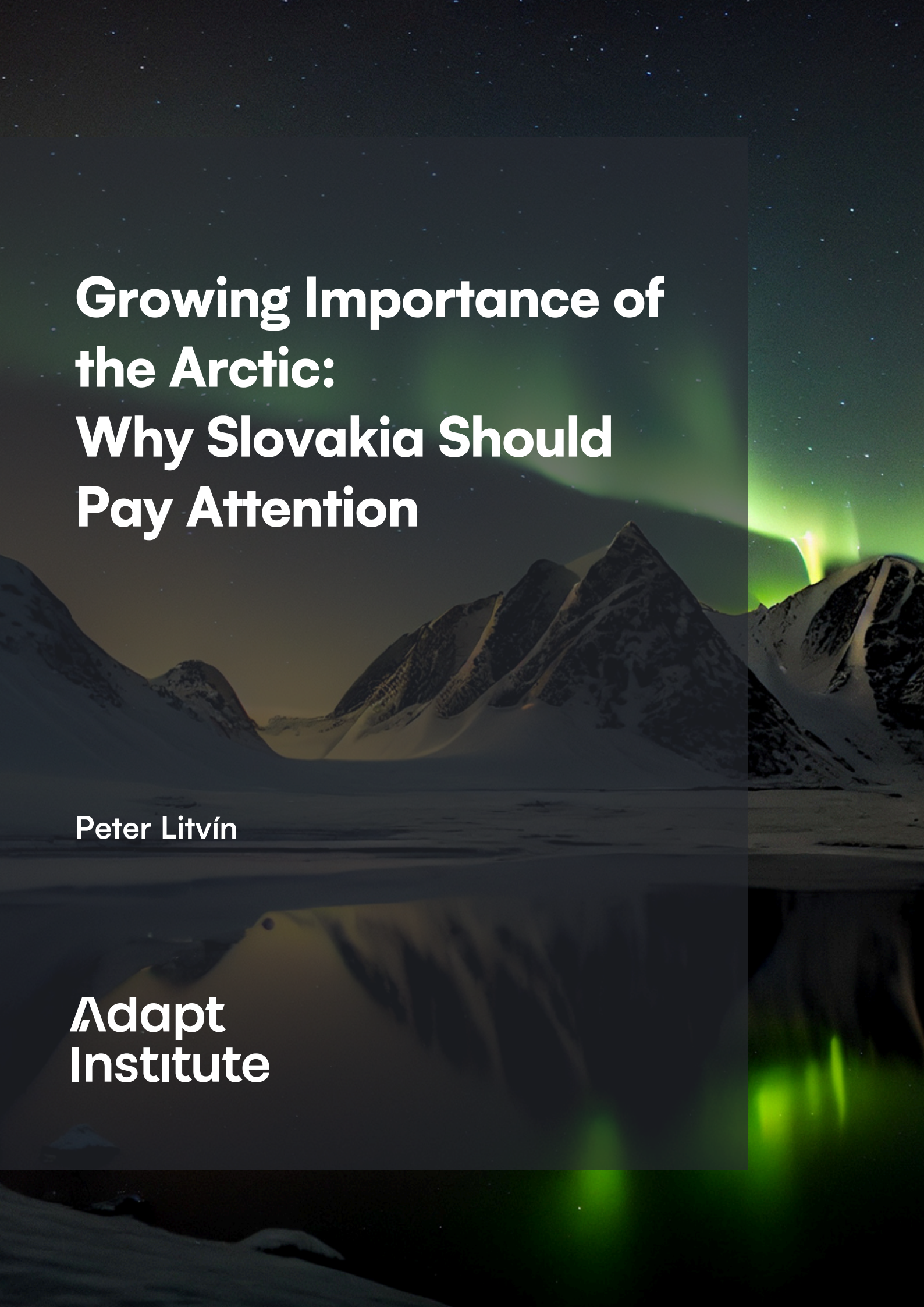

Growing Importance of the Arctic: Why Slovakia Should Pay Attention

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Rapid climate change is transforming the Arctic, bringing this once largely inaccessible and stable region to the centre of global attention. While environmental challenges call for cooperation, growing competition over resources, shipping routes, and strategic influence is driving tensions.
- Increasing cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic presents a strategic challenge for other stakeholders. Halted high-level cooperation with Russia within the Arctic Council and NATO's enlargement with Finland and Sweden following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have further aggravated regional frictions. Given Russia's view of the Arctic as crucial to its political, economic, and military interests, NATO must adapt its strategic approach in the region.
- Although Slovakia has no direct presence in the Arctic, it remains connected to the region through natural processes, economic interests, diplomatic ties, and alliance commitments.
- Slovakia should not wait until circumstances force it to focus on the Arctic. Instead, it should acknowledge the growing importance of the region and actively look for opportunities to advance its own interests. To start this process, Slovakia could:
  1. Reopen the embassies in Denmark and Oslo
  2. Build its Arctic expertise through scientific cooperation with other countries
  3. Establish a dedicated diplomatic position to represent Slovakia on Arctic affairs and gather information

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the Arctic, or the "High North," has not figured prominently in Slovak foreign policy thinking. The Arctic - often defined by the Arctic Circle at 66.3 degrees north (Armstrong & Barr, 2025) - is a remote and inhospitable region. Covering approximately 6% of the Earth's surface, it is home to only about 4 million people (Foggo & Gosnell, 2021). The governance of the Arctic has long been predominantly a matter of the "Arctic Eight" (A8) - Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. In 1996, these countries set up the Arctic Council (AC) to cooperatively address the common issues at hand, though the Ottawa Declaration specifically excluded matters of military security. Thus, since the end of the Cold War, the Arctic could have been regarded as a "low-tension area" without much need for worries. Given this context, why should Slovakia - a small, Central-European country - turn its attention to this region?

This essay will argue that although Slovakia used to have little interest in the Arctic, its stakes in the region are growing. Climate change is transforming the High North, making the notion of an inaccessible and stable region increasingly obsolete. The consequences of these changes warrant Slovak attention, as early engagement could provide economic, scientific, and diplomatic opportunities, while also potentially helping to anticipate future environmental and strategic challenges.

CONTEXT OF THE CHANGES IN THE ARCTIC

The primary driver of developments in the Arctic is climate change (Gosnell 2024, 130). Scientific data shows that Arctic temperatures are rising four times faster than the global average (Mosoni et al., 2023, p. 2). This rapid warming accelerates ice melt and creates a self-reinforcing cycle (Jenkins and Dai, 2021, pp. 1—2). The consequences of climate change are multi-layered.

Environmentally, shifting natural conditions disrupt ecosystems. This also has a human security dimension, as it poses risks to the traditional way of life for indigenous communities (Almonte 2023). Nevertheless, more extreme and unpredictable weather, thawing permafrost, and rising sea levels are threatening Arctic communities more broadly. Governments must invest heavily in securing infrastructure, managing natural disasters, and equipping security and rescue forces. Russia, for example, has struggled to deal with environmental disasters, such as droughts and wildfires, as well as damage to its energy infrastructure in its Arctic regions (Devyatkin 2022, 86-87).

A second major shift is the increasing interest of various actors in the Arctic. From a “Western” security perspective, China's increasing Arctic activities are particularly notable. Declaring itself a "near-Arctic" state, China has strengthened cooperation with Russia. Though their Arctic relationship is "complex and imperfect", it still presents a strategic challenge for other Arctic actors (Gosnell and Thomas Jr. 2024, 3). However, a growing focus on the region is also visible in a growing number of countries seeking observer status in the AC. To obtain it, applicants must secure approval from the A8 by demonstrating political commitment, financial capacity, expertise, and respect for sovereignty of the Arctic states, traditions and culture of indigenous people, and legal frameworks like the Law of the Sea (AC 2025). So far, only 13 countries have been granted observer status, but others, including e.g. Czechia, Estonia, and Ireland, have expressed interest (High North News 2021). The EU has also been a candidate since 2013 (AC 2025).

Generally, economic opportunities and, gradually, also geopolitical considerations, are key reasons for this heightened interest. One example is fishing - ocean warming is pushing fish stocks further north, making the Arctic a valuable future food source (Uryupova 2023).

Significantly, climate change is also unlocking considerable mineral reserves. The region is estimated to hold 22% of the world's undiscovered hydrocarbon resources, along with rich deposits of minerals and other natural resources crucial for the green transition, such as lithium or rare earths (Moltubak 2024).

Perhaps the most transformative economic opportunity, however, is the potential opening of new shipping routes. Currently, the shipping through the Arctic is not cost-effective due to extreme conditions requiring specialized ships, trained crews, and high insurance costs (Ng et al. 2018, 12-13). However, as ice melts, a direct Arctic passage could shorten shipping times between China and Europe by up to 40% (Ebinger and Zambetakis, 1221). Russia, in particular, has been committed to developing this route, with China also showing great interest (Mikhailova and Tabata 2024, 3).

A third major consequence of the Arctic climate change is its impact on Russia. The Arctic has long been central to Russian strategic thinking, a matter of national pride and source of economic income (Conley, Melino, and Alterman 2020). In the past, the inaccessible conditions were natural protection for Russia's High North. Now, climate change puts this in question (Paul and Swistek 2022, 25-26). The situation has been further aggravated because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Russian activities within the AC were halted, and high-level meetings were suspended. Additionally, with Finland and Sweden joining NATO, all Arctic states - except Russia - are now members of the Alliance. Finland's accession also added 1,340 km of direct NATO-Russia border, bringing the Alliance near to Russia's strategically important bases on the Kola Peninsula, as well as to Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg. Unsurprisingly, Russia has used the enlargement to accuse the Alliance of escalation (Jouan 2024).

With heightened tensions, fewer avenues for communication, and increased proximity, the stakes between Russia and other Arctic states are rising. For years, Russia has been investing heavily in its northern military infrastructure and capabilities, notably in a complex, layered area-denial coastal system (Conley, Melino, and Alternman 2020). Although the Russian military has been significantly downgraded by the war in Ukraine, its Northern Fleet has largely been spared (Hughes 2024, 1). Furthermore, while Finland and Sweden bring considerable capabilities and expertise to NATO, their accession has shifted the alliance's centre of gravity northward (Wieslander, Adamson, and Letho 2023). With allied troops now expected to deploy to the Baltic from the north in the event of conflict, the Arctic is becoming increasingly intertwined with NATO's Eastern flank (Vanhanen 2023). Consequently, a new strategic approach from NATO is required (Stoverud-Meyers 2023). This includes preparing bases, logistics, and armed forces to operate in the region's harsh conditions — not only extreme cold but also challenges such as limited navigation and communication capabilities (Gosnell & Jensen 2024).

SLOVAKIA'S STAKES IN THE ARCTIC

While some consequences of the changes in the Arctic remain specific to local actors, others extend beyond. For Slovakia, there doesn't seem to be any immediate threat to its most vital interests in the Arctic. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why Slovakia should consider engaging more actively with the region.

Firstly, the Arctic presents a scientific opportunity. Many new or specially adapted technologies are demanded there (NATO 2021, 43-44). Thus, encouraging Slovak researchers to engage in the region may help to anchor domestic experts in a prospective field. For instance, Slovak companies specialising in niche technologies, such as electronic warfare, communication, and detection systems (Ostatník 2024), may find interesting opportunities. Moreover, Arctic research has broader benefits. Natural processes in the Arctic have a direct influence on weather conditions in Europe (Mosoni et al. 2023, 13). In recent years, Slovakia has experienced extreme droughts, severe storms, floods, and rising temperatures (SHMÚ 2025). Having a better understanding of the developments in the Arctic may help Slovakia to improve preparedness for future risks at home. In this respect, Slovakia could join, for example, Germany, which lists the global impacts of climate change among the primary reasons for its Arctic engagement (German Arctic Office 2024, 11-12) and hosts, for example, the Alfred Wegener Institute, which devotes a large part of its activities to the topic of climate change (see AWI 2025).

Secondly, Slovakia should also be keenly interested in the Arctic's economic potential. Slovakia's economy is based on the export of industrial goods, with the automotive industry being particularly strong. In the future, several types of electric vehicles should be produced in Slovakia (Muzikářová & Ostatník 2024, 13). Simultaneously, Slovakia imports a significant share of raw materials and energy resources (Trading Economics 2025). The potential development of Arctic resources and the emergence of viable Arctic shipping routes could therefore have important implications for Slovakia. While Slovakia will have limited direct influence over these developments, it should not miss opportunities to voice its interests within the EU. To identify those interests, however, an understanding of Arctic affairs is needed first.

Thirdly, the Arctic is gaining diplomatic importance. Out of the A8 states, Slovakia shares NATO membership with seven and EU membership with three. The USA, considered a "strategic partner", remains central to Slovakia's foreign and security policy (MF&EA 2021, 6). Additionally, many of the Slovak closest non-Arctic partners — such as Czechia, Germany, France, Poland, the UK, for example — have formulated Arctic strategies, or at least shown sustained interest in the region. So did the EU as a whole, while NATO's representatives and strategic documents are increasingly concerned with the Arctic affairs (e.g. Bauer 2024). In short, the Arctic is becoming a key region for most of Slovakia's major international partners and alliances.

At the same time, the Arctic is a strategically important region for adversaries and strategic competitors in the form of Russia and China. Since Russia sees the Arctic as a part of a strategic whole (NATO 2021, 32), the region is becoming "an extension of NATO's Eastern flank, with the Baltic Sea acting as a connector" (Gosnell & Thomas Jr. 2024, 4). Slovakia's growing strategic stake in the High North is underscored by its long-standing contribution to NATO's multinational battlegroup in Latvia and its hosting of a multinational battlegroup since 2022. Moreover, with tensions emerging even between allies, as in the case of President Trump's insistence on acquiring control over Greenland (Hardt 2025), Slovakia would be well-advised to take a good account of the evolving diplomatic landscape in the High North.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Arctic is changing at a rapid pace, with consequences felt on multiple levels. Environmental challenges, economic opportunities, and strategic considerations are drawing increasing attention, placing the once-stable region into the international spotlight. Given Slovakia's connection to the Arctic through both natural processes and its membership in both the EU and NATO, it cannot evade the environmental, economic, and political implications of the Arctic changes.

Although Slovakia lacks the capabilities to directly influence developments in the Arctic, there are several steps it could take. To strengthen its presence, Slovakia could consider reopening its recently closed embassies in Denmark and Norway. As both these A8 states have populations similar in size to Slovakia, they could serve as valuable regional partners. Reestablishing embassies would not only be a diplomatic gesture but would also provide further entry points into the region. Additionally, Slovakia could begin developing its Arctic expertise through cooperation with other countries. Since neighbouring Czechia and Poland already have established Arctic research institutions and stations, Slovakia might explore the possibility of joining their projects in a junior role. Finally, Slovakia may consider creating a dedicated diplomatic position focused on Arctic affairs. This official would represent Slovakia internationally, gather information, and seek opportunities for Slovak actors in the region.

At present, Slovakia has an opportunity to define its interests, identify partners, and establish its positions in the Arctic without external pressure. Soon, however, doing so may become a necessity rather than a choice.

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