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PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

Report of the Special Representative on the Arctic and High North

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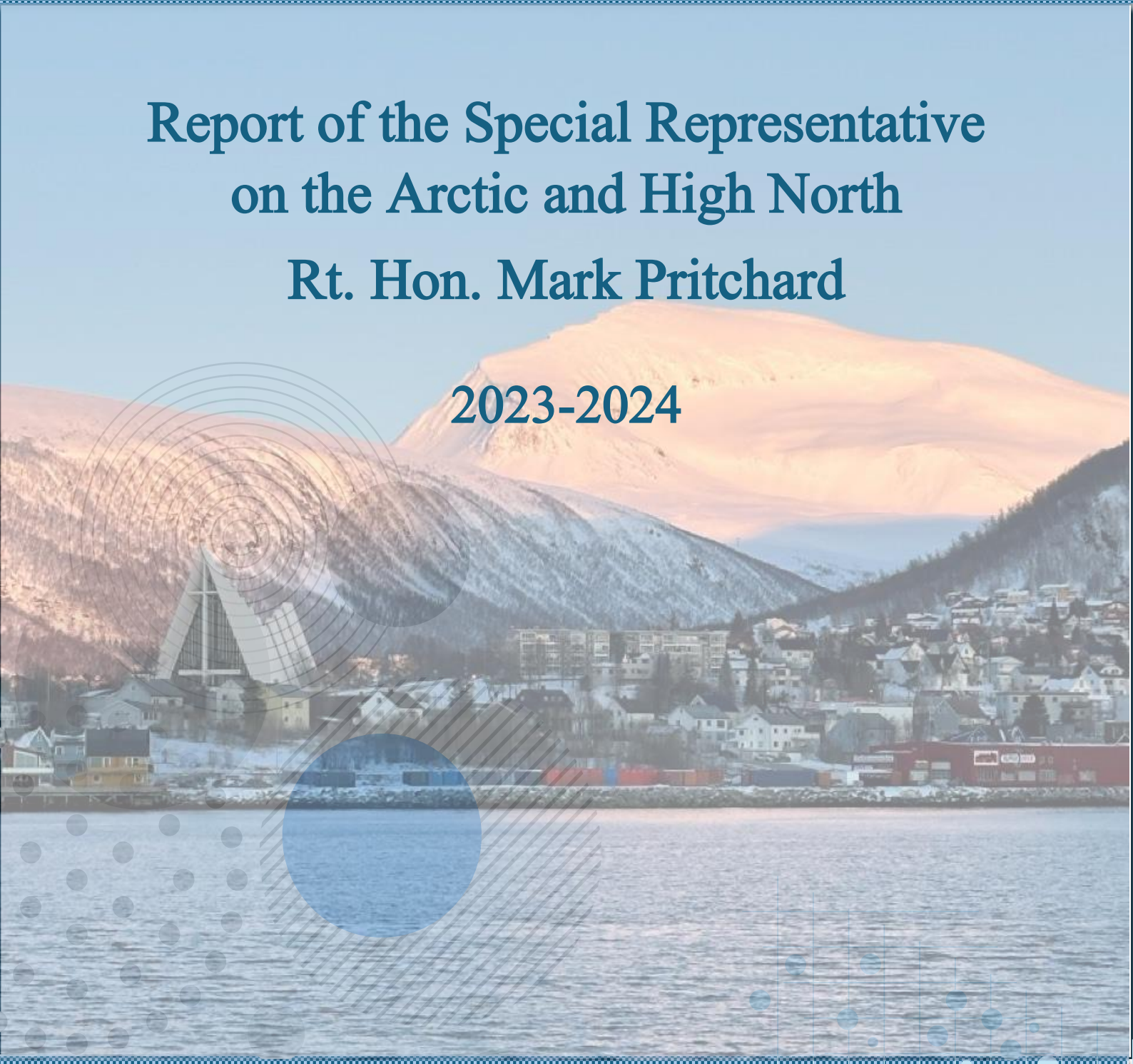


Key recommendations for policy makers:

- **Prioritize strategic planning to address climate change impacts on Arctic security, critical infrastructure, and military operations to enhance resilience and coordination.**

- **Establish collaborative frameworks that balance resource exploitation with environmental protection and geopolitical stability to mitigate emerging security risks.**

- **Address the issue of the outbreaks of invasive insect defoliators in the Arctic and underregulated black carbon emissions to reduce their severe environmental and health impacts in the Arctic.**

- **Ensure inclusive and equitable climate policies that integrate indigenous knowledge, respect indigenous rights, and promote resilience, fostering effective adaptation strategies while safeguarding heritage and well-being amidst Arctic change.**

- **Encourage dialogue among Arctic nations to promote the exchange of insights gained through shared experiences.**

- **Conduct comprehensive research into Arctic search and rescue, emergency preparedness, critical infrastructure, and transatlantic approaches, while assessing collective threats and key environmental issues such as Arctic Ocean dynamics, acidification, glacier melting, and integrating food and cybersecurity efforts, social development, and environmental disaster mitigation, is essential to address the region's complex and varied priorities.**

- **Encourage the OSCE to include Arctic matters at the Permanent Council or Economic and Environmental Forum discussions, reinforcing the organization's role in addressing contemporary security concerns while promoting scientific and environmental partnerships.**

Introduction

There is more that unites us than divides us. This sentiment resonates in the realm of climate science and the urgent need for collective action to address the impacts of climate change. These impacts, which respect neither borders, languages, nor ethnicities, require a unified global response to mitigate the damage being inflicted on our fragile planet. As scientists continue to warn us, the future of our world hinges on how effectively we confront climate change today.

The Arctic is not an exception. Among the most visible and alarming manifestations of climate change is the transformation of the Arctic. The region is undergoing profound transformations, driven by climate change and heightened human activities. These changes present both significant challenges and opportunities. Understanding the complexities of these transformations is critical for developing strategies that balance economic development with the protection of the Arctic environment and well-being of its inhabitants.

Once a stable, peaceful, and remote region, the Arctic is slowly becoming a focal point of geopolitical tensions and environmental upheaval due to rapid warming. Human-induced climate change has led to the melting of ice, shifts in ecosystems, and the opening of new economic frontiers, thereby rendering the Arctic a contested space. Despite the growing unpredictability of global politics, there is reason for hope if constructive dialogue is maintained.

This report draws from discussions during high-level visits to Arctic states and international conferences focusing on Arctic issues. It encapsulates the perspectives and insights of decision-makers, experts, civil society representatives, indigenous communities, and scientists who are engaged with the Arctic region. The report examines the current state of the Arctic, addressing key areas including geopolitical dynamics, environmental concerns, economic opportunities, and scientific findings. It offers an analysis that highlights the urgency of the issues and the necessity for coordinated action. It seeks to inform policymakers, including the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, stakeholders, and the global community about the critical developments in the Arctic and to foster a collaborative approach to navigating the region's future.

Climate change concerns

The Arctic is warming about three to four times faster than the global average, which on the one hand results in dramatic consequences and on the other hand presents new economic opportunities. 2020 marked the Arctic's second warmest year on record, projecting a dramatic climate outlook: under an intermediate emission scenario (RCP 4.5), regions like Low-arctic Finnmark[1] could warm up to 4-7°C by 2100. Additionally, scientists have raised the alarm that by 2100, ice-free conditions may occur from May to January under a high-emission scenario and from August to October under a low-emission scenario.[2] The influx of Atlantic water is driving the melting of sea ice, glaciers, and the warming of the Arctic Basin, rendering sea ice more dynamic and contributing to extreme precipitation events on islands like Svalbard. Consequently, the cumulative impact of multiple stressors is exacerbating ecosystem vulnerability.

Climate change is precipitating significant shifts in northern water ecosystems, forcing species, including commercially significant ones like cod and mackerel, to relocate and alter migratory patterns. Such changes could potentially complicate fisheries management and have security implications for states.

As different studies demonstrate[3], climate change is causing outbreaks of invasive insect defoliators in the Arctic, leading to significant ecological and socioeconomic impacts. These outbreaks result in the death of woody plants, the loss of biodiversity, and the reduction of ecosystem services. Moreover, they contribute to the release of stored carbon, further exacerbating climate change. Additionally, the changing climate complicates the traditional practices of reindeer herders, as finding food becomes increasingly difficult under ice cover compared to snow.

Climate change itself has not directly caused any conflicts in the Arctic nor is it the primary catalyst for emerging geopolitical tensions in the region and beyond. However, it remains a paramount issue in public discussions, serving as a harbinger of global climate trends. The changing Arctic landscape, facilitated by climate change, is granting easier access to both

[1] A county in the northern part of Norway.
[2] Jahn, A., Holland, M.M. & Kay, J.E. Projections of an ice-free Arctic Ocean. Nat Rev Earth Environ 5, 164–176 (2024).
[3] Arctic biodiversity assessment: report for policy makers

Arctic and non-Arctic actors, fostering activities such as navigation, resource extraction, fisheries, and ecotourism, albeit with the looming risk of hybrid threats. Alarming reductions in sea ice and permafrost thawing, coupled with extreme weather events, are directly impacting critical infrastructure and military operations.

The diminishing sea ice poses challenges for military operations, complicating navigation and intensifying the need for stronger situational awareness, governance, coordination, and policy adaptations. As a 'threat multiplier,' climate change renders military operations in the Arctic even more arduous, potentially necessitating heightened readiness to counter external tensions and potential conflicts spilling into the region. **Therefore, there is an imperative for enhanced awareness and comprehension of climate change's impact on security, critical infrastructure, military operations, and associated challenges in the Arctic.**

The Geopolitics of a changing Arctic

The Arctic region has become a focal point of growing geopolitical and research interest. This evolving landscape is characterized by '*internationalization of the Arctic*', reflected in the increasing number of applications to the Arctic Council from both state and non-state entities.

The war in Ukraine waged by the Russian Federation severely affected Arctic cooperation, leading to a significant reduction or suspension of activities with Russia in regional forums like the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Atlantic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and the Northern Dimension.[4] This curtailment of scientific collaboration, which has long been a distinctive feature of Arctic cooperation, is especially concerning given the urgent need for collective action to address unprecedented climate change in the Arctic.[5] According to the European Parliamentary Research Service, rivalries and tensions, even if managed before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, never disappeared completely and have become more prominent over the last 10 to 15 years.[6] The impact of the war in Ukraine and polarization impacts the Arctic and its indigenous communities.

[4] European Parliamentary Research Service, Russia's war on Ukraine: Implications for the Arctic
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO in April 2023 and March 2024 respectively marks a significant enhancement of security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, with profound implications for the Arctic and High North. Their membership became a turning point in deterrence in the North.[7] It results in seven out of eight members in the Arctic Council being NATO members. Their NATO membership extends the alliance's strategic reach, linking the Baltic Sea region directly with the Arctic, thus reinforcing the interconnected nature of these maritime domains.[8] Furthermore, the surge in military activities, including maneuvers and intelligence operations, adds another layer of complexity to the security landscape. There is also a risk of misjudgment leading to unintended escalations, highlighting **the need for careful navigation of geopolitical tensions in these areas**.

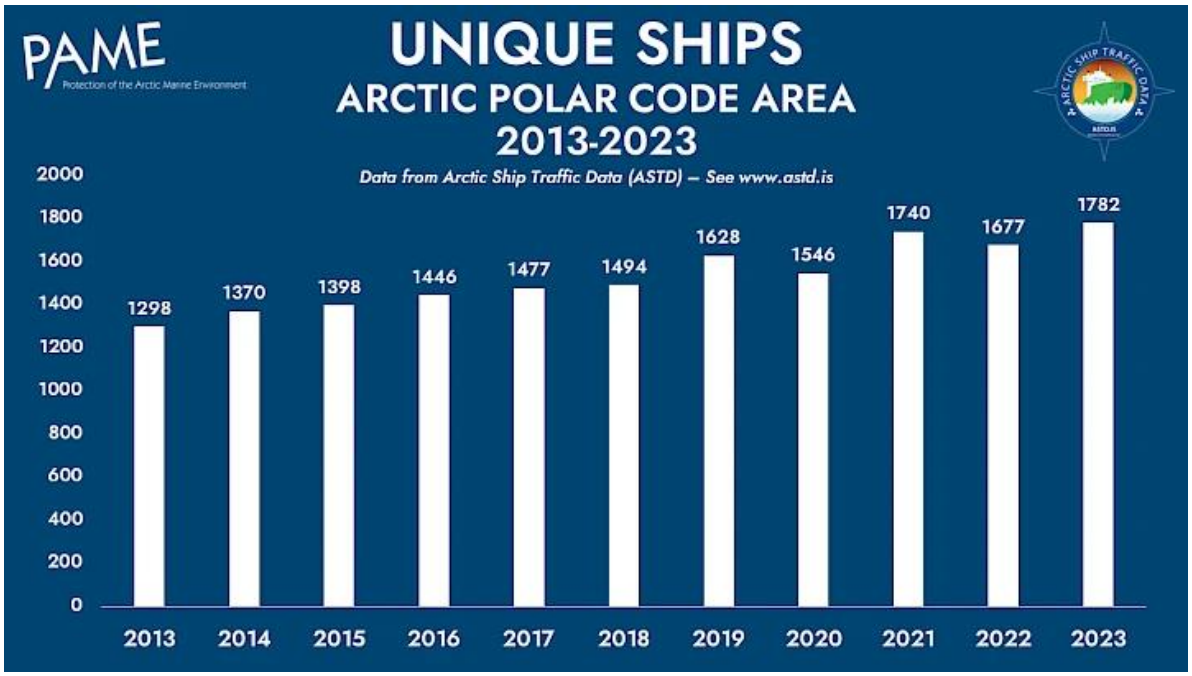
As the Arctic becomes increasingly accessible, new shipping routes emerge, reducing transit times and costs, but also raising the risk of maritime conflicts and accidents. The region's vast untapped resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, are becoming more exploitable, intensifying competition among Arctic and non-Arctic nations for control and access. This competition can escalate geopolitical tensions, particularly involving major powers like the United States, Russia, and China. Additionally, the environmental impact of increased activity threatens fragile ecosystems and indigenous communities, necessitating robust international governance and environmental regulations. **To mitigate these risks, there is a pressing need for collaborative frameworks that balance resource exploitation with environmental protection and geopolitical stability.**

Shipping in the Arctic

The Arctic area is of interest for maritime traffic. According to the Norwegian Coast Guard statistics, since 2008, the number of cruise ships, cargo ships, tankers, and tugs have doubled in the region. Moreover, the challenges of navigation in the Arctic have sparked ongoing discussions regarding rescue operations for cruise ships venturing farther north. Despite concerns, there was so far no situation where such intervention was required. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response Working Group of the Arctic Council continue addressing these concerns.

[7] NATO Is Unprepared for Russia's Arctic Threats, 1 April 2024
[8] As a New Arctic Ally, Finland Contributes to Arctic Security and Defence, 1 March 2024

The escalating levels of shipping activity in certain maritime regions pose significant security challenges. The Arctic Council Working Group on the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) estimates that there will be a 37 percent increase in ships in the Arctic within 10 years period.[9] As seen in the PAME chart below, the number of ships entering the Arctic Ocean area increased by 500 from 2013 up until 2023.



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With increased traffic, there is a heightened risk of accidents, particularly in areas where submerged infrastructure such as pipelines and cables may be present. Addressing these concerns requires more than just adherence to regulations outlined in UNCLOS Articles 113-114, including rules governing responsibility for breaching international agreements. A critical question arises regarding the effective enforcement of these obligations.

Moreover, black carbon emissions from shipping pose a serious threat to the Arctic due to their potent warming effect, as they accelerate ice and snow melt by absorbing sunlight, reducing the region's albedo, and amplifying regional warming. This process exacerbates climate change and leads to habitat loss and rising sea levels. Although Arctic States produce only ten percent of global black carbon emissions, they account for 30 percent of the warming effects in the Arctic as local emissions have a disproportionately

[9] Arctic shipping update, 31 January 2024
[10] Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment chart

higher warming impact in the region.[11] Additionally, black carbon negatively impacts public health, especially in Arctic communities, contributing to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Despite these significant risks, black carbon remains underregulated, allowing shipping and industrial activities to continue emitting harmful levels. Even though the International Maritime Organization ban on the use and carriage of heavy fuel oil by Arctic shipping will come into force fully in 2029, it includes loopholes which could result that around 74% of Arctic shipping will remain unaffected by the ban.[12] **Immediate action to regulate and reduce underregulated black carbon emissions is essential to mitigate its severe environmental and health impacts in the Arctic.**

Indigenous communities

Climate change has profound effects on Arctic indigenous communities, impacting their traditional lifestyles, economies, and cultural practices in several key ways. Firstly, it disrupts subsistence practices like hunting, fishing, and foraging due to melting ice and shifting weather patterns, limiting access to traditional hunting grounds and altering species distributions. Secondly, it poses threats to cultural heritage by eroding landscapes and sacred sites integral to indigenous identity, risking the loss of traditional knowledge and practices. Thirdly, economic challenges arise as traditional livelihoods decline, forcing reliance on wage labor and exacerbating socio-economic disparities. Additionally, health and safety risks increase due to coastal erosion, permafrost thawing, and extreme weather events, leading to displacement and heightened vulnerability to natural disasters. Furthermore, indigenous voices are often marginalized in policy-making processes, hindering efforts to address their unique needs and perspectives regarding Arctic development and climate action. In response, **inclusive and equitable climate policies are urgently needed to integrate indigenous knowledge, respect their rights, and promote resilience, fostering more effective adaptation strategies and safeguarding their heritage and well-being amidst Arctic change.**

Given existing issues, the emphasis for Arctic states should be on cultivating a revitalized relationship with Indigenous Peoples, grounded in the acknowledgment of rights, respect, and partnership. **Arctic nations should**

[11] Expert Group on Black Carbon and Methane - 3rd Summary of Progress and Recommendations
[12] Op-ed: Shipping Industry Must Seize Opportunity Posed by Arctic Heavy Fuel Oil Ban

engage in a dialogue and exchange insights gained through shared experiences.

Scientific Research

The increasing significance of the Arctic is not solely attributed to climate change and its abundant resources but also stems from heightened security concerns. Evidently, security tensions are on the rise. 'Arctic exceptionalism' is becoming latent. The multifaceted transformations in the Arctic need to be studied closely. **Undertaking research into search and rescue initiatives, emergency preparedness, critical infrastructure, and a transatlantic approach to the Arctic, as well as assessing collective threats, would greatly benefit the region, considering the varied and complex priorities of each Arctic state. Additionally, there is a pressing need for research on key environmental issues such as Arctic Ocean dynamics, water acidification, and melting glaciers, alongside efforts to ensure food and cybersecurity, promote social development, and address environmental catastrophes.** Cooperation in preparing for natural disasters is essential for enhancing regional resilience and response capabilities.

Parliamentary debate on the Arctic

Since 2005 the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly is addressing Arctic issues in parliamentary discussions, facilitating a more integrated approach to policymaking and enhancing the organization's capacity to address contemporary security and environmental concerns. The role of the Special Representative on the Arctic and High North in the Assembly is a testament to the commitment to ensuring that the voices and concerns of all the Arctic stakeholders are heard and shared among the Assembly members.

While the parliamentary side of the OSCE is addressing the Arctic issues, the governmental side has a unique opportunity to enhance its role by integrating Arctic issues into its agenda, given the region's growing geopolitical significance and environmental challenges. The Helsinki Final Act's emphasis on scientific and environmental cooperation becomes increasingly relevant as Arctic issues demand collaborative research and knowledge exchange. The OSCE's comprehensive concept of security aligns well with the multifaceted nature of Arctic challenges. **Engaging Arctic matters within the OSCE's Permanent Council or Economic and**

Environmental Forum could foster dialogue and cooperation. Incorporating Arctic topics into OSCE discussions could thus reinforce the organization's role in addressing contemporary security concerns while promoting scientific and environmental partnerships.

Conclusion

As policymakers, we hold a crucial responsibility to enact legislation that addresses the pressing challenge of climate change. The Arctic, a region undergoing unprecedented transformations due to global warming and increasing human activities, stands as a vivid reminder of the urgency with which we must act. Our legislative frameworks must incorporate stringent measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote renewable energy, and enforce environmental protections to mitigate the impacts on this fragile ecosystem.

Moreover, there is a compelling opportunity to maintain the Arctic as a zone of zero tension, free from geopolitical conflict and environmental degradation. Achieving this vision requires our concerted efforts and unwavering political will. It involves fostering international cooperation through multilateral organizations like the Arctic Council and platforms such as the Arctic Circle Assembly to facilitate constructive dialogue among Arctic and non-Arctic nations.

We must prioritize sustainable development that respects the delicate balance of Arctic ecosystems while addressing the economic aspirations of its inhabitants and stakeholders. This includes investing in research and innovation to understand the complex interplay of climate factors and human activities, enhancing disaster preparedness, and supporting indigenous communities who are often on the frontlines of climate impacts.

Furthermore, it is essential to integrate security considerations into our Arctic policies without allowing them to overshadow environmental and developmental goals. This balanced approach can be achieved by strengthening cooperative security frameworks within the region, enhancing joint search and rescue operations, and addressing the challenges posed by emerging shipping routes and resource exploration.

Preserving the Arctic as a zero-tension zone is not merely an option but a necessity. It demands a holistic approach that combines legislative action, international cooperation, scientific research, and inclusive development

strategies. By reinvigorating our collective political will and commitment to sustainable practices, we can ensure that the Arctic remains a pristine and peaceful region, contributing positively to the global climate agenda and setting a precedent for collaborative environmental stewardship.

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