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## **WILL THE ARCTIC BE A NEW MEDITERRANEAN? TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE POLAR GEOGRAPHIES OF POWER**

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### **CZY ARKTYKA BĘDZIE NOWYM ŚRÓDZIEMNOMORZEM? TRANSFORMACJE W POLARNYCH GEOGRAFIACH WŁADZY**

#### **Abstract**

This paper draws upon recent statements by Arctic scholars concerning the need to equip ourselves with geographically sensitive tools in order to understand the transformations underway in the northern polar space in regard to power politics. It argues that Geopolitics is heuristically capable of grasping both the roles played by the Arctic as well as the consequences of its opening and transformation. However, in order to do so Geopolitics as an heuristic approach must be refined and the spatial dynamic the Arctic responds to must be properly grasped. Inspired by the analyses claiming that the Arctic space as a whole makes up a Mediterranean Sea, this paper first proceeds to understand what, from a geopolitical point of view, a Mediterranean is; secondly, it check whether or not the spatialization processes underway and emerging in the Arctic are turning this area into a Mediterranean. It is concluded that although it is improper to claim that the Arctic as a unitary space is a Mediterranean Sea, the heuristic approach of Geopolitics can nevertheless single out and understand several spatial aspects and dynamics of undoubtedly growing importance that are played (and at play) by (and in) the Arctic space.

**Keywords:** geopolitics, geography, Arctic, mediterraneanization, accessibility.

#### **Introduction**

In an attempt to revive Geopolitical studies in the nineties, Santoro defined as “paradox of logic (or trick of reason)” the tendency amongst “politicians and political scientists” to retreat into “globalist certainties”: a tendency which had become widespread in the aftermath of the Cold War. According to the Italian professor, such a retreat – which consisted in the promotion of the ideology of the victorious power – was not able to grasp and explain the transformations that were taking place in the International Political System. On the contrary, it was doom to

“degenerate” into a “dangerous standardising paradigm” supposedly to be “extended [anywhere] without taking into account geographical specificities, historical traditions and cultural connotations, indeed ignoring their tendencies and aspirations”. Ultimately, this could not but result “in an anxiety of standardisation which hides a fear for confrontation and at the same time a blind faith in the institutional and democratic model” (Santoro, 1998, p. 11). To this paradigm it was to be preferred “Geopolitics”, which Santoro understood as a “conceptual tool that can be used for ‘mapping’ the affinities and differences in behaviour of national, sub-national, and institutional actors, as well as for identifying the systemic functioning mechanisms of their interaction” (Santoro, 1997, p. 10).

The widespread success of the liberal paradigm of international relations – as it was understood by Santoro – in the 1990s can also be traced in Arctic studies. In a recent collective study aimed at searching for a functional security paradigm, Bertelsen notes (Bertelsen, 2022) that, following the Soviet collapse, the promoters of the “traditional”, i.e. neo-realist and Kissingerian, idea of security had suddenly found themselves pushed to a corner. They were caught off guard by the dissemination of theories that on the one hand argued for the “exceptional nature of the Arctic” as a region of “a-security” (Wæver, 1998), while on the other one deepened and expanded the concept of security by adding “environmental” and “human” security to the traditional concept of state security (Heininen and Exner-Pirot, 2020). These theories were eventually called theories of the “circumpolar Arctic”, and they regarded “the North” or the “Arctic [as] a coherent” and for the first time “‘unitary’ region” (Heininen and Nicole, 2007, p. 137). These theories believed that the Global North had evolved into an area characterised by a high level of cooperation by virtue and result of the adoption by intra-regional actors of common liberal values and behaviours, eventually enshrined and consecrated by the numerous and new institutions tackling Arctic cooperation, converging in the Arctic Council, established in 1996. However, notes Bertelsen, the environment and hopes for cooperation were a consequence of the unipolar US-centric power distribution (and thus of the ideology underpinning it) in force at that historical juncture. It was not, therefore, the result of a structural revolution in the functioning of the world or Arctic system. In his words, the “liberal Circumpolar Arctic reflects [a] unipolar international system guided by a US liberal hegemon. Now the international system and order is changing, and so is the Arctic and its

order (Bertelsen, 2022, p. 470). In line with this assumption, the recent rebalancing of power due to Russia's new assertiveness and China's growth has caused the return to a "limited and traditional" understanding of security, in the Arctic as well as elsewhere.

Calls for tools capable of capturing the specific features of the Arctic have grown parallel to the recent neorealist reconquest of research spaces in the field of Arctic security. It is a need shared both by those that during the unipolar moment promoted an "expanded interpretation" of the concept of security (Heininen, 2022), as well as by those who stuck to the "narrow and traditional" interpretation of it (Burke, 2022). In this regard, Dodds and Lainteigne note the ways in which in the last years a growing number of Arctic politics scholars have employed concepts and ideas such as "geopolitics of regions", "regional security complexes", "geopolitical imaginaries", the "many forms and dimensions of Arctic geopolitics", even attempting to interpret the "regions as political actors" (Dodds, 2020; Lainteigne, 2020). The flourishing of the prefix "geo-" in Arctic studies is symptomatic of the increasing importance assigned to geography.

Nevertheless, this paper argues that a mere re-proposition of the traditional paradigms of international relations, however spiced up with a greater geographical sensitivity, cannot fully grasp the changes undergoing in the Arctic, not even in regard to security. As it has already been pointed out, "the texture of [Arctic] geopolitics is far richer – and more entangled – than such accounts allow" (Dittmer at all, p. 212). Leaving aside the "ambivalence on how 'geopolitics' is defined" (Heininen, 2018, p. 173) in academia and focusing the attention on geopolitics as a methodology, Heininen notices two main geopolitical approaches in Arctic studies: the "classical" one and the "critical" one (Heininen, 2018). The former promotes a "traditional and narrow interpretation of 'Geo' + 'Politics'" and is "critical [on] how power transformation happens", whereas the latter "goes beyond 'Realpolitik' and challenges mainstream thinking [...] and recognizes knowledge as power" (Heininen, 2018, p. 178). The second approach has challenged and problematised the classical one, but "traditional factors [...] are still present and relevant in the Arctic and Arctic geopolitics" (Heininen, 2018, p. 179). Classical geopolitics's insights cannot be completely dismissed. Therefore, a more promising path may be to use the recently

outlined “toolkit of Geopolitics” (Boria, 2022)<sup>1</sup>, i.e. to assume – precisely in line with Santoro’s insights – the Arctic spatiality, in all its forms and scales, as the core of our enquiry, and not the perspectives and interests of rational actors (e.g. the states), as it is for international relations theories. In other words, it is not only a matter of placing geography in its rightful place, in an open opposition to the now-disgraced instances announcing the “end of geography”, the “death of distance” (Cairncross, 1997) or the “flattening of the world” (Friedman, 2006). Rather, it is about employing the different heuristic approach of Geopolitics as it has recently been supplanted and proposed by Marconi (Marconi, 2022) and Boria (Boria, 2022). With this in mind, the following pages shall outline a geopolitical reading of the world-system and of the Mediterraneans and study the “change in the Arctic geographies of power” (Sellari, 2023) and their local and global repercussions through this approach.

### **Islands, mediterraneans, continents**

According to French geopolitician Chauprade, from a geopolitical point of view the world can be divided into three “macro-islands”, all of which are separated by the oceans: the Americas, the Eurasia-Africa Bloc with the appendix of Australasia included, and Antarctica (Chauprade, 2003). While the latter is at the periphery of the world, the other two are characterised by “regional articulations” linked with each other via “inland seas”. These inland seas are: the complex Gulf of Mexico-Caribbean Sea (between North and South America), the Mediterranean Sea, which includes the Black Sea and the Red Sea (it links Europe, Africa, and Asia), and the Indonesian Seas, namely the Java Sea and the Banda Sea (Zampieri, 2024).

The inland seas also articulate the macro-islands in regard to “power density”, which is distributed exclusively over the first two macro-islands. Moreover, the main centres of power are all located between the 40° and 60° north latitude (Zampieri, 2020). These are also the coordinates where the greatest amount of landmass lay – a “geographical fact” that pushes Spykman to argue that “in general [...] history is made in the temperate latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere. [...] From an economic, political, and military point of view the northern half of the world will always be more important than the southern half”

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<sup>1</sup> With “Geopolitics” with the capital “G” we mean the discipline that adopts the heuristic tools set out in Edoardo Boria (2022). With “geopolitics” with the lower-case “g” we refer to or quote the other meanings of the word.

(Spykman, 1942, p. 42). With this in mind, Zampieri concludes: "In addition to most of the landmass, the northern hemisphere of the globe also contains the most important centres of world power [...] the keys to global geopolitical power lie in North America and Eurasia" (Zampieri, 2020, p. 50).

As for the macro-island of the Americas, this great landmass is composed of the two continents of North America and South America. They both are triangular in shape, and are separated by the American Mediterranean: "The continent of North America has the form of an inverted triangle. Its coastlines flare out toward Alaska and Greenland" (Spykman, 1942, p. 43), with the result that they constitute the closest extremes to Asia and Europe, and that the axis joining them constitutes the polar limit of the North American landmass.

The articulation of Eurasia is much more complex due to its larger size and greater number of inland seas. While the macro-island of the Americas has only one Mediterranean, French geographer Lacoste identifies two Eurasian Mediterraneans: the "Euro-Arab Mediterranean" and the "Asiatic Mediterranean" (Lacoste, 2001). Italian strategist Fioravanzo adds to these two Mediterraneans – which he labels as "Latin Mediterranean" and "Australasian Mediterranean" – the "Japanese Mediterranean" (Fioravanzo, 1936). According to Lacoste's definition:

*From a geopolitical point of view, we can say that a Mediterranean is a maritime whole surrounded by a large number of states among which relations are particularly numerous and complex, since each and anyone of them is potentially in contact with all the others thanks to the sea [Lacoste, 2001, p. 20].*

The geopolitical importance of the Mediterraneans as inland seas has grown as a consequence of the opening of the Suez (1869) and Panama (1914) Canals. Indeed, by changing "the geography of a part of the sea routes" (Vallega, 1997, p. 74), these canals enhanced the "mid-oceanic" role of the Mediterranean Seas. The birth of a new route linking the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean diminished the maritime distance between Western Europe and Asia and bestowed the Mediterranean Sea with the feature of bi-oceanity, therefore creating a new "fundamental commercial artery" of the global oceanic system (Fioravanzo, 1943). Moreover, the Canal enabled Europe to "tighten [further] Europe's commercial and military grip on Asia" (Holmes, 2012). The opening of the Panama Canal entailed an even greater "geopolitical revolution" (Boria, 2022). First of all, it bestowed the United

States with the spatial feature of interconnected bi-oceanity, and created a new fundamental maritime commercial artery. Moreover, it had “the effect of rotating the entire territory of the United States on its axis” (Spykman, 1944, pp. 23-4), for the city of New York was suddenly closer to Shanghai than to the port of Liverpool, contrary to what it had ever been.

The inland seas link the macro-islands with the oceans and via them to the other macro-islands and inland seas. This is so because water is not a separating factor. Rather, water is the connective element *par excellence*: it is “the beginning of the increase of cultures, of land covered by rivers, the coasts of the seas, the inland seas up to the oceans that unite the part of the globe” (Ritter, 1822, p. 17). The world’s oceans can be seen as a single and unified “global oceanic system” (Zampieri, 2020) since they were all ruled and tied together by European (and British especially) seapower following the “Columbian space revolution” (Mackinder, 1902; Mackinder, 1996) of the fifteenth century. This spatial revolution generated the geopolitical principle of the “encirclement of Eurasia by Oceania” (Santoro, 1997, p. 132; Cipolla, 2011). This encirclement between “continental powers” and “insular powers” inspired the “geo-historical” reading of the cyclical conflict between “land-wolves” and “sea-wolves” (Mackinder, 1887), also known as the conflict between the “Land” and the “Sea” (Schmitt, 1986), the two main materialities of Geopolitics. When the twentieth century witnessed the transfer of the “global command role of the united ocean from London to Washington” (Ghisetti, 2024, p. 22), the principle of Eurasia versus Oceania was joined by the principle of “the Old World versus the New World” (Spykman, 1942; Spykman, 1944), i.e. the mutual encirclement of the two macro-island of Americas and Eurasia-Africa. The isolation of the Americas had by then come to an end as a consequence of the ideological victory of the US expansionist movement as well as the victory over space of technical progress, which had shrunk the distances between the two hemispheres (Stefanachi, 2017).

Starting from the nineteenth century, the maritime horizon of the sea routes of Oceania was flanked by a land horizon, i.e. the economic hinterlands feeding in and out the incoming and outgoing ports midway to the sea routes. This flanking is so because “rail and road transport attempted to interpenetrate functionally with land transport, and the land routes were built as an extension of the maritime ones” (Vallega, 1997, p. 186). This process resulted in a deeper penetration of the maritime system into the continental hinterlands. Parallel to this

flooding of the Earth, the decline of “the age of sail” and the beginning of the “age of the screw propeller” involved a process of territorialisation of the sea (Fioravanzo, 1979). In Fioravanzo’s words: “the maritime ‘terrain’ is no longer flat and uniform [and] therefore the maritime road system is more similar to the land one [...] today [the sea] must be thought as ‘organised’” (Fioravanzo, 1936, pp. 66-73), much like the “terrestrial terrain” is. The interpenetration between sea power and land power led to the birth of the amphibious power on the Eurasian rimland. Consequently, a power whose existence swung from a maritime and land existence, such as Bismarkian Germany, could play a balancing and bridging role between Land and Sea (Ratzel, 1900) or become the battleground between insular and continental superpowers (Spykman, 1944; Hillgruber, 1990; Hillgruber, 1991).

The hybridisation and interpenetration of Land and Sea and the advancement in technology and modern weaponry made it possible to “win the space” of “larger areas of oceanic spaces – mostly those next to the continental landmasses. [...] the Mediterranean and the Caribbean Seas [and] the South China Sea and Indonesian Seas [have] become, *de facto*, narrow seas” (Zampieri, 2024, p. 202). Fioravanzo claims that narrow seas are watery spaces where “space is particularly ‘terrestrial’: it is not an unfettered and uniform space which can be traversed in all directions, but a space in which lands and seas are variously intermingled” (Fioravanzo, 1956, p. 283). Narrow seas can be controlled from both sides of the coast, lack physical space and are next to continental masses. Therefore, they are hybrid and amphibious zones, and their control and organisation have always been a major factor in the rise of great powers.

Lacoste-Fioravanzo’s Mediterraneans are spaces that can be unified by an internal political entity, which hegemonizes its region and closes it off to external powers (Gnerre, 2020). In addition, they are a regional system in which “distant great powers can permanently project their fleet there” (Lacoste, 2001, p. 20), preventing such an organisation or opening it up. An internal political entity can unify its Mediterranean macro-region by becoming a “regional hegemon”, “a state that is so powerful that it dominates specific geographical areas” (Mearsheimer, 2008, p. 37). Due to the vastness of the Mediterraneans as well as the relevance of their geopolitical functions, a state that is a regional hegemon lay in a condition of “benign security”. It is not threatened by any other regional power and it multiplies its own power and capability to project it in other regions via sea. The very same oceans that enable a

state to project its power through its navy also acts as a “baking force” (Mearsheimer, 2008), thus preventing large regional areas or the entire world from being absorbed into a single state entity or hegemony.

Depending on the intra-regional power distribution and the presence or lack of an external actor acting as an “offshore balancer”, in a Mediterranean space there can be a condition of multipolarity or unipolarity, closure or openness (Steinberg, 2014, p. 184). Currently, the American Mediterranean is unipolar and hegemonised by the United States, which is the world’s sole regional hegemon. The Japanese Mediterranean is multipolar and may be hegemonised by China. The Latin Mediterranean is multipolar and without a would-be hegemon. The Australasian Mediterranean is multipolar and lacks a potential hegemon, partly due to the lack of a sufficient continental hinterland to accommodate a would-be hegemon.

### **Transformation and mediterraneization processes in the Arctic**

While Lacoste and Fioravanzo disagreed on whether or not the Japanese is a Mediterranean, they both identified the Arctic as the fourth or fifth world’s Mediterranean, albeit only potentially due to the impossibility of overcoming the ice wall and harsh climate and thus of winning the Arctic space. The issue is therefore the following one: will the morphological changes following the melting of the ice and/or further technological progresses enable powers to win and organise (partially or wholly) the Arctic space? Should this be the case, the Arctic would turn (partially or wholly) into a Mediterranean *de facto*: a space that can be geopolitically thought as a Mediterranean Sea.

Tamnes and Holtsmark write that “the Arctic is a latecomer in world politics” (2014, p. 14). In 1558 Niccolò Zeno’s mercatorian world map labelled it as *mare et terra incognita*. However, the Arctic latitudes were not completely isolated or impenetrable: they simply were not central in world politics and suffered the setbacks of what happened in other, more important world’s regions (Bertelsen, 2022; Tamnes and Holtsmark, 2014). While this alone is enough to disprove the idea of Arctic exceptionalism in terms of security and cooperation, it is a fact that “the power conflicts that occurred in the Arctic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were minor episodes in wars that originated elsewhere, but serve nevertheless to illustrate how regional and global developments had an impact in the Arctic” (Tamnes and Holtsmark, 2014, p. 17). Nor was the Arctic a forgotten area. As early as 1822, the British explorer and whaler Scoresby wrote: “Perhaps there is no



question connected with geographical science, which has been so long in agitation without being resolved, and so often abandoned as hopeless – as the question of existence of a navigable communication between the European and the Chinese Seas, by the North” (Scoresby, 1969, p. 18).

Nevertheless, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that it witnessed “the emergence in the Arctic of an internal regional dynamics of its own” (Tamnes and Holtsmark, 2014, p. 18). Specifically, it emerged with the advent of airpower. By verticalizing world geopolitics and adding a third domain to the Land-Sea dyad, airpower opened up the Arctic space in its viability for the first time, eventually causing a geopolitical revolution. At first, this opening prompted observers such as Stefansson to define concepts such as the “friendly Arctic Mediterranean” which would have come into being as a result of the airborne interconnection of the landmasses of Eurasia and North America. In Stefansson’s opinion, airpower could make political, economic, and demographic developments feasible in those previously inaccessible latitudes (Stefansson, 1921; Stefansson, 1944; Stefansson, 1953). The main feature of the Arctic as a Mediterranean in terms of location is the following one: it is the only Mediterranean enclosed between the two macro-islands of America and Eurasia – the only one which is not articulated within only one of them. Additionally, by being a body of water at the top of the northern hemisphere, it is in its space that the shortest aerial distances between the main world power (between 40° and 60° latitudes north) centres are to be found.

The hopes of Stefansson, the Icelandic-Canadian explorer, did not become reality for airpower failed to completely win the Arctic space. Nevertheless, as reconstructed by Vegetti, the partial accessibility of the Arctic resulted in a revolutionary rewriting of spatial and political imaginaries – especially in the United States (Vegetti, 2017; Vegetti, 2022). Renner, in 1942, for instance, wrote in his “most important text, and perhaps of the air age in general” (Vegetti, 2017, p. 57) that aviation had made the two-dimensional mentality (i.e. Land-Sea, Old World-New World) of the sea-minded men absurd. By placing the newly accessible North Pole and the “Arctic Ocean as the new World Mediterranean Sea” (Renner, 1942, p. 151; Renner, 1946), North America and North Eurasia suddenly had become part of the same macroregion. The Heartland became an American affair and America was no longer an isolated continent, what the Monroe Doctrine had successfully neutralised for more than a century. It is therefore improper to claim, like many have done, that Mackinder’s Heartland model is “anachronistic [because it]

was devised before the onset of airpower, rockets and satellites” (Sakwa, 2023, p. 271).

The same view was shared by Weigert, a Mackinder’s faithful pupil but who, contrary to his sea-minded master, posited that airpower had caused a horizontal rupture in the division of the world in two hemispheres (Weigert, 1942), which had resulted in a conceptual and practical rupture of the vertical isolation of the Western Hemisphere. Santoro reconstructs the rupture:

*This azimuthal projection centered on the North Pole upset the established Mercator projection of world geography, altering the notions of centrality and periphery according to geopolitical parameters of far-reaching potential. [...] The “northernness” of the West, and the potential “southernness” of the East, is a very recent discovery. It reveals the influence and cultural effects of the new polar routes, the new international communication network that had been growing hand in hand with the development of aeronautics [...] shifting the pivot to include North America in the landmass. With Weigert’s azimuthal projections, the American continent (and particularly North America) became a natural extension of the Eurasian landmass centered on the North Pole [Santoro, 1992, p. 150].*

The entry of the Arctic and the possibility through airpower to conquer the lands and seas of the Arctic (Santoro, 1992) moved closer the landmasses of the United States and Soviet Union, crushing, not only cartographically, the European peninsula between the landmasses of the two future superpowers. As a result, Europe stopped being the orderly spatial fulcrum of the world (Hillgruber, 1991; Santoro, 1998): the *Jus Publicum Europaeum* ended, replaced by the bipolar world order (Schmitt, 1991).

Tammes and Holtsmark write: “The Cold War brought the Arctic to a crossroads of the global confrontation [...] The main factors behind the strategic importance of the Arctic were geography and technology” (2014, p. 21). Roucek writes that during the Cold War the “Arctic Mediterranean” is a perfect example of an area where technological progress, especially in the field of aviation, caused far-reaching changes that forced “a new evaluation of locational factors in the region” (Roucek, 1983, p. 463). The most relevant “localisation factor” was that, as a result of air, missile and ballistic technology, the United States and the Soviet Union laid much closer than the popular geopolitical imagination suggested, for aerial technology had partially won the Arctic space. Such

a novelty pushed Washington and Moscow to invest an increasing amount of resources in the Arctic latitudes, bestowing the Arctic space and Arctic positions a previously unknown strategic importance.

Let us remember the lesson of Fioravanzo and Zampieri claiming that the value of positions is considerably higher in narrow seas as compared to that in open seas and that their control is key to any strategy of domination and control of Mediterranean spaces. During the Cold War “the line Aleutians-Alaska-Northern Canada-Greenland-Iceland America” – the latter would later be labelled as the GIUK-gap – “could set up a system of air bases much closer to the territory of the USSR than Russia could with respect to the territory of the United States” (Fioravanzo, 1979, p. 30). The “shorter flight times would enable the United States to conduct more intense and more effective air operations (with very-long-range aircraft and missiles) that the USSR could in turn undertake” (Fioravanzo, 1979, p. 30). As a consequence, Moscow’s “general strategic problem is similar to that which Germany faced earlier, but on a very much larger scale: to break the encirclement and attempt to seize positions closer and closer to the territory of her principal adversaries” (Fioravanzo, 1979, p. 32).

The US interest in seizing Arctic positions was first conveyed by Secretary of State Seward, who believed that Washington needed to buy Iceland and Greenland from Denmark and Alaska from Russia (Stefansson, 1944, p. 298). The US interest was not a reflection of an Arctic strategic thinking, but a desire to dominate the northern sectors of the two oceans surrounding the United States. While Seward succeeded in acquiring Alaska in 1867, the seizing of Greenland and Iceland took place only in 1941. In 1946 President Truman even proposed to officially annex Greenland to the United States. The possession of Alaska, the incorporation of Greenland into the US security system, the “‘Americanisation’ of Canada” (Santoro, 1992, pp. 138-140) – as early as 1949 it was possible to state that “Canada and the United States have become integrated” (Watson, 1953, p. 48) – transformed the United States into a complete Arctic power. It was a power controlling the entire northern shore of the American macro-island: the northern coastline of the spykmanian continental triangle of North America.

In contrast, on the other macro-island surrounding the Arctic, the second superpower, the Soviet Union, notwithstanding its longer Arctic coastline, failed to “Sovietize” all the North-Eurasian coastline. Fennoscandia remained neutral in Finland and Sweden, while Norway was even “Atlanticized”. The Soviet Union was thus an incomplete Arctic

power, with the aggravating circumstance that it was also “hemmed in”, the major strategic positions of the Arctic having fallen into the US’ or US satellites’ hands (Fioravanzo, 1979, p. 31). Nor did the albeit sizable Soviet fleet ever manage to quench Moscow’s “oceanic thirst”. Tamnes and Holtsmark write: “Western military interest in the northern region was in part dictated by the need to deny Soviet forces access to the Atlantic Ocean” (2014, p. 27). As for the Soviets, beside yearning for free access to the oceans, they regarded the sea as a buffer area to keep the enemy at a distance and their fleet as playing a supporting role to the army. Overall, during the Cold War the strategic picture of the Arctic as the “new World’s Mediterranean” reflected the distribution of world power at Yalta: an imperfect (or lame) bipolarity (Waltz, 1964; Santoro, 1988) centered on a hegemonic oceanic power, the United States, where the second superpower, of a continental type, had “a role and a voice, but not the power to do anything more than strut inside its own cage. Until, in 1989, the cage imploded” (Wallerstein, 2004, p. 38), giving way to US unipolarism in the Arctic as well as in the world.

Following the end of the imperfectly bipolar faceoff, the Arctic was therefore incorporated into a US-centered unipolar region symbolically institutionalized by the Arctic Council. Three decades later, the new Russian assertiveness and autonomy (Mearsheimer, 2014; Diesen, 2023) and China’s unwieldy entry into the Arctic (Kauppila, 2022) have rebalanced the power relations between the two shores of the Arctic, and one of the coastlines is not under US control anymore. As for the balance of power, Bertelsen argues that there are two possible scenarios for the future. The first one is that the US succeeds in untangling Russia from China, hence reaffirming a situation of unipolarity or at least of US-centered multilateralism. The second scenario is that a Sino-US bipolarism, perhaps imperfect, emerges in the Arctic. In both scenarios, “the Arctic will be very different from the circumpolar Arctic of the Arctic Council we have become used to since the 1990s” (Bertelsen, 2022, p. 478). Both scenarios are unwanted by Russia, which “would prefer a multipolar world order and in the Arctic. Russia does not want to be a natural resource-province of China, to be the ‘Canada’ of China” (Bertelsen, 2022, p. 477). It does not want to be “Sinicized”, much like Canada was “Americanised”. Moscow has therefore taken a strong stance to draw in European capitals and to promote a multipolar European-Russian-Chinese energy and infrastructural system in the Arctic (Salygin, 2022). For Russia the development of its Arctic territories and the exploitation of Arctic natural resources is a “matter of

economic survival” (Kobzeva and Bertelsen, 2021), but the worsening conflict with the West and the US’s pressure on European countries to abandon the partnership is leaving Moscow with no financing option other than China. Moscow’s decision, following the 2022 escalation in Ukraine, to set up with China a joint working body for the Northern Sea Route “represents a [first] significant change for Russia, which traditionally defines control of the NSR as its national prerogative” (Lamazhapov, p. 3), showing Russian growing dependency on Beijing. In a long-term perspective, the gradual rapprochement and incorporation of Russia and China may forecast “a complex infrastructural system capable of turning the Arctic into the link connecting the East-Asian Rimland and the Russian Heartland, a ‘circumeurasian weld’ that envelops the World-Island” (Sellari, 2023, p. 87). The possible result of such an infrastructural system may be that, updating Mackinder’s formula, “whoever dominates the Arctic will dominate the world” (Barcelata Luna, 2022).

The presence of many major powers on the Eurasian macro-island implies its greater instability and unpredictability as compared to the American one. Russia and China share an interest in de-Atlanticizing the westernmost major peninsula of the Eurasian macro-island, which is Europe, and place it within a new Eurasian constellation (Diesen, 2023). Similarly, the US is exerting a growing pressure on European countries in an attempt to protect its unipolarity and leadership in the world as well as in the Arctic (Diesen, 2024). Europe, in turn, extends in the Arctic through the peninsula of Fennoscandia. Due to its higher population and infrastructural density, as well as due to its milder climate as compared to the other subregions of the Arctic and high value of its positions, together with its internal political division and lack of an EU’s coherent (Arctic) grand strategy, the amphibious zone of the European Arctic is the Arctic subregion where the outbreak of an armed conflict is most likely. Contested between the US and the new Eurasian power constellation, the countries situated on the European peninsula and on its Fennoscandian appendage may soon find themselves crushed between the two landmasses of North America and North Eurasia, similarly to what happened on the onset of the Yalta world. With this in mind, Cuniberto posits that such would be the result should today’s Germanised European Union prove unable to play an intermediate amphibious role between a declining America and a rising China (Cuniberto, 2019).

In any case, the ongoing changes in the Arctic's power geographies go deeper than the mere "spilling over" of the South towards the North, though not limited to China alone, given that "one cannot [any longer] be a global power if one shares no interests in the Arctic" (Sellari, 2023, p. 71) and that "The tension in the north is primarily attributed to spillover from global power struggles and events taking place outside the Arctic, yet still influencing the regional dynamics" (Winther and Østhagen, 2024, p. 1). As it has been repeatedly stressed, due to climate alteration "the Arctic region is going through unprecedented changes in its physical, social, geo-economic and geopolitical realities" (Klimentko, 2019, p. 1). Hence, "Fundamental to understanding the geopolitical and economic issues in the Arctic is the phenomenon of climate change" (Brimmer, 2023, p. 4). Limiting our analysis to the melting of the ice, the consequence of this morphological change is that Arctic accessibility is no longer limited to airpower, "possibly opening opportunities for navigation", "chang[ing] access to the oceans" (Brimmer, 2023, p. 4) and creating new routes.

The new Arctic accessibility and the spilling over of the South have triggered a Land-Sea hybridization process on the Arctic rimland. Therefore, climate change may be turning the Arctic into a Mediterranean in the making. In favor of this thesis, one can underline the clear growing strategic importance of the Arctic positions, as it is underscored by the renewed militarization and infrastructuring of the Arctic, as well as by the attempt to nationalize the continental shelves in view of the future exploitation of natural resources. The remilitarization of Iceland, the Atlanticization of Sweden and Finland, President Trump's 2019 proposal to buy Greenland all illustrate a renewed US interest in the Arctic positions (Burke, 2022). The Arctic is America's fourth coast and, as Bouffard underlines, "For the United States, the Arctic's importance in terms of security and geopolitical affairs has been on the rise" (Bouffard, 2024, p. 5). This interest retraces US seapower view for which "freedom of navigation and overflight in the Arctic is essential" (as much as in the other narrow and Mediterranean seas) to survive "as global power" (Offerdal, 2014, p. 81). On the contrary, Russia's interest is, once more, that of taking advantage of the sea as a buffer zone and seeking the long-desidered free access to the oceanic system.

Moreover, the potentially revolutionary geopolitical consequences of the mid-oceanic function played by an Arctic Mediterranean would go far beyond the reduction of shipping times. The navigation around the two macro-islands of the Americas and Eurasia-

Africa would become insular and no longer be peninsular. The disappearance of the ice wall between the two continental masses could even render Chauprade's geopolitical division of the world into three macro-islands outdated. Two of the three macro-islands – the only two that have any real geopolitical significance – would no longer be separated by the oceanic system, but gathered closer and articulated through the Arctic Mediterranean.

Regardless, the possible transformation of the Arctic into a Mediterranean *de facto* is proceeding at a slow pace. Hence, the numerous alarmisms claiming an impending "Arctic scramble" must be tempered. As noted by Brandt: "In the history of mankind the Arctic became one of the great theatres of disillusionment and tragedy, of heroic effort extending to no end" (Brandt, 2005, p. XVI). Similarly, Heininen points out that the (contentious) discourse of the impending "race of resources" in the Arctic competes with the one concerning the "Arctic as a zone of [exceptional] peace" (Heininen, 2018, p. 173). The still-present impediments in winning the Arctic space are insurmountable as of now. Nevertheless, it is clear that we are already moving from a purely strategic use of Arctic space – as it was true, following its first "opening up", for the Cold War period – to an attempt to control, organize and hybridize it, which is something that falls not into the realm of (geo-)strategy, but of Geopolitics.

Whatever the case may be, the full development of the Arctic into a Mediterranean requires transformations that go far beyond spatial accessibility. The Arctic lacks the density of population, of cities, of local consumer economies, of meaningful intra-regional maritime transits. Nor does it appear that the Arctic space can accommodate such transformations, perhaps not even in the long run. In his study on Arctic urbanization, Greaves concludes that there are several "reasons to question the vision of an increasingly urbanized Arctic as a model for the region's future" (Greaves, 2020, p. 74). This questioning is so because the warming of the Arctic not only does not make urbanization easier, but it also "challenges the integrity and viability of [the already existing] Arctic cities" (Greaves, 2020, p. 61). The blossoming of many cities and, therefore, of a strong economy of local production and consumption is a mandatory step for the development of an intra-Arctic coastal economy capable of fostering Land-Sea hybridization and the affirmation of the Arctic as a Mediterranean space. Additionally, the development of a terrestrial and continental horizon alongside the maritime one – hence, a

maritime horizon that is not limited to the mid-oceanic function of sea transit – appears highly doubtful, at least in the short to medium term.

## **Conclusion**

This paper suggests that the Arctic is a space with complex and peculiar characteristics, but to which it is improper – as many did during the Nineties – to assign the feature of “exceptionalism” where rules and laws that do not apply to other spatial and regional contexts are at work. On the contrary, the Arctic is a space that is fully embedded in the world-system, had been partially inaccessible but never really forgotten, and whose progressive opening up and transformation in its geographies of power shall have revolutionary repercussions on the world’s geographies and distribution of power. This is true both in terms of spatial imaginaries as well as actual distribution, manifestation and articulation of power. In order to understand these transformations, future studies of the Arctic as a space within power politics need to take into account the Arctic’s collocation within the world-system. From a Geopolitical perspective, the world-system is articulated and composed of spaces that are unitary and endowed with a regionalized geopolitical dynamics – islands, mediterraneans, continents – which influence and inform its overall functioning. Placing the Arctic in the world-system and understanding the type of spatial dynamic it responds to or will respond to through Geopolitics can be useful in building a “regionalized” comprehensive framework capable of grasping the transformations underway. This paper has placed the Arctic within the world-system but shown that at present it is improper to endow the Arctic with the characteristic of spatial unity, i.e. to read it as a unitary area, at least not in the sense of Mediterraneity. Such reading may be problematic even in the long run, for the very morphological transformations that are making it possible to conquer and organize the Arctic space, such as the melting of the ice cap, have puzzling consequences for other steps that are fundamental to the Arctic to turn into a world’s Mediterranean, such as urbanization.

While it is improper to label the Arctic space as a unitary Mediterranean area, Geopolitics has enabled us also to take some first steps to identify and single out some of the constants and ways of manifestation and articulation of intra- and inter-Arctic power relations. In order to build a comprehensive localized framework of the Arctic space, future studies that intend to employ Geopolitics to “map” the dynamics and manifestation of power within it need to examine in depth



the aspects that have been identified and singled out in this paper. Identification and singling out is true for airpower, the value of Arctic positions, the partial hybridization of Land-Sea, the balance of power between the northern shores of the two macro-islands and their insular or peninsular navigability, the nordicization of geopolitical imaginaries, the spilling over of the South towards the North, and the mid-oceanic role of those waters. These future studies are necessary to understand the function, role and importance in power politics and power balance that the Arctic has played, still plays and will play in the architecture and spatialization of world power.

In conclusion, Geopolitics provides a sound heuristic method to understand and grasp the functioning and transformations happening in the Arctic space as well as their repercussions on the world-system. It can make up for the current difficulties faced in academia concerning the lack of geographic-sensitive tools in international relations theories. Regardless of whether we confer on them a higher geographical sensitivity, these theories appear to be unequipped to fully grasp the transformations taking place in the Arctic, their potentially revolutionary consequences or, to “map” intra- and inter-Arctic spatial dynamics.

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### **Streszczenie**

Niniejszy artykuł opiera się na niedawnych wypowiedziach badaczy Arktyki dotyczących potrzeby wyposażenia się we wrażliwe geograficznie narzędzia służące zrozumieniu przemian zachodzących w północnych obszarach polarnych w odniesieniu do polityki władzy. Argumentuje, że geopolityka jest heurystycznie zdolna do uchwycenia zarówno ról odgrywanych przez Arktykę, jak i konsekwencji jej otwarcia i transformacji. Jednak aby to zrobić, geopolityka jako podejście heurystyczne musi zostać udoskonalona, a dynamika przestrzenna współczesnej Arktyki musi zostać odpowiednio uchwycona. Pod wpływem twierdzeń, że przestrzeń Arktyki jako całość tworzy Morze Śródziemne, niniejszy artykuł najpierw stara się zrozumieć, czym z geopolitycznego punktu widzenia jest Morze Śródziemne, a następnie sprawdza, czy procesy zachodzące w Arktyce przekształcają ten obszar w nowe Śródziemnomorze. Stwierdzono, że chociaż niewłaściwe jest twierdzenie, że Arktyka jako jednolita przestrzeń stanowi nowe Morze Śródziemne, heurystyczne podejście geopolityki może jednak wyodrębnić i zrozumieć zjawiska i procesy przestrzenne i dynamikę o niewątpliwie rosnącym znaczeniu, które są realizowane w arktycznej przestrzeni i które ona sama realizuje.

**Słowa kluczowe:** geopolityka, geografia, Arktyka, śródziemnomorskość, dostępność.