The Arctic as a potential space for Great Power Competition

Maksim Nikulin
RUDN University, str. Miklukho-Maklaya, 6, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation
E-mail: nikulin-ma@rudn.ru

Abstract. At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the Arctic Ocean experienced a short reduction in both the extent and the amount of sea ice. These events, triggered by a global rise in temperature, have opened the door to more active use of new sea shipping routes and the possibilities of extraction of natural resources from deposits previously inaccessible. Such changes led to an increase in the activity of states both belonging to the Arctic region and outside it. The result of these processes was a gradual increase in rivalry between the key actors in the Arctic region. The author analyzes how the state of relations between the great powers affects the Arctic region. Using the example of relations between US and Russia, which are key in the Arctic, it is shown that, despite the growing rivalry between the two states, they least of all affect the Russian-American relations in this region. Against this background, there is growing and interesting another great power to this region - the PRC. In contrast to the Russian Federation and the United States, China uses a non-confrontational path in its activities in the Arctic region, advocates the preservation of peace and stability in it. As a result, the rivalry of states in the northern latitudes can be called a semblance of a Cold War on a regional scale.

1. Introduction
The end of the bipolar confrontation in the world that ensued the transformation of the system of international relations had a significant impact on the Arctic region. The Arctic ocean waterway, which for decades divided the USSR and the US as two superpowers, became a space for interaction and cooperation. Besides the polar powers, other Arctic nations as well as extraregional ones also participated in these processes.

However, the growing fight for natural resources possession, growth of contradictions between the most powerful states in the world, as well as the low level of trust in the international arena put a question mark over the established status-quo in the Arctic region.

2. Methods
The main methods used by the author in the study are event analysis and system analysis, which best allow tracing the evolution of the strategic situation in the Arctic region.

3. Specifics of the Arctic as a region of global affairs
By the beginning of the 21st century the Arctic represented the region where transition from the confrontation model of relations between the two superpowers to the system of multipolar cooperation both of regional and extraregional countries in order to achieve the regional peace and stability took place. Besides the general regional structure of the Arctic region, its interpenetration also changed. There was a transition from examination of issues of classic state security arrangements to the international global problem solving focused on environmental issues and those related to the
extraction of natural resources. Within the framework of interstate cooperation, a significant role was played by scientific diplomacy. Thus, for example, in 2010, a dialogue on environmental security in the Arctic Ocean between the Russian Federation and NATO took place in London. Its apolitical format and the work of three task groups, headed by representatives from the Russian Federation and the United States, made it possible to develop and adopt a number of important agreements. However, against the background of the events in Ukraine and the subsequent growth of contradictions between Russia and its Western partners, position of affairs began to gradually change [1].

Other particularities of the region are related to its geographical position, since the Arctic is situated in adverse climatic conditions. It defines the necessity of collaboration in the field of research and extraction of the natural resources since the high cost of their development and the necessary technologies cannot be provided by any country alone. The Arctic holds up to 22% of the world's oil and gas reserves, which is about 90 bnbarrels, vast stocks of soft water and rare metals. The shortest route to carry out a nuclear-missile strike for the USSR and the USA as former opponents of the bipolar confrontation passes through the Arctic waters. Thus, the time of arrival of ballistic missiles is about 15 minutes. Here also passes the Northern Sea Route, one of the sea transport routes, which reduces the time of delivery of goods from East Asia to Europe, in contrast to routes through the Suez or Panama Canals.

The legal status is another feature of the Arctic region. According to Philipp Wolfrum, this unique region may “turn out to be a laboratory for a new international-legal regime” [2]. After the end of the cold war, the region became a platform for the development of multilateral cooperation, in which regional and extraregional states, organizations of different levels (for ex. the Arctic Council at the regional level and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council at the subregional level, multiple interstate organizations of the Nordic countries, etc.), as well as representatives of indigenous people were and are still taking part. Thus, a number of important agreements such the Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic (2011), the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution, Preparedness and Response in the Arctic (2013), the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation (2017) were signed within the framework of the Arctic Council, the key regional organization. Along with that we can highlight the initiatives of individual countries to resolve controversial issues in the delimitation of the maritime space in the region, for example, Russia and Norway [3].

On the other side, if we refer to the text of the Ilulissat Declaration based on the results of the 1st conference on the Arctic ocean signed on May 28, 2008, we can find the paragraph that there is no need to develop a new comprehensive international legal regime for the management of the Arctic Ocean. It was also noted that all the disputable questions must be resolved according to the UN norms, while the text of the document itself did not mention the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), which was a consequence of the principled ground of the US government that did not sign this Convention. Whereby the declaration itself was signed without the participation of three members of the Arctic Council - Iceland, Sweden and Finland, which are not littoral Arctic countries, and without the participation of representatives of indigenous peoples.

According to Russian researchers Valery Konyshev and Alexander Sergunin, at the moment there is an unspoken agreement between the regional actors that the Arctic governance system can have a multidimensional, multilevel, and not necessarily strictly formalized structure [4].

As another particularity of the Arctic as the region of the world politics, we can mention its insignificant sensitivity to conjunctural changes in the international political situation. Thus, for example, the general deterioration of relations between Russia and the Western governments, which are at the same time Arctic ones, did not radically affect either the development of Arctic cooperation with the Russian Federation, or the plans for military construction in the region [5].

Moreover, in fact, such position means recognition of the important role of Russia in the activities and resources development in the Arctic region, as it was rightly noted back in Soviet times by the experts in the field special rights and interests of the Arctic states of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), that the basis of special rights is a historically established
situation that originates in the research and economic activities of Russian scientists and entrepreneurs in the Arctic.

As the result, we can draw a conclusion that today the Arctic is the region, where transition from the confrontation model of relations between the two superpowers to the system of multipolar cooperation both of regional and extraregional countries in order to achieve the regional peace and stability took place. Besides the general regional structure of the Arctic region, its composition also changed, there was a transition from examination of issues of classic state security arrangements to the international global problem solving focused on environmental issues and those related to the extraction of natural resources.

4. Particularities of the world political regulation in the Arctic

There are, nevertheless, a number of cons. Thus, the lack of legal basis as well as law-application practice, and mutual obligations impose restrictions on the effectiveness of the current system of multilateral cooperation in the Arctic region [6]. From the point of view of the neorealist theory in international relations, existence of such a regime of interaction in the Arctic defines by the intention of great powers to ensure their national interests, which drags them to such a compromise division of powers and responsibilities in the region. In this case, it is quite problematic to use the theories of liberal approaches in international relations because despite the existence of interstate cooperation, and a vast amount of institutions of different level and character, as it was noticed before, there is a lack of defined legal basis of interaction between the key actors in the region [7].

In this connection, we can pay attention to one of the key organizations in the Arctic region, on which modern mechanism of regional governance is based – the Arctic Council. Founded in 1996, this organization represented a logic result of first steps of post-bipolar reality building in the Arctic, which started from signing of the Declaration on the Protection of the Arctic Environment (1991). In fact, the Arctic Council is a forum, which has mutual legal commitments. Moreover, being the key mechanism in the frames of modern interstate interaction in the Arctic region, the Council is responsible for areas of economic development only (transport, logistics, infrastructure, etc.), environmental protection, and cooperation in such areas as border control, prevention of radioactive contamination, efforts to assist in overcoming the consequences of natural disasters and emergencies, etc. Questions related to military-technical and military-political character are out of its jurisdiction, and a number of experts believe that the Arctic Council needs to adapt to the changing environment [8]. This is why, on the one hand, according to Haakon Stephen Bruun-Hanssen, Norwegian officer with the rank of Admiral and Inspector General of the Navy, the Arctic is probably the most stable region in the world [9], but on the other hand, the development in the region of the military infrastructure and expeditionary capabilities of individual Arctic countries cannot be denied [10].

5. Influence of the Russian-American relations on the Arctic region

A number of researchers believe that the actual position of affairs in the Arctic region is regulated and based on the other criteria, that are not related neither to the military-strategic potential of the Arctic countries nor to the system of multilateral cooperation that has been established in the Arctic since the end of the 20th century. According to the Chinese researcher Deng Beixi, in a certain sense, the existing international regime in the Arctic and its agenda can be viewed as a product of the development of U.S.-Russian relations after the Cold War [11]. It is based on bilateral Russian-American relations, changing from cooperation to confrontation, as well as competition between Russia and the US on security issues and a lack of trust between the parties (Table 1). This table was prepared by the author based on the data from the article [12].
Table 1. The Impact of Russian-American Relations on the Arctic Region.

| Years     | State of bilateral relations | Impact on the Arctic region                                                                 | Factors for tension                                      |
|-----------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1867-1890 | Cooperation                  | Russia sells Alaska to the U.S.                                                             | Great Britain is a mutual opponent                        |
| 1890-1921 | Confrontation                | Landing of American troops in Arkhangelsk - US military intervention in the Civil War in Russia | Resistance to the rising communist regime                 |
| 1921-1945 | Cooperation                  | Shipment of military and humanitarian cargoes by the Northern Sea Rome to support the Soviet Union in fighting Germany and his allies | Allies in World War II                                    |
| 1945-1987 | Confrontation                | Tire Arctic as a strategic frontier for deployment of army units and nuclear deterrence facilities | Rivalry for world hegemony during the Cold War            |
| 1987-2014 | Cooperation                  | Cooperation in the Arctic beyond the big politics sphere; parties have failed to get rid of Cold War legacy | A thaw in relations                                       |
| Since 2014 | Confrontation                | Perception of the activities of the Russian Federation in the Arctic as the activities of China in the South China Sea. accusations of unilateral militarization of the region | Growth of contradictions in the Arctic Region             |

There has to be also noted that despite the growing importance of the Arctic region in international relations, the region itself has a limited impact on interrelations between states on a global level and is also subject to outside influence. In this vein, we can highlight the above-mentioned events in Ukraine in 2014. As the Russian-American contradictions in the international arena grew, their side effects began to affect the Arctic region, which first of all, had an impact on such types of cooperation, as a joint development of deposits of useful minerals, carrying out of research work, and search and rescue operations.

For example, the US canceled joined search-and-rescue exercises of the Coast Guard and the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation [13]. The updated list of US and EU sanctions against Russia mentions an economically significant energy sector, since the Western governments refused to transfer technologies for deep-water drilling, exploration of oil fields in the Arctic, and shale oil production to Russia. They also impose restrictions on investment and financing of Russian oil and gas projects.

Interstate relations in the Arctic reflect the U.S.-Russian relations on the global stage to a certain extent. However, the institutional mechanisms of cooperation in the Arctic, created after the end of the cold war, gradually became to function as a “buffer” or “security system” for the Arctic, protecting it from the influence of external factors. These mechanisms include the Arctic Council, the only multilateral regime of regional governance, covering all Arctic states as well as sub-regional groups such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Nordic Council, the Northern Forum, and the Northern Dimension. Besides that, there are several bilateral or multilateral treaties and agreements, which envisage practical activities in the Arctic, for example in search and rescue operations, fishery regulation, etc.

First of all, these mechanisms are capable of diffusing the impact of the U.S.-Russian tensions on cooperation in the Arctic and serve as a reminder to the two countries that they should participate in resolving current issues only as regional players. A number of agreements to create mechanisms for solving Arctic problems facilitate dialogue on security issues. They also help build a consensus that regional peace and stability benefits everyone and limit the side effects of global geopolitical tensions in the Arctic region. In other words, the Arctic should not be involved in big politics, remaining an
area of cooperation, and not a field for confrontation. Therefore, some experts, for example, the
Russian researcher Aleksander Savoisky, believe: “Strategic cooperation between Russia and the US in
the development of natural resources of the Russian North can become very useful in the development
of Russian-American relations, including the economic aspect” [14].

The other goal of this system is to keep regional powers from reckless actions and induce them not
to participate in war games in the Arctic region. For the US, the country, which do not plan to spend a
lot of money on defense and security in the Arctic, NATO intervention in Arctic security issues in the
name of territorial defense or a readiness to implement contingency plans in case of military scenarios
(such as responding to Ukrainian events) is seen as less expensive and a realistic option.

Nevertheless, this will inevitably lead to the confrontation between east and west in the spirit of the
cold war. The possibility of Sweden or Finland joining NATO will also disrupt the regional balance of
power. Russia will have to take countermeasures, and there is a risk that the US will not accept it. As
for NATO meddling in Arctic affairs, Russia and such NATO member as Canada do not agree with
this alliance on such perspective. Moreover, Canada argues that the Arctic can be independently
regulated by Arctic states and that its problems should be solved within the Arctic Council and United
Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea without NATO participation.

As the strategic importance of the Arctic in the world increases, geopolitical changes outside the
Arctic region, such as the Ukrainian crisis, will continue to indirectly affect the region. Taking into
account regional governance mechanisms, coordinated consensus and cooperation, as well as growing
independence and exclusivity in regional development, the U.S.-Russian relations in the Arctic are no
longer a simplistic reflection of their relations in the world arena. Structural interstate conflict and
internal rivalry limit all-round cooperation between the two countries in the Arctic. With this
background, China enhances its northern direction of foreign policy.

6. Interests of China in the Arctic
Speaking about the interests of China in the Arctic region, we can distinguish three key components –
security, resources, and science. Let’s dwell on the issue of security, which includes several aspects,
reflecting traditional problems referring to rising and great powers. First of all, this represents the
 provision of Sea lines of communication, SLOCs, the projection of force as a sea power and the
strengthening of defence. From the point of view of non-traditional security, interests of China in
economic and strategic science in polar regions also require stable and peaceful political situation in
the Arctic, where interests of China are protected and may be more prosperous. All these categories
are both separate and interrelated and reflect the new geopolitics of the present day, in which
maintaining global connectivity and cooperation is as valuable as dominating one geographic region.

Unlike the Arctic states, China does not have territorial sovereignty and associated sovereign rights
to extract resources and fishing in the Arctic. Faced with very limited rights as a non-Arctic state,
China aims to develop strategies to bridge the growing gap between legal and institutional restrictions
in the Arctic and its growing Arctic interests. These strategies reflect Beijing's stable passage towards
the projection of military power around the world, one of the traditional indicators of a great power.

According to foreign researchers, the events of 2007, when a Russian expedition planted a flag on
the bottom of the Arctic shelf, influenced the formation of China’s geopolitical interests in the Arctic
region [15]. However, it cannot be denied that China was not present in the Arctic before this period;
the main difference is that at the present stage it is the state that is more involved in this activity,
even though earlier this place was occupied by the scientific community.

The current stage of China’s activity in the Arctic began in 1990, when Chinese scientists resumed
their participation in scientific research of the North Pole [16]. In 1993, the Chinese government
purchased from Ukraine a multipurpose icebreaking transport vessel of the reinforced ice class of the
Vitus Bering type, which was laid down at the Kherson shipyard, and completed its construction as an
icebreaker called the Snow Dragon. Another group of Chinese scientists with journalists visited the
Arctic in 1995 in tow-boat [17]. The Chinese Academy of Sciences created the Polar Science
Committee the same year. In 1999 a Chinese icebreaking research vessel Xue Long went on a first
scientific trip to the Artic from Bering Sea to the Chukchi Sea). In 2004, China established a new polar research centre – the Arctic Yellow River Station in Ny-Ålesund, the centre for international Arctic research in Svalbard [18].

In 2006, for the first time the program of development of research in polar field was included in the XI five-year plan of China. For this country the Arctic represents a potential source of resources for a growing national economy, a place for research-and-development activities, as well as a new shipping route that can reduce the time required for goods going to Europe, as well as avoid getting into troubled waters of the Middle East (in particular the Gulf of Aden). In 2007 China was granted the status of a temporary observer in the Arctic Council, and in 2013 the status of a permanent observer [19]. In 2011, Chen Lianzeng the Deputy Director of China's State Oceanic Administration said that the key objective of the five-year plan is to increase China's status and influence in polar affairs to better protect its interests in the Arctic and in the Antarctic.

In 2009, within the framework of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Department for Boundary and Ocean Affairs was established, whose tasks include formulating ideas for the China’s foreign policy course related to land and sea borders, as well as promoting diplomatic work in this area. In the same year, Chen Lianzeng announced that China's Arctic strategy was aimed at strengthening China's soft and hard powers, and that China was ready to become a "great Arctic power."

Thus, as distinct from the US and Russia, China started its involvement in the Arctic region much later and through the activation of its research-and-development activity. With the growth of its possibilities and necessities in energy resources, Beijing started to consider the Arctic region also from the point of view of its economic, resource and transit potential. By the beginning of the XXI century, the Chinese have done a great job of studying the region and creating a large-scale institutional base, which contributed to the increase in the activity of China in the region.

In 2013, Beijing made a declaration that China’s goal is to become a great polar power within the framework of developing maritime strategy of Beijing. In November 2014 Xi Jinping during the speech, which he gave in Hobart, Australia a term “Great Polar Power” was used. He declared that due to the profound alterations in the international system and the unprecedented level of China’s economic development during the past 20 years, China will soon join ranks of great polar powers. After this speech the Arctic was officially included in China’s New Silk Road. According to Russian researchers VatanyarYagyua, NadezhdaKharlampyeva, and Maria Lagutina this is the Northern Sea Route is the key component of Chinese interests in the region within the frames of the “Belt and Road initiative” [20].

The acquisition of the status of a great polar power is now one of the key components of Beijing's new maritime strategy. In this regard, China's activities in the Arctic are adapting to new economic conditions, but one cannot deny its achievements of the past few years. In the next 5 years, the following changes will be made to the plan of China's polar expeditions: an increased emphasis on national strategic priorities in polar researches in the natural sciences and a transition from using foreign-made polar equipment to the one made by China.

In September 2012, a Chinese icebreaking research vessel Snow Dragon undertook its fifth Arctic expedition, using itinerary of the Northern Sea Route passing through the Pacific Ocean and returning to Shanghai through the Atlantic Ocean. Moreover, a Chinese entrepreneur Huang Nubo tried but couldn’t purchase a piece of remote Icelandic agricultural land to build a luxury hotel and eco-resort; in 2014 he wanted to buy land in Svalbard, and he finally managed to acquire a huge plot of land in Tromso, Norway. The interests of Chinese entrepreneurs in buying parcels of land on the territory of the Arctic countries provoke criticism from the US, and in some cases even scandals in bilateral relations, which happened in the case of the US and Denmark, when Washington offered to acquire Greenland island. Such an idea was a logical continuation of the multiple attempts by the US to gain control over this island, especially in the 20th century. [21].

In 2013, icebreaking research vessel Snow Dragon and two container ships, which belonged to the biggest in the world container operator, the Chinese company COSCO Group, successfully navigated
the Northern Sea Route, provided that merchant vessels sailed from the port of Dalian to Rotterdam. As a result of this transition, in 2014, Beijing developed and issued Guide to navigation through the Northern Sea Route.

Another event, which, on the one side, became an indicator of the growing interest of China in the Arctic, and on the other, an indicator of the growth of China’s naval capabilities, became the penetration of 5 naval ships belonging to People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy) (3 surface combatants, 1 landing craft) into the territorial waters of the US near Alaska, as reported by the Pentagon on September 2, 2015. This was the first in the history of China, the dispatch of military ships to Arctic waters, which took place on the eve of the largest military parade in China and the visit of US President Barack Obama to Alaska on August 31, 2015, where he planned to announce a new US Arctic policy [22]. In August 2016, China announced plans to build nuclear-power icebreakers, and on October 21, 2016, it was officially announced that China had begun construction of the second icebreaker, Snow Dragon-2, engineered with the participation of the Finnish company Aker Arctic Technology. On July 11, 2019, on the Day of the Sea (a holiday introduced in 2005 by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China in honour of the 600th anniversary of the expeditions of the admiral of the Ming Zheng He Dynasty era), Snow Dragon – 2 was officially launched from the slipways.

By 2018, the basis for its Arctic strategy were formed in Beijing. On June 20, 2017, the document “Concept of cooperation at sea within the framework of the Belt and Road initiative” was released. In this document ways and plans of development of Maritime Silk Road were emphasized. Among them, a necessity of development of trade and economic route that would connect Europe and the Pacific Ocean through the Arctic Ocean was indicated. At the same time, it was noted that Beijing is determined to cooperate with the countries of the Arctic region; this applies to both scientific researches, as well as natural resources development in the region, and the commercial use of transit routes.

As a result, the first White Paper on China’s Arctic policy was released on January 26, 2018. It emphasized that Beijing also has the right to explore the Arctic, citing the merits of Chinese scientists in its study. For the first time China is recognizing that its Arctic interests are no longer limited to scientific research, but extend to various types of commercial activities, which are included in a new cooperation initiative led by China. The goal of this initiative is the creation of an Ice Silk Road, that would connect China to Europe through the Arctic.

The White Paper highlights China's commitment to supporting the institutional and legal framework for Arctic governance and respect for the sovereign rights of Arctic states. On the other side, the document states that China is a Near-Arctic State, that is to say one of the continental states, closest to the Arctic region. China's Arctic policy supposes a strong desire to internationalize the regional governance of the Arctic.

Unlike other aspects of its maritime activities, for example, in the Pacific or Indian Ocean, in the Arctic, the Chinese government operates from the position of neoliberal institutionalism, that is it primarily relies on international cooperation and joint development of the Arctic region, its resources and the use of transit routes. On one side, this is related to the concentration of Beijing's naval interests on more southern waters and predominant participation in research-and-development activities in the Arctic, on the other side, with the complexity of activities in Arctic waters (as far as is known, in 2019, Beijing had only two icebreakers). In addition, in the structure of the PLA Navy there is no separate fleet, so that its scope would include the Arctic zone. The closest to it is the Northern Fleet, which is part of the Northern Combat Command Zone, which includes the Bohai Golf and the Yellow Sea. The Northern Fleet consists of 33 surface ships (7 destroyers, 11 frigates, 7 corvettes, 5 nuclear-powered submarines, about 35 diesel-electric submarines, 5 landing crafts, 3 auxiliary ships and 40 submarines) [23]. Thus, taking into account the presence of only two icebreakers and out-of-date models of submarines (4 nuclear-powered submarines of Han class (type 091 submarine), and one nuclear-powered submarine of Xia class (type 092 submarine) were developed back in the 1960s – 1970s), the naval forces of China play a secondary role in promoting Chinese interests in the Arctic.
region. As mentioned above, Beijing's primary focus is on cooperation with the regional countries, and not on unilateral defence of its position, which it does within the South China Sea.

According to the Russian scientists, Valery Konyshev and Maria Kobzeva, increase in China’s activity in the Arctic region can play both a positive and a negative role [24]. In the first case, this may become one of the reasons of future strengthening of cooperation between China and Russia in the frames of resource extraction and development of regional infrastructure. In the second case, Beijing will take a stand in favour of further development of specifically non-Arctic countries, that is for the promotion of the international regime for the governance of the Northern Sea Route and the application of the norms of the concept of “common heritage of mankind” to the Arctic [25].

On the contrary, the Chinese researcher Deng Beixi believes that China does not aim to revise the existing Arctic order and does not project its military power into the Arctic [26]. China is least of all interested in building its military potential in the Arctic, but not only because of the logic of mutual nuclear deterrence, which China has always reckoned with, since a stable and peaceful Arctic today meets China's interests. It is in such conditions that the possibility of a peaceful and stable use of the Northern Sea Route will be kept. It should also be noted that cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic does not imply an increase in military power in the region. For example, the holding of joint naval training of Russia and China near the territorial waters of the US in Alaska was rather a consequence of the activities of the US in the South China Sea, and did not reflect China's strategic or military-political ambitions in the Arctic.

7. Conclusion
Consequently, we can make a conclusion the Arctic represents a complex region, where there is a lack of formal system of governance based on regulatory and legal framework, as it is, for example, in the case of another polar territory – the Antarctic. Instead of this, the position of affairs in the Arctic derives from two factors: the existing mechanisms of governance of the region, which first of all are based on the activity of the Arctic Council, and the development of Russian-American relations in general, in the frames of which position as well as activity of China must be taken into account.

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