

Wars in Ukraine and Gaza could soon affect our approach to the North Pole, researcher warns

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Credit: Daiwei Lu/Unsplash

The Houthis are attacking ships in the Red Sea. Rerouting via South Africa is expensive, whereas the Arctic route only takes a week. Once a no-go zone, this route might be a more realistic option. Mind the nuclear submarines, though...

Having spent years researching the Arctic from many different angles—using his knowledge of the law, geography, biology, international relations, national security studies, economics, energy, and governance—Ph.D. candidate Alexandros Sarris is the go-to person to

shed light on current affairs affecting the Arctic. We sat down with Sarris.

Cold War 2.0 in Arctic waters

Sarris: When I started researching the Arctic back in 2010, everyone was talking about [climate change](#). The North Pole was melting much faster than expected and there was a real sense of urgency to protect the environment. But in 2022, the situation changed practically overnight due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This brought a halt to environmental plans and collaborations between the Arctic states.

Now that [armed conflict](#) has entered the dialogue, the Arctic states tend to consider their priorities more carefully. According to a theory on [international relations](#), a Cold War 2.0 is going on that's also affecting the Arctic.

Nuclear submarines

It's not common knowledge that the Arctic is heavily militarized with a lot of activity going on in Arctic waters. Russia has deployed its nuclear submarines in Murmansk, a small Arctic gulf with only submarines and king crabs. Due to their extended range, Russian submarines can target any city in Europe, the United States or Ukraine. The United States, which is the other major nuclear power and Arctic state, has its nuclear missiles based in Alaska, which is partially situated in the Arctic.

Ghost submarines, which take their name from their ability to be untraceable and unseen, travel through the middle of the Arctic. These massive submarines, which measure between 100m and 120m in length, move along the seabed. These submarines are sometimes involved in collisions, not that this is ever reported as such. Recently, an American

[submarine](#) "collided with an object." Anyone who's listening carefully will know that the incident most likely involved a collision between two submarines.

Houthi attacks: Rerouting via the North Pole

And then there's the Israel-Gaza war. This conflict has turned out to be a gamechanger for the future of the Arctic because it's changed the maritime routes from one day to the next.

Houthi rebels are attacking ships passing through the Red Sea. Rerouting via South Africa takes an additional two weeks, meaning that a four-week journey is now taking five to six weeks. These massive delays are expensive in themselves, but the higher gas and oil prices are making this [route](#) even more expensive. The carriers say that if we continue traveling via South Africa, the current supply chains will be destroyed—and that's not a sustainable option.

Alternative route

And that's where the Arctic route comes in. Take a look at the map—there's no other option than to travel via the North Pole.

The Arctic is ice free between March and October. It takes only one week to sail from Shanghai to Rotterdam via the Arctic route, and it's a no-go for pirates as it's too cold for them.

And so this route is rapidly becoming a more realistic option. Albeit not in the very near future as no one can argue that a war zone counts as a viable route. Military activity would disrupt normal shipping communications, for example. There's also a lack of other essential infrastructure such as harbors. And don't forget that there are many

unregulated waters—Russia and the United States wouldn't allow ships to pass through these waters without paying a toll.

An environmental disaster

At some point, however, when there's at least some level of peace between Russia and Ukraine, the route will become more navigable and financially sustainable. Not that I think it's a good idea—on the contrary, in fact. From an environmental perspective, it could be disastrous. An oil spill in cold water would be much worse as it's harder to clean up. And let's not forget the impact on the region's biodiversity and Indigenous people, who are already struggling to survive due to the loss of viable fisheries. But it's a realistic scenario that might soon feature in public debate.

Provided by Leiden University

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