

## **HIGH TENSIONS AT ARTIC REGION: INTERNATIONAL RELATION**

**NEWS:** Why are tensions high in the Arctic?

### **WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?**

The Arctic region is becoming a geopolitical hotspot due to climate change, resource competition, and territorial disputes, with countries like Russia, NATO members, and China asserting influence. Key concerns include natural resource access, new navigational routes, and military tensions, with India actively involved in Arctic research.

### **About the Arctic Region**

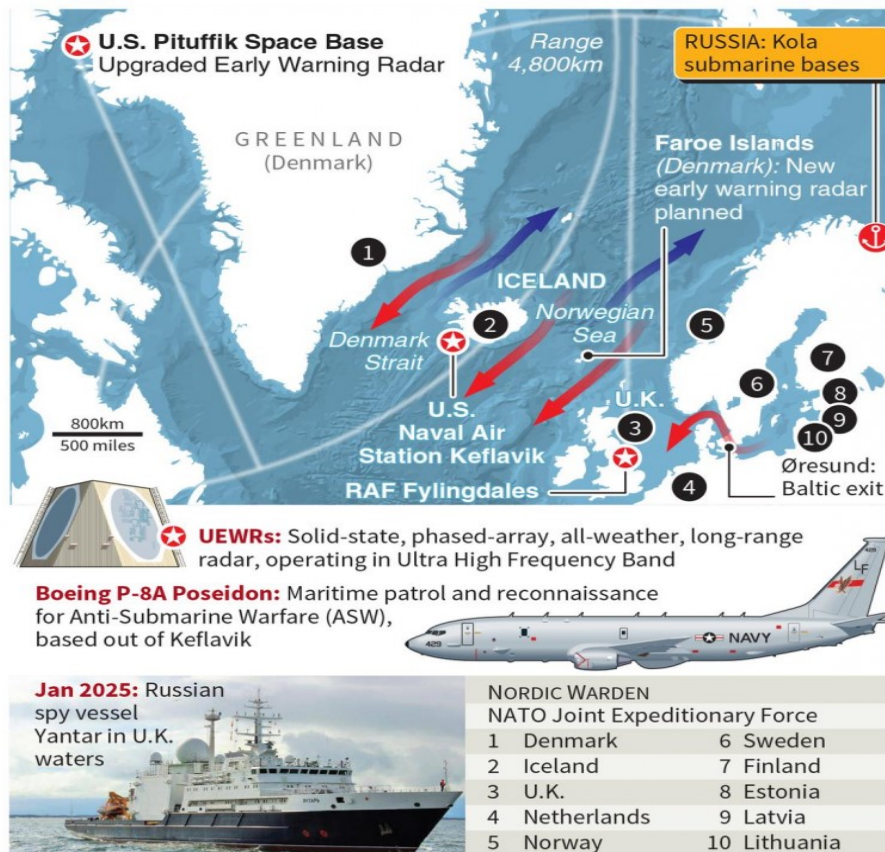
- The Arctic is one of the most delicate and vital ecosystems on Earth, situated in the northernmost part of the planet.
- It includes the Arctic Ocean and territories of Canada, Russia, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and the United States (Alaska).
- The region is experiencing warming at nearly four times the global average, leading to environmental changes and significant economic shifts.
- This warming is influencing policies and territorial claims, making the Arctic a focal point of geopolitical activity.

### **Key Factors Driving Geopolitical Tensions in the Arctic Region**

- **Natural Resources:**
  - The Arctic is believed to hold approximately 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of its natural gas, as per the U.S. Geological Survey.
  - As the ice caps melt, these resources are becoming increasingly accessible, fueling competition among countries looking to exploit them.
- **New Navigational Routes:**
  - The retreat of ice in the Arctic opens up new shipping routes like the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Northwest Passage.
  - These routes could serve as viable alternatives to the Suez and Panama Canals.
  - For example, the Northeast Passage along Russia's Arctic coast could reduce the shipping distance between Asia and Europe by 8,000 km, leading to reduced costs.
  - The Northwest Passage, crossing through Canada's Arctic archipelago, is a flashpoint, with Canada claiming it as internal waters and the US asserting it as an international strait, open to free navigation.

# Ice cold war

The melting of Arctic sea ice has prompted renewed interest in the region. The U.K. has repeatedly emphasised the strategic importance of the Greenland-Iceland-U.K. (GIUK) gap, a critical choke point for NATO's naval defences



## Key Concerns/Challenges

- **Russia's Expansion in the Arctic:**
  - Russia controls nearly half of the Arctic coastline and has been increasingly militarizing the region.
  - It has re-opened Soviet-era military bases, deployed nuclear-powered icebreakers, and modernized its Arctic military infrastructure.
  - Regular military drills have been conducted by Russia, signaling its intent to assert control over the Arctic waters.
- **NATO's Response and Western Concerns:**
  - In response to Russia's growing influence, the US and NATO have ramped up their military presence in the region.
  - Finland and Sweden's decision to join NATO is partially driven by concerns over Russian expansionism, especially after the invasion of Ukraine.

- The US has increased Arctic military exercises, stationed submarines, and strengthened ties with Norway and Canada to counter Russian influence in the region.
- The UK has consistently highlighted the strategic importance of the Greenland-Iceland-U.K. (GIUK) gap, a key maritime chokepoint for NATO's naval defenses.
- **China's Growing Arctic Ambitions:**
  - Despite being a non-Arctic nation, China has declared itself a 'near-Arctic state' and is investing in Arctic infrastructure.
  - China has proposed a 'Polar Silk Road' as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), seeking to establish economic and scientific interests in the region.
- **Legal Disputes and Territorial Claims:**
  - Several Arctic nations have overlapping territorial claims, particularly over the continental shelf.
  - These disputes are compounded by the changing geography of the Arctic as a result of warming and ice cap melt.

## Geopolitical Implications

- **UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS):**
  - The UNCLOS allows nations to extend their claims to the seabed beyond the 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) if they can prove that the area is a natural prolongation of their continental shelf.
  - Russia, Canada, and Denmark (via Greenland) have all submitted claims to extend their seabed sovereignty under the UNCLOS.
  - The US, which has not ratified the UNCLOS, faces restrictions in asserting its claims. Meanwhile, Russia has used legal maneuvers and strategic military positioning to strengthen its territorial claims in the Arctic.
- **Arctic Council:**
  - The Arctic Council is composed of **eight nations**: the U.S., Canada, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland.
  - Its mission is to promote environmental protection, scientific cooperation, and sustainable development in the region.
  - The Council was formally established in 1996 through the Ottawa Declaration.
  - India is an Observer in the Arctic Council, signaling its growing interest in Arctic affairs.



