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Geopolitical tensions framing different industries in the European Arctic: aquaculture, forestry, mining, and tourism in question

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ABSTRACT

Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine in early 2022 has brought geopolitics, particularly classical geopolitics, back into the political and economic discussions and decision-making. Discursive, as well as real-world change, has been rapid, as the turn of the 21st century was the time of globalisation and neoliberal ideology – the free movement of people, products, and services. However, in this paper, we argue that classical geopolitics has defined the development of Northern industries even before the war began in 2022. Our interview data ($n = 60$) collected in the advent of the Russian invasion of Ukraine reveal that the themes of state power; 'hard' security meaning military armament; the economy as a field of national interests; and spill-over effects of geopolitical tensions between superpowers have framed economic fortunes in the European Arctic. It is concluded that the state actors' interests in the European Arctic's physical space and natural assets will be increasingly expanding.

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Introduction

The neoliberal idea of the global economy – free flow of people, capital, and goods – has been a dominant ideology in the Western world since the middle of the 20th century. At the heart of neoliberalism is to reduce the state's role in regulating economic activity and allow the market to operate as freely as possible (e.g. Harvey, 2005). After Russia started a full-scale offensive war in Ukraine in February 2022, this discourse, however, changed. In a very short time, the political discussion and concrete decision-making in Europe have been coloured by the dividing line between the West and the East: news from the war at the Ukrainian front; expansion of the military alliance NATO to Finland and Sweden; military defence and preparedness; border controls and fences and closing borders against Russia and its ally Belarus; and protectionism and the effort to disengage from the supply-chains from unstable or hostile countries from the point of view of the Western world. Indeed, *geo*politics in its classical meaning has returned to the political and economic front line in Europe, in decision-making and vocabulary, in media coverage and everyday discussions

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Table 1. Differences between classical and critical geopolitical approaches (modified from Heininen, 2018.).

	Classical geopolitics	Critical geopolitics
Temporal dominance	After II World War until the 1990s; potential (neo) classical paradigm from the 2020s onwards	From 1990s onwards
Main question	What happens in real-world politics?	How regions, geographical areas, and natural assets are framed in politics?
Interest	Analysis of real-world events: political decisions, relations between different actors	Analysis of discourses: rhetoric, constructive positioning of actors
Main actors	States, interstate assemblies, and organizations	A range of actors, e.g. NGOs, assemblies of interest groups, indigenous people, industries
Factors	State power/force (sovereignty, hegemony, borders, security, safety); physical space (control over people and natural resources in the territory)	Constructive power (images, language, knowledge, identity politics); the politicization of physical space (perceptions of places and their meaning)
Geopolitics	Geography, natural conditions (e.g. impacts of climate change), and location of natural resources influence politics	Natural conditions (e.g. climate change as a phenomenon), the use of natural resources, and geographical features as political discourses

especially in the Northern and Eastern parts of the European continent, in the borderlands of Russia (see Hoogensen et al., 2020).

Theoretical perspectives reflect both time and real-world situations. Classical geopolitics has been a dominant approach in international relations and political geography since World War II, during 'the Cold War', an era dominated by the confrontation between East and West (Heininen, 2018). Scholars of classical geopolitics have discussed the importance of state actors; 'hard security' referring to military actions; border control between the states; and state sovereignty over its area and natural assets (Heininen, 2014, 2018; Powell & Dodds, 2014). In the 1990s, at the end of the Cold War, the European Union enlarged with new member states, including Finland and Sweden from the European Arctic (afterwards referred to as EA), and subsequently, globalisation and neoliberalism started to become powerful ideologies (Beck, 2000; Eriksen, 2014; Harvey, 2005).

As a part of the general constructivist turn of the social sciences in the 1990s, the research on geopolitics also changed, applying the ideas of the social and contextual nature of 'knowledge', discursive research, and qualitative research methods (Dodds et al., 2022; Heininen, 2014, 2018). This approach, called critical geopolitics, challenged the premises of classical geopolitics and its knowledge interests. Without delving deep into these two theoretical considerations of geopolitics, the differences between these approaches are summarised in Table 1.

In this article, we apply the classical geopolitical approach and ask, how geopolitics has affected the development of the four major industries, i.e. aquaculture, forestry, mining, and tourism, in the EA. The trade of natural resources and tourism destinations located inside the state borders, hence being national assets, relate to one of the central dimensions of classical geopolitics and security discourses: the state actors' control over the 'expansion of land and capture of natural resources' (Mohapatra, 2017, p. 688), which we see as central when considering the classical geopolitics regarding the four major industries in this article. We argue that state actors, national jurisdictions, and state sovereignty have never been absent from the economic development of these industries. Instead, states and their decision-making have eventually framed the development of these industries in the EA.

The article is organised as follows: in the next section, we describe the research project, material, and methods, and after that, the empirical sections illustrate – industry by industry – how classical geopolitical tensions have framed the industry developments. In the Discussion section, we elaborate main themes, without forgetting the special geopolitical features of different industrial sectors. In the Conclusions, we draw out the situation at the beginning of 2024 regarding economic development and geopolitical tensions in the EA.

Research project, material, and method

This article is one of the outputs of the H2020 -project *Global Drivers, Local Consequences: Tools for Global Change Adaptation and Sustainable Development of Industrial and Cultural Arctic 'Hubs'*, which is usually referred to by the abbreviation *ArcticHubs* project. The geographical focus of the project was in the EA, which the project defines as proposed in the Arctic Human Development Report, i.e. Lapland region in Finland; Nordland, Troms, Finnmark Counties and Svalbard in Norway; Norrbotten and Västerbotten Counties in Sweden; the whole of Iceland; as well as Faroe Islands and Greenland as autonomous territories of Kingdom of Denmark (Larsen & Fondahl, 2014). Almost 30 researchers from the above-mentioned areas participated in the research task intending to find out the meanings and effects of global drivers and geopolitics on four industries, i.e. aquaculture, forestry, mining, and tourism, which has also resulted in the production of two project reports (Nygaard et al., 2022; Suopajärvi et al., 2022).

To answer our research question of how geopolitics has affected the development of the aquaculture, forestry, mining, and tourism industries in the EA, we utilised a qualitative approach. A total of 60 interviews were conducted in 2021. The interviews included (1) business developers in different industries in the EA, (2) decision-makers, such as politicians and authorities, from the above-mentioned countries or autonomous territories, and (3) representatives from international non-governmental and governmental organisations with an interest in the European northern regions (see Nygaard et al., 2022; Suopajärvi et al., 2022). In the open-ended interview questions, the interviewees were asked to look into the future and describe the trends, weak signals, and wild cards that would potentially affect these four industries in the EA. Since China's presence in the European Arctic was a special issue in the late 2010s, when the project application was written, its role was asked specifically.

The interviews were first transcribed and analysed, then summarised and translated into English. For this article, a thematic analysis, 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns [themes] within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) was applied. The analysis of the interviews began on the qualitative analysis program NVivo in which the coding and theming of the data was conducted. The data was coded according to the following keywords: 'border', 'military', 'nation', 'politics', 'safety', 'security', and 'state', which are central concepts in classical geopolitics emphasising physical space, state power and sovereignty, hegemony, and force (Heininen, 2018, p. 178). The idea of coding was being able to handle the large data corpus and further move to analysis of the data set, step by step (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After the coding process, the corresponding author and researcher conducting the analysis read through the full data set and analysed it together in two data analysis meetings, which were recorded. In these meetings, both presented their interpretations of the material and discussed them. The recorded discussions from data analysis meetings were further transcribed, a total of 43 pages in Finnish, and analysed together with the coded data. After that, the coded data were organised industry by industry and then the industry-specific themes were brought to the centre of the last part of the analysis. This theming process can be defined as organising 'a group of ideas' (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), i.e. in this context, how the classical geopolitical themes were discussed in different industries. The themes from the coding process shared some similarities but also industry-specific differences. The role of state actors became prominent in every industry. In addition, themes, such as politics, regulations, the superpowers (China, Russia, and the U.S.A.) and their influence, investments and ownership, climate change, security, international cooperation, trade wards, and the role of the EU were present. Lastly, the industry-specific subchapters were developed further on and after that, a draft of the article and industry-specific data were sent to other authors for critical evaluation, being researchers in these specific industries. After their input, the corresponding author and researcher conducting the original data review finalised the analysis by discussing the results with academic literature.

The data collection and analysis process followed the guidelines of the Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (see TENK, 2023). Interviewees were sent a letter of consent in connection with the first contact in which the purpose of the research and the use and storage of the materials were described. Further, a summary of the interview was made and sent to the interviewee. The summary was included in the data corpus only if the interviewee gave his/her consent.

Classical geopolitics of different industries

Aquaculture: trade politics and foreign investments shaping the future of the industry

Aquaculture is often considered the 'fastest expanding global production system' (Bush & Marschke, 2014). The expansion of the industry, especially the salmon aquaculture, has been rapid in the Faroe Islands, Norway, and Iceland. Together these three countries produced close to 1,8 million tonnes of salmonids in 2022, and as the production of fish is relatively large compared to the national consumption in the above-mentioned countries, most of the fish (95%) is exported abroad (Faroese Seafood, 2022; The Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries, 2023; Statistics Iceland, 2023). Norway has for the last 30 years supplied about half the volume of farmed Atlantic salmon alone (Iversen et al., 2020), resulting in producing 1,65 million tonnes in 2022 (The Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries, 2023). As the world population grows, the demand for seafood will increase too, which was pointed out by the interviewees. A Norwegian interviewee addressed this by saying that in the future 'food becomes more important than oil', which highlights the importance of aquaculture and fisheries globally. However, the industry is dependent and vulnerable to fluctuations in international geopolitics.

Geopolitical tensions between state actors have spill-over effects on aquaculture trade. A Faroese interviewee addressed that 'trade politics is more and more becoming geopolitics' and 'trade wars and embargos between big nations can affect us severely'. Another one noted that 'all kinds of tariff barriers between countries are bad'. Norway, especially, has already experienced tensions with superpowers, which has resulted in losing periodic access to important markets, such as the U.S.A., Russia, and China. At the beginning of the 2010s, Russia had become the largest single market for Norwegian seafood, but in August 2014, Russia set an import ban on Norwegian goods (Kleven, 2014). The ban was a reaction to Norway joining EU sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This ban, however, opened the Russian markets for the Faroese salmon companies. Norway has also experienced a ban from China after Liu Xiaobo received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, which effectively stopped the rapidly growing exports of Norwegian seafood to China. After the 'normalisation' of the relationship in 2017, the trade increased sharply. These examples underscore that geopolitical tensions between states have effects on the trade of seafood in the EA.

Foreign investments play a role in the aquaculture industry. An Icelandic interviewee addressed that 'where it [the investment] comes, does not really matter' because it is needed for the industry. The interviewee continued by saying that 'China is very interested in being able to invest in the aquaculture companies'. The regulations regarding investments are quite similar between the three countries. In Norway and Iceland, there are no restrictions on companies´ foreign ownership. Iceland has welcomed foreign investments, while some Faroese restrictions have been set. This has resulted in Norwegian companies owning all aquaculture in Iceland. In the Faroes, one company is locally owned, one is foreign, and the last one has a mix of local and foreign ownership although being mostly Norwegian-owned. In Norway, foreign ownership is around 30%, mostly in larger and stock-listed firms, and mostly by institutional or smaller investors.

Aquaculture, being a global industry but locally embedded, is rapidly growing into a large-scale industry. This prompts a political debate on, for instance, how to manage this rapid growth and where to find suitable conditions for growing the industry. One of the emerging questions regards the competition for sea space. Conflicts between stakeholders have risen as aquaculture companies

are competing over valuable coastal zones. The competition for coastal areas, combined with the rapid growth of the industry and ocean warming, increases the interest in offshore-based aquaculture in the Northern waters. A Faroese interviewee addressed that there are both potential and challenges regarding this type of development within the industry. Aquaculture in the offshore facilities may lead the industry out of coastal conflict zones. Similarly, this may lead to deepening conflicts among other users of marine environments, such as traditional fishing, cruise tourism, energy production, and military operations, as well as lead to increased geopolitical tensions between the eight Arctic states, if the industry moves further north, for instance, closer to Svalbard or into international waters.

Recent years have shown that the aquaculture industry is quite resilient despite external global trends and geopolitical tensions. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the industry greatly as states closed their borders and markets closed. Several interviewees addressed that as passenger flights got cancelled, the products could not be shipped to the markets. This reduction in demand lasted only for a few weeks though, allowing aquaculture companies to handle the COVID-19 crisis relatively well. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has, however, affected aquaculture in several ways. Ukraine is among the largest exporters of a range of agricultural products that serve as ingredients to salmon feed, such as wheat and vegetable oils, for which prices have increased (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022; Trading Economics, n.d.; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). As air traffic routes are now avoiding Russian territory, freight routes are now longer and more expensive to the desired markets of aquaculture.

Forestry: Finland's and Sweden's nationally important industry being pressured by the EU's environmental goals

In Finland and Sweden, forests covered around 70% of the land area in both countries in 2020, which is significantly more than in Europe in general (Ritchie, 2021). The forest industry has traditionally been an important driver for economic development in these countries. In Finland, the forest industry was the most important industry after World War II, which practically brought Finland into the ranks of welfare states over the decades. Forestry has also been important in terms of the living standards and well-being of sparsely populated areas, as logging employed a large workforce until the 1980s, before the rapid development of mechanisation. In addition, tens of thousands of Finns and Swedes are private forest owners, receiving economic returns from the forests. State-owned forest companies, Metsähallitus in Finland and Sveaskog in Sweden, are also large forest owners, especially in the northern regions. It is therefore no wonder that forests have been referred to as 'Green Gold' in both countries and that special national interests have been attached to the industry (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018; Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland, 2019).

When Finland, Sweden, and Austria joined the EU in the mid-1990s, the EU's forest area doubled (Nygaard et al., 2022). This resulted in the EU becoming a player in forest policy, which has also received criticism in the Northern member countries. EU is building its forest policy according to the goals of the Green Deal, which are to combat climate change and achieve a climate-neutral EU by 2050, and biodiversity strategy, as well as sustainability goals with the aim 'to improve the quantity and quality of EU forests and strengthen their protection, restoration and resilience' (European Commission, 2021a). Among the interviewees, although understanding the necessity of environmental protection and the need for sustainable forestry, EU policy was considered a risk to the profitable and productive use of forests. Interviewees also identified the dilemma in EU's and national forest policies, which is seen to put pressure on increasing the growth of protected forest areas. Still, at the same time, new industrial investments, such as a bioproduct mill in Kemi, Finland, are celebrated in the field, although they are accelerating the use of forest resources.

Different values related to forests and growing expectations associated with forests were identified in the interviews. On the one hand, there is a need to increase wood-based production and products for a fossil-free future in the EU. On the other hand, the need to protect biodiversity in

northern forests as well as the recreational values of forests to local peoples and tourism are noticed. This is creating tensions in forest policies and the management of this natural resource. Forest *bio*-economy discourse and associated policies on the EU level and in Finland and Sweden have strengthened the pressures for different uses of forests since the early 2000s (Fischer et al., 2020; Kröger & Raitio, 2017). Forests as ecosystem services should provide opportunities for industrial production, cultural meanings, and recreation, as well as life-sustaining functions – 'more of everything' as concluded by Kröger and Raitio (2017).

In the interviews, Russia's political unpredictability was identified as a 'wild card' already in the advent of the war in Ukraine, in 2021. The import of Russian timber has been especially important for Finland throughout history. The shortage of raw materials may prove to be critical, especially when the use of raw materials increases with the factory investments in the North. In addition to Russia's political unpredictability, also China's role was mentioned regarding the future of forestry development. China's development was seen as unpredictable, as in 2021 when the interviews were conducted, the pulp was exported to China, but it was unforeseen how much China would invest in domestic forestry and what its raw material policy around the globe would be like.

In early 2024, the forest industry is facing many challenges that are partly due to Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022. In 2021, the share of wood raw materials imported from Russia to Finland was about 10% of the domestic forest industry's raw material consumption (Lukinmaa, 2022). After the war, the imports stopped totally in 2022. Due to inflation and the fall in consumer demand, several forestry companies have reported layoffs, dismissals, and production constraints in Finland at the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024 (Malminen, 2024). The uncertainty caused by the war may partly be behind the downturn in forestry as well as in the European economy more generally.

Mining: more mining in the North due to the EU's green deal and self-sufficiency in critical raw materials

The main geopolitical theme in the mineral sector was the EU's dependency on global supply chains of critical raw materials, minerals and metals, necessary for manufacturing and technological development. EU´s aspiration to be a carbon-neutral continent in 2050 (European Commission, 2019) means the need for solar panels and windmills in the energy sector, and electrification of transport with so-called 'battery-boom', meaning a need for many rare minerals for all types of equipment. Alongside European green or sustainable transition, also digitalisation demands minerals, of which the EU itself only produces a fraction (EU critical raw materials scoreboard, CRM-lists).

In the interviews, especially dependency on China and its raw materials was seen as a risk. A vast country with rich ore deposits and the mines it owns in Africa, exemplified by the Democratic Republic of the Congo's cobalt mines, has made China a major producer of raw materials. Hence, Chinese mining investments were not as welcomed in Scandinavia as investments in forestry and tourism sectors although, in Norway, China owns two mines: one in operation and one in the planning stage. In addition, China was able to produce relatively cheaply, for example, electric cars and digital devices, making profitability for European producers difficult. A Norwegian interviewee concluded this by saying 'Minerals will be more important than oil and gas in the future. The struggle to control mineral resources will increase.'. 'Resource wars' (Humphreys, 2012), indeed, may realise in trade in many forms, such as taxes, export and import restrictions, and embargos, in a world where limited natural resources of the globe are overconsumed (see e.g. WWF, 2024).

Finland and Sweden have long had a favourable jurisdiction for foreign investment in mining (e.g. Fraser Institute, 2019, 2021, 2023) resulting in intense mineral exploration, especially in the minerally rich and sparsely populated Northern areas, as well as plans or opening of new mines. This is different in comparison to Norway, where new mines have not been opened during the last 35 years (Nygaard, 2016), but several have been under planning for decades. Pro-mining legislation and situating mines in Northern Scandinavia were criticised especially by Sami people representatives,

whose nature-based culture and traditional livelihood, i.e. reindeer herding with freely roaming animals in need of vast territories, was threatened by mining and associated infrastructure (see also Raitio et al., 2020; Zachrisson & Beland Lindahl, 2019). They criticised national regulation and policymaking as well as often foreign-owned companies having no understanding of local contexts and livelihoods. The industry, although recognising the legal framework as favourable, perceived national political decision-making as uncertain when in 2021, the Finnish and Norwegian Mining Acts were under revision. The EU mining policy was seen as contradictory, as it already 2008 promoted European mineral self-sufficiency, but on the other hand, required sustainability in all activities in the Arctic region, for example in its Arctic strategy (European Commission, 2008, 2021b).

If there is an industry, where the *geo*political approach is relevant, it is the mineral industry. Ore deposits are located where they are as they cannot be moved, and there are no replacement areas for rich deposits. Northern parts of Scandinavia are rich in minerals and are already important mining regions. As summarised by a Finnish interviewee from the mining sector: 'When talking about the future of the Finnish mining industry, it is almost the same as talking about Lapland's future".

By the end of the year 2023, mining was a contested sector in the Northern areas of Europe – and in other rural mineral exploration and mining areas, perhaps more than ever before. European Parliament accepted the Critical Raw Materials Act (European Parliament, 2023), intending to increase the self-sufficiency of Europe in minerals production, which means increasing demand for mining in the ore-rich regions of Europe and less reliance on China and Africa. Several NGOs and citizens reacted to the Act, demanding 'communities' right to say 'No' and of rights of nature as well as its legitimisation and support of manipulative 'social acceptance' and mining certification schemes that breach fundamental citizens' rights and research ethics' (Mining Watch, 2023). There were also signatories from the northern Scandinavian regions making clear that resource wars are not only between nations but between the EU and local people in the North in the future.

Tourism: security risks threatening the desire and ability for the freedom of movement

Tourism has been seen as the flagship of neoliberal ideology due to its nature in 'free trade' (Fletcher, 2023), which has also been prominent in functional cross-border mobility and freedom of movement. However, this traditional representation has faced challenges due to geopolitical changes in the 2020s, especially related to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and regulations, along with additional controlling measures implemented by state actors. The restrictions and regulations following the pandemic, as well as the complete shutdown of all international tourism, were highlighted among the interviewees. State actors were noteworthy capable of shutting down the global industry within a few days or weeks. The first and most distinct controlling measure was to close states' borders which made the borders visible in comparison to the pre-pandemic, especially in the EA and Schengen areas where state borders have long not been visible. Following this, border controls, quarantines, and vaccination passports were applied as security measures after tourism was slowly 'opened' again. Therefore, the pandemic-related restrictions affected the freedom of movement greatly in the EA.

The role of state actors regarding other than pandemic-related controlling measures was according to our interviewees, related to states' willingness to either speed up or restrict processes of allowing certain nationalities to enter the country. An example mentioned by a Greenlandic interviewee was, for instance, when the Danish embassy in China made an application procedure for a fast-track visa for Chinese tourists and therefore, the Chinese were able to get a visa easily and enter Greenland faster (Visit Greenland, 2019). Another example pointed out by an Icelandic interviewee was when China excluded Norway from a 72-hour visa-free travel scheme after the Nobel Prize was awarded to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo (Bennett & Iaquinto, 2023). Interviewees highlight controlling measures that reflect states' decisions to either expedite or restrict entry processes for specific nationalities. These examples underscore the geopolitical significance of how states wield the ability to permit or deny entry, turning it into a potential geopolitical weapon.

Security and stability have been considered the main and most important aspects of tourism in the EA, which has also supported tourism growth in the region, as interviewees pointed out. The real or perceived security risks, such as wars, terrorism, political tensions, and ethnic or political violence (Lee et al., 2020), as well as military risks, hostile international relationships, or power dynamics, affect tourism greatly. Although these risks have been relatively absent from the EA, the interviewees pointed out that these risks are emerging and may affect tourism significantly in the region. An example of this was when interviewees addressed increasing military activity in the Arctic Ocean (AO) as one of the security risks. Another example was related to the security risks regarding logistics, as the northern regions rely heavily on air traffic and cruise ships due to geographical factors. Lastly, one of the emerging security risks addressed by our interviewees was related to the risk of geopolitical instability, especially between the superpowers, i.e. the U.S.A., Russia, and China. A Norwegian interviewee addressed that tourists who experience unstable or unsafe circumstances, such as unrest or terror, will simply not travel to these destinations. Thus, the combination of climate change, winter sea ice loss and therefore, opening the Northern Sea Route, and increasing human activity in the AO, such as rising cruise tourism and military activities, elevate the risk of accidents in these sensitive environments, whether intentional or not. These geopolitical factors would have a significant impact on tourism in the EA, which has largely had its foundations in security and stability.

National jurisdictions as well as national or foreign investments shape the future of tourism development in the European Arctic. Environmental concerns were considered to affect tourism through a potential tax on airlines, more expensive travelling, or 'travel quota', through which the number of tourists could be restricted. National jurisdictions, such as the national ban on heavy fuel oil in Svalbard, were also addressed to affect tourism in the region. Interviewees also highlighted the theme of tourism investments, whether domestic or foreign. While states generally maintain infrastructures, there is a noticeable imbalance, with less focus on the northern regions compared to the southern areas. However, there are many signs of rising interest among foreign investors in large tourism investments, e.g. the purchase of a large hotel chain in Iceland by Asian investors. China has furthermore long been interested in investing in the Arctic and Chinese investments in tourism, although still limited, are seen as a geopolitical tool to gain a foothold in Northern European countries (Koivurova et al., 2019).

Controlling measures that were taken during the pandemic may not be the last ones – once 'hard security' actions are taken by state actors, it will not be difficult to put them in action again. Although tourism has recovered from the pandemic, the future will bring new challenges for the industry for sure. Tourism cannot be isolated from geopolitical influences, as geopolitical tensions also affect tourism. In late 2023, the geopolitical tensions in the EA have risen even more, which is seen concretely in the closure of the Finnish-Russian border (Toivonen et al., 2023), which has affected the border mobility between these two states.

Discussion

'Security … It's safe to be here, it's safe to come here', as an Icelandic tourism expert argued. 'Northern regions are secure. Lapland may be attractive for this reason', as a Finnish interviewee concluded. These exemplary quotes point out that the Arctic has been considered sheltered and safe from external impacts. Security has been considered an important asset in the northern regions, especially among interviewees in the tourism industry. Security, high stability, and peacefulness in the EA, sometimes called 'Arctic exceptionalism' (e.g. Hoogensen & Hodgson, 2019; Käpylä & Mikkola, 2015), have been the result of political will among the eight Arctic states. This is highlighted by the stabilised and organised cooperation in established entities like the Arctic Council (1996), the Barents Regional Council (1993), alongside the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (1996), and international law, for example in maritime areas (Brutschin & Schubert, 2016; Heininen, 2014, 2018; Henrikson, 2020). Human security (Hoogensen & Golovizina, 2014; Hoogensen et al., 2020), everyday life in the

northern regions of Europe, was also perceived as safe among interviewees. Small populations and sparsely populated areas; high levels of education and technological development; equality with small class divisions; and fair well-fare societies with positive images were mentioned as the foundations for experienced security in the interviews.

As Bertelsen (2020, p. 66) has argued, 'Arctic security was never about the Arctic and will not be in the future'. This was also supported by our interviewees, who brought up how the fortunes of different industries and Northern communities are dependent on relations and tensions between the three superpowers, i.e. Russia, China, and the U.S.A.. In the interviews, Russia was seen as a wild card, but not only Russia. US policy, with its two-party system flailing from side to side, was also seen as creating uncertainties. Also, President Trump's victory and presidency (2017–2021) increased the level of international uncertainty (Yakovlev, 2020), as noted in some of the interviews in this study. Hoogensen et al. (2020, p. 3) conclude that President Trump, 'after spending much of the beginning of tenure ignoring the Arctic, has now begun to weigh the possibility of a greater American military presence in the Far North', which reflects that, although only individuals, the heads of superpower states are of great importance to world politics. However, among the interviewees, the U.S.A. was brought up considerably less than e.g. China and Russia.

The attitude towards China varied between different livelihoods. The mineral sector brought up the dependency on Chinese critical raw materials, and China was seen as a threat to the technological development required for sustainable transition in the EU (about supply risks, see e.g. Brown, 2018; Mancheri, 2015; Sverdrup et al., 2017). Norwegian aquaculture experienced exclusion from the huge Chinese market after Liu Xiaobo received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. On the other hand, although followed by national concerns, in the tourism industry, China, with its investment capacity, was seen as a secure co-operator as China's party-state system was seen as stable and had a long-term focus on its interests and investments. The positive attitude towards China was addressed by interviewees regarding the fast-track visa procedure in Greenland, which made the application procedure faster for Chinese tourists. Instead of waiting for 2–3 weeks, by this decision, the visa application procedure could only take three days (Visit Greenland, 2019). In forestry, Chinese investments were perceived as positive as well. Industrial investments were hoped for in Finnish Lapland, particularly in the biofuel project Kaidi in Kemi and the bio-refinery project in Kemijärvi (Koivurova et al., 2019), but none of these investments were realised, and Chinese delegations came and went without yielding any tangible results.

However, the biggest geopolitical risks and threats were associated with Russia. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was feared to cause tensions between the West and Russia and spill-over effects also in the North. Examples of these are Russia's rearmament of the North-West region with military exercises, Russians buying real estate, especially in Finland, and in general, mostly a sense of unpredictability and uncertainty caused by actions from the Russian side. Despite these doubts, cooperation in the Arctic was hoped to continue in 2021 as Russia, for instance, took its turn as the chair of the Arctic Council in that year (see also Bertelsen, 2020; Gricius & Fitz, 2022).

Threats and risks regarding Arctic industries were closely related to the negative spill-over effects of superpower conflict(s), which were identified almost in every interview. Tourism based on air traffic and cruise ships was addressed to be a security risk in terms of logistics. Aquaculture and fisheries could suffer due to military actions or aggressive confrontations, making operating on the seas even more dangerous. Forestry was concerned about the supply of raw materials and timber, especially in Finland, where new industrial investments were planned in the northernmost region, the Finnish Lapland. The mineral sector brought up the dependency on mineral production in China and Russia. Generally, the interviewees were concerned about threats to the logistics of goods from the South, as northern areas are dependent on supply chains from southern areas. Besides these, concerns regarding uncontrolled migration, energy security, cyber security, terrorist actions, e.g. against tourist destinations, and destruction of the marine environment due to irresponsible activities such as oil spills were indeed addressed in the interviews. The sense of security was jeopardised already before Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine started in February 2022.

State actors have sovereignty over their lands and people (Hoogensen & Golovizina, 2014). The role of state actors was discussed in three contexts. First, *borders* became visible when the COVID-19 pandemic entered the EA, when the EU's ninth coronavirus case of a traveller from Wuhan, China was identified in Finnish Lapland in January 2020. Tourism, the flagship industry of neoliberal freedom, was especially 'hit' by the pandemic, as illustrated in interviews, due to lockdowns, quarantines, and vaccination certifications. Discourses of closure and opening became prevalent because different countries closed their borders at different times and sometimes even unexpectedly. Closures also affected people's lives and local trade in border areas, especially in northern Scandinavia. Borders became clear, especially from the point of view of the Sámi people, the only Indigenous peoples living in the territory of four states in the EA.

Second, state sovereignty over *land* was a theme, especially when discussing managing natural resources. In the mineral and forestry sectors' interviews, resource nationalism was brought up, stressing the idea that states have control over forests and mineral deposits located inside their borders. In forestry, the EU's taxonomy as a criterion for sustainable funding raised criticism in Finland and Sweden, when the Climate Delegated Act was published in December 2021. In Sweden and Finland, forests were seen as traditionally important natural assets, owned by private owners and the state and hence EU-level sustainability regulation was seen as a threat (Muilu, 2021). Some interviewees in the mineral sector demanded resource nationalism (see EY, 2022), although most acknowledged that national companies did not have the financial capacity to sustain new mines. In times of climate change, it has become evident that there are no stable environmental conditions 'because the "geo" in the geopolitics is warming, thawing, melting, burning and so on' (Dodds et al., 2022, p. 80) which will also affect the industries and livelihoods in the EA.

Third, state sovereignty over *people* was mainly discussed as the state's obligation to ensure that remote northern regions are inhabited. In interviews, it was demanded that state actors provide services and infrastructure important for living and developing industries in the North. Interviewees were critical, arguing that Northern regions were not protected by the state but were 'an Eldorado' for large companies. For them, foreign ownership also meant dependency on outsiders, who perhaps did not care for local communities. As well, over the years, the EU has taken a significant role in the development of the northern regions, using, among other things, project financing as an instrument (European Commission, 2021b). When the feeling of insecurity experienced by the people becomes stronger, it can lead to nationalism and demands for a stronger state actor. How this will affect international cooperation, which is necessary to combat climate change, for example, remains to be seen.

Conclusions

Geopolitics in its classical meaning has returned to political vocabulary in Europe after Russia started the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022. Spill-over effects of the war made visible how superpowers' (China, Russia, and the U.S.A.) politics affect economic development also in the EA. Tourism and trade of fish, timber, and minerals with Russia have stopped or at least diminished in minority compared to the time before Russia's outbreak. In Northern Scandinavia, the U.S.A.'s military presence is strengthening as Finland joined rapidly to NATO in 2023 and Sweden followed the same path in early 2024. It remains to be seen, how this affects, e.g. tourism, whose market strengths in Fennoscandia or Arctic Ocean cruise routes have been considered safe and peaceful nature. China, which promoted investments in the EA region, especially in the late 2010s, seems to have reduced economic activity in the EA in 2024.

The EU's aspiration to become a carbon-neutral continent by 2050 has led to completely different natural resource policies in two industrial sectors important in the North, namely forestry and mining. In short, it seems that Northern forests should be protected as carbon sinks hence expected

to limit timber felling in Fennoscandia, whereas the growth of the mining industry is supported in the North to produce critical raw materials necessary for the 'Green Deal'.

To conclude, there are no 'local' industries in the North as all livelihoods are connected to global markets and geopolitical tensions impose boundary conditions on economic operations. Hopefully, the states will continue to work together for peace and sustainable development – otherwise conflicts over territory between the states might have severe consequences for the Arctic and its people.

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