

The Geopolitics of the Arctic: a platform for projecting Russian interests onto the world geopolitical stage

La geopolítica del Ártico: una plataforma para proyectar los intereses rusos en el escenario geopolítico mundial

Abstract: The natural particularities of the Arctic space and its political-strategic value place the region at the center of global geopolitical interests as it had been during the Cold War. This study aims to analyze the interests of some nations in this macrospace, especially Russia. In this context, the new North Sea route brings economic and strategic advantages by significantly reducing the distance between Asia and Europe. Russia has launched efforts to ensure its influence in the region, materialized in its 2035 Strategy, which reinforces its Arctic pre-eminence. The country faces increased international interest in the region. Furthermore, this research highlights the fact that Russia is the only Arctic country that is not a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The results of this study delineate the conflicts involving the Arctic issue and the Russian repositioning in face of such conjuncture.

Keywords: Arctic, Northern Sea Route, Strategy 2035, Russian repositioning.

Resumen: Las particularidades naturales del espacio ártico y su valor político-estratégico posicionan la región nuevamente en el centro de los intereses geopolíticos globales, tal como durante la Guerra Fría. El propósito de este artículo es analizar los intereses de algunas naciones en este macroespacio, especialmente de Rusia. En este contexto, la nueva Ruta Marítima Septentrional aporta ventajas económicas y estratégicas, especialmente al acortar significativamente la distancia entre Asia y Europa. Rusia realiza algunos esfuerzos para asegurar su influencia en la región, mediante la Estrategia 2035, en la cual refuerza su preeminencia en el Ártico. El país se enfrenta a un creciente interés internacional en esta región. Además, cabe destacar que Rusia es el único país ártico que no forma parte de la Organización del Tratado del Atlántico Norte (OTAN). Este artículo presenta como resultados la delineación de conflictos que involucran el tema del Ártico y el reposicionamiento ruso en este contexto.

Palabras clave: Ártico, Ruta Marítima Septentrional, Estrategia 2035, investigación bibliográfica, reposicionamiento ruso.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Arctic is a space of historical disputes, which have recently worsened due to climate phenomena, the War in Ukraine, and the energy crisis. The possibility of oil and natural gas exploration has stimulated even more interest in this area. The states in this polar space have waged strategic battles to assert their energy dominance as they have the right to extract and exploit it in their exclusive economic zones. The Kremlin has taken the lead by reinforcing its fleets and military bases and deploying natural resource exploration ships and nuclear submarines.

As equally important, during the Cold War, the Arctic was a “hot” space—the United States (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), representing their respective blocs, had a “common border,” making it an extremely vulnerable region. The end of the Cold War failed to redefine the geostrategic capacity for cooperation in the Arctic space. On the contrary, instability and new international tensions have intensified the dispute in this important and strategic international space.

The circumpolar north configures a geopolitical macrospace of outstanding international geopolitical importance. According to Trevisan (1998, p. 11), the “Arctic comprises the region of the extreme north of the Earth, including the land and ice around the North Pole, in which the terrestrial part covers around 12.5 million km² and the Arctic Glacial Ocean covers approximately 15 million km².” This portion of the globe has suffered the consequences of climate and environmental changes, including global warming. In recent years, the melting of Arctic Ocean ice has led nations such as Russia, Canada, Norway, and the United States to reassess their geopolitics for the region (Gustafsson, 2021).

Global warming, due to internal and external factors, is increasing the average temperature of the surface of the earth, transforming the Arctic region. Internal factors are associated with solar activity, atmospheric physicochemical composition, tectonism, and volcanism. External factors stem from human actions and are related to greenhouse gas emissions due to the burning of fossil fuels (Silva; Paula, 2009). According to the Arctic Council (2021), the consequences of global warming are profoundly accentuated in the Arctic region: thrice as fast as in the rest of the world. Environmental changes in the region affect not only the native population, but a much larger community around the world.

According to Trevisan (1998), during the Cold War, circumpolar states were trapped in a geopolitical discourse focused on the Arctic. The Arctic economic value has currently aroused the interest of several countries regarding access to large reserves of oil, natural gas, and other minerals and has given rise to possibilities for new maritime trade routes in the northern hemisphere. Gustafsson (2021) adds that a renewed arena of international competition gains additional weight due to the melting of the Arctic sea ice, which has been increasing the military presence of countries such as China and those on the Arctic coast. A consequence of the military presence refers to the emergence of the classic security dilemma. These nations, perceiving a foreign military presence, will tend to arm themselves or act as a deterrent despite the absence of concrete hostile actions.

Thus, the study of the Arctic is fundamental as it is a region in transformation, arousing international interest due to its geoeconomic and geostrategic potential. The nation that controls the Arctic will have a significant international advantage. Moreover, increasing militarization makes this area a place of possible conflicts. Thus, this study seeks to evaluate the actors and points of tension in this geopolitical macrospace from the point of view of Russian strategy by conducting an exploratory research on the geopolitics of the Arctic to analyze the developments of the 2035 Strategy, especially the possibility of a new arms race in the Arctic.

2 THE 2035 RUSSIAN STRATEGY

The transformation of the Arctic environment and the economic opportunities from it instigated the development of a Russian development strategy for the Arctic, entitled Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Zone Until 2035, hereinafter referred to as the 2035 Strategy. The 2035 Strategy lies in the context of the Russian re-emergence on the international stage. According to Visentini (2022), as the heir to the USSR, Russia constitutes the only state that can rival the US technological, industrial, aerospace, and military capabilities. One way to compensate for its geopolitical weaknesses is by prioritizing its strategic environment since the Arctic space offers an economic and geostrategic opportunity to balance world power.

The 2035 Strategy aims to promote the exploration of the abundant energy resources in the region, mainly oil and gas. The Russian state also hopes to establish the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a new global maritime trade route in the long term. A relevant point of this plan refers to the double message of the Russian international agenda, which aims to promote the Arctic as a region of peace and stability but also as a space in which Russia can expand its military capabilities to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The West often interprets the Russian military presence as a sign of growing assertiveness and potential danger. According to Sukhankin (2021), the simple dichotomy between “hard power” and “soft power” is unable to explain the Russian strategic interests. Other nations have an interest in the Arctic, making it a geopolitically contested area. According to Gustafsson (2021), creating an Arctic security environment offer the following challenges:

- Attempts by foreign governments to reconsider basic international treaties regulating business and other activities in the circumpolar north.
- Incomplete international legal delimitations of the Arctic seas.
- Exclusion by foreign governments or international associations from the creation of legal business or other activities of the Russian Federation in the Arctic.
- Foreign military forces in the Arctic.

The content of the 2035 Strategy highlights that the Russian government will prioritize three areas by 2035: the export of resources by the NSR, the construction of dual-use (civilian and

military) infrastructure in the NSR, and the strengthening of Arctic military defenses. According to Mehdiyeva (2021), this Strategy differs from previous documents in that it explicitly mentions the potential growth of conflicts in this region, which requires a corresponding increase in the military capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces in the Arctic.

About 80% of the natural gas and 17% of the oil of the Russian Federation are produced in the Arctic zone, whereas its continental shelf contains an estimated reserve of 85.1 trillion cubic meters of gas and 17.3 billion tons of oil. The 2035 Strategy reinforces the view that the Russian socioeconomic development stems from its access to economic resources. From this perspective:

The 2035 Strategy specifies the launch by 2035 of five oil projects on the continental shelf, 21 projects to develop solid minerals (from diamonds to rare earth minerals, titanium, quartz, gold and coal), and three petrochemical plants. But the biggest increase in resource production is to come from Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) which is projected to increase from 8.6 million tonnes in 2018 to 91 million by 2035. Securing outlets for such large volumes of LNG will depend on Russia's ability to develop the year-round route for deliveries to Asia via the NSR. (Mehdiyeva, 2021, p. 3).

According to Kluge and Paul (2020), the Russian state must bear one-third of the investment to develop the NSR, which Rosatom estimates to total about \$11.7 billion. Rosatom, Rosneft, Novatek, Gazprom Neft, Gazprom, Nornickel, banks, and future route users will divide the remainder. Moscow hopes that commercial projects to develop offshore oil and gas exploration will also stimulate its development.

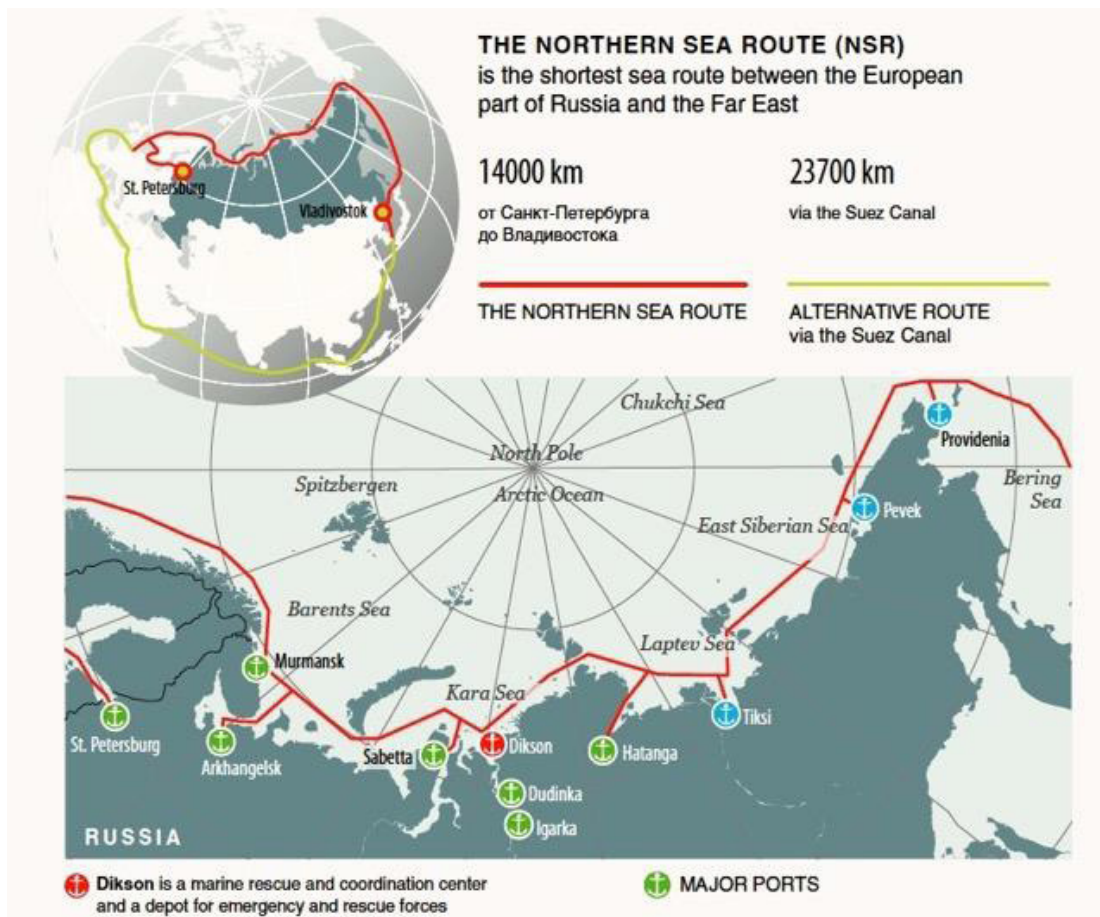
The areas selected for financing until 2035 fall into two categories: those rich in mineral resources (hydrocarbons and solid minerals) and those that provide access to the ocean. The document highly prioritizes the construction of ports to export mineral resources by the NSR to reduce transport costs to final markets. The 2035 Strategy advocates no large-scale exploitation of continental shelf resources, treating them as a "strategic reserve" to be kept untouched until economic conditions change and prices rise sufficiently to support Arctic coastal development.

According to Sukhankin (2021), most actions specified in the Strategy 2035 document revolve around the NSR, which Russia reports is the shortest, cheapest, and safest way to reach northern and western Europe from Asia by sea. Moreover, the country sees NSR as a source of income and as a means of strengthening its partnership with China. Thus:

The NSR comprises a series of routes that run from Novaya Zemlya to the Bering Strait, the length of which ranges from 2,200 to 2,900 NM and crosses the Kara, Laptev, Eastern Siberia, and Chukchi Seas. The Yugorskiy Shar

Strait connects the Barents and Kara Seas, causing no particular difficulties to navigation (Baptista, 2015, p. 77).

Figure 1- The Northern Sea Route (NSR)



Fonte: Freight Week, 2016.

According to Filipe (2017), the main international trade routes follow a pattern that places them as a route between the continents, and the search for shorter maritime connections between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region is a primary issue. Traditional maritime routes have mandatory crossing points with high strategic importance (chokepoints) that fall susceptible to piracy, such as the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Malacca Strait. The NSR would avoid the costs of longer sea connections and the insecurity of chokepoints around the world.

The NSR has major limitations to its navigation support infrastructure, notably those related to communications, search and rescue systems, and meteorological monitoring. According to Perry (2012), paragraph 12 of the 2012 Russian Strategy provided for the development of a unified transport system in the Arctic, including the Northern Sea Route and the southern river and rail communications around it. This assertion denotes the importance of the NSR for Russia.

According to Kotlyar (2022), a member of the International Legal Council of the Russian Foreign Ministry, the nature of the NSR as a national sea route fails to negate its openness to foreign-flagged ships, according to the legislation. Thus:

Vessel owners or captains intending to navigate the NSR must apply for a navigation permit (which is issued for a strictly defined period) to the NSR Administration at least 15 days prior to commencement of such sailing in this area . . . Russian and foreign vessels must meet special requirements for sailing through ice and have insurance when navigating the NSR. Moreover, In addition, they must notify the Administration 72 hours in advance of their approach to the boundaries of the NSR area and provide daily information on their vessel movement, condition, and actual time of crossing the boundaries of the area. (Kotlyar, 2022, p. 4).

According to Kluge and Paul (2020), Russia will prioritize the use of NSR by domestic companies to deliver energy resources to global markets. The 2035 Strategy formalizes this, indicating that NSR projects to increase from 31.5 million tons of hydrocarbons in 2019 to 130 million tons in 2035. Russian international trade will comprise only 10 million tons of this total.

According to Silva (2018), the Strategy 2035 also addresses projects to build search and rescue facilities, nuclear-powered icebreakers, and offshore supply ships, which are essential to develop the NSR. Indeed, a fleet of nuclear icebreakers is considered a prerequisite to effectively consolidate control over the NSR. At least five nuclear-powered icebreakers were expected to be built, the first of which, *Arktika*, went into operation in October 2020.

Russian strategies seek to cement the NSR as national waters that provide Russia with full control over the Arctic and seeks to establish the NSR as a globally competitive national transport corridor, according to Sukhankin (2021). However, Russia still depends on aspects such as global energy prices, the Asian demand for resources, environmental constraints, and Arctic security, restricting its freedom of action in the Arctic.

Regarding the Russian military presence in the Arctic, historically extreme weather conditions have acted as a natural barrier that has always protected the long Russian Arctic coast. Thus, the melting of the “eternal ice” causes concern. The 2035 Strategy elaborates on the growing potential for conflict in the Arctic, requiring a permanent expansion of the Russian military presence in the region. Thus, the Russian military presence in the Arctic seeks three objectives, namely, to strengthen its defense, specifically in an advanced line against foreign incursions; to ensure its economic future; and to create a deterrent platform, especially toward the North Atlantic.

In a sense, Russia implementing the NSR suggests the adoption of new borders that must be protected from potential aggressors. A naval threat could theoretically come from the east from the Bering Strait, or from the west from North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO) military bases in Greenland and Norway. Figure 2 shows Russian military restructuring in the Arctic to counter these threats.

Figure 2- Russian militarization in the Arctic



Fonte: Reuters, 2017.

Substantial Russian budget increases aimed to boost military and economic activities in the region over the past few decades. Its major infrastructure projects focus on protecting the NSR natural resources and sea passage. According to Melino and Conley (2020), the Russian Northern Fleet is the largest nuclear icebreaker fleet in the world, with more than 40 ships, playing a crucial role in the transit of ships on the Russia Arctic coast in the NSR. According to the authors:

Russia's military posture in the Arctic emphasizes air and maritime early warning and defense, highlighted by the reopening of 50 previously closed Soviet-era military posts. This includes the refurbishment of 13 air bases, 10 radar stations, 20 border outposts, and 10 integrated emergency rescue stations (Melino; Conley, 2020. p. 3).

Note that Russian military capacity largely stems from initiatives related to rehabilitation and from state investment in the structure inherited from the USSR. Figure 3 shows that the Military Base in Alexandra Land ratifies the Russian defense strategy at its oil and gas terminals.

Figure 3- Alexandra Land Military Base



Source: CSIS, 2021

Moreover, Kluge and Paul (2021) highlight that:

From the Russian perspective, its oil and gas terminals are also prime targets requiring defense. In response, many of the Soviet-era bases that had been closed since 1990 have been reactivated and new ones constructed – including ten search and rescue bases, sixteen deepwater ports, ten new air bases (out of fourteen in all) and ten air defence installations. (Kluge, 2021, p. 2).

It should be added that, as Mehdieva (2021) points out, the Defenarctic project designed an integrated information system to monitor actions on land, water, and air, serving the military and civilian segments. The project is expected to be completed in two stages. The first, until 2024, in the western section, connects Teriberka, near Murmansk, to the former military base of Amderma in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug and the second, until 2026, in the eastern section, by the dual-use ports of Dixon, Tiksi, and Pevek bound to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Nakhodka, and Vladivostok.

New air defense missiles were stationed near Novaya Zemlya in the Barents Sea, and a hypersonic missile was tested as a show of Russian force in 2019. Moreover,

S-350 mobile surface-to-air missile launchers were incorporated into an area denial strategy (A2/AD), protecting the Franz Josef, Severnaya Zemlya, New Siberian Islands, Novaya Zemlya, and Wrangel Island land bases. The scope of the system as a whole covers all archipelagos along the NSR. The Russian military restructuring in the Arctic also includes its air vector projection capacity, as in Figure 4 in Severomorsk (Kluge; Paul, 2020).

Figure 4- Severomorsk Air Base-1



Source: CSIS, 2020

In October 2019, 10 Russian submarines passed by the Norwegian Sea on their way to the North Atlantic in the largest such maneuver since the end of the Cold War. In August 2020, a Russian warplane chased a US bomber into Danish airspace during the NATO Allied Sky exercise. All these actions show the Russian military re-equipping, especially in the Arctic region, to the world. Note that Strategy 2035—rather than emphasizing conflict or militarization—aligns itself with the Moscow stance of improving Arctic defenses. Although the Russian government does not purposely opt for an open confrontation in the Arctic, the country plans and prepares for possible conflicts of interest involving control of the NSR.

3 3. INTERNATIONAL INTEREST IN THE ARCTIC

With the end of the Cold War and the international political changes from the 2000s onward, especially the Russian strategic inflection, the Arctic became, once again, a zone of dispute. In this sense, former Soviet bases are being reopened and modernized, and new bases are being built. In fact, the NATO eastward expansion, incorporating new countries into the Atlantic alliance, contributed to this Russian defensive attitude. Other countries, especially China, have a great interest in the adoption of a multilateral and stable regime for the region. Therefore,

international agendas, interests, and factors converge and render international relations in the Arctic complex, having Russia as a central actor.

Berthiaume (2020) states that the Chief of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, US General Terrence O’Shaughnessy, highlighted the need to modernize the early warning system in the Arctic while warning that the United States and Canada have lost their military advantage in the Arctic to Russia. In written remarks to the U.S. Senate committee on the military, the general said the new land-based cruise missile launchers inside Russian territory pose a new and direct threat to North America because of their range and ability to operate in the Arctic. In addition, the North American Aerospace Defense Command commander also highlighted concerns about the growing interest of China in the Arctic, which includes what O’Shaughnessy described as “signs of a nascent but growing strategic cooperation” with Russia.

In contrast to the NATO thinking, on May 17, 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that the Arctic belongs to Russia and that the Russian military activities in the region are legitimate. President Vladimir Putin added, three days later, that Russia will “pull the teeth” out of anyone who tries to “take a piece” of Russia. Thus:

(...) The Russian investments in the socioeconomic development of the Arctic zone are not merely a means for increasing the well-being of its citizens (...). It is also a means for supporting the claim that Russia is a true Arctic power with an Arctic population. In addition, socioeconomic development means that military operations will be easier to sustain when the civilian infrastructure, such as dual-use ports, airfields, and roads, is maintained and expanded. (Gustafsson, 2021, p. 2, free translation).

Thus, the Arctic powers have accelerated the modernization of their armed forces. The development of new technologies is a central objective in the domestic debate of these countries since military and economic issues are intertwined. In August 2020, the US president demanded from the US executive departments a project to develop a fleet of icebreakers, enabling the reinforcement of its military presence in the Arctic.

Mattos (2021) reports that the Chinese military ambitions in the Arctic and its partnership with Russia put governments and foreign policies on alert. Despite no clear military policy for the far north of the planet, the region is essential for deterrence by China, especially regarding the United States. Since 2016, the design and construction of polar capacity vessels has been one of the declared objectives of the Chinese, mainly favoring the implementation of the Polar Silk Road project.

Therefore, China has positioned itself internationally as a state “close to the Arctic” and as “an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs” since the launch in 2018 of “China’s Arctic Policy.” However, China has been active in the region since the

2000s, promoting scientific and military expeditions and expressing real interest in the Arctic natural riches and the possibility of establishing interconnected routes through South Asia.

Still, the transformation of the world order after the Cold War must constitute the explanatory basis for the world tensions of the last three decades. Despite historical antagonisms, Russia and China converge in the defense of a stable multipolar order that remains permeated by conflicts and economic crisis. The outbreak of a multifaceted world confrontation between “East and West” cannot be ruled out and the Arctic will certainly be a space of disputes.

4 CONCLUSION

The Russian Federation considers the Arctic as a pillar for its return to the status of great power. This geopolitical macro space has substantial economic value due to its mineral reserves and biodiversity and a strong geostrategic value since it hosts the Northern Sea Route (NSR), a shorter alternative for maritime connection between Europe and Asia.

The 2035 Strategy establishes two priorities for the Arctic, namely, economic exploitation and Russian regional security in the NSR. Thus, the Russian military presence in the Arctic aims to secure its economic future and create a platform for deterrence. This document outlines the Russian strategic objectives for the Arctic and identifies certain actors that could clearly hinder their achievement in the medium and long term. In this context, the 2035 Strategy foresees a possible arms race in the Arctic that may intensify conflicts of interest for access to sources of mineral resources, especially hydrocarbons, and to the maritime line of communication marked by the NSR.

The Russian military presence to the north is justified by the fact that it considers that the melting of the Arctic creates territorial vulnerabilities to its northern areas, which endorses its strategy to protect the northern continental shelf and the NSR. For this, Russia has increased its military capabilities in this area, which materialize in the construction of new bases and the reactivation of those from the Soviet era. This apparatus is being mobilized from the Bering Strait to the Barents Sea, which corresponds to a strong instrument of deterrence in the international context.

The growing Russian militarization in the Arctic has caused insecurity in other international actors, such as the United States, Canada, Norway, and China, within the scope of the so-called security dilemma. Such a condition has the potential to cause the emergence of an Arctic arms race, which has been primarily on the agenda of multilateral organizations focused on the Arctic, such as the Arctic Council, whose current presidency is occupied by Russia.

Other geopolitical interest is the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which avoids international straits (*Chokepoints*) with established security problems, such as the Strait of Malacca, the Suez Canal, and the Gulf of Aden. This new route could make a decisive contribution to international maritime trade. As a result, international

disputes may intensify in the search for the use of this link, which is restricted by Russia itself. Thus, the 2035 Strategy clearly identifies the international interest in the Arctic space, which could foment, in a short period of time, potential and real conflicts.

Finally, the current geopolitical situation in the Arctic, impacted by current climate change, commercial interest and the arms race, has fostered the dispute between nations with Arctic interests and Russia itself, which uses the 2035 Strategy to endorse its actions for the Arctic Glacial Ocean, particularly with regard to the Russian continental shelf and the NSR. This dynamic draws attention to this important geopolitical space and proposes a new agenda for the international defense and economic agendas, which is capable of changing the power relations between actors that make up the international political arena.

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