clear, for instance, in the U.S. Navy’s Blue Arctic strategy, released in January 2021.

A BIPOLAR FUTURE?

Cold War experience and emerging Sino-American bipolarity suggest a bipolar future for the Arctic order, where the regional-bounded-order concepts of Mearsheimer help to understand what is happening now and may happen in the future. NATO allies and EU members Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland will be part of a new U.S.-led bounded regional order, as was the case during the Cold War. The U.S. will once again tie its allies and client states together to marshal forces in its security competition with China and, in the Arctic context, with Russia. This bipolar-bounded regional order-building undermines the post-Cold War liberal circumpolar Arctic order.

We see this U.S.-led bounded regional Arctic order-building in two domains. First and foremost is the emphasis by the U.S. to exclude and delegitimize China in the Arctic. This exclusion is well illustrated concerning Greenland, which is of geostrategic defense interest to the U.S. Greenland is on an ever-increasing and eventual path to full independence from Denmark, a move that will require economic development in tourism and mining (and human capital development). China's government is a potential partner, with Chinese companies invested in mining licenses and with the China Communications Construction Co. (CCCC) as a potential builder of extended or new Greenlandic airports. The U.S. has intervened forcefully with the Danish government to exclude a Chinese mining company from acquiring the former Danish naval base Grønødal in Greenland or CCCC from building Greenlandic airports. The U.S. is also mobilizing Norway, Denmark and Iceland as NATO allies to strengthen control over the North Atlantic and provide closer patrolling near Russian bastions in the Barents and Kara seas. We interpret such U.S. policy as the (re-)creation of a bounded, regional Nordic and North American Arctic order.

The Russian Arctic comprises about half the Arctic in terms of territory, population and economy. The position of Russia then becomes crucial for circumpolar Arctic cooperation and order. Will Russian-Western conflict in the Caucasus, Black Sea, Eastern Europe and Baltic regions, with sanctions and countersanctions, force Russia into ever deeper financial, technical and strategic collaboration with China? Can the same be said of the Russian Arctic? Sanctions following the Ukraine crisis of 2014 cut off the Russian natural gas company Novatek from Western funding and made it much more dependent on Chinese funding for the flagship Russian Arctic energy project Yamal LNG, a liquefied natural gas plant on the Yamal Peninsula.

Russia and China are deepening their strategic cooperation in various ways, such as in space science and technology and distant early-warning systems. Russia and China have more than 4,200 kilometers of shared border in the Far East and centuries of complex history, but a lack of common identity or shared interests. The triangular strategic relationship of the U.S., Russia and China brings some parties together when the others are in conflict, as the U.S. skillfully

did in the early 1970s by normalizing relations with the People's Republic of China, benefiting from poor Soviet-Chinese relations. A multipolar (three or more dominant powers) Arctic is theorized to be highly unstable by Waltz in his 1979 book, because two powers will eventually gang up on the third. Could there be U.S.-Russia Arctic confrontation with China on the sidelines? Would standing aloof offer China more room to maneuver in the Arctic overall? Probably not, considering the global Sino-U.S. bipolar security competition evidenced in the U.S.'s determination to keep China out of Greenlandic strategic minerals and critical infrastructure, and to delegitimize cooperation with Chinese academic, commercial or other partners.

An alternative scenario is Sino-Russian alignment in the Arctic in competition with the U.S., which seems to be the current direction with deepening Sino-Russian cooperation. Their individual conflicts with the U.S. and Russian dependence on Chinese funding to develop its Arctic energy resources, under post-2014 Western sanctions, also suggests such a scenario. In this scenario, China's access to the Russian Arctic is circumscribed by the Sino-Russian relationship. Here it must be remembered that the Arctic is a matter of defense and economic survival to Russia, not to China.

Will the post-Cold War liberal, circumpolar Arctic order continue to encompass both the U.S.-bounded regional order of the Nordics and North America, as well as Russia? Can the liberal, low-politics agenda of the Arctic Council continue below the high-politics security and geoeconomic competition dictated by the international system? The future Arctic order will emerge in the tension between U.S. dreams of continued unipolarity, Russian dreams of emerging multipolarity and the global realities of Sino-American bipolarity.

Extrapolating Cold War and post-Cold War experiences and applying Mearsheimer's concepts for international and regional order does not bode well for a circumpolar, liberal Arctic order. It suggests that there will be increasingly less space for this low-politics Arctic order, which will be increasingly pressed by high-politics competition. Security competition in geoeconomic areas of natural resources development and new shipping lanes, together with rising mutual suspicions and decreasing willingness to cooperate people-to-people and institution-to-institution, will crowd out the post-Cold War liberal, circumpolar Arctic cooperation. Preserving that cooperation will require strategic innovation from all parties facing international systemic change.

CONCLUSION: ARCTIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR TESTING NEW POLICIES

Learning from history is difficult, and it is perhaps more difficult to learn from victories than defeats. What did the U.S., the EU, Russia and China learn from the end of the Cold War, and what will it mean for the Arctic? The U.S. and the West were victorious in the Cold War and reaped great benefits afterward in terms of peace dividends,



a united Europe and a liberal international order. In contrast, post-Soviet societies paid a high price in terms of social and economic affairs, public health and public security, which informs Russian domestic and foreign policy. The Chinese Communist Party watched developments in the Soviet Union and made it clear that it would not accept such developments in China, suppressing student protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

The U.S. seems strategically determined to preserve unipolarity under the heading of “rules-based order” by reapplying its successful lessons of containment, economic pressure by sanctions, and strategic pressure by aggressive patrolling and the Strategic Defense Initiative (known now at Ballistic Missile Defense). Will these lessons work against Russian and Chinese adversaries, who learned their own lessons? The peaceful — and for the West, largely cost-free — conclusion of the Cold War was in hindsight miraculous and contingent. Applying a similar U.S. strategy to obtain the same outcome against China and Russia may not work the same way today and poses grave risks.

Perhaps the Arctic offers an opportunity for the U.S., Russia and China to rethink their future relations under new international systemic conditions. Such an idea, in a way, points back to Gorbachev’s 1987 Murmansk speech

Chinese troops participate in the Vostok military training exercise in eastern Siberia, Russia, in 2018. The maneuvers spanned vast expanses of Siberia and the Far East, the Arctic and Pacific oceans and involved Russian troops and aircraft.

calling for the Arctic to be a zone of peace, environmental protection and scientific cooperation. Could the U.S., the EU, Russia and China rethink their high-politics security and geoeconomic competition to allow for sustainable development of Arctic energy, critical minerals resources and new shipping lanes along with a boost in scientific and people-to-people relations? Could the Arctic be the laboratory for new and safer superpower relations?

The Arctic is unfortunately an unlikely laboratory because of its central — rather than remote — position in the international system. The Arctic remains central to nuclear strategic stability between the U.S. and Russia and, increasingly, China. The region will be progressively more important for space security. The Northern Sea Route will challenge the Anglo-American global maritime hegemony existent since Lord Nelson, and Russia cannot tolerate anything but full control of its Arctic, which is a matter of defense and economic survival. □