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## **Discussing the Influence of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict in the High North**

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**Abstract:** The notorious climate change phenomenon is creating significant challenges around the world. In particular, the Arctic region, historically inhospitable to human activities due to its icy terrain, is undergoing rapid transformation. The melting of polar ice has opened up new sea routes and unlocked access to valuable energy resources. Consequently, several nations are

already trying to expand their influence in the Arctic, and the possibility of heightened territorial claims and jurisdictional disputes is also increasing. This growing competition is not only influenced by internal dynamics but is also exacerbated by external geopolitical events, with the recent extensive use of military violence in Ukraine being a prominent example. These global power plays have the potential to turn the Arctic into a battleground for nations seeking to enhance their standing in the international arena, thereby creating political ripples across the broader region. This paper adopts a structural framework rooted in offensive neo-realist theory, drawing upon existing research to analyze the situation. It identifies two key inputs in the Arctic region: climate change (X1) as the primary driver and the armed conflict in Ukraine (X2) as a secondary factor. The study evaluates the possibility of a “spillover of tensions in the Arctic” as a potential outcome (Y1). Additionally, it recognizes the existence of a second potential outcome, an “icebreakers race” (Y2), which warrants further investigation. Within the scope of this research effort, it was clearly highlighted that the Svalbard Treaty effectively serves the Arctic. Furthermore, Russia's position in the Arctic and its political perspective were integrated in the relevant discussion. Finally, proposals for solutions to avoid any further tensions were identified.

**Keywords:** Arctic; Geopolitics; Russia; Security Dilemma; Svalbard Treaty.

### **Introduction**

The Arctic is most often defined as the area containing the Arctic Ocean, as well as the respective territories of the states with a latitude higher than the Arctic Circle (66°33'48.3" N); the land within the Arctic Circle is divided among eight countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Russian Federation, the United States of America (Alaska), Canada, The Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland), and Iceland (where it passes through the small offshore island of Grimsey) (Drewniak et al., 2021). The Arctic Archipelago, which stretches north of the Canadian mainland, consists of 94 large islands (larger than 130 km<sup>2</sup>) and 36,469 small islands, covering a total area of 1.4 million km<sup>2</sup> (Adams, Dunbar, 2015).

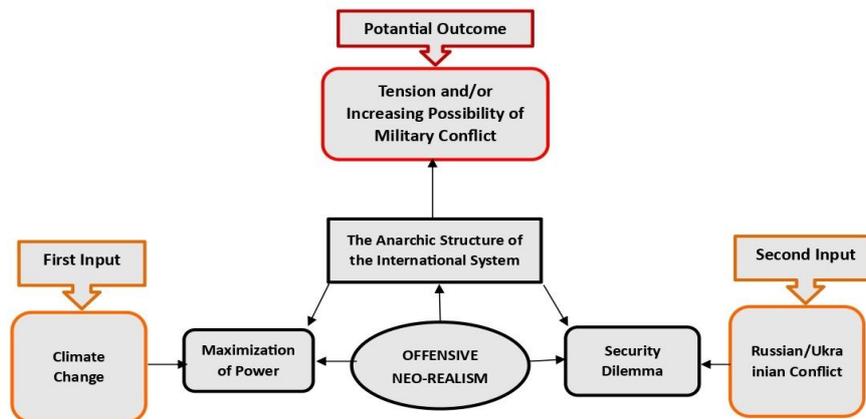
Of particular interest is also Svalbard, located in the north of the European landmass, approximately in the middle of the Arctic and at a significant distance from mainland Norway. The islands of that group are located between 74° and 81° north latitudes and 10° and 35° east longitudes. The largest island is Spitsbergen, followed by Nordaustlandet and Edgeøya. Svalbard is a vital island formation because it is a landmass located very close to the middle of the vast Arctic Ocean (Ostenso, 2022).

Since most of this ocean was covered with ice until recently, it was very challenging or even impossible to access. However, due to climate change, access to the Arctic Ocean has improved over time, and the importance of the islands in the High North has also increased. Natural resources and the Arctic seabed are simply “waiting to be explored”; Svalbard could be associated with tensions/disputes in the future. Maritime zones are controversial today in Svalbard, where basic economic activities such as coal mining, research, and tourism are carried out up to the present peacefully. In any case, (apart from the Svalbard Treaty), the Arctic Council is considered to have a leading role in Arctic governance. Today, the Council consists of eight Arctic states; twelve non-arctic countries have also been admitted as observers (Arctic Portal, 2006). This is a high-level interstate forum that promotes cooperation/coordination, and interaction on matters related to the Arctic region. It is also useful to note that the Arctic Council cooperates with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to help ensure the safety, security, and environmental performance of Arctic shipping (Dalaklis et al., 2022).

The purpose of this article is to conduct an analysis of potential outcomes for the future of the Arctic region under the influence of climate change and by also factoring in the on-going Russia-Ukraine conflict; there was special focus on maintaining a

position of impartiality regarding the moral standing of the involved parties. Emphasizing the distinct provisions of international law and agreements in the Arctic, particular attention is directed toward the Svalbard region. Furthermore, it is pertinent to note that this analysis deliberately refrains from the examination of military activities conducted by the parties in conflict. To begin with, the existing literature was thoroughly scanned with the keywords “Arctic”, “geopolitics” and “tensions” included in the relevant search and by further limiting the pool of data to those efforts published after 2008 (15 years back); likewise, current news relevant to the Russian/Ukrainian conflict that were examining the possibility of increasing tensions in the Arctic were also scanned. Then, certain input related to the obtained literature was integrated within the theoretical framework created. As a result of this evaluation, a primary and very important input “Climate change” (X1), along with a secondary one “Conflict in Ukraine” (X2) were clearly revealed. Next, an effort to provide informed assumptions about the future of the region under examination was conducted. Simultaneously, the recent aggressive attitude of Russia has been incorporated within the framework of the Offensive Neo-Realist theory by determining Russia's recent political behavior/approach (Figure 1). The anarchical structure of the international system, described at the center of the theory

of Offensive Neo-realism, leads to a security dilemma between states looking to maintain the current status quo and those states attempting to maximize their power (Schweller, 1996).



**Figure 1.** Reserch Structural Framework. **Source:** Created by the authors

In the Arctic, occasions where “territorial disputes” were piecefully resolved have been recorded in the past. As a very indicative example, below, the case of “Hans Island” is briefly discussed, under the notion that it has been a longstanding territorial dispute between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark (for decades). The selected approach was a historical review of the so-called “Whiskey War”. In that section, the history and current political position of Hans Island (also known as Tartupaluk in the Inuit language) are evaluated, the approaches of the interested parties and the solution seeking are examined; the solution process and its consequences are interpreted as a result. Then, the location and main features of the Svalbard archipelago are presented. The parties engaged in activities in the archipelago and their respective interests are evaluated; the Svalbard treaty and its signing process are also explained. By evaluating certain articles of the Svalbard treaty, the rights of the signatory countries are elaborated, and the current state of sovereignty and claims over the archipelago are evaluated.

Following that, the status and importance of Russia in the Arctic are clearly highlighted. At the same time, Russia's historical ties with Svalbard are evaluated, and its regional interests are discussed. Moreover, the sea routes in the Arctic and the significance of these routes is highlighted, including Russia's

interests on these exact routes. Considering all the above, the possibility of “increased tensions” has been put forward as a potential outcome in the relevant research framework. The Arctic sea routes and various resources (with the energy related ones clearly standing out) are attracting the attention of countries such as Russia, Canada, and Norway (or even the USA) each passing day. While issues such as disputes, claims of jurisdiction, Arctic governance, security dilemmas and climate change remaining high on the research agenda, whether the Arctic will remain a place of cooperation (or, friction) in the future remains a question. The prolonged Russia/Ukraine conflict clearly has the potential to increase tensions between certain countries with an “arctic footprint”; it is therefore an enigma, if peace and the spirit of cooperation in the Arctic will remain intact in the long run. Additionally, certain future scenarios are evaluated, and possible solutions to avoid frictions in the future are examined. Finally, there is a summary of the main findings, along with the associated conclusions.

### **Literature Review**

Svalbard is an essential form of a patch of islands with a quite distinct archipelagic structure, located in the Arctic Ocean. Especially since the Svalbard treaty was signed on February 9, 1920, it has been a focal point for Russia, Norway, and certain

other actors with interest in the Arctic. Although numerous governance issues have been clarified with the signing of the treaty, some open-ended clauses existing in the relevant text have caused additional disputes in the long run. Jensen (2020) has examined the provisions of the Svalbard treaty and focused on the broader topic of sovereignty that the agreement brought along. In that research effort, Jensen focused on the concept of “territorial waters”. Jensen touched upon how to interpret the concept as mentioned above and discussed whether the Treaty’s concept of “territorial waters” shall be interpreted to include the 200-mile zone exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and continental shelf concepts that come along with UNCLOS.

Furthermore, Østhagen (2018) researched the same concept (of territorial waters) and associated disputes over the Svalbard archipelago; however, he was more focused on conflict management within the scope of the Fishery Protection Zone (FPZ). This author collected data on how many incidents involving Russian fishing vessels escalated to the top arrest level in the FPZ between 1997 and 2017. Consequently, it can be concluded that none of these events had gone beyond control, and both countries have managed to avoid further escalation and effectively resolve any arising issue. He also suggested that disputes over the archipelago should be divided into two main categories as “low-level” disputes and “high-level” ones. This

way, the resolution of disputes in the archipelago can be managed on a more accurate basis. Gavrilov et al. (2022) focused on the delimitation of maritime boundaries and the issue of jurisdiction in the Arctic Ocean since these concepts influence together the border disputes in the region under examination. In that research effort, disputes have been examined between the following: Russian Federation-Norway; Russian Federation-United States; Canada-the Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland); Canada-United States; Canada, Russia, and the United States and the Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland)–Russian Federation–Canada, respectively. Although claims over maritime areas mainly cause these disputes, boundary disputes have also been included in that effort. Surprisingly, these authors have also included in this work a long-standing border dispute between the Kingdom of Denmark and Canada, which has a very limited place in the literature. More specifically, they described “Hans Island” as the only disputed land territory in the Arctic.

It should be pointed out that the dispute between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark over Hans Island has always been associated with low tension, despite being in existence for decades. Dawes and Tukiainen (2008) deployed the mapping technique over Hans Island, which is located in the famous Nares Strait (Dawes, Tukiainen, 2008) (see figure 2). The island

itself is barren and uninhabited, with an area of 1.3 square kilometers (0.50 sq mi), measuring 1,290 by 1,199 meters (4,232 by 3,934 ft), and a maximum elevation of 168,17 m (551.7 ft). The island is located in the strait that separates Ellesmere Island of Canada from northern Greenland; it was, for years, a border dispute between the countries of Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark. Hans Island is the smallest of three islands in the Kennedy Channel. This strait is 35 km (22 mi) wide, placing the island within Canada's and the Kingdom of Denmark's (Greenland) territorial waters. A 1,280 m (4,200 ft) long border traverses the island. This helped to achieve two things: firstly, to briefly summarize the Danish geological work on the Kennedy Canal, illustrated by the first map with Hans, and secondly, to show how the Geological Survey in Copenhagen used modern research techniques to maintain interest in the far North. The very modern Satellite mapping technique was used on Hans island, which was previously visited only by scientists, explorers, and locals, since Hans island, which has become a disputed territory, was inhabited but frequently visited by politicians and military personnel. After coming to a controversial position, the political aspects of Hans island have come to the fore. Rudnicki (2017) emphasized that this dispute between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark may be a symbolic occupation rather than a real one. Rudnicki (2017)

concluded in his paper that the status “occupation” mostly resembled a symbolic occupation to avoid further escalation. Until 2022, Hans island remained the last standing border dispute in the Arctic. But, it should be clearly emphasized that, recently, and immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Kingdom of Denmark and Canada come to an agreement in relation to Hans Island (Beamont, 2022).



**Figure 2.** Location of Hans Island. **Source:** Wikipedia. (2023, May 4)

McGwin (2022) stressed that these two countries (the Kingdom of Denmark and Canada) had resolved the long-standing dispute amicably. He also noted that this settlement process sends a clear message that border disputes can be resolved in a peaceful manner by utilising the relevant provisions of international law. Even considering that Svalbard is defined as a peace zone and tension is at a low level, disputes are arising from the claims of countries such as Russia, Norway, the Kingdom of Denmark, and Canada, over the archipelago. Solli et al. (2013) indicated that all the concerned countries struggle with environmental and scientific concerns, as well as commercial interests in the Arctic. In this context, that paper examined Asian countries and Arctic policies along with certain states in the Arctic (Norway, Russia, and the USA) and discussed the Arctic-related interests of China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, respectively. While describing Russia as one of the two superpowers of the Arctic region (the other one being the USA), that author also touched on Russia's quite skeptical approach to the presence of non-Arctic states. It can be speculated that Russia is not satisfied with the presence of non-Arctic states in the Arctic and their "Arctic interest", and therefore a security dilemma exists. It should also be taken into account that Russia is one of the key states in the Arctic, and the Russian political perspective can reach high tension levels frequently. Kjellén (2022) examined

Russia's military posture in the Arctic within the overall historical framework by emphasizing Russia's increasing military presence in the region. In this regard, Kjellén especially highlighted the deteriorating relations and the general circumstance of insecurity after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Elgsaas (2018) examined the formal institutional foundation for a comprehensive emergency preparedness system in the Russian Arctic. He pointed out that Russia aims for the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation to become Russia's main base for strategic resources by 2020-2030. Furthermore, Wilhelmsen and Hermann (2022) identified a security dilemma in the Arctic and highlighted Russian hostility towards NATO in the Arctic. They concluded that both actors (Russia and NATO) consider their presence and execute steps in the wider region to improve their security posture respectively (not for the time being in an "aggressive" manner).

The above research efforts have certain inadequacies. Firstly, existing literature on Svalbard emphasizes the shortcomings caused by the structure of the Svalbard treaty, however, they do not propose a solution to the issue. Secondly, it is clear that there is a vulnerability in the Arctic governance regime. At the same time, most of these studies focus more on state-centered activities and policies in the Arctic. Previous studies such as those (Wegge, Halsne, 2022) and (Blakkisrud, 2018) put

forward the notion that a security dilemma in the Arctic increases with each day passing. In addition, in most of these efforts, Russia is considered as a principal actor. However, the Hans island dispute, which has been longstanding and is the last remaining dispute in the Arctic until recently, has not been given enough focus in the literature. There is a positive influence on the security status related to Hans island; “how” this issue is now resolved will be discussed in the following section. In addition, the root cause of the security dilemma in the Arctic has not been addressed, and the literature has been insufficient to find a solution or propose a solution at this point. Therefore, the novelty of the current research effort is to discuss whether the Svalbard agreement is a supporter or a trigger in resolving the disputes in the Arctic, based on the Hans Island dispute resolution process and the message intended to be given here.

### **Whisky War**

Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark, the main actors of the “Whiskey War”, are two states that exercise sovereignty in territories within the Arctic ocean. In relation to the Arctic islands of Canada, the largest of which is Baffin Island that extends close to Greenland’s autonomous Danish-dependent territory (BBCnews, 2021). Nunavut comprises the majority of Canada's Arctic archipelago. On the other hand, Greenland is a

self-governing territory of the Kingdom of Denmark and the largest island in the Arctic ocean. Hans island, located in the middle of the Kennedy channel between the northwest coast of Greenland and Ellesmere Island, Canada, was the only territorial dispute in the Arctic (until 2022). This rocky island, which has no mineral resources or attractive features, has been the cause of a dispute between Canada and Greenland (the Kingdom of Denmark) for decades (Beaumont, 2022). This dispute is known today as the “Whiskey War” or the “Liquor Wars”.

The Whiskey War began due to a border dispute between Canada and Greenland. The dispute between the two nations began in 1978 and continued until 2022. Hans island, located between Greenland and Canada, is the main reason. Hans Island is one of the three islands in the Kennedy Channel; it is basically an uninhabited, rocky, half-square-mile Arctic island. For a significant time, politicians from Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark visited this rocky island respectively, planted their flags, and consumed a bottle of traditional drinks (McGwin, 2022). Although the dispute between the two countries has never turned into a hot conflict, no specific steps have been taken for decades. By 2005, both countries agreed that it was necessary to round off this dispute to a conclusion. In 2012, a proposal was submitted to Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark to divide Hans Island. And again, in 2012, Canada and the

Kingdom of Denmark agreed on the exact border between them, without including Hans Island. Although both countries agreed on a compromise, nevertheless, no steps have been taken. In 2018, the countries decided to establish a joint working group to resolve the dispute; it was successfully settled four years after that date. The governments of Ottawa and Copenhagen divided the island into two, ending the only territorial dispute officially in the Arctic in 2022 (McGwin, 2022).

With the agreement signed between the two countries, Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark will have established the world's most extensive maritime border with 3,882 km (Murphy, 2022). The main question here is, what was the reason that has led to this dispute which has been going on for decades, even if it has been agreed from time to time that some peaceful steps will be taken, to be agreed kind of abruptly? It is interesting to note here that this long-standing and last remaining dispute in the Arctic has been resolved immediately after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War. This circumstance has not gone beyond the media's notice. The Washington Post published the news that shows the dispute between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark is over with the headline "Ukraine war brings peace-between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark" (Coletta, 2022). The New York Times also published similar news on the relevant topic. The New York Times cited the rhetoric of the

foreign ministers of the two countries (Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark), citing Russia's invasion of Ukraine simultaneously and emphasizing the peaceful resolution of disputes (Austen, 2022).

Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark's solution-oriented approach is in contrast with what can be considered Russia's aggressive attitude and two different examples at this point; however, these countries cannot be evaluated separately. The fact that Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark have peacefully resolved the dispute over Hans island has been an excellent example of solving problems in the Arctic. In this regard, Jeppe Kofoed, the Kingdom of Denmark's Foreign Minister has pointed out says:

“This agreement sends a clear signal to the world, that border disputes can be resolved based on international law, and in a pragmatic and peaceful way, where all parties come out as winners,”

and in case it wasn't clear whom exactly this comment was directed at, he continues:

“That is an important signal to send now that there is so much war and unrest in the world.” (Jacobs, 2022).

On the other hand, there is a concern that Russia's aggressive stance on Ukraine will also spill over into Russia-based disputes in the Arctic region (Gignac and Tukker, 2022). It is true that the uninhabited Hans Island has been a long-standing dispute until today, even though there is no apparent reason. For example, no mineral resources have been discovered on the

island; it does not have fertile soils and is far from life-hospitable climate conditions. Therefore, this dispute over the island between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark is evaluated as a kind of symbolic occupation (occasionally) (Rudnicki, 2016). For this reason, perhaps, the dispute took decades to resolve, but in the end, a peaceful settlement was achieved. The Whiskey War, known in history as a decades-long dispute, will now take its place in history books as a fair sample of peaceful settlement of disputes in the Arctic.

### **Svalbard Treaty**

Svalbard refers to the archipelago located in the Arctic Ocean under Norway's sovereignty. In this archipelago, while whaling was widespread in the 17th and 18th centuries, in the early the 20th-century, coal mining activities started. Today, coal mining represents the island's primary industry, with Russia (Arktikugol) and Norway (Store Norske) owning a significant share. At the same time, tourism and research activities have become popular over the years. The vast majority of the archipelago is covered with glaciers and is home to polar bears, arctic foxes, and reindeer, particularly the habitat of many sea birds (Overrein, 2019). Svalbard, whose administrative center is Longyearbyen, is the northernmost inhabited region in the world. Furthermore, Svalbard is in an excellent location for the

so-called Transpolar Shipping Route (TSR), which is possible in the future as an Arctic shipping route (Bennett et al., 2020), as well as other Arctic shipping networks (Bennett et al., 2020). On the other hand, Svalbard is “not useful” for international trade, apart from coal exports and support of local population needs (resupply/restocking).

Earlier, Svalbard was no man's land, and the regional states carried out hunting, fishing, and mining activities on the archipelago (Jensen, 2020). Although discussions on the archipelago's sovereignty began in the 1910s due to increasing interest in coal mining, no agreement was reached due to World War I. After the Paris Peace Conference in 1920, this issue was agreed upon, and the Svalbard Treaty was signed. Subsequently, Svalbard Treaty entered into force in 1925 and the landmass under discussion was put into practice under Norwegian sovereignty. Today, the Svalbard treaty has 46 signatory countries, of which 8 are Arctic Council (AC) member states and 12 are AC observer states.

According to Article 1 of the Svalbard Treaty, signed in Paris on 9th February 1920, Norway has complete and absolute sovereignty over the archipelago of Svalbard (Spitsbergen, 1920: Article 1). On the other hand, in compliance with Article 3, all signatory countries will have equal rights of access and entry to the waters, fjords, and ports of the specified territories

in Article 1. Also, Article 3 expressed clearly that all signatory countries shall be admitted under the same conditions of equality to the exercise and practice of all maritime, industrial, mining, or commercial enterprises both on land and in territorial waters (Spitsbergen, 1920a). Furthermore, Article 2 granted Norway the right to maintain, take or decree suitable measures to ensure the preservation and, if necessary, the reconstitution of the fauna and flora of the said region and their territorial waters (Spitsbergen, 1920: Article 2). The fact that Svalbard is a demilitarized zone is assisted by Article 9, and hereof Norway undertakes the obligation not to create nor to allow the establishment of any naval base in the territories specified in Article 1; therefore, Svalbard may never be used for warlike purposes (Spitsbergen, 1920b).

Specific articles of the treaty under discussion clearly stated that the signatory countries have equal rights in the territories specified in article 1. It is also emphasized that Norway has complete and absolute sovereignty over the archipelago, and the region is an unarmed peace zone. On the other hand, articles 2 and 3 stated that the signatory countries had equal rights on the island, and article 3 also touched upon on territorial waters of the archipelago. However, the treaty does not contain any explanation about the 200-mile EEZ and continental shelf since these concepts were “invented” later (by UNCLOS). This

uncertainty is the main reason for the disputes taking place today over the archipelago's marine space. These issues have been partially resolved by the fact that Norway has the right to create maritime zones around Svalbard and has already created a fishery protection zone. However, this situation still cannot prevent claims by other actors, like Russia. The treaty does not explicitly mention the 200-mile zone of the EEZ and the continental shelf because, in 1920, there were no such concepts in international law, which leads to a problem that arises from the essence of the agreement today (Jensen, 2020).

In a different direction, terrestrial and marine biology, as well as atmospheric and oceanographic research, are becoming increasingly popular in Svalbard (Pedersen, 2019). Global warming, and the associated increase in the rate of melting glaciers, make this region and its marine areas even more interesting. On the one hand, Norway has sovereignty over the island, and Russia, one of the most active countries in the region, will take an even more competitive position in this region, which is becoming more and more open to exploration every day. In addition, other Arctic countries, like the Kingdom of Denmark, Canada, and the United States (USA), continue to conduct scientific research in the region. Moreover, signatory countries that are non-arctic countries and, in fact, both non-signatory and non-arctic countries like Türkiye conduct

scientific research in the region.

Increased scientific activity and demand for knowledge in an incrementally more ice-free Arctic Ocean may require a conversation between legal and marine scientists (Woker et al., 2020) in order not to face an intractable dispute in the future. Although this area, which should be protected as a peace zone, has recently witnessed a peaceful resolution of disputes with the example of Hans Island, it seems unlikely that the same attitude will be displayed in disputes over the maritime space. Norway has stressed the importance of having a substantial presence in these islands over the years (Pedersen, 2017), and Russia has not compromised on its presence and claims in the region. Given that Russia also has an aggressive attitude rather than a peaceful settlement of disputes, such as in the case of Ukraine, it is debatable whether the Svalbard Treaty will be sufficient for the future establishment of maritime zones in relation to the Archipelago.

### **Russia's Political Approach**

Russia has the longest coastline in the Arctic, providing access/jurisdiction to vast areas of the Arctic Ocean (The Arctic Institute, 2020). Russia is an active state in the Arctic because of geography as well as geopolitical reasons. In this context, for Russia, which is a member of the AC (and one of the so-called

Arctic 5), this region has strategic importance. With the increasing melting of ice over the years, the control of promising sea routes in this region has become a topic of interest. While Russia controls the Northern Sea Route (NSR) under regulations, the Northwest Passage (NWP) is acknowledged by Canada as its internal waters (Bennett et al., 2020); however, further details will not be provided, since this is outside of the scope of this research effort. In particular, the further development/control of the NSR is one of the powerful arguments of Russia because this route will play an essential role in the development of northern Siberia and fostering transit shipping (Lasserre, Cyr, 2022).

Due to unprecedented climate change, these Arctic routes have become more feasible in recent years, but in any case, the support of ice-breakers will still be needed as a backbone of any presence in the Arctic (Drewniak et al., 2018). Russia is indeed the world's leading country in the field of icebreaker ships; it has the majority of the icebreakers in the world, with 46 icebreakers, 4 of which utilize nuclear propulsion. In addition, there are 11 under construction and four future-planned icebreakers. Russia is followed by Finland, Canada, Sweden, and the United States (USA), respectively (Woityra, 2017).

It is also interesting to note that Russia already claims that the Svalbard Archipelago was first discovered by the Russian

people (Todorov, 2020) (although there is no evidence on this subject). Therefore it has established a historical connection to the archipelago. Given that Russia is very committed to its historical values, it cannot be ruled out that Russia can use this claim in the future to support a change in the status quo. In this context, the subject that can be associated with another historical link of Russia is sea routes. Throughout human history, Russia's primary geopolitical aspiration has been accessing to “warm seas” (Chauhan, 2020). Russia has been trying to achieve this in the past by providing access to the Black Sea through Ukraine and Crimea (Sevastopol) (the later already annexed by Russia) and the Mediterranean Sea, through the Bosphorus/Dardanelles Straits (Türkiye). However, today, climate change and certain technological applications such as pipelines and rail are changing this. Especially the footprint of climate change in the Arctic landscape may provide another option for Russia to access warm seas and main international trade routes through the Arctic Ocean.

Shifting the discussion towards the main maritime transport corridors in the Arctic, NSR is a quite significant sea route because it provides a shorter traveling time compared to traditional routes, as well as fuel efficiency and economic advantages. Due to the fact that a large part of this route passes through the coastline of Russia, Russia is effectively controlling

the NSR. Most of the ongoing investments for the NSR are, in fact, provided by the Russian state, such as developing logistics and hinterland connections; besides, the Russian state also provides the essential icebreaker support in the region and receives search and rescue (SAR) centers (Dalaklis, 2017). This route through the Norwegian sea could provide a way for Russia to access the warm seas, considering climate change and its increasing impact. In addition to the historical meaning of access to the warm seas for Russia, there is also an economic interest: access to the main trade routes. With the domination of this route, Russia can raise its status in the region and at the global level and boast its geostrategic goals. Therefore, the Russian state considers this issue as a maritime policy both from the traditional perspective and in terms of globalization (Chauhan, 2020).

Shifting back to Svalbard, along with Norway, Russia is actively engaged with economic activity on the Svalbard island, particularly coal mining, hunting, and fishing. While fishing and coal mining are two critical economic activities, coal mining is increasingly important, especially for Russia. In this context, Russia has developed a coal strategy, “Coal Strategy 2035”, which is planned to be implemented by 2035 and consists of 3 stages (Sukhankin, 2020). The first stage (2019-2025) aims to increase coal production and improve infrastructure; the second

stage (2016-2030) entails the structural transformation of the coal industry of Russia, creating new coal mining centers, as well as the extraction and operation of coal; the third and final stage (2030-2035) involves the integration of the use of the latest technologies and their application to global standards to improve efficiency and capacity (Sukhankin, 2020). It is visible that most European countries, especially Germany, are substantially dependent on Russian gas, considering the EU imports more than 40% of its total gas consumption, 27% of oil imports, and 46% of coal imports from Russia (European Commission, 2022). Taking into account the importance and domination of energy sources for Russia, it can be speculated that Russia will try further boost its presence and raise its status in the Arctic, especially in Svalbard, which is strategically important in terms of coal mining, as well as other potential carbon-based energy resources like oil and gas in the sea bed of the Arctic Ocean.

Russia's political approach in the Arctic is discussed under three main categories. These domains are explained by Offensive Neorealism, a sub-theory of Neo-Realism, originator by Kenneth Waltz from the theories of international relations (Lobell, 2010). Offensive realists argue that the system's structure is anarchic and therefore security is not enough. Moreover, the maximization of their share of world power is

more vital than equality; only in this way can security be achieved (Lobell, 2010). This assertion explains Russian aggressive behaviors and willingness to be superior to all Arctic countries in the region. Early on, Russia was unwilling to acknowledge Norway's sovereignty over Svalbard. Even if it officially recognizes it today, it strives to establish superiority over other vital countries and maximize its share of power in the region. Today, a Russian Strategic objective could be to “Improve its Geopolitical Status”; this can be achieved via: a) “Ensuring control over the Arctic Ocean” and b) “Securing access to more energy resources”.

At the same time, the significant expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU eastwards and around the Baltic Sea are factors that can trigger Russia's aggressive attitude, based on the fact they can be viewed as a (Russian) security problem (Dalaklis, 2015). Such security issues/problems could trigger each other, and the consequences can sometimes become unpredictable predicaments. For instance, the security problem caused by NATO and EU enlargement has effectively contributed into a crisis in Ukraine today, which has led to the fact that (previously) neutral countries such as Sweden and Finland are being threatened by Russia and are, therefore, more willing to become NATO members. It is debatable how Russia, which has initiated a

special military operation in Ukraine because it opposes NATO reaching just outside its border, will react to the fact that all members of the Arctic Council (except Russia) will become NATO members.

It is necessary to note that the Arctic is warming faster than the rest of the planet, and this impacts the melting rate of sea ice; mostly in summer, this broader marine access infers longer navigation seasons (Hildebrand, Brigham, 2018). This case, which leads to the emergence of new sea routes and the extension of their utilization has further implications and/or consequences. These consequences are collected under headings like resource extraction, tourism, maritime transportation, and access to energy resources. In case the issue of access to energy resources is considered, it requires to be equally evaluated at the regional, national, interregional, and international levels when studying Russia's energy policy (Salonen, 2018). In addition to the fact that energy is a key factor in Russia's national interests, Russia could probably be interested in protecting its presence both regionally and internationally, given the growing energy-centered claims in the Arctic. The uncertainty arising in the face of the security dilemma caused by the anarchic structure of the international system is a source of concern (Hamilton, Rathbun, 2013), which leads Russia to the only path to achieve its interests in the Arctic, which is the maximization of power.

As a result, Russia could act upon its regional and international interests in the Arctic and develop/implement its strategies accordingly. Russia could aim to protect its presence, raise its status, facilitate access to energy resources, control new sea routes in the Arctic and promote its geostrategic interests. In this context, the aggressive attitude of Russia encountered both today and in the past is explained by Offensive Neo-Realism, which is a sub-theory of the theory of Neo-Realism, one of the very important theories of international relations.

### **Concerns about Russia's war on Ukraine for the Arctic in mid-late 2023**

After the commencement of Russia's military operations against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, significant resistance and casualties were observed on both parties, and despite Ukraine's recent counteroffensive attempts, substantial progress has not been achieved. Presently, the situation seems to be moving towards a stalemate, evolving into a prolonged war of attrition. This phase signifies a prolonged period of static confrontation and resource depletion, with neither side holding a clear advantage. The prolonged conflict, persisting for nearly two years, has placed significant stress on Russia's connections with Western nations, resulting in a broader decline in global relationships and confidence. This scenario has heightened

apprehensions, particularly in nations situated in close geographical proximity to Russia. Consequently, countries such as Finland and Sweden, traditionally upholding longstanding international neutrality, have demonstrated a closer alignment with NATO (Güçyetmez, 2023).

The involvement of Russia and its strategic interests in the Arctic region as part of the Russia-Ukraine conflict bears consequences for the area. For example, Russia has recently bolstered its military positioning in the Arctic, recognizing the region's strategic significance, notably due to its adjacency to Russia's northern border (Winkel, 2023). This situation might prompt apprehensions regarding the militarization of the Arctic and the possibility of heightened security tensions in the area, emphasizing the need to concentrate on stabilizing the region. Also, in May 2023 after the takeover meeting from the Russian leadership, a collective statement was issued by all eight Arctic nations (marking the initial joint statement since Russia's incursion into Ukraine), affirming their collective resolve to safeguard and enhance the Arctic Council (Hosa, 2023). Nevertheless, the declaration lacks clear indications concerning the present state of affairs, leaving the outlook for collaboration with Russia uncertain and ambiguous. In summary, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has resulted in notable geopolitical and security-related repercussions, causing reverberations across

multiple regions. These effects encompass the Arctic, prompting a reexamination of strategic interests and security considerations in that area.

### **Discussion**

The Arctic has increased its importance with the contemporary international system and has come hitherto both as a peace zone and as a region where claims continue. In particular, Arctic countries and non-Arctic states are enhancing their claims in the Arctic Ocean each passing day. In this context, the Arctic is at the forefront of international attention, even though it is constantly changing and a number of uncertainties remain (Drewniak, Dalaklis, 2018). At this point, the Arctic, especially with ice melting facilitating business opportunities like mining, tourism, fishing, and transportation of goods can flourish. The Arctic is a promising field, especially for economic activities, and the term “the industrial Mediterranean of the Future” has already been used for the Arctic by certain stakeholders (Dalaklis, Baxevani, 2018). This globalized interest in the Arctic has inevitably brought along several disputes.

Some parts of the Arctic Ocean are claimed by particular countries such as Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the USA as territorial waters. On the other hand, there are disputes over Arctic passages such as NSR and NWP

with countries aspirings complete control. At this juncture, while NWP has been claimed by Canada, Russia has complete jurisdiction over NSR (Bennett et al., 2020). Besides, the Beaufort Sea has been facing an ongoing dispute between Canada (Yukon) and USA (Alaska) (Lewis-Koskinen, 2010). Hans island was indeed the only remained territorial dispute in the Arctic that was resolved recently. However, many disputes in the Arctic sea are related to marine areas, as in Svalbard.

As a result of UNCLOS provisions, 12 nautical miles of the territorial sea of a coastal state, extending from the baseline measurement and the creation of a new Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), have been extended 200 nautical miles from the baseline (UNCLOS, 1982). The Svalbard Treaty required (the country) to allow access and use of the islands as well as Svalbard's 12 nautical miles territorial sea; however, unlike territorial waters, the exclusive economic zone was not the concept that existed in 1920 (Zimmerman, 2018). While the disputes in the Arctic are still ongoing, the world is in danger of the spillover effects of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the 2022 Russian invasion in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 under the term "special military operation". It is Europe's largest conventional warfare operation since the Second World War (Papava, 2022). Before the breakout of full-scale military activity in early 2021,

Russian President Vladimir Putin criticized the post-1997 NATO expansion as a threat to his country's security. He expressed his views by demanding a legal ban on Ukraine from joining the military alliance. Recently, Ukraine's efforts to join NATO and the progress of relevant negotiations on this issue have triggered Russia's aggressive reaction. Therefore, it was not something unpredictable that Ukraine's probable membership in NATO would be at the expense of an aggressive military reaction by Russia. Today, a divided Ukraine, like Germany during the Cold War, is a candidate to become a geopolitical symbol of the new Cold War. Maybe, the main symbol of the geographical dividing line of the new cold war will appear with the division of Ukraine into Western Ukraine-Eastern Ukraine type.

Today, Russia has already delivered an aggressive response towards NATO's further expansion. This is seen today with the occupation of significant parts of Ukraine, but it can also be expected to overspill the Arctic in not so distant future. There is a mutual trigger in the decisions made at this point, so it has become a challenging issue to resolve. In the immediate aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it would not be wrong to interpret that this situation was the trigger for the resolution of the Hans island dispute, which has been going on for decades. On the other hand, with this peaceful settlement, the Kingdom

of Denmark and Canada have sent a message to Russia for a peaceful resolution of disputes. After the Ukraine invasion, Norway prevented delivering food and cargo to Spitsbergen. As a result, Russia's foreign ministry accused Oslo of blocking access to the Svalbard archipelago and threatening retaliation (The Local, 2022). This situation, which is a result of the sanctions imposed on Russia due to the Ukrainian war, was soon resolved by Norway in the face of Russia's complaint, stating that the containers would be brought using Norwegian vehicles; the Norwegian ministry commented that it was positive that this issue had found a solution (The Local, 2022). This is an indicative example that Russia will not remain silent against any "exclusion" in the Svalbard or the wider Arctic region.

On a very positive notion, a quite influential territorial dispute, ownership of Hans Island, was recently peacefully resolved. There are two possible suggestions for any remaining disputes over Svalbard derived from how the treaty was written. First, these articles of the Svalbard Treaty that remain open to interpretation should be amended/updated as soon as possible, to reflect the concept of EEZ and all other related issues. In this context, if negotiations fail, but maybe a totally new annex can be signed in the end. Two different scenarios are identified here, based on pros and cons: The first is to conclude an agreement in which Russia is included, which comes with pros. The second is

to conclude an agreement without including Russia, which is not probable and brings an extensive number of cons than pros. In the first scenario, Russia feels accepted/recognized and exhibits positive behavior, is more moderate, and is inclined to an agreement. On the other hand, an agreement may not be reached in the face of a situation that does not fit Russia's interests. The second scenario, which is not probable, could trigger Russia's aggression, provoking a military conflict. Although Russia is busy with Ukraine still has ease of use of force, and there is still the possibility of launching a hybrid war.

### **Conclusion**

Until today, the Svalbard Archipelago has been a place of peace and tranquility. No significant conflicts/tensions have not been detected between the interested parties involved, such as Russia, the USA, and Norway, except for a change in rhetoric in relation to various minor disputes. Russia and Norway have been effectively engaged in field activities in the Arctic after the Cold war, with Search and Resque cooperation standing out. Especially engagement and/or cooperation in certain economic activities with coal mining being the starting point (one of the main economic activities of Svalbard), have been also followed by tourism and research. Today, with the melting of Arctic glaciers, Svalbard, as a very important land mass in the Arctic

Ocean, can be on the agenda in terms of establishing maritime zones for environmental protection. However, certain ongoing political developments in the world also spillover to the Arctic and Svalbard, both directly and indirectly. The prolonged Russian-Ukraine conflict is causing a security dilemma and in a combinatory effect with climate change there is always the potential of a power race between states. These issues, in which Russia is at the epicenter, indicate that we should be concerned for the near and long term future. For instance, although Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an issue that takes place within an Arctic context, this aggressive attitude of Russia can have a devastating outcome in the Arctic in case Russia deploys the same style of “conflict resolution”. Given that Russia has already a significant number of inhabitants in Svalbard, it is an enigma what its future course of action can be.

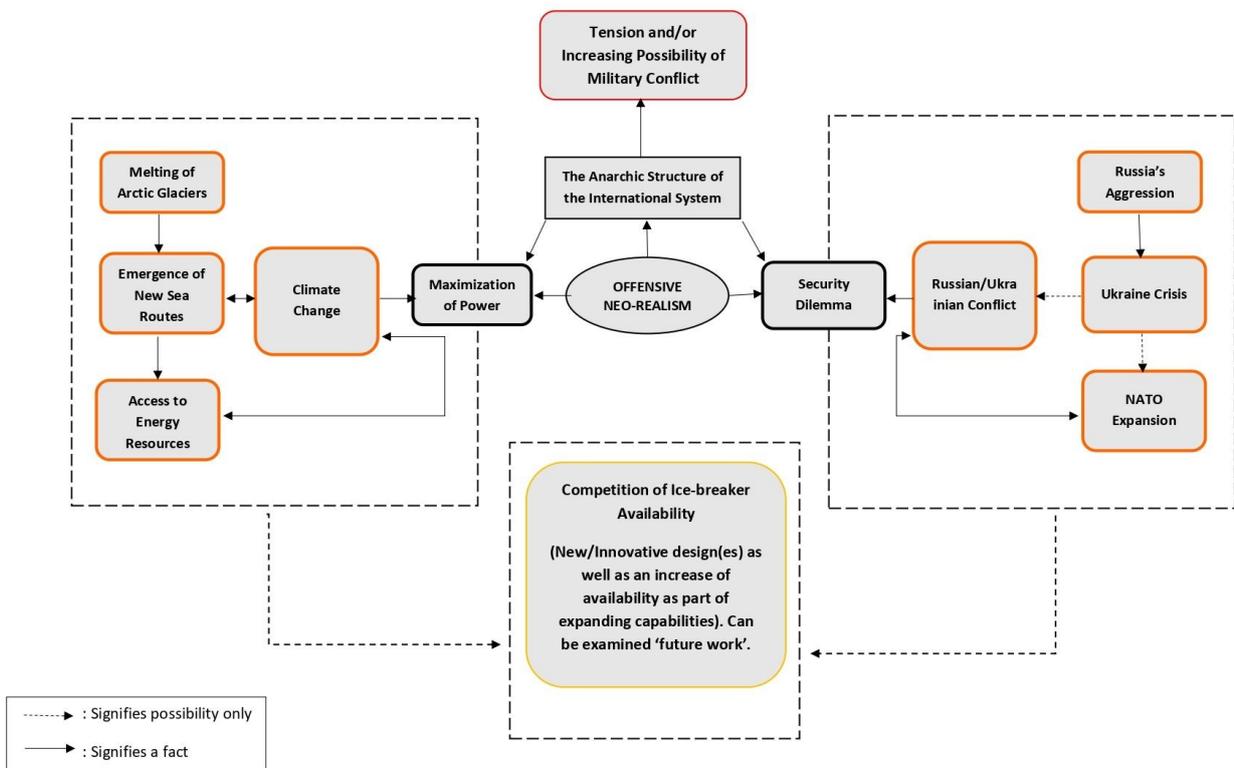
Russia has already taken the risk of launching an invasion in Ukraine, despite all the warning and sanctions that have already been imposed on the country and those that will be deployed in the future, by arguing that though Ukraine NATO will be expanded up until Russia's western border. However, economic sanctions have not been proven effective in the short term. Furthermore, there is a high possibility that economic sanctions will be proven a weak tool of enforcement in the long run, because Russia has vast energy resources available and a huge

agricultural production, as well as a adequate military power to support its vital national interests. For example, in order to project power and even effectively overcome those sanctions, Russia, (similarly to certain Western Powers) can use the Arctic Ocean and its adjacent seas as patrol and operational areas for platforms such as submarines, surface vessels, and strategic bombers (Wegge, Halsne, 2022). In addition, Russia, which has a vast icebreaker capacity (also expected to increase in the future), is already using the Arctic sea rather actively. The “new Arctic routes” are significant to Russia, which can use its icebreaker capacity to effectively support traffic in this still frozen region; the Arctic Ocean is no longer in isolation. Even so, competition for icebreaker availability is on the table, and new/innovative design(es), as well as an increase of their availability as part of expanding capabilities, can be examined as part of future work. At this point, Russia has been setting policies on the Arctic sea routes, particularly NSR, since the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Bhagwat, 2022). Russia, which is willing to take part in global trade, has had the chance to provide a connection with these routes as a second alternative to achieve its primary geopolitical aspiration: access to the warm seas.

When the two inputs obtained within the framework of Offensive Neo-Realism are integrated , a certain chain of events

is triggered, with a broken line indicating possibility only, and the solid one indicating a fact. In this case, the starting point of the first input is the melting of the arctic glaciers. The melting of Arctic glaciers is resulting to the emergence of new sea routes. In turn, the emergence of new sea routes has two consequences: Facilitates access to energy resources and at the same time results into an increase of claims in the Arctic, for those states that can further push their jurisdiction towards the Arctic Ocean. Thus, it can be supported that the melting of ice could lead to an increase in claims in the Arctic. The second starting point (other input) is Russia's aggression, which has caused the Ukrainian crisis that we are facing today. In this regard, the Ukrainian crisis has the possibility push towards a further NATO expansion (as already indicated by the recent addition of Finland to the alliance), (Gonzalez, 2019) with Sweden's NATO membership still pending. This in turn could create even more security concerns for Russia that could view the developments in Ukraine as a vital interest and like a victory worthwhile of pursuing at all costs. Simultaneously, NATO's expansion (via Swedish and Finish membership) could exercise negative influence in the domain of the Arctic and increased tensions. There is also tense of a potential second outcome that can termed as "ice breakers race" and must be further examined as part of future work. Cutting a long way short, access to the

Arctic still requires ice breaker ships capability and it looks like concerned states will increase their efforts to built this type of ships in the near future.



**Figure 3.** Chain of Events (Offensive Neo-Realism Theory).

**Source:** Created by the authors

There is also a peculiar dilemma in relation to the Russian efforts to develop further the utilization of the NSR: From the one hand, these attempts could be approached as an attempt to improve the country's status within the international arena; but, Russia's ambition to develop the NSR further and to make the Arctic an area of economic growth, is also something that can be viewed as a driver for keeping Russia away from escalating potential conflicts with other stakeholders in the region. In any case, because of the anarchic structure of the international system, states endeavor to maximize their power with the main aim to protect their broader interest and security status. In summary, a security dilemma arises from the current structure of the international system. Considering this, there is always a possibility of tension and/or the increasing possibility of military conflict in the Arctic. For example, Russia could use its Arctic card in the future in Svalbard, where it can quickly deploy its naval force depending on the future course of its military activities in Ukraine and exercise pressure on NATO's forces to respond. Alternatively, Russia could trigger civil unrest by using the Russian inhabitants in Svalbard; another option could be to declare a blockade in the Archipelago (via its rather widely available naval power in the Arctic) in an effort to send a "warning" to Norway and/or Finland/Sweden.



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