

Consequences of the war in Ukraine on the Arctic: an analysis of post-conflict macro-scenarios

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has opened a Pandora's box with certain global consequences. From the beginning of the invasion, the first effects on government, research and economic activities also appeared.

This conflict has radically changed the dynamics of security in the Arctic. The deterioration, unprecedented since the end of the Cold War, in relations between Russia and the West has meant that cooperation between the two blocs has also disappeared in the main and perhaps the only region of the globe still spared from political tensions.

The outbreak of the conflict led to a breakdown in cooperation and an escalation of military tensions in the Arctic. How these disputes end will be decisive in determining the Arctic region's future political and strategic balances.

The seven remaining Arctic states denounced Russia's operation in Ukraine from the start, thus suspending all activities related to the Arctic Council. This is an immediate consequence and it indicates rapid and challenging changes for Arctic governance.

Keywords:

Russian victory; Ukrainian victory; stalemate; special military operation; Russian-Ukrainian war; Arctic; Arctic exceptionalism; frozen conflict; Euro-Barents Arctic Council.

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Methodology

In planning this particular scientific project, I considered it appropriate to adopt fundamental research as a way of working. The scientific research methodology approached within this scientific project had the task of guaranteeing the actuality, truthfulness and accuracy of the data presented so that the quality of the work reaches the highest possible level. For the purpose of the previously recorded research, we used as scientific research methods: the combination of the quantitative and qualitative approach of open sources, the analysis of official documents, such as the security strategies of the most important actors of the international scene and studies of security research institutes, from states with an important geostrategic position, the method of direct observation by identifying the most important elements belonging to the war in Ukraine. Also, through direct observation, we managed to identify characters who officially took part in certain international activities relevant to the ideas addressed in this project. I also used the inductive method to formulate some conclusions and proposals, starting from particular aspects and building up to general aspects.

Introduction – the three post-conflict macro-scenarios

It is difficult to predict how this war will end. This will largely depend on the commitment of the major players involved, particularly Russia and the United States. However, it is possible to identify three post-conflict macro-scenarios that can act as a compass for understanding the evolution of relations between Russia and the West and on the Arctic chessboard, namely:

1. Victory of Russia;
2. Victory of Ukraine;
3. A stalemate.

Victory of Russia

It is difficult to define in any way the scenario of a Russian victory in Ukraine, without ambiguity, since the stated objectives of the Kremlin regarding its “*special military operation*”¹ are often unclear and subject to constant change as the conflict evolves, although it remains clear that Russia’s ultimate goal is a complete one, namely, the annihilation of the Ukrainian state and its territorial entry into Moscow’s sphere of influence (Watling and Reynolds 2024). Given the difficulties on the ground, a possible victory could only happen if Russia were able to slowly advance towards the most strategic and important population centres in eastern Ukraine while limiting the effectiveness of any Ukrainian counter-offensives. If Russia could occupy and annex important cities in eastern Ukraine such as Kupyansk and Izyum, already

¹ Special military operation = an invasion condemned by most states of the world.

occupied by September 2022, Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, necessary for the total conquest of Donbass, followed by forcing the Ukrainian government to neutrality. Propagandistically, the Russian government may speak of “victory”, having achieved its stated goal of liberating Donbass and having Ukraine demilitarized (Wasielewski 2023).

Regarding a decisive Russian victory, although it is unlikely considering the progress of the war, however, we could only talk about the total occupation, or more than half, of the Ukrainian territory by the Russian army, with large cities such as Kharkiv, Dnipro, Odessa or even Kiev. This scenario would only be feasible in the medium or long term, following an intense war of attrition in which Russia would succeed in eliminating the willingness of Western countries, especially the United States, to support Ukraine militarily. Thus, it would confirm its numerical superiority in military, technical means and greater production capacity compared to the enemy, thereby leading Ukraine to a slow but inexorable defeat, or even a complete collapse of the war front.



Figure 1 Russian control over Ukrainian territory (updated 14.08.2024)
Source: Institute for the Study of War, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-14-2024>

Victory of Ukraine

We can say with more certainty what “victory” means to Ukrainians, considering that the government in Kiev has repeatedly outlined as a goal the total regaining of the territories, conquered and annexed by the Russians since 2014. For this desideratum to materialize, Ukraine should be able to implement a series of counter-offensives that penetrate deep into Russian defences in strategic areas. First, it is vital that Ukraine may move beyond the lines and fortified positions located along the entire

front line, the so-called “*Surovikin line*”, where the Ukrainian counteroffensive effort is concentrated, albeit without any significant success. Reaching the Sea of Azov and liberating Mariupol, Berdiansk or conquering the 1,000 square km in the Kursk region would cut the Russian supply lines to Crimea leading to the impassability of the Kerchi bridge, which could create vulnerabilities thus leading to the rupture of the Russian front in two.

Given the failures of Ukrainian offensive efforts in 2023, this remains a long-term scenario (Posen 2023a). This would require strong military and economic support from the West. More attention should be paid to the loss of human life, and equipment and a progressive decline in the confidence of the Russian government and population in the success of the „*special military operation*”. This scenario does not take into account the possibility of a third country directly intervening in the defense of Ukraine, as this possibility would make this scenario somewhat unpredictable, given the important consequences it would have on the global security structure.

A stalemate

A stalemate seems the most likely scenario. This is because the conflict has increasingly assumed the characteristics of a war of position and attrition, in which neither side is able to deliver a decisive blow to the enemy and resolve the war in its own way. This conflict could become similar to those present in the Caucasus, which always involve Russia, such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia and, although in the resolution phase, Nagorno-Karabakh, thus bringing with it the consequences of the crisis and its global consequences for many years to come, with serious consequences for European security (Wall and Wegge 2023). As an alternative to that, imagine the possibility, however remote now, of a peace treaty that provides for the maintenance of limited territorial gains by the Russians, the entry of Ukraine into the European Union and possibly NATO, and allowing for the expansion of the diplomatic relationship between Russia and the Atlantic Alliance, with mutual security guarantees.

For this to happen, there would need to be a rigorous awareness on both sides so that the possibility of obtaining other advantages from military conflict disappears. So far, the latter scenario seems possible only in the long term and only after a long and bloody war of attrition.

Possible consequences of the three macro-scenarios in the Arctic

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the period of Arctic exceptionalism in international relations ended. Due to the outbreak of war in the year 2022, the

Western countries of the Arctic Council, all except Russia, suspended their activity in the council. World War II neutrals Finland and Sweden have joined NATO, and numerous economic sanctions have been imposed on Russia, which is now turning to China to support its economy, which is heavily dependent on the export of natural resources. In this sense, the Arctic plays a primary role for Russia, because it is in that region that the largest number of natural resources, such as gas, oil and minerals are extracted, and China represents an important support in the development of Russian energy and infrastructure projects in the Arctic (Oberti 2023). In addition, the war has caused an increase in military tensions between Russia and NATO, and the Arctic is increasingly perceived as a potential conflict ground.

Russia suffers from “chronic” insecurity on its northwestern flank and, at the same time, sees the Arctic as a fundamental strategic “bastion” of national security (Boulègue 2019). The Northern Fleet, in fact, is a fundamental strategic component of Russia’s national security: among its many functions, it guarantees the Kremlin’s ability to carry out a swift nuclear second strike and thereby maintain the nuclear deterrent of the United States (Paul and Swistek 2022).

Next, I would like to highlight the main consequences that each of the three scenarios could have in the Arctic area:

1. A Russian victory in Ukraine is likely to encourage Russia to also pursue an assertive foreign policy in the Arctic. The reduced military effort in Ukraine forces the Kremlin to increase the degree of militarization in the region, especially near the borders with Finland. NATO’s presence so close to the strategic naval base in Murmansk, the headquarters of the Northern Fleet, and the land military bases of Pechenga and Alakurtti would pose a strong threat to Russia, as an attack on the strategic infrastructure linking the Kola Peninsula to the rest of Russia would isolate in this way its military assets and would make them more vulnerable. However, the heavy losses suffered by the two Arctic brigades during the war in Ukraine, deployed first to Kharkiv and then to Kupyansk in 2022, certainly compromised the strengthening of Russian military capabilities in the Arctic in the short/medium term, which would guarantee NATO more time to continue its military development in that region.

2. A Ukrainian victory would likely have the opposite effect. A defeat of Russia in Ukraine could force Russia to adopt an assertive policy in the Arctic area. NATO may also prove ready to ease tensions in the region by reducing its military presence if adequate assurances are provided by Russia, and this would prompt Russia to slow down its developing militarization of the region (Wall and Wegge 2023). On the contrary, if the effects of Russia’s defeat were to lead to the political destabilization of Moscow, there would be unpredictable consequences for the Arctic, and much would depend on the new regime that would be established in Moscow. It could turn out to be much more open to the demands and security guarantees of the West in the Arctic.

3. A “frozen conflict” would create the conditions for prolonging tensions and the emergence of a new Cold War in the Arctic, with a progressive militarization of the region and the expansion of military and naval bases, airports, radar and anti-aircraft systems (Wasielewski 2023). In the event of peace resulting from a prolonged military stalemate, it might become possible to resume diplomatic relations in the Arctic, with the imposition of Russia as the hegemon in the Arctic zone, as its economic interests in the region become increasingly large so that it can be believed that Moscow really wants an open military confrontation in this part of the globe (Trenin and Baev 2014). This scenario is much more likely than the one of resolving the conflict through diplomatic means, which could lead to a reduction of tensions in the Arctic as well as a resumption of dialogue, including through multilateral instruments such as the Arctic Council or the Euro-Barents Arctic Council.

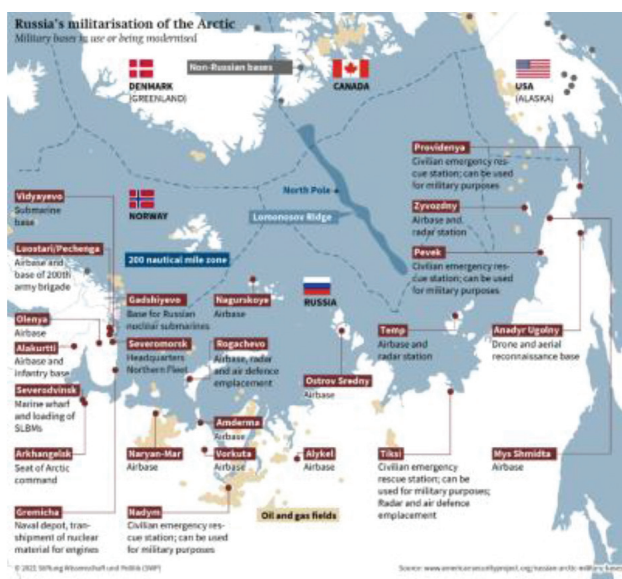


Figure 2 Russia's militarized system in the Arctic
Source:Nicole Franiok, Russian Arctic Military Bases, American Security Project, 22 April 2020, <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/russian-arctic-military-bases>

Conclusions

Each of the three identified macro-scenarios projects the end of the medium/long-term war in Ukraine only.

What changes radically with the different scenarios is the political state of Russia, very important for defining the way in which the future relations between NATO and the Russian Federation in the Arctic will develop. However, it can be predicted that in all three scenarios analyzed above, given the failures and heavy losses suffered, Russia emerges militarily weakened.

In the first scenario, Russia is militarily weak but politically strengthened. These conditions would precede an increase in political-military tensions in the Arctic as well, although the chances of open conflict in the region remain low due to the

diminishing of the state's military power, and unlikely, in the short/medium term, the development of economic cooperation in the Arctic.

In the second scenario, Russia is seriously weakened militarily and severely weakened politically, too. The Russian government's loss of legitimacy caused by the defeat in Ukraine would make Russia less present in the Arctic. The risk of a military conflict in the region would be almost nil with an increased probability of the resumption of economic and political cooperation in the Arctic. This would depend on the willingness of Western countries to accept Russia back into collective regional governance. Also in the second scenario, the eventual defeat of Russia in Ukraine would cause the collapse of the internal political system, and the consequences on the Arctic would become extremely unpredictable.

In scenario number three, Russia is militarily weak but politically stable. Russia maintains a strong military presence in the Arctic, albeit with a defensive posture. We can see the impossibility of a strong opposing reaction to the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO, as well as a possible strengthening of the military presence of the Alliance in the Arctic. In this situation, Russia could try a diplomatic approach to protect its economic and security interests in the region with a possible resumption of cooperation in the Arctic, although not in the short term.

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