

Demilitarising the Arctic Ocean: The 66th Parallel Plan

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I. Introduction

Serving as an Allied supply route since WWII, the Arctic has become a geopolitical hotspot. Revealing approximately 90 billion barrels of oil and 1,669 trillion cubic feet of gas¹ due to accelerated ice melt of 12.2% per decade.² Projections suggest that by 2035, the Arctic might be ice-free during summer.³ A shift is taking place with dozens of Arctic military exercises conducted during the last five years.⁴ This poses a risk to both security and the environment. The melting Arctic ice is making the centre of the ocean increasingly accessible, creating volatility and with rising geostrategic tensions, a powder keg. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte recently stated “We are not at war, but we are certainly not at peace either”,⁵ emphasising the need to prepare for escalating conflict.

History has shown that scaling militarisation alone cannot safeguard our planet and guarantee long-term security; rather, it leads to a “Treadmill of Destruction,” where militarisation exacerbates environmental degradation and societal harm.⁶ Deterrence is critical, with the Arctic’s unique vulnerabilities, both ecological and geopolitical. A more proactive vision centred on collaboration and demilitarisation is needed, instead of increasing militarisation eventually causing escalation. However, the Overton Window for the Arctic demilitarisation policy is distant. Conflict should not create policy, but policy should prevent conflict. Strategic action is essential to mitigate the risks posed by climate change and escalating geopolitical competition, which threatens to induce irreversible consequences.

The 66th Parallel Plan is a new framework to demilitarise the Arctic Ocean by limiting physical military presence, opportunities for uncertainty, and fostering rapport between states. Geostrategic competition cannot escalate with limited space for it to thrive.

II. Background

The concept of Arctic demilitarisation on a macro level is not new, in 1987 Mikhail Gorbachev gave

¹ U.S. Geological Survey, *The Water Cycle: U.S. Geological Survey Circular*, FS 2008-3049 (Reston, VA: U.S. Geological Survey, 2008), 1, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/fs2008-3049.pdf>

² Alexandra Jahn, Marika M. Holland, and Jennifer E. Kay, “Projections of an Ice-Free Arctic Ocean,” *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment* 5, no. 3 (2024): 164–176, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-023-00515-9>.

³ Alexandra Jahn, Marika M. Holland, and Jennifer E. Kay, “Projections of an Ice-Free Arctic Ocean,” *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment* 5, no. 3 (2024): 164–176, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-023-00515-9>.

⁴ Arctic Military Activity Tracker | CSIS Europe, Russia, Eurasia Program. (z.d.). <https://arcticmilitarytracker.csis.org/>

⁵ NATO, “‘To Prevent War, NATO Must Spend More’: Speech by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the Concert Noble, Brussels,” NATO, December 12, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_231348.htm.

⁶ Gregory Hooks and Chad L. Smith, “The Treadmill of Destruction: National Sacrifice Areas and Native Americans,” *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 4 (2004): 558, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3593065>.

a speech in Murmansk where he proposed the Arctic should become a “zone of peace.”⁷ He specifically mentioned creating a “nuclear-free zone in Northern Europe”⁸ and holding conferences “between the Warsaw Treaty Organization and NATO on restricting military activity and scaling down naval and airforce activities in the Baltic, Northern, Norwegian and Greenland Seas, and on the extension of confidence-building measures to these areas.”⁹ He even voiced a consideration to discuss “banning naval activity in mutually agreed upon zones of international straits and in intensive shipping lanes in general”.¹⁰ However, the initiative was not a success militarily because the West believed it gave more of an advantage to the Soviet Union¹¹ and the nuclear-free zone did not cover the entirety of the Arctic Ocean.¹² Additionally aided by the reality that the Soviet Union and the United States considered their nuclear submarines too important to restrict voluntarily.¹³ The Murmansk initiative is a source for international relations in Northern Europe and the Arctic. It demonstrates that a superpower can advocate for demilitarisation in the region though its acceptance is greatly contingent on who receives the most immediate benefits.

III. Analysis

The Arctic, once dominated by scientific and environmental concerns, has now become the domain for military and economic competition. Initiatives such as the International Polar Years, with the first held in 1882–1883, exemplify the long standing emphasis on scientific exploration in the region.¹⁴ Russia remains the most established Arctic power, with a monopoly on (emerging) trade routes, a significant icebreaker fleet,¹⁵ and geographic proximity. This means an advantageous position in case of a conflict, especially in the initial phase, being able to mobilise assets rapidly in the first 24 hours as supported by Zimmermann’s analysis.¹⁶ However, in the maturing phase of a conflict, this advantage is offset by NATO’s superior logistical capabilities, which allows them to scale and sustain an upper hand over an extended period.¹⁷ This imbalance

⁷ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Speech in Murmansk at the Ceremonial Meeting on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star to the City of Murmansk*, October 1, 1987, 4, https://www.barentsinform.org/docs/gorbachev_speech.pdf.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹ Ibid., 4–5.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹¹ Kristian Åtland, “Mikhail Gorbachev, the Murmansk Initiative, and the Desecuritization of Interstate Relations in the Arctic,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 43, no. 3 (2008): 299, citing Hayward, 1988, 1 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45084526>.

¹² Kristian Åtland, “Mikhail Gorbachev, the Murmansk Initiative, and the Desecuritization of Interstate Relations in the Arctic,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 43, no. 3 (2008): 298, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4508452>

¹³ Ibid., 298

¹⁴ NOAA Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory, Arctic Zone: International Polar Year, <https://www.pmel.noaa.gov/arctic-zone/ipyear.html>.

¹⁵ U.S. Coast Guard, *Major Icebreaker Chart* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2017), <https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/DCO%20Documents/Oce%20of%20Waterways%20and%20Ocean%20Policy/20170501%20major%20icebreaker%20chart.pdf?ver=2017-06-08-091723-907>.

¹⁶ Zachary N. Zimmermann, *Arctic Warfare: Modelling Conflict Scenarios in the High North*, (Bachelor's Thesis, University, 2024), 39.

¹⁷ Ibid., 39.

proves to be a reason for discussion, as each side's defensive measures are threats to each other. The showing-o between NATO, Russia, and emerging influences like China underscores the need for a balanced, cooperative approach to the Arctic.

China's entry with a singular warship into the Arctic Ocean marks a new phase in international relations and increases tension.¹⁸ Even though China is not an Arctic state, it has declared itself a "near-Arctic state"¹⁹ proven by its significant investments in the Polar Silk Road Initiative.²⁰ This creates precedence for other geographically indirect states to claim justification for entry into the region as engagement is no longer isolated to geographic proximity. The cooperation between Russia and China, economically and militarily²¹ forms an increasing risk for NATO's long-term planning²² and potentially threatens their maturity phase overhand in case of conflict. China as of 2020 had a total navy battle force count of 360 to the United States 296 and by 2030 China is projected to increase to a total of 425 and the United States to 290.²³ This projected 135-ship difference, though across different classes and likely quality, changes the domain and aids in equalising Russo-Sino leverage in negotiations with NATO. It is becoming a multipolar balance of power denied by a lack of a singular state or alliance able to exert total authority.

The increasing (joint) exercises and asset developments increase the likelihood of accidents or miscalculations. As highlighted by Zimmerman, especially around the GIUK-N Gap and Northern Sea Route, even minor incidents can result in escalation²⁴. Near-misses in military manoeuvres, such as the 2019 near-collision between Russian and U.S. naval vessels in the Bering Sea,²⁵ underscore the need to directly address tensions to prevent these outcomes.

IV. Policy Solutions

To properly account for limiting military presence, a source hierarchy should be introduced

¹⁸ Jessie Yeung, "China and Russia Coast Guard Ships Sailed Near Alaska in Arctic Ocean: Report," CNN, October 3, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/03/china/china-russia-coast-guard-arctic-ocean-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁹ Björn Jerdén, "The Ice Silk Road: Is China a Near-Arctic State?" Institute for Security & Development Policy, <https://www.isdp.eu/publication/the-ice-silk-road-is-china-a-near-artic-state/#:~:text=Factually%20speaking%2C%20China%20is%20not,its%20attention%20toward%20the%20region.>

²⁰ The Arctic Institute, "China's Polar Silk Road: A Long Game or a Failed Strategy?" The Arctic Institute, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-polar-silk-road-long-game-failed-strategy/>.

²¹ Junhua Zhang, "Russia Clears the Path for China in the Arctic," GIS Reports Online, December 9, 2024, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-arctic-russia/>.

²² NATO Allied Command Transformation, *Regional Perspectives: 2021 Edition*, April 2021, 27, <https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/regional-perspectives-2021-04.pdf>.

²³ Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities*, RL33153 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated November 2, 2024), 10, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/276>.

²⁴ Zachary N. Zimmermann, *Arctic Warfare: Modelling Conflict Scenarios in the High North*, (Bachelor's Thesis, IE University, 2024), 35.

²⁵ Barbara Starr, Ryan Browne, and Nathan Hodge, "U.S. and Russian Warships Nearly Collide," CNN, June 7, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/07/politics/us-russia-navy-near-collision-intl/index.html>.

following the UNGA (A/71/259) 7+1 report²⁶ for arms as the primary definition source but applying UNCLOS Article 29 for warships to broaden the applicability away from tonnage and to being manned and commanded by an officer. The Wassenaar Arrangement²⁷ would apply to all other undisclosed definitions. Lastly, a new definition to be added to the list of defined weapons is “militarised animals,” defined as aquatic or terrestrial, equipped with but not limited to weapons, armaments, or reconnaissance items. Definitions should be reevaluated and updated regularly to prevent loopholes.

Every warship above the 66th parallel north is a force multiplier for uncertainty. That is why implementing a respected cap on the total number of warships above the 66th parallel north beyond the Contiguous zone to a total of fifteen²⁸ creates a ceiling. Of this total cap, all nations would be restricted to three warships²⁹ to prevent any single state from exerting asymmetrical military influence. Submersible vessels, specifically submarines, will be limited to two³⁰ per nation in these denied waters as well. Establishing a respected distance of 85 nautical miles between each warship³¹ creates predictability by slowing down movements at key points such as the Bering Strait, Davis Strait, and Barents Sea. Due to the range of modern platforms,^{32,33} the distance should not pose an individual security risk. If concern is raised about protecting commercial assets from pirates, states are encouraged to work together with the limited warship presence against the common threat. Predictability and channeling a funnel towards cooperation are the intended outcomes.

However, in isolation, this would constitute a repetition of what happened after the London Naval Treaty,³⁴ where states faced with a warship cap would turn to Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs) or militarised animals. Additional measures must be implemented as UUVs do not meet the UNCLOS Article 29 definition of warships. To close this potential loophole, each UUV, Militarized Animal, and in good faith, any other non-described asset upon entering the 66th Parallel North or exiting the contiguous sea will be required to identify themselves and will be added to a live index. Upon reentering the contiguous sea or

²⁶ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, The United Nations Register of Conventional Arms, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://disarmament.unoda.org/convarms/register/>.

²⁷ Wassenaar Arrangement Secretariat, Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies: Founding Documents, December 2019, <https://www.wassenaar.org/app/uploads/2019/12/WA-DOC-19-Public-Docs-Vol-I-Founding-Documents.pdf>.

²⁸ Ian Shepherd, Tjeerd Hetteema, “Arctic Imperative,” unpublished draft resolution for the Disarmament and International Security Council, 2024 IEUMUN Model United Nations, 2024.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Vincent Walther, “Arctic Imperative,” unpublished draft resolution for the Disarmament and International Security Council, 2024 IEUMUN Model United Nations, 2024.

³² Department of Defense, *Tomahawk Land Attack Missile Fact Sheet* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 2017), 1, [PDF le](#).

³³ Rosoboronexport, *Yakhont Naval Anti-Ship Missile System* (Moscow: Rosoboronexport, [n.d.]), 1, [PDF le](#). Shepherd & Hetteema, 6

³⁴ Matthew Wright, “What the Second London Naval Treaty ‘Escalator Clause’ Really Meant,” Navy General Board, October 9, 2018, <https://www.navygeneralboard.com/what-the-second-london-naval-treaty-escalator-clause-really-meant/>

going below the 66th Parallel North they will be removed from the index and a vacancy will be opened. This index would be accessible to governments of all participating states and would foster transparency, accountability, and ensure collective awareness of Arctic movements. Constant collective tracking ensures states cannot abuse their assets, and they can solely be used for collective security. Violations by way of failure to disclose presence or deliberate connection flickering would result in diplomatic or economic consequences based on the nature of the case. Due to the flexible nature of the mission for UUVs and Militarised animals, imposing a total cap or time limit could be counterproductive to the point of general non-compliance.

Overt transparency while seemingly hyperbolic will be a key factor in incentivizing states to commit to the plan. This can be achieved by installing buoy transponders along key choke points and intensive shipping lanes. Warships above the 66th Parallel North should “ping” their location on open channels every 24 hours³⁵ to generate rapport and notify proximity.

From the moment of entry, each warship will be allotted a maximum duration of three months to facilitate an influx of new actors and prevent any single alliance from exerting asymmetrical military influence. Once a state has exhausted the duration of three warships, it must leave and allow another state the same duration before being eligible to re-enter itself. Warships in good faith will be immutable; if ownership is transferred to a separate state or its serial number changes, it cannot be deemed a new warship. The potential subsequent problem of “queuing” just below the 66th Parallel North would be mitigated by the need to resupply and refuel, if the warship is non nuclear, and the diplomatic maintenance required. Simply put it would be economically and diplomatically expensive to loiter. If a warship were to overstay the three-month duration, guaranteeing successful expulsion is difficult, especially if it is a warship of a directly proximate nation or within their alliance. Ensuring compliance with this requires creativity as action is limited beyond directly requesting desistance over diplomatic channels however potential remedies include disincentivizing states from admitting unyielding warships above the 66th parallel North within their ports, applying sanctions, and leveraging the perpetrating state a deliberate delay in ongoing trade and services from other states. A regime of deniable and deliberate stalling would discretely pressure perpetrating states to fall in line and return below the 66th parallel.

Another obstacle to compliance and success is the probable presence of undisclosed military assets above the 66th parallel north. To generate assurance, a universal alignment agreement should be signed by all states, declaring that there will be no undisclosed assets beyond the contiguous sea above the 66th Parallel north on 1 January 2026 and each state with such assets is responsible for restoring them if refusing to disclose them below the 66th Parallel north or within the contiguous seas. This agreement gives states

³⁵ Ian Shepherd, Tjeerd Hetteema, “Neutralization.” Unpublished working paper for the Disarmament and International Security Council, 2024 IEUMUN Model United Nations, 2024.

diplomatic flexibility to not disclose if there were any in the region prior and a commitment the rest of the world can hold each other to. This would be an opening for independent observers to monitor compliance from ratification onwards.

An additional potential approach to demilitarisation though not part of the main plan is grandfathering in current military assets. Current land-based weaponry, weapons platforms, machinery, or reconnaissance items could be eligible to remain in the 66th parallel north until they deteriorate or are destroyed from which point new military assets would be ineligible or be subject to another cap.

V. Greater-Scope

It would be in the United States' interest to follow the 66th Parallel Plan because of their lack of icebreakers compared to Russia³⁶ and the amount of time it would take to catch up.³⁷ It puts them in a position to be eager for breathing room as they catch up alongside the ICE Pact. As icebreakers are specifically not mentioned to be limited or restricted, The United States can ramp up manufacturing without perceiving a potential threat of Russia sending a fleet of warships behind their icebreakers. Additionally, the incoming second administration of President Donald Trump could use the plan to signal broader de-escalation and leverage closer diplomatic ties with Vladimir Putin. And if NATO, as a defensive organisation, can defeat Russia's naval assets at least without China, it would be in their interest to comply as initial aggression would be more difficult to manifest.

To the rest of the world, if a conflict or limited war occurred between NATO and Russia in the Arctic Ocean, it would be relevant to them because the conflict would economically mirror the Red Sea Crisis.³⁸ Future trade above the 66th Parallel North would be disrupted and markets would be impaired, whereas with the 66th Parallel Plan market volatility can be mitigated by limiting insecurities caused by potential (or accidentally induced) conflict. This potential conflict could include trade routes, resource-gathering, and other market-affecting activities.

Support for the plan ideally would immediately be found from member states of the non-aligned movement, the general public, and non-state actors who would pressure NATO and Russia to establish and

³⁶ U.S. Coast Guard, *Major Icebreaker Chart* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2017), <https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/DCO%20Documents/Oce%20of%20Waterways%20and%20Ocean%20Policy/20170501%20major%20icebreaker%20chart.pdf?ver=2017-06-08-091723-907>.

³⁷ "US, Canada, Finland Launch Eort to Build Ice-Breaking Ships as China and Russia Cooperate in Arctic," Reuters, July 11, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-canada-nland-launch-eort-build-ice-breaking-ships-china-russia-cooperate-2024-07-11/>

³⁸ "Red Sea Crisis: Economic Consequences of Escalating Maritime Tensions," Allianz Trade, https://www.allianz-trade.com/en_BE/news/latest-news/red-sea-crisis.html

adhere to this framework. It should be mentioned that direct acknowledgement by NATO or Russia of Arctic de-escalation would be an acknowledgement of present escalation and could also be construed by members of both sides as a sign of weakness on their part as seen in the 10th Arctic Circle Assembly in October 2023, where NATO emphasised the importance of peace and stability while Russia expressed concerns over NATO's activities potentially escalating tensions in the region.³⁹ Framing acceptance and implementation to constituents will require clever diplomatic tact from all sides to quell inner-party concerns or prevent war hawks from emerging. To help shift the framing, the 66th Parallel Plan, as long as it maintains the sum of its parts, can be a component of a greater framework, avoiding the central spotlight and making it more politically palatable. A role the general public could take on within Arctic demilitarisation efforts could include shifting analysis from the national level to the potential personal benefits of militarising the Arctic and from sabre-rattling. This could reveal the real drivers of fear that fuel the present escalation and as such scrutiny should be administered upon military officials, bureaucrats, and politicians responsible for the Arctic Ocean.

VI. Conclusion

Applying the central concept within *Essai sur la non-Bataille* to the Arctic Ocean, the decisive battle can now be avoided with “series of smaller, statistically effective actions...the non-battle.”⁴⁰ These can be characterised by states or alliances posturing and expressing themselves in a predictable environment.

This proposed new domain of exhaustive transparency and accounting should be embraced because preemptive norms can be established before the ice melts. Channelling the 66th Parallel plan via the United Nations Security Council would be idealistic but could easily prove ineffective due to the potential for it to be vetoed or amended to lose its original purpose. Therefore focusing on a multilateral level aside from the United Nations could prove more realistic, effective, and timely. If the 66th Parallel Plan is widely adopted via treaty or *opinio juris* and complete non-compliance or special objection eventually occurs, it is certainly not ideal. However, the creation of sources and or a status quo within that timeframe would be a positive advancement for communication and strengthen international relations.

Ideally, a summit should be held in early 2025 with representatives of all interested states in attendance to discuss the future of the Arctic and the 66th Parallel Plan. In the summit, a joint declaration should be made and the 66th Parallel Plan put into operative clauses to be signed for immediate effect.

³⁹ "NATO's Arctic Militarization Increases Risks of Escalation, Russian Diplomat Says," TASS, May 13, 2023, <https://tass.com/russia/1617105>

⁴⁰ Guy Brossollet, *Essai sur la Non-Bataille*, translated into English with AI (Paris: Éditions Robert Laont, 1975), 99.

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