

## STRATEGIC FLASHPOINTS: NATO'S CONTAINMENT OF RUSSIA IN THE BLACK SEA AND ARCTIC REGIONS\*

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the strategic significance of NATO's containment policy in the Black Sea and Arctic regions and its impact on Russia's geopolitical and military responses. These areas, once peripheral to play only a minor role in global security dynamics, have become critical flashpoints because of NATO enlargement and increasing Russian aggression. By applying George Kennan's containment theory to NATO's post-Cold War strategy, this study examines how NATO's actions have contributed to the escalation of tensions in these regions. The analysis addresses the challenges and risks NATO faces in maintaining its containment approach and offers insights into the future relationship between NATO and Russia.*

**Keywords:** *Arctic, Black Sea, containment, NATO, Russia, United States.*

**Rezumat: Puncte de inflamare strategice: Limitarea Rusiei de către NATO în regiunile Mării Negre și Arctică.** *Studiul examinează semnificația strategică a politicii de izolare a NATO în regiunile Mării Negre și Arctică și impactul acesteia asupra răspunsurilor geopolitice și militare ale Rusiei. Aceste zone, cândva periferice, jucând un rol minor în dinamica securității globale, au devenit puncte critice de inflamare, ca urmare a extinderii NATO și a agresiunii în creștere a Rusiei. Prin aplicarea teoriei de izolare a lui George Kennan la strategia NATO post-Război Rece, acest studiu examinează modul în care acțiunile NATO au contribuit la escaladarea tensiunilor în aceste regiuni. Analiza abordează provocările și riscurile cu care se confruntă NATO în menținerea abordării sale de limitare și oferă perspective asupra relației viitoare dintre NATO și Rusia.*

## INTRODUCTION

Defining geopolitical regions is rarely a straightforward process, as their importance changes depending on the global political, military and economic context.<sup>1</sup> Strategic zones that were once considered peripheral can become critical arenas of contestation in new eras of geopolitical rivalry. This is particularly evident in NATO's evolving role along its northern and eastern flank, where the Arctic and Black Sea regions have gained prominence. Although these regions are geographically separate, they are at the centre of renewed tensions between NATO and Russia. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's war with Georgia in 2008 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have greatly changed the security dynamics in both areas. As a result, the Arctic and the Black Sea regions have evolved from secondary concerns to primary theatres of geopolitical confrontation.

From Russia's perspective, NATO's continued enlargement has reignited historical fears of containment — a strategy dating back to the Cold War and aimed at limiting Soviet, and now Russian, influence. Despite NATO's efforts to portray its enlargement as integration rather than aggressive expansionism, Moscow has always interpreted it as a direct threat to its national security. Scholars such as John Mearsheimer argue that NATO's post-Cold War enlargement was a crucial foreign policy mistake by the United States (U.S.) and unnecessarily provoked Russia.<sup>2</sup> Others argue that Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine and other regions are an expression of deeper, revisionist ambitions aimed at reasserting its influence in the post-Soviet space.<sup>3</sup>

NATO's enlargement — whether seen as defensive or expansionist — has significant implications for the Arctic and the Black Sea regions, both of which are crucial to Russia's military strategic calculations. The Arctic, home to vital Russian military installations, including a significant part of its nuclear deterrent, has seen increasing militarization in recent years. The Black Sea, a historic gateway to the Mediterranean and central to Russian naval strategy, has also become a flashpoint

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Dodds and Mark Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles: The Geopolitics of the Arctic and Antarctic*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs*, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Wilhelmsen and Anni Roth Hjermann, "Russian Certainty of NATO Hostility: Repercussions in the Arctic," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 13, 2022, pp. 114–42, <https://doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v13.3378>.

following the annexation of Crimea. NATO's actions in these regions have reinforced the Russian sense of encirclement and led to an increased risk of conflict.

This study addresses two primary research questions that focus on the intersection of NATO's containment policy and Russia's strategic responses:

1. How has NATO's evolving containment strategy influenced Russia's military and geopolitical responses in both the Black Sea region and the Arctic?
2. What key strategic and operational risks does NATO face in maintaining its containment strategy in these areas?

By examining these questions, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which NATO's adaptation of George Kennan's containment theory continues to shape post-Cold War geopolitics. The Arctic and the Black Sea serve as case studies for understanding the broader geopolitical consequences of NATO expansion and Russia's increasingly aggressive responses. This analysis not only sheds light on current tensions, but also offers insights into the future evolution of NATO-Russia relations in these critical regions.

### CONTAINMENT POLICY: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

The containment policy conceived by U.S. diplomat George Kennan in the early years of the Cold War was aimed at containing Soviet expansionism after the Second World War. Kennan's influential "Long Telegram"<sup>4</sup> and the subsequent article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" laid the groundwork for this policy.<sup>5</sup> He argued that Soviet aggression stemmed from historical mistrust and ideological differences and not from misunderstandings with the U.S. Kennan argued for patient but decisive containment to limit Soviet influence in Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> Kennan advocated comprehensive support for states threatened by communism,

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. National Archives, "Telegram from George Kennan Charge d'Affaires at United States Embassy in Moscow to the Secretary of State" (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 1946), 2642322, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2642322>.

<sup>5</sup> George Kennan (Bay X), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, 1947, pp. 566–82. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct>.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Walker, "The New Containment: Undermining Democracy," *World Affairs* 178, no. 1 (2015): 42–51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43555281>; Henry Kissinger, "Reflections on Containment," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 3, 1994, pp. 113–30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20046662>.

including economic, political, military, and cultural assistance.<sup>7</sup> To share the burden of containing Soviet influence, Japan and the war-ravaged European states needed to be strengthened.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. had a transatlantic responsibility to maintain the global order and demonstrate its status as a great power.<sup>9</sup> Kennan's analysis emphasized the inherent hostility of the Soviet system to democracies and the need for decisive containment to counter Soviet expansionism.<sup>10</sup> He emphasized that the Soviet advance must be met with unwavering counterforce in order to secure global peace and stability.<sup>11</sup>

The doctrine facilitated aid to European states threatened by the Soviet Union through the Marshall Plan, which aimed to revitalize Europe economically while encouraging dependence on the U.S. NATO furthered these security concerns.<sup>12</sup> While Kennan supported the Marshall Plan because of its potential for economic revitalization and weakening local communist parties, he opposed NATO because he feared it would perpetuate the division and militarization of Europe.<sup>13</sup> Kennan advocated a non-military containment strategy and emphasized the political, economic and ideological dimensions. In his 1985 article "Flashbacks," he proposed restoring Western Europe's and Japan's confidence in communist repression and forcing the Soviet Union to confront its borders and eventually negotiate a political agreement.<sup>14</sup>

Despite his continued rejection of military approaches, Kennan recognized the role of military action within the containment theory (Kennan 1997). He criticized NATO enlargement and described it as a significant mistake in American policy. While NATO's mobilization during the Cold War was aimed at deterring a Soviet invasion and maintaining clear lines of demarcation, Kennan warned that

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Frazier, "Kennan, 'Universalism,' and the Truman Doctrine," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 2, 2009, pp. 3–34, <https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2009.11.2.3>.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Griffiths, Steven C Roach, and M Scott Solomon, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, New York, Routledge, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Kennan (Bay X), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," p. 582.

<sup>10</sup> Kennan (Bay X), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct"; George Kennan, "Containment Then and Now," *Foreign Affairs* 65, no. 4, 1987, pp. 885–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20043100>.

<sup>11</sup> Kennan (Bay X), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," p. 581.

<sup>12</sup> Frazier, "Kennan, 'Universalism,' and the Truman Doctrine."

<sup>13</sup> Michael Kimmage and Matthew Rojansky, "A Kennan for Our Times: Revisiting America's Greatest 20th Century Diplomat in the 21st Century," Introduction: Reading Kennan in the 21st Century, Washington, Wilson Center & Kennan Institute, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> George Kennan, "Flashbacks," *The New Yorker*, 1985, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1985/02/25/flashbacks>.

such expansion, especially in 1998, would provoke a negative Russian reaction and lead to a crisis.<sup>15</sup> He foresaw a rise in nationalist and anti-Western sentiment in Russia that would hinder democratic development and reignite Cold War tensions.<sup>16</sup> Kennan argued for a NATO system that did not treat Russia as an enemy and warned against the abuse of the containment policy.<sup>17</sup>

As global dynamics shifted, containment theory was applied in various contexts, including the Arctic and Black Sea regions, which present unique challenges. These areas have become focal points of NATO's efforts to contain Russian influence, as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1 Application of Containment policy in the Arctic and Black Sea Regions**

Region	Key Factors	Relevance for Containment Policy
<b>Arctic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Geopolitical competition</li> <li>-Climate change</li> <li>-Resource exploration</li> <li>-Military build-up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Competition for resources (oil, gas) and new shipping routes (e.g., Northern Sea Route) is intensifying.</li> <li>-NATO seeks to limit Russia's growing military and economic dominance in the region to ensure strategic balance and stability.</li> <li>-Russia's militarization of the Arctic poses direct challenges to NATO's northern flank.</li> </ul>
<b>Black Sea</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Russian influence</li> <li>-NATO-Russia rivalry</li> <li>-Energy transit routes</li> <li>-Regional security instability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The Black Sea is a critical area for Russian power projection, especially after the annexation of Crimea.</li> <li>-NATO is countering Russian military actions in Ukraine, Georgia, and its dominance over key energy routes.</li> <li>-Maintaining stability in the Black Sea is essential for NATO's southern security and energy security</li> </ul>

<sup>15</sup> Frank Costigliola, "George Kennan's Warning on Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/ghosts-george-kennan-lessons-cold-war>; Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault."

<sup>16</sup> Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault."

<sup>17</sup> Deborah W. Larson, "The Return of Containment," *Foreign Policy*, 2021, <https://foreign-policy.com/2021/01/15/containment-russia-china-kennan-today/>.

		interests, especially with Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye as key actors.
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Source: Authors' results

The data in Table 1 illustrates the complexity of NATO's efforts to contain Russian influence in both regions. In the Arctic, growing competition for resources and access to new shipping routes contrasts with the militarization of the region. Russia's military build-up and control of the Northern Sea Route make this region a critical area for NATO. Russia's dominance in the Black Sea — especially after the annexation of Crimea — is also a constant challenge for NATO, as the Alliance must balance regional security with the strategic needs of member states such as Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria. These factors highlight the need for NATO to take a more integrated and dynamic approach to containing the crisis.

## METHODOLOGY

This study analyses NATO's containment strategy in two critical geopolitical regions — the Arctic and the Black Sea — focusing on the post-Cold War period until 2023. By comparing these regions, the impact of NATO's policy on Russia's strategic behaviour will be examined. This analysis covers all countries bordering the Black Sea and the Arctic, especially where NATO and Russian interests collide.

**Research approach:** The research takes a qualitative approach and uses case studies to examine NATO's evolving containment strategy. The analysis incorporates historical events, security policies and military doctrines and focuses on NATO's actions in the Arctic and the Black Sea and Russia's corresponding responses. The study draws on a combination of secondary literature, official documents and existing geopolitical analysis to ensure a comprehensive examination of these regions.

**Data collection:** The data for this study comes from several sources:

- Peer-reviewed literature: Academic articles and books on international relations, security studies and geopolitical strategies form the basis for understanding containment theory and its modern application by NATO.
- Government reports and regional organizations: NATO, Arctic Council and Black Sea Economic Cooperation reports provide insights into official positions and actions in the two regions. These documents serve as important sources for understanding the political frameworks that determine NATO's strategic behaviour.
- Secondary data: Statistical data on military expenditures, troop deployments and infrastructure developments are used to contextualize the changes in military capabilities and the security situation in both regions.

**Analytical framework:** The study draws on George Kennan's containment theory, a framework originally developed during the Cold War to limit Soviet influence. This framework is applied to analyze NATO's strategic expansions in the Black Sea and Arctic regions. The analysis is divided into two components:

1. Descriptive analysis: This section describes NATO's actions, including military deployment, partnerships and diplomatic strategies in both regions. It highlights the key events that have shaped the current geopolitical landscape.

2. Interpretive Analysis: This section interprets Russia's responses to NATO's containment strategies and examines the motivations behind Russia's military buildup and diplomatic manoeuvres in the Arctic and Black Sea.

**Validation and triangulation:** To ensure the reliability of the findings, the study applies a triangulation method, in which qualitative findings from the academic literature are compared with data from government and military reports. This approach helps to reconcile subjective interpretations with empirical evidence and provides a comprehensive overview of NATO's containment strategy and its impact on regional security.

## SETTING: THE BLACK SEA REGION AND THE ARCTIC REGION

The Black Sea region is a geopolitical hotspot characterized by the division between NATO, its partners and Russia, both politically and militarily. Located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and the Caucasus, the Black Sea acts as a buffer zone for Russia against NATO's influence.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the region must be considered not only within the borders of the Black Sea, but also in the broader context of the Balkans and the South Caucasus.<sup>19</sup> Russia's illegal invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 undermined key cooperative frameworks in the region, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Black Sea Cooperation Task Force (BLACKSEAFOR), rendering them ineffective.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kristian Atland and Ihor Kabanenko, "Russia and Its Western Neighbours: A Comparative Study of the Security Situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea Regions," *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 2, 2020, pp. 286–313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1690634>.

<sup>19</sup> Burçin Canar, *Soğuk Savaş Sonrasında Karadeniz [Black Sea After the Cold War]*, Ankara, Phoenix, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Atland and Kabanenko, "Russia and Its Western Neighbours: A Comparative Study of the Security Situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea Regions"; Doğan Polat, "NATO ve Rusya Federasyonu'nun Karadeniz politikaları [Black Sea policies of NATO and the Russian Federation]," in *Karadeniz Jeopolitiği [Black Sea Geopolitics]*, ed. Hasret Çomak

The Arctic, defined as the sea and land areas around the North Pole where North America, Europe and Asia meet, has also emerged as an important geopolitical arena.<sup>21</sup> Seven of the eight non-Russian Arctic states are NATO members, including the United States (Alaska), Canada, Denmark (Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden.<sup>22</sup> Like the Black Sea, the Arctic region represents a political and military border between NATO and Russia. The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 shattered the long-standing perception of the Arctic as an “exceptional,” “low-tension” and “stable” region.<sup>23</sup> In response to the invasion, Western states condemned Russia’s actions and the seven Arctic states suspended cooperation with Russia during its presidency of the Arctic Council (2021-2023). This marked one of the most significant developments in Arctic politics since the establishment of the Council in 1996.<sup>24</sup>

Finland’s accession to NATO and Sweden’s pending application for membership have changed the region’s security architecture and escalated tensions

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et al., İstanbul, Beta, 2018, pp. 365–390.

<sup>21</sup> Dodds and Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles: The Geopolitics of the Arctic and Antarctic*.

<sup>22</sup> Steven E. Miller, “The Return of the Strategic Arctic,” in *Arctic Indigenous Peoples: Climate, Science, Knowledge and Governance*, ed. Lassi Heininen, Heather Exner-Pirot, and Justin Barnes, Akureyri, Arctic Yearbook, 2023, [https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2022/Commentaries/6C\\_AY2022\\_Miller.pdf](https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2022/Commentaries/6C_AY2022_Miller.pdf); Klaus Dodds, Chih Yuan Woon, and Mamadouh, “The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Politics, Territory and Governance,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11, no. 8, 2023, pp. 1519–1536, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2256119>; Paal Sigurd Hilde, Fujio Ohnishi, and Magnus Petersson, “Cold Winds in the North: Three Perspectives on the Impact of Russia’s War in Ukraine on Security and International Relations in the Arctic,” *Polar Science*, 41, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polar.2024.101050>.

<sup>23</sup> Hilde, Ohnishi, and Petersson, “Cold Winds in the North: Three Perspectives on the Impact of Russia’s War in Ukraine on Security and International Relations in the Arctic”; Gry Thomasen, “After Ukraine: How Can We Ensure Stability in the Arctic?,” *International Journal*, 78, no. 4, 2023, pp. 643–651. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020231217463>; Lawson W. Brigham, “Ten Ways Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Impacts the Arctic and the World,” *The Hill*, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3736434-ten-ways-the-russia-ukraine-war-impacts-the-arctic-and-the-world/>; Andreas Osthagen, “Five Misconceptions in Arctic Security and Geopolitics,” The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies, 2023, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/five-misconceptions-arctic-security-geopolitics/>.

<sup>24</sup> Timo Koivurova and Akiho Shibata, “After Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Can We Still Cooperate With Russia in the Arctic?,” *Polar Record*, 59-e12, 2023, pp 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000049>.



between NATO and Russia. As a result, the Arctic and the North Atlantic are increasingly seen as contiguous NATO operational areas. Until the adoption of the Strategic Concept 2022, NATO did not have a unified strategic vision for its role in the Arctic. While Canada had previously opposed NATO expansion in the region and advocated for the status quo, its position changed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Ydstebo 2024; Strauss and Wegge 2024). Norway, on the other hand, has become a strong proponent of an enhanced NATO role in the Arctic.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly important as the Arctic hosts a significant part of Russia's sea-based nuclear second-strike capabilities, making the region a crucial element of Russia's global strategic objectives.<sup>26</sup>

## EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Black Sea Region: NATO-Russia relations

In the post-Cold War period, the Black Sea region was of secondary geo-strategic importance compared to Central and Eastern Europe, which were the focus of NATO's integration and stabilization efforts. Initially, NATO took a cautious approach to the Black Sea, having inherited the delicate balance of power from the Cold War era. During this period, the U.S. and NATO became more focused on the broader post-Soviet space and emphasized arms control and nuclear disarmament, notably through Ukraine's 1994 agreement to give up its nuclear

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<sup>25</sup> Joachim Bentzen, "Norway's Strategic Role and Interests at NATO's Northern Flank: Finding a New Balance?," in *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge. New York, Routledge, 2024, pp. 205–24, <https://www.routledge.com/Defending-NATOs-Northern-Flank-Power-Projection-and-Military-Operations/Strauss-Wegge/p/book/9781032381930>; Palle Ydstebo, "NATO, Doctrines, and the Arctic," in *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge. New York, Routledge, 2024, pp. 84–102, <https://www.routledge.com/Defending-NATOs-Northern-Flank-Power-Projection-and-Military-Operations/Strauss-Wegge/p/book/9781032381930>; Tormod Heier, "Norwegian Problems of Confidence Building: Geopolitical Exposure and Military Vulnerabilities in the High North," in *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge. New York, Routledge, 2024, pp. 103–20, <https://www.routledge.com/Defending-NATOs-Northern-Flank-Power-Projection-and-Military-Operations/Strauss-Wegge/p/book/9781032381930>.

<sup>26</sup> Jonas Kjellén, "The Russian Northern Fleet and the (Re) Militarisation of the Arctic," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 13, 2022, pp. 34–52, <https://doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v13.3338>.

arsenal in exchange for security guarantees under the Budapest Memorandum. However, the tensions over Crimea — due to its strategic value — remained an ongoing issue between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>27</sup>

For Russia, the Black Sea has always been central to its national security and regional influence. Moscow sees NATO's eastward expansion into its periphery, particularly through Georgia's and Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO, as a direct threat. These concerns crystallized in the early 2000s as the NATO ambitions of Ukraine and Georgia became increasingly clear. Russia responded militarily to these perceived threats with its invasion of Georgia in 2008 and annexation of Crimea in 2014 — actions that not only called into question NATO's credibility as a regional security guarantor, but also highlighted the limits of NATO's influence in the Black Sea region.<sup>28</sup> These events highlighted NATO's inability to act decisively in the Black Sea, in stark contrast to its more organized engagements in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Control over Crimea has allowed Russia to significantly increase its military presence in the Black Sea. By expanding its Black Sea Fleet and deploying advanced missile systems, air defence capabilities and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies, Russia has enhanced its ability to project power throughout the region, from the Bosphorus to the Eastern Mediterranean. This military build-up, especially since 2014, has shifted the regional balance of power in Russia's favour.<sup>29</sup>

### **NATO's strategic response and the challenges in the Black Sea:**

NATO's response to these developments was complicated by several structural and political challenges:

1. The Montreux Convention: created in 1936, the Montreux Convention continues to limit NATO's naval flexibility in the Black Sea and prevents NATO members not located near the straits from maintaining a permanent naval presence. Türkiye, which controls the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, has sole

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<sup>27</sup> Siri Neset et al., "Turkey as a Regional Security Actor in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Levant Region," Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) Report, Bergen, 2021, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7820-turkey-as-a-regional-security-actor-in-the-black-sea-the-mediterranean-and-the-levant-region>.

<sup>28</sup> Mustafa Aydın, "Turkish Policy towards the Wider Black Sea and the EU Connection," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 16, no. 3, 2014, pp. 383–397, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2014.928541>.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Stronski, "What Is Russia Doing in the Black Sea?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/20/what-is-russia-doing-in-black-sea-pub-84549>.

authority over military traffic in the Black Sea. Although Türkiye is a NATO member, it takes a pragmatic approach by balancing its NATO commitments with its desire for cooperative relations with Russia, especially after the downing of a Russian jet in 2015. Türkiye's enforcement of the Montreux Convention, including the closure of the straits to Russian military vessels during the invasion of Ukraine, underscores the complexity NATO faces in maintaining a sustainable military presence in the Black Sea.<sup>30</sup> (Neset et al., 2021; MFA of Türkiye, 2022).

2. Black Sea security institutions: Initiatives such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)<sup>31</sup> and the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR) were created to promote regional stability and cooperation.<sup>32</sup> However, these efforts have been largely eclipsed by Russia's repeated military actions and territorial aggression in the region. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 has effectively neutralized the ability of these organizations to mediate conflicts or advance cooperative security programs, especially as Russia continues to exclude countries such as Ukraine and Georgia from participating in such forums.<sup>33</sup>

3. Divergent regional responses: NATO members in the Black Sea region — Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria — have taken different approaches to NATO's role in the region. Romania has been the most active, advocating a permanent NATO presence and hosting key NATO facilities such as the headquarters of the Multinational Division Southeast. Bulgaria, traditionally a balancing actor between the West and Russia, has moved closer to NATO following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Türkiye, with its unique geopolitical position and significant maritime capabilities, has sought to maintain a balanced approach and avoid direct confrontation with Russia while preserving its interests under the Montreux Convention.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Neset et al., "Turkey as a Regional Security Actor in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Levant Region"; MFA of Türkiye, "BLACKSEAFOR," 2022, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/blackseafor.en.mfa>.

<sup>31</sup> BSEC, "Black Sea Economic Cooperation," 1992, <http://www.bsec-organization.org/>; BSEC, "Headquarters Agreement Between the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Government of the Republic of Turkey" (Black Sea Economic Cooperation, 1999), <http://www.bsec-organization.org/UploadedDocuments/StatutoryDocumentsAgreements/HeadQuartersAgreementFourthEdition.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> MFA of Türkiye, "BLACKSEAFOR."

<sup>33</sup> Atland and Kabanenko, "Russia and Its Western Neighbours: A Comparative Study of the Security Situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea Regions."

<sup>34</sup> Lulian Romanyshyn, "Ukraine, NATO and the Black Sea" (NDC Policy Brief, 2023), <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1792>.

<sup>35</sup> Valentin Naumescu, "NATO in the Black Sea Region: Unpredictability and Different Levels of Commitment among the Three Coastal Allies," *The Journal of Cross-Regional*

4. Military contributions: Despite the growing political will of NATO members in the Black Sea region, Romania and Bulgaria's military contributions continue to be constrained by limited capabilities. While Türkiye has a considerable naval force, it has focused on balancing its relations with both NATO and Russia. NATO's naval presence in the Black Sea has been strengthened through regular joint exercises and deployments but is insufficient to counterbalance Russia's significant military build-up in Crimea and across the region. Internal disagreements over the creation of a permanent NATO naval force in the Black Sea have further exacerbated NATO's strategic disadvantage.<sup>36</sup>

**Russia's military dominance and NATO's strategic ambiguity:**

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent build-up of its Black Sea Fleet have dramatically altered the region's security architecture, allowing Moscow to consolidate its military presence and extend its power far beyond the Black Sea. NATO's limited and disparate presence, exacerbated by internal divisions and legal restrictions such as the Montreux Convention, made it difficult for the Alliance to counter Russia's growing dominance. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exacerbated this dynamic, posing new challenges for NATO and changing the geopolitical landscape.

For NATO, the invasion in 2022 has highlighted the strategic ambiguity that has long characterized its approach to the Black Sea. Despite heightened rhetoric and increased military exercises, the alliance's ability to effectively deter Russian aggression remains constrained by internal disagreements and the legal limitations of the Montreux Convention, which prevents a permanent NATO naval presence in the Black Sea. While Romania and Bulgaria have pushed for a more robust role for NATO, Türkiye's balancing act and reluctance to escalate tensions with Russia continues to complicate NATO's strategic posture in the region.

The war has made it clear that NATO needs to rethink its strategic options in the Black Sea. The Alliance's failure to prevent or significantly mitigate the consequences of Russia's actions in Ukraine raises serious questions about its ability to serve as a credible security guarantor for other vulnerable states, including Georgia and Moldova. Without a clear and coherent strategy, NATO risks further undermining its credibility in a region where Russia's military dominance appears largely unchallenged.

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*Dialogues/La Revue de Dialogues Inter-Régionaux*, no. Special Issue, 2020, pp. 131–52, <https://doi.org/10.25518/2593-9483.141>.

<sup>36</sup> Atland and Kabanenko, "Russia and Its Western Neighbours: A Comparative Study of the Security Situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea Regions."

**Analytical summary: geopolitical dynamics in the Black Sea:**

It is crucial to understand the geopolitical landscape of the Black Sea, as this region is characterized by significant Russian military advances and a fragmented NATO response. Russia's control over Crimea and its ability to project its power from the Black Sea into the Eastern Mediterranean underscore the strategic importance of this region. However, NATO's ability to counterbalance Russian influence is hampered by internal disagreements, particularly around the Montreux Convention, which limits NATO's naval presence in the Black Sea. Table 2 provides an overview of these challenges and their implications for NATO and Russia.

**Table 2 Navigating the Black Sea: NATO's fragmented response to Russian military strength**

Key Challenges	Implications for NATO	Russia's Response
<b>Montreux Straits Convention</b>	Limits NATO's ability to maintain a permanent naval force in the Black Sea. Türkiye's balancing act complicates NATO's naval strategy.	Enables Russia to dominate maritime security in the region without facing a sustained NATO naval presence.
<b>Black Sea Security Institutions</b>	Black Sea institutions have been sidelined due to Russia's aggressive actions and exclusion of key states like Ukraine and Georgia.	Russia has neutralized these forums, effectively controlling the regional security agenda.
<b>Diverging NATO Member Responses</b>	Differing priorities among Black Sea NATO members—Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria—create an inconsistent strategic posture.	Russia exploits these divisions to maintain influence and discourage a unified NATO approach.
<b>Military Contributions from NATO States</b>	Despite periodic joint exercises, Romania and Bulgaria's limited capabilities and Türkiye's balanced approach prevent NATO from effectively countering Russia.	Russia has taken advantage of NATO's military shortcomings by rapidly expanding its Black Sea Fleet and deploying A2/AD capabilities.
<b>Crimea's Militarization</b>	NATO's limited response to the annexation has allowed Russia	Russia uses Crimea as a launchpad for regional military

	to transform Crimea into a military stronghold, complicating future NATO operations.	operations, projecting power into the Eastern Mediterranean.
<b>2022 Ukraine Invasion</b>	Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has intensified NATO's security concerns, pushing Eastern European members to advocate for stronger defense measures.	Russia's military actions in Ukraine, supported by its Black Sea Fleet, further consolidate its dominance and challenge NATO's presence.

Source: Authors' results

Table 2 clearly shows the challenges facing NATO in the Black Sea. The constraints imposed by the Montreux Convention, combined with Türkiye's cautious stance and the divergent strategies of other NATO members, prevent a unified and effective response to Russian dominance.

### **Arctic Region: Relations Between NATO and Russia**

With the end of the Cold War, the strategic importance of the Arctic region has diminished considerably.<sup>37</sup> Since Mikhail Gorbachev's groundbreaking Murmansk speech in 1987, the Arctic has largely been regarded as a zone of peace, supported by numerous cooperative initiatives and confidence-building measures between the Arctic states.<sup>38</sup> The establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996 facilitated multilateral dialog and promoted the perception of the Arctic as a "low tension" area, underpinned by the concept of "Arctic exceptionalism".<sup>39</sup> However;

<sup>37</sup> Dodds and Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles: The Geopolitics of the Arctic and Antarctic*; Heather Exner-Pirot, "Between Militarization and Disarmament: Challenges for Arctic Security in the Twenty-First Century," in *Climate Change and Arctic Security: Searching for a Paradigm Shift*, ed. Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2020, pp. 91–106, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20230-9\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20230-9_6).

<sup>38</sup> Pavel Devyatkin, "Arctic Exceptionalism: A Narrative of Cooperation and Conflict from Gorbachev to Medvedev and Putin," *The Polar Journal* 13, no. 2, 2023, pp. 336–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2023.2258658>; Heather Exner-Pirot, "Arctic Exceptionalism Is Over. Who Will Tell the Diplomats," *Macdonald-Laurier Institute*, 2023, <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/arctic-exceptionalism-is-over-who-will-tell-the-diplomats-heather-exner-pirot-in-eye-on-the-arctic/>.

<sup>39</sup> Heather Exner-Pirot and Robert W. Murray, "Regional Order in the Arctic: Negotiated Exceptionalism," *Politik*, 20, no. 3, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.7146/politik.v20i3.97153>; Oran Young, "Can the Arctic Council Survive the Impact of the Ukraine Crisis?," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 2022, <https://gja.georgetown.edu/2022/12/30/can-the-arctic-council-survive-the-impact-of-the-ukraine-crisis/>.

this atmosphere of cooperation has been increasingly influenced by the accelerating effects of climate change, globalization and changing global power dynamics.<sup>40</sup>

Over the past two decades, the Arctic has warmed more than twice as much as the global average.<sup>41</sup> According to the IPCC, the Arctic Ocean will be ice-free by 2050, and in more optimistic scenarios by 2070.<sup>42</sup>

The interplay of climate change, globalization, and global power shifts has strained cooperation in the Arctic and fundamentally altered the regional security architecture, especially as relations between Russia and the West continue to deteriorate.<sup>43</sup> This shift is partly due to the securitization of Arctic affairs.<sup>44</sup> Although the region has not returned to Cold War conditions, there is an increasing tendency towards power politics as the Arctic becomes more integrated into the global system.<sup>45</sup> Five major events have contributed to this evolving dynamic:

1. The 2004 Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA): the ACIA highlighted the severe consequences of climate change in the Arctic.<sup>46</sup> These findings were recognized by the Arctic states in the Reykjavik Declaration,<sup>47</sup> which increased international attention to the region.

2. Russia's 2007 flag-raising on the Arctic seabed: This symbolic action heightened concerns about a race for control of the Arctic continental shelf and

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<sup>40</sup> Liisa Kauppila and Sanna Kopra, "China's Rise and the Arctic Region up to 2049—Three Scenarios for Regional Futures in an Era of Climate Change and Power Transition," *Polar Journal*, 12, 2022, p. 151, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2022.2058216>.

<sup>41</sup> IPCC, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. Hans-Otto Pörtner et al. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Valérie Masson-Delmotte et al., eds., *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157896>.

<sup>43</sup> Exner-Pirot and Murray, "Regional Order in the Arctic"; Koivurova and Shibata, "After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Can We Still Cooperate With Russia in the Arctic?"

<sup>44</sup> Andreas Østhagen, "The Arctic Security Region: Misconceptions and Contradictions," *Polar Geography* 44, no. 1, 2021, pp. 55–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2021.1881645>.

<sup>45</sup> Young, "Can the Arctic Council Survive the Impact of the Ukraine Crisis?"

<sup>46</sup> ACIA, *Impacts of a Warming Arctic: Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), <https://www.amap.no/documents/doc/impacts-of-a-warming-arctic-2004/786>.

<sup>47</sup> Arctic Council, "Ministerial Meeting in Reykjavik," 2004, <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/1560>.

fueled fears of international conflict.<sup>48</sup>

3. The 2008 U.S. Geological Survey report: This report revealed the significant hydrocarbon reserves in the Arctic and sparked global interest in exploiting these resources.<sup>49</sup>

4. Russia's invasions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (2008) and Crimea (2014): These actions exacerbated tensions between Russia and the West and fueled fears of a new Cold War or an arms race in the Arctic.<sup>50</sup>

5. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022: This event significantly undermined security in the Arctic, eroding the cooperative spirit of Arctic exceptionalism and lowering relations between Russia and NATO to their lowest point since the Cold War.<sup>51</sup>

### **The evolution of Russia's Arctic policy and security concerns:**

Russia's Arctic policy is set out in three key strategic documents published in 2008, 2013 and 2020 respectively.

1. "Basics of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period Till 2020 and for a Further Perspective".<sup>52</sup>

2. "Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and the National Security up to 2020".<sup>53</sup>

3. "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation State Policy in

<sup>48</sup> Exner-Pirot, "Between Militarization and Disarmament: Challenges for Arctic Security in the Twenty-First Century"; Klaus Dodds and Jamie Woodward, *The Arctic: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Lassi Heininen, "Arctic Security – Global Dimensions and Challenges, and National Policy Responses," *The Yearbook of Polar Law Online* 5, no. 1, 2013, pp. 93–115, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116427-91000120>; Lassi Heininen, "Special Features of Arctic Geopolitics-A Potential Asset for World Politics," in *The Global Arctic Handbook*, ed. Matthias Finger and Lassi Heininen, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019, pp. 215–234, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91995-9\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91995-9_13).

<sup>50</sup> Michael Byers, "Arctic Security and Outer Space" 3, no. 1, 2020, 183–196, <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.56>; Heininen, "Special Features of Arctic Geopolitics-A Potential Asset for World Politics."

<sup>51</sup> NATO, "Strategic Concepts," NATO, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_56626.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm).

<sup>52</sup> Government of the Russian Federation, "Russian Federation Policy for the Arctic to 2020", 2008, [http://www.arctis-search.com/Russian+Federation+Policy+for+the+Arctic+to+2020#I\\_General\\_Provisions](http://www.arctis-search.com/Russian+Federation+Policy+for+the+Arctic+to+2020#I_General_Provisions).

<sup>53</sup> Government of the Russian Federation, "The Development Strategy of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation", 2013, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21042-long-telegram-original>.



the Arctic to 2035".<sup>54</sup>

These documents focus primarily on addressing soft security threats and challenges related to shipping in the Arctic, in particular the operation of the Northern Sea Route, while balancing national security needs and international cooperation.<sup>55</sup> In addition, they emphasize the strategic military importance of the Russian Arctic, economic development, environmental protection and cooperation on issues of common interest, including the rights of indigenous peoples.<sup>56</sup> However, the 2020 document was significantly amended following the presidential decree of February 2023. Key changes include the removal of previous references to "strengthening good neighborly relations with the Arctic states" in areas such as economic, scientific, cultural and cross-border cooperation.

These have been replaced by the more nationalistic goal of "developing relations with foreign states on a bilateral basis, taking into account the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic".<sup>57</sup> In addition, references to multilateral cooperation formats such as the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Region have been removed from the new text, signaling a shift in Russia's approach to Arctic diplomacy.

### **NATO's limited strategic engagement in the Arctic:**

In contrast to Russia, NATO's strategic engagement in the Arctic has been

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<sup>54</sup> Anna Davis and Emily Holland, "Strategy for Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Provision of National Security for the Period up to 2035," trans. Anna Davis and Emily Holland, Russia Maritime Studies Institute, United States Naval War College, 2020, [https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/20201026\\_ENG\\_RUS\\_Arctic%20Strategy2035\\_final.pdf?sv=2017-04-17&sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=JPiKWVeEv99KKXlrD599Z4zzdhZLpt2omVYXicVPvI0%3D](https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/20201026_ENG_RUS_Arctic%20Strategy2035_final.pdf?sv=2017-04-17&sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=JPiKWVeEv99KKXlrD599Z4zzdhZLpt2omVYXicVPvI0%3D).

<sup>55</sup> Maria Lagutina, "Russia's Arctic Policies: Concepts, Domestic and International Priorities," *The Polar Journal* 11, no. 1, 2021, pp. 118–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2021.1932262>; Alexander Sergunin and Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, "The Politics of Russian Arctic Shipping: Evolving Security and Geopolitical Factors," *The Polar Journal* 10, no. 2, 2020, pp. 251–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2020.1799613>.

<sup>56</sup> Sergunin and Gjørsv, "The Politics of Russian Arctic Shipping."

<sup>57</sup> Malte Humpert, "Russia Amends Arctic Policy Prioritizing 'National Interest' and Removing Cooperation Within Arctic Council," 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-amends-arctic-policy-prioritizing-national-interest-and-removing-cooperation-within-arctic>.

relatively limited.<sup>58</sup> There are several reasons for this reluctance: 1) The complexity of Arctic geopolitics, where political considerations often take precedence in NATO's consensus-based decision-making processes.<sup>59</sup> 2) The small number of Arctic states within the Alliance and Canada's reluctance to expand NATO's role in the region. 3) NATO's perception that Arctic security is an extension of Cold War-era regional tensions, particularly in regions such as the Black Sea.<sup>60</sup> These factors have prevented NATO from providing a unified response to Russia's increasing activities in the Arctic. While the Alliance's Strategic Concept 2022 briefly mentions the Arctic, it does not address NATO's role or strategy in the region in detail.<sup>61</sup>

Despite this limited engagement, there have been discussions within NATO about how to increase its presence in the Arctic. Since a NATO conference on "Security Prospects in the High North" in 2009, officials have explored potential areas for engagement, including search and rescue, energy security and critical infrastructure protection.<sup>62</sup> The Alliance has also conducted joint military exercises in the Arctic, such as Trident Juncture in 2018 and Cold Response in 2022, signaling a growing interest in regional security.<sup>63</sup> However, internal disagreements among NATO members — particularly Canada's opposition to NATO involvement in the Arctic on sovereignty grounds — have hampered the Alliance's ability to formulate a coherent strategy for the Arctic.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Kristen Csenkey et al., "A Not so Frozen 2035: The Future of NATO in the European Arctic and High North" (Canada: Defence and Security Foresight Group, 2021); Duncan Depledge, "NATO and the Arctic: The Need for a New Approach," *The RUSI Journal* 165, no. 5–6 (2021): 80–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2020.1865831>.

<sup>59</sup> Hilde Gunn, "NATO Summit: Little Reference to the Arctic, but Region Still on the Radar," *High North News*, 2021, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/nato-summit-little-reference-arctic-region-still-radar>.

<sup>60</sup> Csenkey et al., "A Not so Frozen 2035: The Future of NATO in the European Arctic and High North."

<sup>61</sup> NATO, "Strategic Concepts."

<sup>62</sup> Brooke A Smith-Windsor, "Putting the 'N' Back into NATO," Research Paper (Rome, 2013), [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/167451/rp\\_94.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/167451/rp_94.pdf); Jason Smith, "Melting the Myth of Arctic Exceptionalism," *Modern War Institute*, 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/melting-the-myth-of-arctic-exceptionalism/>.

<sup>63</sup> Lee Mottola, "NATO's Arctic Command: A Case for the Expansion of NATO's Mission in the High North," *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies*, 2023, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-command-case-expansion-nato-mission-high-north/>.

<sup>64</sup> Liselotte Odgaard, "Russia's Arctic Designs and NATO," *Survival* 64, no. 4 (2022): 89–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2103259>.

**Analysis of NATO-Russia relations in the Arctic:**

To better understand the current state of NATO-Russia relations in the Arctic, Table 3 below summarizes key aspects, including post-Cold War cooperation, the impact of climate change, and the main military strategies of both sides. Together, these elements illustrate the evolving security dynamics in the region and the challenges posed by Russia's assertive actions and NATO's limited engagement.

**Table 3 Key aspects of NATO-Russia relations in the Arctic**

Aspect	Details	Impact/Challenges
<b>Post-Cold War Cooperation</b>	Arctic viewed as a zone of peace; Arctic Council established in 1996.	Cooperation strained by climate change and geopolitical shifts.
<b>Climate Change</b>	Arctic warming faster than the global average; projected to be ice-free by 2050-2070.	Increased accessibility draws global interest, challenging regional stability.
<b>Russia's Arctic Strategy</b>	Focus on territorial claims, Northern Sea Route, military presence, and resource control.	Militarization of the Arctic, especially after 2022, raises tensions with NATO.
<b>NATO's Limited Role</b>	NATO's Arctic engagement is restrained due to internal divisions, especially Canada's reluctance.	NATO lacks a unified strategy and sufficient infrastructure to counter Russia's growing presence.
<b>Key Russian Actions</b>	Flag-planting in 2007, invasions of Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), Ukraine (2022).	Heightened fears of conflict and intensified military competition in the region.
<b>Finland and Sweden's NATO Bid</b>	Finland and Sweden's potential NATO membership.	Could shift regional security but also provoke further Russian militarization.
<b>China's Role</b>	China declares itself a "Near Arctic state" with growing economic and environmental interests in the region.	Adds another layer of competition, complicating NATO and Russia's influence in the Arctic.

Source: Authors' results

In sum, NATO-Russia relations in the Arctic are characterized by a mix of militarization, environmental change and global power shifts, with Russia increasingly viewing NATO's presence as a threat. Conversely, NATO's approach in the

Arctic is cautious and fragmented, hampered by geopolitical constraints and the divergent interests of its member states. In the future, the Arctic's growing importance to global security and the economy will likely force both NATO and Russia to rethink their strategies as the region becomes more accessible and contested due to climate change.

### CONCLUSIONS

In today's geopolitical landscape, the practice of containment faces a fundamental problem: it fails to address the unique and evolving challenges posed by modern Russia, which are markedly different from those of the Cold War era. NATO's expansion into the Black Sea and Arctic regions, while seemingly a bold response to Russian assertiveness, has done little to ease long-standing tensions. Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, NATO's stance towards Russia in these regions was fragmented and lacked unity. The invasion sparked a wave of unity among NATO allies in the Arctic, but the Black Sea remained largely locked in a familiar stalemate. In this new chapter, Romania has taken the lead in the Black Sea, mirroring Norway's proactive stance in the Arctic in advocating for an increased NATO presence.

Before the invasion, Canada was the only Arctic nation to oppose NATO expansion and support the status quo. But after February 24, the winds quickly changed as Canada shifted its position, much like Türkiye, whose delicate balance between East and West in the Black Sea now mirrors Canada's stance ahead of 2022.

For Russia, NATO's growing presence in the Black Sea and the Arctic has reignited deep-seated fears of encirclement and brought back memories of Cold War-era containment strategies. Russia's aggressive approach in recent years is less a sign of uncontrolled expansionism than a reaction to what it sees as existential threats posed by NATO's advance.<sup>65</sup> The geographical division within NATO continues to lead to different security priorities and thus to fragmented approaches to common challenges. It remains to be seen how Sweden's recent NATO membership will play out following Finland's accession. However, it is almost certain that Moscow will respond with increased aggression in the Arctic, a region it sees as crucial to its future influence.

Meanwhile, Russia's complex partnership with Türkiye in the Black Sea and its strategic alliances in the Arctic have further complicated NATO's efforts to contain Moscow's ambitions. Although recent events have changed the dynamic in the

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<sup>65</sup> Lagutina, "Russia's Arctic Policies."

Arctic, the potential for renewed cooperation between Russia and other Arctic states remains — cooperative frameworks, if carefully managed, could still provide pathways to stability. However, NATO's growing presence in the region increases the risk of missteps, misunderstandings and misjudgments that could plunge the fragile Arctic balance into deeper instability.

As NATO and Russia navigate these turbulent waters, one thing is clear: the road ahead is fraught with both danger and opportunity. Whether the two sides will go for confrontation or cautiously seek ways to compromise remains a question for the future — a question whose answer will undoubtedly shape the geopolitical map for years to come.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank the editorial team of *Codrul Cosminului*, Dr. Ekaterina Uryupova and Professor Klaus Dodds for their comments and suggestions.

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