

Introduction

War and Peace in the Arctic

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In 1945, following the end of World War II, 49 sovereign nations declared their determination “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind”, by ratifying the United Nations Charter (see, Full text 2025; also Westing 1990). In 2025, despite the Charter and United Nations’ activities, whose ranks of member-states has swelled to 193, new generations have suffered from the scourge of wars and armed conflicts, as we are witnessing today in Gaza/Israel, Sudan, and Ukraine.

Whereas after the end of the Cold War international tensions and rivalries decreased for a while, armed conflicts and wars are “once again looking like an inescapable part of our future – though in changing forms that are confounding historians, military theorists and philosophers alike” (Mazower 2017), and in their wake, so are peace movements. “The recurrence of war is explained by the structure of the international system...War is normal” (Waltz 1989, 44).

In relations between different entities of a society, in relations between states, as well as in the entire international system, there is always cooperation and competition (indicating peace); sometimes tension, rivalry and conflicts (challenging peace); and every now and then armed conflicts and wars (breaking peace). If you consider international politics to be a spectrum, ‘peace’ would be on one end and ‘war’ on the other.

Competition, rivalry and conflict are interpreted as *opposition*, “contrasted with *cooperation*, the process by which social entities function in the service of one another”. While a society “can exist without violence and war... [but] cannot exist without competition and conflict”, it is questioned if conflict is naturally included alongside cooperation, and if it can ever be avoided as a disruptive manifestation of opposition. (Wright 1951, 321-323)

Yet it is worth asking if war is normal, or is this blunt explanation only determinism based on a structural, neorealist theory? As a matter of fact, isn’t peace more normal, or is that idealistic and wishful thinking?

The Arctic Yearbook 2025, with the theme “War and Peace in the Arctic”, seeks to provide a collection of articles reflecting on this question, coming at a time when hot conflict, in the form of reflections of the war in Ukraine, has reached the Arctic region. The volume consists of 15 scholarly articles, 10 briefing notes and commentaries, and 6 emerging voices (as a new section), of timely and thoughtful analyses of Arctic military, security and diplomacy, as well as war and peace.

On war and peace

Discussions, discourses, debates on war and peace, as well as argumentation on behalf of war and peace, have been going on forever (see e.g. Akintug in this volume). Peace, even everlasting peace, is often stated by nations and leaders as an ultimate aim or objective to reach. Though still debated, modern anthropological research like for example, Douglas Fry criticizes the assumption that war is in our genes, and hence unavoidable based on human nature. Further, there are archaeological findings that warfare intensified when human beings transferred from hunting & gathering into agriculture (Virtanen 2007), based on anthropological studies on peaceful societies among Indigenous peoples from tropical rain forests to the Arctic tundra, such as the ‘Copper Eskimo’ in Northern Canada (Fabbro 1978); the implication is that war is not inherent, and it would be possible to prevent.

Sensible reasons and excuses for and against war, as well as various forms of knowledge about war, are constantly found. One of the most influential arguments is that “war as an instrument of national policy... is the continuation of politics by other means” by Carl von Clausewitz (Falk and Kim 1980, 7). Interestingly or strangely, in global politics of the 2020s, with the changing character of warfare and advanced studies on structural violence, the main idea of this early-1800s Prussian soldier and thinker - “that war is a form of social and political behavior” - is still vivid and quoted (e.g. Lamy et al. 2023, 256-258), and not widely debated.

Similarly accepted is the assumption that “The origins of hot war lie in cold wars, and the origins of cold wars are found in the anarchic ordering of the international arena... States continue to coexist in an anarchic order.” (Waltz 1989, 44, 48). By contrast, new realism argues that anarchy in the international system is much based on states, which also “recognize that the best path to peace is to accumulate more power than anyone else can make of it”, even if global hegemony is not possible (Lamy et al. 2023, 96-97). Indeed, “The chances of peace rise if states can achieve their most important ends without actively using force. War becomes less likely as the costs of war rise in relation to the possible gains.” (Waltz 1989, 48)

The roads to war are various, sometimes simple and sometimes complicated and complex, though seldom logical and never determinate. Furthermore, we seem to be experiencing less prevention of wars. An explanation for this trend is that war is a means to achieve power, emphasizing national interests. There are also other causes of war / armed conflicts, and behind them geographical and demographic factors followed by a claim of territory, for example to secure national security; economic factors followed by exploration of (natural) resources; political ones including a fight over values and ideologies; and the tendency of finding victims and / or those who are stated / manipulated to be guilty for something which is interpreted to be bad, even evil, for the society, as their religion, ideology, race or color is different.

Finally, there is misperception with many effects as a cause or road to war, including “inaccurate inferences, miscalculations of consequences, and misjudgments about how others will react to one’s policies” (Jervis 1989, 101), as well as mis- / disinformation spread and accelerated by the established and social media. Consequently, the binary nexus of war and peace deals with threat and enemy pictures – a psychological and sociological phenomenon – often based on misperceptions, and accelerated by religion, ideology or (established and social) media. These inferences could easily become interpreted as threats, i.e. requiring responses, and then real enemies, i.e. to defend from and fight against (e.g. Harle 1991).

There is always an alternative to war, starting with its absence. ‘Negative Peace’ provides the mainstream definition, focused on the absence of war but still structured in a society around military establishments and deterrence activities. ‘Positive Peace’, on the other hand, is centered around non-violent structures (in a society) and structured cooperation and confidence-building activities between nations as a precondition for peace.

Hence, it would be better to fulfill the comprehensive criteria of a ‘peaceful society’: “no wars fought on its territory... not involved in any [ones]... no international collective violence... or interpersonal physical [and] structural violence... [with] the capacity to undergo change peacefully; and ... opportunity for idiosyncratic development” (Fabbro 1978).

If the above-mentioned are reasons enough for war, they might be prerequisites for peace. Models of / for peace, related with theories of international politics / relations, have been initiated, discussed and debated by thinkers and philosophers for centuries. These include Chinese Confucianism and Taoism; Socrates and Plato from the ancient Greek; European Dante and Pierre Dubois, as well as the Enlightenment philosophers Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham; Gandhi in India, as well as Johan Galtung, a peace research theorist; and Nelson Mandela, a politician and practitioner who transferred civil war into peace. Not least, peace movements have been, though less so today, vocal and active, and peace research analytical.

In spite of the thesis of everlasting peace, that of democratic peace (based on liberal states), and other theories with their ultimate aims for peace, as well as the UN Charter aiming to end all wars, warfare and wars (or major / minor armed conflicts) proceed constantly. Consequently, people and the environment are suffering due to them, although historically less so in the Arctic region.

War and peace in the Arctic

To call the Arctic a “zone of peace”, as President Gorbachev (1987) did; or to describe the region as “peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative” as the US National Strategy for the Arctic ([The White House 2022](#)) does; or being ready to reaffirm “our commitment in maintaining peace, stability and cooperation in the Arctic”, as the eight Arctic states did in Arctic Council Ministerial in 2025 (Romssa – Tromsø Statement 2025), sound appealing in the world (in disorder, and with turbulence and ecological impacts) of 2025.

Nonetheless, these slogans / statements mean ‘negative peace’, ie. an absence of hot war; they imply neither ‘positive peace’, nor would they fulfill the criteria of a ‘peaceful society’.

This is in contrast to the Inuit Circumpolar Council’s Principles and Elements for Comprehensive Arctic Policy (ICC 1992, 25) explicitly includes a more holistic approach building and emphasizing relationships between human rights, peace and development (see, UN report on Relationship

between Disarmament and Development (1982), UN report on Common Security (1983)). It played an important foundation for further Arctic policies of ICC (e.g. Heininen et al. 2020, 169-183).

The document states that “The Arctic policy should recognize that there is a profound relationship between human rights, peace, and development. None of these objectives are truly realizable in isolation from one another... In a global context, peace is much more than an absence of war. It is considered to entail a fair and democratic system of international relations, based on principles of mutual co-operation.”

The Arctic region was not among the pivots of the World War II, although hot warfare took place in a few spots in the European Arctic. In the Pacific North, fighting was focused on the southernmost islands of the Aleutian, which Japan occupied for a short time, in 1942-1943.

The Norwegian and Barents Seas, as parts of the Atlantic Ocean, were real battle fields for maritime war, in particular submarine and anti-submarine warfare. The Allies transported military assets, including equipment and ammunition, as well as other material assistance, for the Soviet Union, and German submarines hunted these civilian cargo ships like wolves. “Escorts to Murmansk”, so named after the final destination on the northernmost coast of the Kola Peninsula, became one of the metaphors of the Arctic war front.

Interestingly, due to its ice-free coast, and the railway to St. Petersburg, Murmansk faced for a while hot warfare already in World War I, when British and Finnish troops were fighting with Russian white generals against the Soviet Russia.

It was not only about naval forces and fighting at sea, since in the European Arctic there were also constant air battles and fighting on the ground between Germany and Soviet Union. This contrasts with the fighting of the Winter and Continuous Wars between Finnish and Soviet troops, which mostly took place in southern fronts, except fighting over Petsamo in the Winter War. The German bombers bombed Murmansk and its harbors, and Soviet ones Kirkenes and other locations in northernmost Norway. After occupying Denmark and Norway in spring 1940, Nazi Germany had quickly entered into the coast of Barents Sea and the Soviet border, and received (almost) total control of the Nordic part of the European Arctic, including the northernmost part (almost half) of Finland, by allying with Finland after Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Nonetheless, German troops never managed to conquer Murmansk, the Allies' aid to Soviet Union continued to run, and the front was stuck in the Western part of the Kola Peninsula. The real turn started after Finland entered into a ceasefire with the Soviet Union, in September 1944, and had to push German troops out of its territory, which meant Finland's third war within World War II. Germany paid back this revanche by destroying and burning the infrastructure of the entire Lapland, from small houses to big bridges and main roads, which pushed Lapland's residents to be evacuated to Sweden.

A minor episode of the war, though a serious act, was when Great Britain “invaded and occupied Iceland” in May 1940, which the Icelandic Prime Minister described “as a precaution against possible German action against Iceland” after the Nazi Germany had occupied Denmark. Although “an occupied country [Iceland] had no to say in presence of British troops... by inviting U.S. troops to Iceland the government of Iceland was making a sovereign decision to accept U.S. military protection” (Petursson 2020, 34).

All in all, the World War II meant severe fighting and moving fronts, in 1941-1945, between Germany and Soviet Union in the European Arctic, in real Arctic climate conditions. Important geopolitical factors started to emerge: Firstly, the experience of warfare in cold conditions, and the revolution in military technology, manifested by the explosion of the atomic bombs in Japan; and secondly, the strategic implications of the shortest distance between the (new) superpowers, the Soviet Union and the USA, being over the Arctic Ocean; and thirdly, that certain strategic minerals, at the time nickel, played a more important role in the superpowers' arms race and geopolitics in general.

More relevant in the long run is the legacy of the World War II that since then, there has neither been wars nor armed conflicts, nor disputes on sovereignty, in the entire region. That is until the Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian airport on the Kola Peninsula destroyed two strategic nuclear bombers (parked in open air due to START Treaty), an attack that could be interpreted, as many did, as a breaking of the peaceful state of Arctic security. In fact, according to the data by professionals, in particular the SIPRI Yearbook, it did not qualify as an armed conflict *per se*¹, but yet was a damaging hit against the Russian nuclear triad which could have long-term consequences militarily and potentially affect the US-Russian arms control negotiations.

Correspondingly, the legacy of the Cold War in the Arctic, partly based on the legacy of World War II, could be interpreted to include among other things: firstly, two powers of the Allies, the Soviet Union and the USA, later becoming enemies, started to deploy heavyweight military structures, in particular nuclear weapon systems, in the Arctic: nuclear submarines patrolling in Arctic waters, radar stations searching for attacks by a potential enemy, and nuclear bombers in alert to reach the targets on the other side if needed; secondly, the original nature of Arctic military was, and is still, global "nuclear deterrence" with the capability of carrying out a second strike in retaliation if attacked, as the main premise of the nuclear weapon system (Heininen 2024); thirdly, the strategic military importance of the nuclear weapon systems makes the Arctic geostrategically important for the major nuclear weapons powers, and forces them to negotiate on nuclear arms control, if not disarmament, including to agree to extend the New START after its expiration of February 2026. Ironically, all this has supported the high geopolitical stability and peace in the region - one more Arctic paradox if you wish.

Finally and interestingly, the Cold War period also showed, even manifested, small northern states' influence, punching above their weight, in the post-World War international rule-based order world system, as well as an importance of soft-power based on negotiations (though assisted by the USA and NATO membership) in the case of Iceland. Iceland unilaterally extended its Exclusive Economic Zone, EEZ to 12 nautical miles (in 1961), 50 nautical miles (in 1973), and 200 nautical miles (in 1976), although this was heavily opposed by European great powers. It took three so-called Cod Wars, in 1958-1976, between Britain and Iceland before Britain gave up and the 200 nautical miles EEZ became part of UNCLOS (e.g. Petursson 2020, 50-78).

Conclusions

Hot war and warfare in the Arctic region is a rare thing, limited even during World War II and occurring mostly in the European Arctic (northernmost part of Norway, Finnish Lapland, eastern parts of the Kola Peninsula). Interestingly, warfare in the Arctic has not occurred between two or more Arctic states, but between an Arctic state and an invader / aggressor from outside (British troops in World War I, Nazi Germany in World War II, Britain in the Cod Wars).

Most important geopolitically, and from the point of view of people(s), is the legacies of the World War II and the Cold War that since them, there has neither been wars or armed conflicts, nor conflicts over sovereignty, in the entire Arctic region. Although not much discussed today, the fact that the previous wars have fundamentally shaped Arctic geopolitics and Arctic security could be interpreted as a lesson from the past.

This mostly manifested as an absence of hot war. Ongoing Arctic cooperation, based on the Arctic diplomatic model, still lends itself to, and has built a foundation for, positive peace.

Note

1. An armed conflict is “where more than 1000 battle-related deaths have been incurred during the course of the conflict”, and war is defined to cause more than 1000 deaths during a year (Wallersteen & Axell 1994, p. 333).

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