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The Arctic thaw: A new imperial dawn

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Commentary

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Abstract

Since 2022, the Arctic region has entered a period of significant instability, which has placed considerable strain on the institutional frameworks established during the post-Cold War era. With the conclusion of that historical phase, the future of Arctic governance is being contested by Russia and the United States – two pivotal polar powers essential to defining the regional order. Following the return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025, both nations have exhibited signs of diplomatic rapprochement, despite deploying distinct strategic postures. These postures situate the Arctic within competing metanarratives, wherein the region becomes the subject of new political imaginaries that instrumentalise imperialism. While the United States has resumed an assertive rhetoric towards its northern neighbours, Russia is attempting to resolve its long-standing civilisational identity debate by positioning the Arctic as a new centre of geopolitical gravity. Confronted with the threat of a division into spheres of influence, this paper contends that the Nordic states and Canada face the challenge of addressing the fragmenting polar governance regime that is essential in the context of the planet's rapidly changing climate regime and growing geo-economic competition for natural resources.

Introduction

The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) instituted a demarcation line that simultaneously created a geopolitical reality and a cartographic abstraction. It effectively partitioned the non-European world between the Iberian kingdoms of Spain and Portugal (Bennassar, 1992; Rumeu de Armas, 1992). Historians widely regard this division as a foundational moment in the genesis of global interconnectedness, formalising the ascendancy of a European-centric world order that would endure for over four centuries. The treaty heralded the dawn of an imperial paradigm without historical precedent: the age of planetary-scale empires. The technological and logistical capacities unleashed during 19th-century industrialisation – exemplified by the British Empire under the Victorian era (Bell, 2006) – intensified this model of global hegemony.

This historical precedent of extra-territorial division acquires renewed salience in the contemporary era. Among the hypotheses under consideration in the current global context, the question of the emergence of an imperial regime is central. The decline of the post-1945 international order, together with its constitutive institutions and legal frameworks, is manifest in a revival of imperial practices on the part of great powers, such as the United States, China, and Russia (Alessio & Renfro, 2022; Oksamytna, 2023; Steinmetz, 2005). Each of these powers endeavours to promulgate its own narrative; these narratives may develop along parallel lines, only eventually to clash. The Arctic is a case in point where the Trump–Putin summit held in Alaska in August 2025, though more symbolic than strategic, represents the resurgence of an imperial-style reunion aimed at negotiating the division of spheres of interests and influence (Belmessous, 2014). The current global geopolitical and historical moment, increasingly characterised by the convergence of systemic failures – a condition scholars term a polycrisis regime (Brosig, 2025; Henig & Knight, 2023; Homer-Dixon et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2024) – reinforces such imperial logics, albeit in a reconfigured and distorted form. The unipolar moment of the late 20th century has given way to a fragmented landscape defined by renewed great power competition and the assertion of spheres of influence.

Since the early 2020s, the arc of this competition – comprising geopolitical, public health, climate, and military affairs – has accelerated. It has the potential to produce a lasting reconfiguration of the international system. This arc has now entered a phase of disintegration, thereby highlighting underlying structural trends that have been present since the turn of the century. A realignment of the international order is taking place with the emergence of new powers, primarily China (Jacques, 2009). This dynamic is further entangled by the systemic rivalry between China and the United States, whose relationship is becoming increasingly aggressive (Bello, 2023).

Within the confines of this analytical framework, the Arctic serves as a prime example of this global phenomenon, with major economic powers exerting influence over the region and its resource potential (Dodds & Nuttall, 2016). The polar region is also a critical indicator of planetary-scale stressors, evidenced by an accelerated rate of climate change (Ford, Pearce,

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Villaverde Canosa, & Harper, 2021; Previdi, Smith, & Polvani, 2021), significant biodiversity shifts (Culp et al., 2022; Markley, Gross, & Daru, 2025), and the pervasive presence of persistent pollutants (Borgå et al., 2022). In the Arctic, the convergence of these two fast-paced dynamics – planetary crisis and resource competition – structurally reshapes the regional governance architecture, within which post-Cold War institutions, particularly the Arctic Council, have been weakened (Balton & Haig, 2026; De Lucia, 2025; Dyck, 2024; Koivurova & Shibata, 2023; Paukkunen & Black, 2024). In light of these developments, the Arctic appears to be in the grip of an emergent pluriverse of hegemonic spheres of influence, also conceptualised as *Großräume* (see Rossi, 2025).

The line of inquiry pursued in this article proceeds as follows: it first examines the erosion of post-Cold War Arctic governance, analysing how the United States and Russia, as dominant Arctic powers, seek to reframe the region in accordance with their respective national interests. It then argues that other Arctic nations, notably the Nordic countries, could nonetheless envisage a future governance model that safeguards key cooperative mechanisms, including scientific collaboration. Such a model would be explicitly calibrated to emerging geopolitical realities without abandoning the principle of functional cooperation.

The collapse of the post-Cold War order in the Arctic

The Arctic space had been largely insulated from geopolitical upheavals due to the favourable context of the post-Cold War era. However, the expansion of the polycrisis is now universal and is directly affecting the region, putting an end to the exceptionalism the Arctic appeared to enjoy during the brief period of governance initiated by its littoral states (Devyatkin, 2023; Shvets & Hossain, 2022). From 1991 to 2014, a phase of building and consolidating institutional mechanisms fostered cooperation and dialogue among regional actors, as well as the establishment of a governance framework focused on resolving common problems, such as environmental protection, economic development, and becoming more sensitive to the rights and recognition of Indigenous populations. In this sense, the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996 and its subsequent growth reflect this trajectory, which overlapped with a global trend of economic and liberal globalisation and the widespread democratisation of human societies (Fukuyama, 1992; Mearsheimer, 2025).

In the Arctic, however, this dynamic has experienced a series of interruptions. Three key moments mark the weakening of the polar region's governance structures. First, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 ruptured trust between the Western Arctic states and Moscow. Second, the arrival of Donald Trump at the White House in 2016 disrupted the stability of the governance architecture by rejecting the principles of multilateralism. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in 2020, hindered practical discourse and functions and created distance among the actors. This confluence of factors signalled latent fragilities within the governance structures.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought an end to this post-Cold War interlude and destroyed normal relations between the West and Russia. For the Arctic, the lasting consequences of this geopolitical realignment are leading to a slow erosion of the governance architecture and its institutional instruments. Particularly, Balton and Haig (2026) describe the Arctic Council as an irreplaceable intergovernmental structure that cannot function properly without the effective inclusion of Russia. Recognition of the Council's role as a producer of expertise and institutional broker renders it an unparalleled entity in regional governance (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). Nevertheless, its state of deterioration has led to "serious operational constraints and a significantly reduced scope and diplomatic profile" (Balton & Haig, 2026), making a tangible evolution of its functioning and composition indispensable to ensure its long-term survival (De Lucia, 2025). This state of crisis is the result of a cumulative crisis that began in 2014 and continues to expand across several layers, including the transatlantic dispute over Greenland, which has significantly hampered the regional body. All in all, the political degradation of the Arctic Council has mimicked a process of "zombification" – a condition in which the institution has lost control of its ability to set a direction or initiate new dynamics, while its vital functions gradually weaken.

More saliently, the effective suspension of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, created in 1993, following Russia's withdrawal in September 2023 and the cessation of the organisation's funding by Finland from 2026 onward, illustrates the region's shift into a new era (Edvardsen & Hansen, 2024). The accession of Finland and Sweden to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 2023 and March 2024, respectively, constitutes a further factor in this ongoing transformation, accentuating the region's strategic dependence on various theatres of confrontation (Alberque & Schreer, 2022). From NATO's perspective, these memberships streamline its defense policy for the northern and eastern flanks of the European continent, chiefly by enabling a more coherent articulation of the Barents–Baltic security architecture (Rossi, 2025; Vidal, 2025). Overall, it effectively marginalised post-Cold War Arctic governance aspirations to centre the schism between the NATO bloc and Russia, thereby creating a lasting fracture across the polar region.

The weakening of the post-Cold War Arctic governance architecture and the rearrangement of security structures open the prospect of new dynamics in this phase of the transitional regime. Such dynamics are bolstered not only by geopolitical and security-related factors but also by domestic dynamics at play in the two main Arctic nations – the United States and Russia. Both exhibit patterns in the polar region consistent with imperial postures, fuelled by their respective metanarratives.

Donald Trump and the shadow of McKinley

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 occurred at a pivotal juncture for Arctic geopolitics, adding a new layer of complexity in light of the previous momentum that marked the deterioration of the polar region's governance structures. Within this increasingly fragmented geopolitical context in the polar region, Greenland has emerged as a central point of contention, exacerbating tensions between the United States and the Kingdom of Denmark and, more broadly, the European Union (Cassidy, 2025). The autonomous island has effectively become the epicentre of an expanding transatlantic crisis. President Trump's ambition to acquire Greenland, first articulated in 2019 (Breum, 2019), was promptly reaffirmed at the outset of his second term, justified through a discourse of national security and geo-economic imperatives (Holland, 2025; Jacobsen, 2025). The growing transatlantic rift manifests in a strategic competition among major global powers, with Greenland emerging as a pivotal theatre. The United States is seeking to expand its influence across the polar region, marking its emphasis on the strategic landscape.

Despite the aggressive and often caricatured rhetoric from the US President and members of his administration, ambitions regarding Greenland have not at this stage materialised. This

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unperfected ambition is largely due to firm opposition from the Greenlandic population, which intends to retain control of its political future – a status guaranteed by its autonomy within the Kingdom of Denmark. This sentiment is quantified by a January 2025 poll, in which 85% of Greenlanders expressed disapproval of the prospect of joining the United States (Reuters, 2025). However, these postures infuse a divergent perspective on how the Arctic is conceptualised as a strategic space and reflect a more deeply entrenched trend: that of an imperial trajectory. As illustrated in Figure 1, the United States has historically sought to establish comprehensive hemispheric dominance, spanning from the Arctic to the Antarctic Peninsula. This dynamic is particularly evident in US efforts to reassert a dominant foreign policy initiative in Latin America, a region where China has substantially expanded its presence and influence (Berg, 2026; Stallings, 2025). In the context of contemporary systemic rivalry with China, this strategic objective portends a significant reinforcement of US efforts to consolidate control over the Western Arctic. The promotion of the concept of "Greater North America" by the Department of War, which encompasses the entire territory north of the equator, is intended to tighten US control in the region (U.S. Department of War, 2026). As a result, such a policy could potentially pose a threat to the sovereignty of neighbouring countries. The imperial rhetoric therefore directly affects its relations with its northern neighbours – Canada and Greenland (Fee, 2025; Kapoor, 2025).

The offensive rhetoric directed at Canada signals a shift in approach in relations with its northern neighbour. This shift, however, echoes a two-centuries-old anxiety about the threat the United States poses to the Canadian Confederation (see Penlington, 1965). In 1812, the United States invaded Canada, driven by a cumulative set of grievances against the British Empire, foremost among them British support for Indigenous peoples who resisted Washington's westward expansionist aspirations. The war, which concluded with the Treaty of Ghent on 24 December 1814, resulted in a strategic loss for US expansionism, as it failed to annex Canadian territory. This long-standing fear holds that the Confederation could fragment due to internal secessionist movements within the Prairie provinces (Wilkinson, 2025). The tensions surrounding the province of Alberta are representative of these fears, as any potential attempt to organise a secession referendum is viewed as a development that would fuel the US imperial project in the High North (Counter & Latimer, 2025).

Regarding Greenland, US strategic interests in the Arctic region have historically included the aspiration to gain control of the island. This objective was pursued from an early stage in the nation's history. In 1867, during the process of acquiring Alaska from the Russian Empire, the federal government deliberated on the potentiality of extending an analogous offer to the Danish crown, sovereign over Greenlandic territory. Since then, there have been several unsuccessful attempts to achieve this objective in 1910 and 1946, respectively, which suggests the presence of a fundamental geopolitical ambition: the desire to anchor this territory within the American sphere. Beyond the geographical dimension (Fig. 1), this aspiration recalls one of the pillars of the Monroe Doctrine, which aimed to end European colonisation in the Americas. In his address to Congress in December 1823, President Monroe stated that,

> "(. . .) the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonisation by any European powers." (Monroe, 1823)

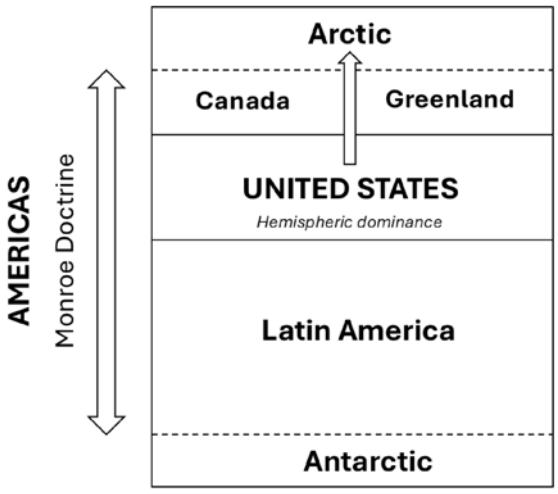


Figure 1. The architecture of a US imperial system in the Americas, first blueprinted in the 19th century.

Monroe defined a long-standing foreign policy objective that the United States intended to pursue – a policy that reached its apogee at the end of the 19th century under President William McKinley (1897–1901). From this perspective, Donald Trump has held up McKinley, the 25th President of the United States, as a model to drive towards the end of the liberal order (Immerwahr, 2025; Palen, 2015). A proponent of the Monroe Doctrine, McKinley was also the president who, in 1898, engaged the country in a military confrontation against Spain, a waning empire then grappling with a war against Cuban nationalists (Hamilton, 2006; Offner, 2004; Ward, 2022). This notable episode, which marked the end of the Spanish presence in the Americas, echoes a now-eroded trust between the two sides of the Atlantic (Grillo, 2025). As Ivie (1972, 15–16) observes, McKinley also pursued an expansionist foreign policy, a stance clearly illustrated in his rhetoric advocating for the annexation of the Philippines. This position solidified his reputation as a major advocate of an imperial path for the nation. This more assertive imperial strategy does not constitute a departure from the softer form of US imperialism that has been operational since the end of the Second World War (Rowe, 2004). For Trump, engaging in a diplomatic standoff with Denmark is a way of aligning his policy with that of his predecessor, while also asserting Washington's imperial projection ambitions in the Arctic (Dodds, 2025).

The Russian civilisational debate: a Middle-Earth empire?

For its part, Russia remains entrenched in a protracted debate over its civilisational identity – a discourse concerning its geographic belonging that has been crystallising since the 19th century (see Danilevsky, 1888; Riasanovsky, 1960). The construction of the Russian Empire since the 16th century and its expansion into the Arctic and the Far East continue to be the subject of a contemporary debate, one reinvigorated in ideological circles, many of which have ties to the Russian government, following the crisis in relations with the West since 2014 (Laruelle, 2016). As Figure 2 illustrates, the core driver of the civilisational identity debate relates to Russia's geographical identity – in other words, which civilisational sphere Russia belongs to. The fundamental tension between Western-oriented "Westernizers" and nativist "Eurasianists" has historically

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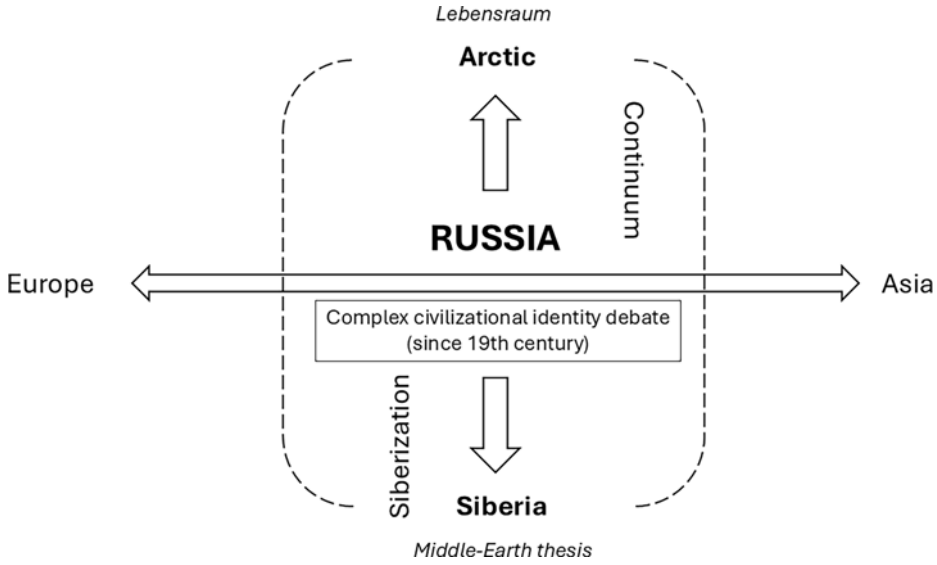


Figure 2. The shifting civilisational identity towards a vertical integration driven by Siberia and the Arctic.

structured the pendulum swings of Russian state policy for centuries (Bassin, 1991; Gvosdev, 2007; Halperin, 1982; Laruelle, 2018; Tsygankov, 2007). Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Asian pivot undertaken by President Putin has accelerated markedly against the backdrop of comprehensive economic and financial sanctions imposed by Western countries.

A strategic reorientation is underway, one in which the Arctic is becoming a central component in the consolidation of Russia's civilisational identity. In his speech held in Murmansk in March 2025, Putin explicitly mentioned the historical and geographical significance of the polar region (Putin, 2025). Consequently, the Arctic's future is envisioned as a pivotal nexus of industrial and logistical activity. This vision anticipates the migration of Russian settlers – distinct from the excluded Indigenous peoples of the Arctic such as the Nenets, Chukchi, Yakuts, and Komi – for brief periods, thereby creating a continuous flow of workers between the centre and its Arctic periphery (Lancereau, 2025). Nevertheless, their presence would lastingly reinforce the integration of this far northern region with the rest of the Russian state. By leveraging its extractive infrastructure – from geological research institutions (e.g. Rosgeo and Institute of Geology of Ore Deposits, Petrography, Mineralogy and Geochemistry of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS)) to mining enterprises – Russia intends to continue its long-standing policy of natural resource exploitation in the region. As Slezkine (1994) describes, this relationship with the Arctic follows a logic of conquering a territory perceived as backward, a process undertaken at the expense of the circumpolar peoples. Following this logic, the Russian state, through the Russian Geographical Society, founded in 1845 and promoting scientific expeditions, has treated the Arctic as a priority region for full integration (Sukhova & Yu Skrydlov, 2018).

Putin thus depicts a strategic space, redefining the boundaries of a region that is now perceived as vital to the Russian state. The reinforcement of the polar territories' incorporation into the central power can be characterised as a form of *Lebensraum*, or "living space," vital for the survival of the Russian state. Developed by German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), the concept of Lebensraum became a stated geopolitical objective of the German Empire during World War I and was promoted by German nationalists such as the Pan-German League (*Alldeutscher Verband*). The Nazi regime later exploited it to define and justify its expansionist policies in Central and Eastern Europe (see Smith, 1986). In his Murmansk speech, Putin (2025) bridged the Arctic to Siberia as he stressed, "the potential of the Arctic's inland waterways, our great rivers – the Lena, Yenisei, and Ob – must be unlocked at a new technological level to develop the Trans-Arctic route."

This continuum between the Arctic and Siberia (Fig. 2) is a critical pattern that Russia aims to pursue to revitalise its civilisational project. Lobanov-Rostovsky (1929) conceptualised the geographical expanse of the Russian territory as stretching from the Baltic to the Pacific and from the Arctic to the Gobi. It is arguably this final, vertical dimension in which the Russian state may seek to consolidate its civilisational project by materially realising the hypothesis of a Middle-Earth empire (see Fig. 2). The geographic concept of a central landmass, inspired by Tolkien's Middle-Earth, has been employed by Eurasianists and Western intellectuals alike (Ashford, 2018; Rossi, 2025). Some Russian intellectuals advocate for the *Siberization* of the Russian state, shifting its centre of gravity towards the Urals and Siberia to break with three centuries of European integration and develop a strategic eastern territory (Karaganov & Omelchuk, 2023; Karaganov, 2025). This re-centreing aligns with the Middle-Earth theory, wherein the Arctic catalyses the country's civilisational refoundation (Rossi, 2025; Sukhorukov, Gladkiy, & Kulik, 2021). The framing of this narrative aims to reinforce the anchoring of the Arctic as a fundamental part of Russian identity. This posture echoes the one emerging in the United States with respect to the Arctic. For these two powers, the Arctic is becoming a compass in the continuation of their imperialist posture.

The diplomatic re-engagement initiated between the United States and Russia in January 2025 signalled a readiness to reset a bilateral dialogue and envision a potential venue to restore cooperation in some segments. Facilitated by the resumption of bilateral exchanges, these interactions have revealed a convergent and predominantly mercantilist vision of the Arctic, centred on resource exploitation. For instance, the possibility of resuming economic cooperation in the energy sector is illustrative of this common understanding between both countries (Hirtenstein, Rashad, & Dang, 2025). While this outcome remains a speculative

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thesis at present, the notion of a bilateral imperial partitioning of the polar region reflects a tacit recognition of the profound structural transformations underway.

Anti-imperial resistance and Nordic dilemmas

Due to the ongoing symmetrical process in the United States and Russia, this dynamic is marked by a notable concordance of views on illiberalism. According to Laruelle (2022), illiberalism is, among other things, a backlash against contemporary liberalism in its various forms: political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, and civilisational. This pushback is often articulated in the name of democratic principles and achieved by securing popular support. Against this backdrop, the future of polar regional governance is threatened by a gradual slide towards an imperial regime. As the Arctic may serve as an imperial venue, the structural and long-term weakening of regional governance mechanisms is occurring within the context of a generalised deterioration of the international system established after 1945, undermining peace and stability. This development underscores the ascendancy of power dynamics to the detriment of international law and intergovernmental bodies that privilege dialogue and negotiation within multilateral formats. This trajectory induces a more evident reaffirmation of practices rooted in the pre-1945 period. Citing perceived threats to national security, major powers are increasingly inclined to pursue geopolitical aims unilaterally, demonstrating a readiness to employ military force where deemed expedient. Within the turbulent geopolitical landscape of the 2020s, the Arctic region has become enmeshed in this wider structural erosion of the international security architecture (Koivurova & Shibata, 2023; Vidal, 2025). The trajectory of Arctic governance is therefore rendered profoundly uncertain, a predicament exacerbated by the impending strain on its resilience mechanisms in the face of resurgent imperial practices.

In response, other Arctic nations attempt to navigate hostile geopolitical conditions and develop mechanisms to resist a transitional regime whose outcome remains unknown. Interestingly, the discourse of resistance articulated by Canadian Prime Minister Carney in Davos in January 2026 is illustrative of this dynamic, as it called for achieving emancipation within a network of middle powers founded on liberal and democratic values (Gunitsky, 2026). In the Arctic context, Canada and the Nordic countries seek to create a balance of power against Russian and American imperial ambitions. For these states, the goal is to reduce their collective anxiety induced by a profoundly degraded geostrategic environment that undermines the stability of regional societies. All in all, the Nordic countries and Canada may be compelled to accelerate their strategic convergence as a countermeasure to protect international cooperation and scientific infrastructure, which are uniquely vulnerable at this critical juncture.

For the Nordic states, the confluence of the Russian security threat and the crisis in transatlantic relations destabilises the long-standing principles that have shaped their regional posture across numerous decades. Indeed, the repercussions of this geopolitical shift portend a phase of strategic marginalisation, jeopardising the established political, diplomatic, and security order in the region. This new historical phase raises a fundamental question of contextualisation: within what continuum is it situated? Some scholars posit that the Arctic is experiencing a resurgence of Cold War mentality, a latent conflictual attitude that has merely transmuted into a new form. Huebert (2019) suggests that the Cold War persisted and that the Arctic region remained an integral component of this broader historical continuum. The post-Cold War metanarrative, which was built upon the Murmansk Initiative – a speech delivered by Gorbachev in Murmansk in 1987 – envisioned the future of the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation (Gorbachev, 1987). However, this new vision of "exceptionalism" was fundamentally predicated on the consolidation of ties between the West and post-Soviet Russia. This interpretation underscores the failure of post-Cold War endeavours to reconstruct a stable Western relationship with Russia. From this perspective, the existing framework of Arctic governance, a product of the immediate post-Cold War era, appears fundamentally unbalanced and desynchronised from the accelerated pace of contemporary geopolitical realignments.

The present course of events in the Arctic governance domain calls into question the consistency and future resilience of the prevailing institutional architecture. The continued existence and preservation of the Arctic Council may serve as an indication that the post-Cold War legacy could endure amidst the prevalent shifts in the region. In Northern Europe, the structural shift in the Arctic's geostrategic environment is perceived by Nordic governments as an existential threat that extends across multiple historical eras, reaching back even further than the Cold War period. Indeed, the weakening of the regional order, in conjunction with the deteriorating conditions of the security architecture in Europe, has the potential to signal the conclusion of a two-century interlude. For a considerable period, the Nordic countries were regarded as the heirs to a model of peacebuilding in Europe. Furthermore, they have played a direct role in the establishment of an Arctic governance system, a distinctive regime at the international stage that has served to strengthen cooperation, particularly in the scientific domain. The observed fragmentation of the Arctic region may induce a corresponding disintegration of its cooperative frameworks. Since 2022, scientific collaboration has suffered significant setbacks, entering a state of survival in which its core functions are severely constrained (Johansson & Callaghan, 2025; Vidal & Saas, 2025). The "Nordic peace," which has served as a model of stability on the European continent since the post-Napoleonic period (Archer & Joenniemi, 2003; Rekvig, 2024), now faces dissolution.

Consequently, current developments may not signify the continuation of a perpetual Cold War; rather, they may represent a more profound historical rupture: the demise of the Nordic peace paradigm dating from 1814. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, in conjunction with the extensive regional militarisation, indicates a substantial shift in this paradigm. For Northern Europe, the intensification of hostilities with Russia arguably signals the most pressing security concern since the Second World War. The dynamic of tensions and the line of fracture spanning the entire European continent from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea are weakening the position of the Nordic countries and exposing them to the establishment of a permanent regime of security tensions. This context could facilitate the consolidation of an imperial understanding founded on a mercantilist vision of the polar region and a complacent acceptance of the transformation of its climatic regime at the expense of international scientific cooperation. To oppose this scenario, the Nordic countries and Canada may develop a counter-metanarrative that shields science, international law and transparent governance against predatory temptations in the region.

Conclusion

Since 2014, the Arctic region has undergone a series of overlapping crises that have gradually led to a breakdown of trust among the

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region's states. These cumulative crises are driving a transformative shift away from the governance framework established in the post-Cold War era. The institutional architecture inherited from that period is now imperilled, and the window of opportunity to preserve it is closing rapidly. The ongoing expansion of military activities in the polar region, along with a rising trend of anti-science policies in Western democracies, is eroding both the functioning and the diplomatic posture of the Arctic Council, an institution that emerged during the height of the liberal international order. Even if the characterisation of the Arctic as an imperial venue per se remains a hypothesis rather than an established reality, the ongoing effort by the United States and Russia to narratively construct the region as a shared sphere of influence constitutes a meaningful signal. Such a configuration threatens to marginalise both the other Arctic states and other critical stakeholders who have been instrumental in shaping regional governance, chief among them Indigenous communities.

In that context, the prospect of dual *Großraum* – pursued by both Russia and the United States – positions the Arctic as a central strategic stake for the major powers in the 21st century, thereby revealing their underlying imperial postures. Echoing the great power rivalries of the 19th century, this dynamic implies a growing risk of open conflict. Compounding these geopolitical ambitions, planetary environmental changes, whose effects are disproportionately amplified in the Arctic, further exacerbate the risk of systemic instability. Within this context, the hypothesis of a long-term understanding between Russia and the United States to partition the Arctic into spheres of influence warrants serious consideration. Such a tacit condominium would ostensibly aim to exclude extra-regional geo-economic powers, notably China, and create an *entente* on controlling regional natural resources.

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