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# Switzerland and the Arctic

Closer Than You Think

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# Content

## Executive Summary

|          |                                                      |           |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Introduction</b>                                  | <b>11</b> |
| <b>2</b> | <b>The Arctic Council and Switzerland</b>            | <b>15</b> |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Challenges in the Arctic</b>                      | <b>18</b> |
| 3.1      | Environment & Resources                              | 18        |
| 3.1.1    | <i>Extraction of resources</i>                       | 19        |
| 3.1.2    | <i>Trade</i>                                         | 20        |
| 3.1.2    | <i>Infrastructure</i>                                | 21        |
| 3.2      | Peace & Security                                     | 22        |
| 3.2.1    | <i>The Arctic and national securities</i>            | 23        |
| 3.2.2    | <i>Geopolitical spillover into the Arctic</i>        | 24        |
| 3.2.3    | <i>Influence on Arctic (non-)cooperation</i>         | 25        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>A Swiss Vision for the Arctic</b>                 | <b>27</b> |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Switzerland in the Arctic: Ways of Engagement</b> | <b>30</b> |
| 5.1      | Fully Engage Through Arctic Council Working Groups   | 31        |
| 5.2      | The OSCE as a Platform to Discuss Arctic Security    | 32        |
| 5.3      | Further Ways of Engagement                           | 34        |
|          | <b>Endnotes</b>                                      | <b>37</b> |

# Executive Summary

English As ice caps are melting, the Arctic receives unprecedented attention from states in the region and from other major powers. Trade routes for international shipping and some of the Arctic's vast resources are becoming more accessible. Increased interests and activity in the Arctic bear opportunities and risks in two main areas: environmental and security. Even though the Arctic appears far off, both are also of concern to Switzerland.

A changing climate and poor maintenance of infrastructure increase the risk of disasters. The recent oil spill disaster in Norilsk, Siberia, demonstrates that accidents have devastating effects on the environment and the livelihood of Arctic populations. The extraction of energy and mineral resources in the Arctic is difficult, given the harsh conditions, and counters efforts to mitigate climate change. Meanwhile, the region's attractiveness coincides with heightened tensions between major powers, particularly between Russia and the West, but also between China and the US. These tensions entail increased military activity and the risk of geopolitics spilling into the Arctic, where territorial disputes already exist.

These developments challenge the cooperative spirit that has thus far prevailed in the Arctic Council, the leading intergovernmental body for Arctic matters. Switzerland joined the Council as an observer in 2017, primarily due to scientific expertise in polar regions. In 2019, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) presented the first pillars of a Swiss Polar Policy, focusing on this scientific collaboration for and on the Arctic.

In our paper, we emphasise that developments in the Arctic are important to Switzerland and extend beyond research. Consequently, we put forward a "Swiss Vision for the Arctic": imagining the kind of Arctic Switzerland would like to see and to which it could and should contribute. Based on a Swiss interest to mitigate climate change and environmental hazards, this vision highlights that commercial activities and regional development in the Arctic need to be pursued in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to the benefit of the local population. As Switzerland's security and prosperity depend on a functioning European and international order, our vision foresees a peaceful resolution of disputes through legal mechanisms, transparency about security perceptions, and

a limitation of military activities, guided by the principle of human security.

To realise this vision, we suggest different ways of engagement for Switzerland. We specifically elaborate on two major institutional channels: within the Arctic Council and through the OSCE.

First, given the Swiss expertise on alpine and glacial environments, Switzerland could help **establish a new working group** in the Arctic Council to deal with the sustainable development of infrastructure. Second, given its high reputation as an impartial third party with good relations to all actors in the Arctic, Switzerland could - if geopolitical tensions and disputes increase - advocate for the **arrangement of a regional security order** through the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Third, we suggest additional ways of engagement at the international and national level. Switzerland could **offer its Good Offices** to facilitate the peaceful resolution of disputes in the Arctic. In an effort of science diplomacy, Switzerland could promote the elaboration of a **joint declaration on the impact of climate change** on the Arctic and a commitment by the Arctic states to ambitiously mitigate global warming. Finally, **involving the private sector** allows testing and implementing scientific results in practise, offers new business opportunities, and raises awareness of the challenges mentioned above.

As a basis for all these efforts, we encourage Swiss federal departments to analyse these emerging challenges and opportunities in the region in a strategic and comprehensive manner - in a whole-of-government approach. The Swiss government should reflect on the many ways Swiss policies are influenced by and can influence these challenges, as the Arctic and Switzerland are closer than one thinks. ●

Deutsch Während die Eiskappen schmelzen, erhält die Arktis zuvor noch nie dagewesene Aufmerksamkeit von den Staaten der Region wie auch von anderen Grossmächten. Handelsrouten für die internationale Schifffahrt und einige der enormen Ressourcenschätze der Arktis werden leichter zugänglich. Zunehmende Interessen und Aktivitäten in der Arktis bergen Chancen und Risiken in zwei Hauptbereichen: der Umwelt und der Sicherheit. Auch wenn die Arktis weit entfernt erscheint, sind beide auch für die Schweiz von Bedeutung.

Ein sich wandelndes Klima und ein mangelhafter Unterhalt von Infrastruktur erhöhen das Risiko von Desastern. Die jüngste Ölpest-Katastrophe im sibirischen Norilsk zeigt, dass Unfälle verheerende Auswirkungen auf die Umwelt und die Lebensgrundlage der arktischen Bevölkerung haben. Die Gewinnung von Energie und Bodenschätzen in der Arktis ist angesichts der rauen Bedingungen schwierig und steht den Bemühungen zur Eindämmung des Klimawandels entgegen. In der Zwischenzeit kollidiert die Attraktivität der Region mit erhöhten Spannungen zwischen den Grossmächten, insbesondere zwischen Russland und dem Westen, aber auch zwischen China und den USA. Diese Spannungen ziehen verstärkte militärische Aktivitäten nach sich und bergen die Gefahr, dass die Geopolitik in die Arktis ausstrahlt, wo es bereits territoriale Streitigkeiten gibt.

Diese Entwicklungen stellen den kooperativen Geist in Frage, der bisher im Arktischen Rat, dem führenden zwischenstaatlichen Gremium für arktische Angelegenheiten, überwogen hat. Die Schweiz trat dem Rat 2017 als Beobachterstaat bei, vor allem aufgrund ihrer wissenschaftlichen Expertise in den Polarregionen. Im Jahr 2019 präsentierte das Eidgenössische Departement für auswärtige Angelegenheiten (EDA) die ersten Pfeiler einer schweizerischen Polarpolitik, die sich auf diese wissenschaftliche Zusammenarbeit in der und über die Arktis konzentriert.

In unserer Publikation unterstreichen wir, dass die Entwicklungen in der Arktis für die Schweiz von Bedeutung sind und über die Forschung hinausgehen. Folglich präsentieren wir eine «Schweizer Vision für die Arktis»: Wir stellen uns vor, welche Art von Arktis die Schweiz gerne sehen würde und zu der sie beitragen könnte und sollte. Basierend auf dem Interesse der Schweiz, den Klimawandel und die Umweltgefahren zu mildern, unterstreicht diese Vision, dass kommerzielle Aktivitäten und regionale Entwicklung in der Arktis



im Einklang mit den Zielen für nachhaltige Entwicklung (SDGs) und zum Nutzen der lokalen Bevölkerung verfolgt werden müssen. Da die Sicherheit und der Wohlstand der Schweiz von einer funktionierenden europäischen und internationalen Ordnung abhängen, sieht unsere Vision eine friedliche Beilegung von Streitigkeiten durch rechtliche Mechanismen, Transparenz über das Sicherheitsempfinden und eine Begrenzung militärischer Aktivitäten vor, geleitet vom Grundsatz der menschlichen Sicherheit.

Um diese Vision zu verwirklichen, schlagen wir der Schweiz unterschiedliche Wege des Engagements vor. Wir gehen insbesondere auf zwei wichtige institutionelle Kanäle ein: innerhalb des Arktischen Rates und über die Organisation für Sicherheit und Zusammenarbeit in Europa (OSZE).

Erstens könnte die Schweiz mit ihrem Fachwissen über die alpine und glaziale Umwelt dazu beitragen, eine **neue Arbeitsgruppe** im Arktischen Rat einzurichten, die sich mit der nachhaltigen Entwicklung von Infrastruktur befasst.

Zweitens könnte sich die Schweiz angesichts ihres hohen Ansehens als unparteiischer Drittstaat mit guten Beziehungen zu allen Akteuren in der Arktis für die **Ausgestaltung einer regionalen Sicherheitsordnung** durch die OSZE einsetzen, falls die geopolitischen Spannungen und Streitigkeiten zunehmen.

Drittens bringen wir zusätzliche Möglichkeiten des Engagements auf internationaler und nationaler Ebene ein. Die Schweiz könnte ihre **Guten Dienste** anbieten, um die friedliche Beilegung von Streitigkeiten in der Arktis zu erleichtern. Im Rahmen der Wissenschaftsdiplomatie könnte sich die Schweiz einsetzen für die Ausarbeitung einer **gemeinsamen Erklärung zu den Auswirkungen des Klimawandels** auf die Arktis und für eine Verpflichtung der arktischen Staaten, die Klimaerwärmung ehrgeizig einzudämmen. Schliesslich ermöglicht der **Einbezug des Privatsektors** das Testen und Umsetzen wissenschaftlicher Ergebnisse in der Praxis, bietet neue Geschäftsmöglichkeiten und schärft das Bewusstsein für die oben erwähnten Herausforderungen.

Als Grundlage für all diese Bemühungen ermutigen wir die Schweizer Bundesämter, diese aufkommenden Herausforderungen und Chancen in der Region strategisch und umfassend zu analysieren - in einem regierungsweiten Whole-of-Government-Ansatz. Die

Schweizer Regierung sollte über die vielen Möglichkeiten nachdenken, wie die Schweizer Politik von diesen Herausforderungen beeinflusst wird und sie beeinflussen kann, denn die Arktis und die Schweiz liegen näher beieinander, als man denkt. ●

Français Alors que les glaciers fondent, l'Arctique reçoit une attention sans précédent de la part des États de la région et d'autres grandes puissances. Les routes commerciales pour le transport maritime international ainsi que les ressources naturelles de l'Arctique deviennent plus accessibles. L'intérêt mondial croissant pour l'Arctique et l'augmentation du nombre d'activités qui s'y développent comportent des opportunités et des risques dans deux domaines principaux : l'environnement et la sécurité. Même si l'Arctique semble lointain, ces deux domaines concernent également la Suisse.

Les changements climatiques et le manque d'entretien des infrastructures augmentent le risque de catastrophes environnementales. La récente marée noire à Norilsk, en Sibérie, démontre que les accidents industriels ont des effets dévastateurs sur l'environnement et les moyens de subsistance des populations arctiques. L'extraction des ressources énergétiques et minérales dans l'Arctique est délicate, compte tenu des conditions difficiles, et va à l'encontre des efforts déployés pour atténuer les changements climatiques. Parallèlement, l'attractivité de la région coïncide avec l'intensification des tensions entre les grandes puissances, notamment entre la Russie et l'Occident, mais aussi entre la Chine et les États-Unis. Ces tensions entraînent une augmentation de l'activité militaire dans l'Arctique et risquent de faire de la région, où des conflits territoriaux existent déjà, le théâtre de la rivalité entre grandes puissances.

Ces développements remettent en question l'esprit de coopération qui a prévalu jusqu'à présent au sein du Conseil de l'Arctique, le principal organe intergouvernemental qui traite des problèmes rencontrés par les gouvernements des États ayant une partie de leur territoire dans l'espace arctique et par les peuples autochtones de la région. La Suisse a rejoint le Conseil en tant qu'observatrice en 2017, principalement en raison de son expertise scientifique sur les régions polaires. En 2019, le Département fédéral des affaires étrangères (DFAE) a présenté les premiers piliers d'une politique polaire suisse, axée sur la collaboration scientifique pour et sur l'Arctique.

Dans notre papier, nous soulignons que les développements dans l'Arctique sont importants pour la Suisse et vont au-delà de la recherche. Par conséquent, nous proposons une «Vision suisse

pour l'Arctique» en imaginant le type d'Arctique que la Suisse aimerait voir et auquel elle pourrait et devrait contribuer. Fondée sur l'intérêt qu'a la Suisse à atténuer les changements climatiques et les risques environnementaux, cette vision souligne que les activités commerciales et le développement régional dans l'Arctique doivent être poursuivis conformément aux objectifs de développement durable (SDGs) et bénéficier à la population locale. Comme la sécurité et la prospérité de la Suisse dépendent du bon fonctionnement de l'ordre européen et international, notre vision prévoit un règlement pacifique des différends par des mécanismes juridiques, la transparence des perceptions de la sécurité et la limitation des activités militaires selon les principes de la sécurité humaine.

Pour réaliser cette vision, nous suggérons différentes pistes d'engagement pour la Suisse. Nous nous concentrons plus particulièrement sur deux canaux institutionnels majeurs : au sein du Conseil de l'Arctique et par l'intermédiaire de l'Organisation pour la sécurité et la coopération en Europe (OSCE).

Premièrement, compte tenu de son expertise sur les environnements alpins et glaciaires, la Suisse pourrait contribuer à la création d'un **nouveau groupe de travail** au sein du Conseil de l'Arctique pour traiter du développement durable des infrastructures.

Deuxièmement, étant donné sa réputation de tierce partie impartiale entretenant de bonnes relations avec tous les acteurs de l'Arctique, la Suisse pourrait – si les tensions et les différends géopolitiques s'aggravent – plaider en faveur de l'**instauration d'un ordre de sécurité régional** par l'intermédiaire de l'OSCE.

Troisièmement, nous suggérons des pistes supplémentaires d'engagement au niveau national et international. La Suisse pourrait **offrir ses services** pour faciliter la résolution pacifique des conflits dans l'Arctique. Dans un effort de diplomatie scientifique, la Suisse pourrait promouvoir l'**élaboration d'une déclaration commune sur l'impact des changements climatiques** sur l'Arctique et un engagement des États arctiques à atténuer de manière ambitieuse le réchauffement climatique. Enfin, la **participation du secteur privé** permet de tester et de mettre en pratique les résultats scientifiques, offre de nouvelles opportunités commerciales et sensibilise aux défis mentionnés ci-dessus.

Comme base à tous ces efforts, nous encourageons les départements fédéraux suisses à analyser ces nouveaux défis et opportunités dans la région de manière stratégique et globale avec une approche pangouvernementale. Le gouvernement suisse devrait réfléchir aux nombreuses façons dont les politiques suisses sont influencées par ces défis et peuvent elles-mêmes les influencer, car l'Arctique et la Suisse sont plus proches qu'on ne le pense. ●

# 1. Introduction

The Arctic is most known for its massive ice, snow masses and polar bears. Apart from research, it had not received much international attention. However, natural obstacles are literally melting away.

The Arctic is most known for its massive ice, snow masses and polar bears. The annual temperature differences can amount to up to 70°C. While the region mostly consists of the Arctic Ocean, 4 million people in eight states live in the vast and largely inhospitable land areas above the polar circle. The Swiss government's 2019 Polar Policy<sup>1</sup> vastly focuses on research collaboration as a basis for the Swiss approach to the region. Apart from research, the Arctic had not received much international attention for a long time, let alone attention in Switzerland. The harsh climatic conditions have impeded trade, the construction of infrastructure or access to resources.

However, natural obstacles are literally melting away. The volume of the Arctic ice cover has decreased by 75 percent since 1979,<sup>2</sup> which enables crossing between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans without icebreakers in summer.<sup>3</sup> This uncloses new trading routes to and

from East Asia. Some commentators speak of a “new Suez Canal without pirates or queues”.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, better accessibility of the Arctic enables development for remote areas and populations, and facilitates access to rich reserves of natural resources.



Sources: Economist, Norwegian Polar Institute, BBC, NSIDC

These developments raise global interest in the Arctic from both regional and major powers outside the region, such as China, Japan and the EU. Cooperation largely persists with regards to research and resource extraction projects. However, developments also bear risks. The extraction of fossil resources not only fuels global warming but also puts the fragile local fauna and flora, the population and indigenous communities at risk. As some resource deposits lie in disputed territory, both environmental risks and tensions between states in an increasingly charged geopolitical environment are exacerbated. As a consequence of the Russian-Western divide, increased military and commercial activity in the Arctic may entail escalation dynamics. Human security of Arctic populations is at risk. While the Arctic Council, a high-level intergovernmental forum in which Switzerland became an observer in 2017, excludes these topics, other fora have proven inadequate to fully deal with these issues.

Developments in the Arctic region, in particular the issues of environmental protection as well as stability and human security, are common global challenges and responsibilities.

We consider developments in the Arctic region, in particular the issues of environmental protection as well as stability and human security, as common global challenges and responsibilities. As such, Switzerland and the Arctic are closer than one would think.

Switzerland's highly globalised economy relies on global trade routes. New access to resources in the region offers opportunities for Switzerland as a hub for commodity trade. On the other hand, it runs counter to the global goals of climate and biodiversity protection. Furthermore, Switzerland considers the current geopolitical antagonism as a threat to European and thus Swiss security,<sup>5</sup> and is interested in preventing tensions. Switzerland is dependent on a functioning international order in which sovereignty is based on norms and agreed procedures, and offers its Good Offices to that end.

This paper will elaborate on the Arctic Council as the major forum for Arctic matters. Subsequently, we will consider the challenges and



opportunities in the most urgent two thematic areas: environment and resources, and peace and security. We are then putting forward a “Swiss Vision for the Arctic”. This vision imagines the kind of Arctic we would like to see and to which Switzerland could and should contribute. Realising it calls for a coherent strategic approach to the Arctic in economics, environment, security, diplomacy and international relations. Lastly, we suggest channels to that end, namely Switzerland’s observatory membership in the Arctic Council, and other multilateral platforms such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). ●

## 2. The Arctic Council and Switzerland

Up until now, a cooperative spirit has guided relations between Arctic states.

Up until now, a cooperative spirit has guided relations between Arctic states. As the Arctic mostly consists of ocean, relations are based on the UN Convention of the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), which provides an extensive legal framework for issues such as navigational rights or the sovereignty and thus economic zones of Arctic states. Since its foundation in 1996, the Arctic Council has been the leading intergovernmental forum<sup>6</sup> promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among states, indigenous communities, and other inhabitants in the Arctic region on common issues, in particular on sustainable development and environmental protection. It has been successful in fostering a constructive dialogue and initiated various treaties, notably on pollution, scientific research, and search and rescue.<sup>7</sup> The Council is based in Tromsø (Norway) and convenes twice

a year. Decisions are taken by consensus and enforced by the member states.

The Council's members are the five Arctic littoral states Canada, Denmark (Greenland/Faroe), Norway, Russia, and the United States, and three immediate neighbors that are considered Arctic countries as well: Finland, Iceland and Sweden. Six organisations representing regional indigenous Arctic communities are Permanent Participants and thus an integral part of the Council. In addition, thirteen states, twelve non-governmental and thirteen inter-parliamentary organisations have observer status. This status is the only possibility for non-Arctic states to participate in the Arctic Council. Observers are partly allowed to make statements at meetings and are explicitly expected to participate in working groups.

**Matters of hard (military) security and territorial issues are explicitly excluded by the Arctic Council's charter.**

The Arctic Council addresses common challenges through six working groups - covering flora and fauna conservation, emergency prevention and response, environmental protection and contamination, and sustainable development - and four programs and action plans, dealing with issues such as biodiversity, climate, or human development. However, some environmental aspects have not been addressed, such as future greenhouse gas emissions from any exploitation of Arctic fossil fuels. Matters of hard (military) security and territorial issues, meanwhile, are explicitly excluded by the Arctic Council's charter. We discuss these two sets of challenges in the following chapter.

In 2017, Switzerland became part of this cooperative regime. The principal reason for the application - and its acceptance - was Swiss scientific expertise in polar regions related to ice sheets and in the high Alps related to glaciology, snow, atmosphere, permafrost and mountain ecosystems<sup>8</sup>. The Swiss Polar Institute - funded by a consortium of Swiss universities and located at EPFL - serves to strengthen synergies among Swiss polar researchers and linking science between polar regions and high-altitude environments, namely the Swiss Alps. In 2019, the Swiss government presented

its Swiss Polar Policy at the Arctic Circle Assembly, focusing on the main pillar of innovation and research cooperation.<sup>9</sup> On top of this, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) recognises the Arctic as a region with “growing economic potential and geopolitical importance”.<sup>10</sup> This paper elaborates precisely on this region’s growing potential and importance, and accordingly on Switzerland’s potential role in it. ●

# 3. Challenges in the Arctic

The Arctic not only consists of huge snow mountains, but also boasts an incredible ecosystem and is rich in resources.

## 3.1 Environment & Resources

The Arctic not only consists of huge snow mountains and ice shelves on land and on the Arctic Ocean but also boasts an incredible ecosystem. Its biodiversity is unique and the terrestrial fauna is particularly rich in species due to the geographical position between two continental landmasses. The Arctic hosts about 75 mammals, more than 200 birds and over 3000 insect species.<sup>11</sup> The land is also very resource-rich, including large quantities of minerals such as iron ore, copper, nickel, zinc, phosphates and diamonds.<sup>12</sup> The Arctic land and sea boast an estimated 22% of global oil and 30% of gas reserves.<sup>13</sup>

The Arctic is heavily affected by global climate change and related self-reinforcing feedback effects. A larger change in temperature can be observed near the poles than the planetary average (due to polar amplification): more ice is melting at a faster rate than in

other regions. For example, Greenland losing about 4,000 billion tonnes of ice since 1992 caused the mean sea level to rise by about 1 centimetre.<sup>14</sup> The nascent land areas exhibit a lower reflection of the sunlight than the areas covered with snow, resulting in accelerated warming. The thawing of permafrost, large natural reservoirs of carbon, accelerates the release of greenhouse gas emissions such as CO<sub>2</sub> and methane, which further aggravates global warming.<sup>15</sup>

Climate change increasingly endangers local fauna, flora and the population. The sea algae that are key for oxygen production, for example, cannot bear the increasing share of fresh water from the snowmelt. Native species are additionally threatened by invading species that advance northwards.<sup>16</sup>

According to the latest Special IPCC Report, the extent of Arctic sea ice is declining rapidly.<sup>17</sup> A central problem is that the snowmelt allows for activities that prompt the change of climate and ecosystems further, namely the extraction of resources, shipping activities and construction of infrastructure. It is expected that, in a decade or two, multiple sea routes will be ice-free for several weeks in summer.

### *3.1.1 Extraction of resources*

For a long time, drilling for fossil fuel energy sources under Arctic conditions has not been economically attractive nor technically possible. However, these obstacles are being reduced, leading to expressed interest and test drillings.

It is estimated that more than half of Russia's oil and gas reserves lies in the Arctic region<sup>18</sup> and the country plans to increase their extraction, in which European and Asian energy companies participate.<sup>19</sup> Even though conditions remain harsh and hydrocarbon prices have been dropping in 2020, eased access and technological advances will ensure that interest in Arctic resources remains a long-term challenge. While Canada put exploration of Arctic oil reserves on hold, Norway and the United States also ramped up their activities related to the extraction of Arctic oil.<sup>20</sup>

Several severe problems are linked to resource extraction. First, the depletion and burning of oil and gas causes new greenhouse gas emissions. The 6th IPCC report clearly states that the global community has to stop burning fossil fuels by the second half of the

21st century.<sup>21</sup> Thus, a large part of detected oil and gas must not be burnt for the international climate targets agreed in the Paris Agreement to be met. Second, and as a consequence, global warming and related developments such as ocean acidification are considered the biggest threat to Arctic biodiversity.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the drillings are - still - subject to high risk due to the difficult climatic conditions for work and rescue operations. The ecosystem may not be able to recover at all or only slowly in case of an oil spill.<sup>23</sup> The recent oil spill disaster in June 2020 in Norilsk, Russia, exemplifies the high costs of disasters in Arctic regions. Clean-up efforts may take years and cost up to USD 1.5 billion. The causes for the oil spill are believed to be the dilapidated infrastructure and the ground subsidence beneath the fuel tanks - due to thawing permafrost.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.1.2 Trade

The extraction of resources as well as the shorter trade routes incur an increase of commercial activities in the Arctic region. There are four international trade routes in the Arctic: the Northwest Passage, the Northeast Passage, the Arctic Bridge and the Transpolar Sea Route. These routes may offer significant distance savings between ports in East Asia and Europe compared to traditional routes via the Suez or Panama Canals. In particular, China, an Arctic Council observer, shows increased interest in the region.<sup>25</sup> Geostrategically, an alternative, less geopolitically charged sea route through the Arctic as part of its Belt and Road Initiative is highly interesting for the diversification of China's trade routes and energy supply.

The IPCC report summarizes impacts associated with the observed increase in Arctic shipping with a higher rate of reported accidents compared to southern waters, vessel noise propagation and air pollution.<sup>26</sup> Cleanup efforts and rescue operations in the Arctic are much more difficult than in other sea lane or even impossible. Furthermore, heavy fuel oil (HFO)-powered vessels emit black carbon emissions, whose black particles induce a lower reflection of sunlight and thus cause a stronger warming effect.<sup>27</sup> In February 2020, not least due to increasing public pressure, the member states of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) agreed on a draft regulation phasing out the use and carriage of HFO in the Arctic starting in 2024. However, environmental groups raised criticism

about exemptions that delay the ban until 2029.<sup>28</sup>

Hydrocarbons are not the only tradable resource in the Arctic: as global demand for seafood rises and stocks become more accessible, local fish and crustacean populations are at risk. Finally, pollution from marine shipping increases stress to the sensitive local ecosystems. For example, discharging ballast from ships could introduce invasive species.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.1.3 Infrastructure

Resource extraction and new commercial activities entail the construction of new infrastructure. In addition, climate change and thawing permafrost put large parts of the current infrastructure at risk.<sup>30</sup> For the indigenous populations and residents in the Arctic, the growing interest in the region may be boon and bane. It enables economic activities and creates employment and connectivity. The extension of roads and railways, telecommunications networks, electricity grids and heat supply could help develop settlements.

The Arctic Council has recognised the challenges and risks for the Arctic ecosystems with respect to climate change but also human activities.

At the same time, new infrastructure implies an intrusion of the local environment and bears the risk of serving strategic, not local interests. Projects today induce consequences decades later and thus require planning that is even more cautious and sensible with regard to its effect on the climate. Finally, contaminants from military, other human activity or infrastructure have impacted and will continue to impact biodiversity in the region.<sup>31</sup>

The Arctic Council has recognised the challenges and risks for the Arctic ecosystems with respect to climate change but also human activities. In the Ottawa Declaration, the founding document of the Council, the Arctic States affirmed their commitment to protect the Arctic environment, to maintain biodiversity and enable sustainable use of natural resources.<sup>32</sup>



The Arctic Council, meanwhile, served as a forum leading to the *Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic* in 2013. The Council established a task force to reduce the emission of black carbon and a new expert group regularly assesses the progress of the implementation of the *Framework for Action on Black Carbon and Methane*. Furthermore, all six working groups focus on the assessment of environmental changes and damages, sustainable development and coordination to mitigate and best respond to events damaging the environment. The Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2019-2021) has made several environmental topics a priority.<sup>33</sup>

**The Norilsk oil spill disaster in Russia also illustrates that certain intentions may remain dead letter.**

Despite the official acknowledgment of the environmental value, there is a high risk that national interests outweigh public concerns. In their most recent meeting in May 2019, the foreign ministers of Arctic states could not agree on a joint declaration.<sup>34</sup> In particular, they could not find a consensus on how to tackle climate change: while seven of the eight countries regarded “climate change as a fundamental challenge facing the Arctic”, the United States refused to take part in any real climate change work in the Arctic. The Norilsk oil spill disaster in Russia also illustrates that certain intentions may remain dead letter.<sup>35</sup> A report by the Arctic Council Working Group AMAP has already warned in 2017 of the risk of thawing permafrost for the existing infrastructure.<sup>36</sup> The scientific results gathered and created in the working groups should not end up in written reports only but enter the political decision-making process.

### **3.2 Peace & Security**

Two broad concepts of security are relevant in the Arctic: soft and hard security. In terms of soft security - e.g. dealing with accidents, oil spills, emergencies and the safety of people living in the area - cooperation between the Arctic states has been fruitful due to clear

mutual interests. With regard to hard security – which concerns military and state security – the picture looks rather bleak. Many Arctic states consider the Arctic crucial for their respective national security, which influences the level of cooperation and exacerbates the threat of geopolitical tensions spilling over into the Arctic.

### *3.2.1 The Arctic and national securities*

Climate change and technological innovation facilitate navigation and resource extraction in the Arctic, which increases both its importance for security and the economy. Consequently, Norway and Canada have stepped up their military presence in the region, including limited combat capabilities. Additionally, the US has reactivated the Keflavík airbase in Iceland and started investing to boost its capacity for patrol flights, thus paving the way for combat readiness.<sup>37</sup>

Russia similarly emphasises the vital importance of the Arctic for its national security and for its nuclear deterrence. A large part of Russian nuclear forces are located in bases in the Arctic, the potential routes of nuclear missiles and thus of missile defence efforts between Russia and the US would be over Arctic territory, and submarines use the ice shields as protection of their nuclear second-strike capabilities. The Russian military reactivated Cold War-era military bases and built new ones,<sup>38</sup> and it underscored the importance of the Arctic by turning the Northern Fleet into a full-fledged Military District in 2019.<sup>39</sup>

This salience of the Arctic in terms of economics and military security may exacerbate persisting territorial disputes in the region, for example around the Lomonosov Ridge. In 2010, Norway and Russia were able to settle a large disagreement over borders. After bilateral consultations, they found middle ground between different ways of delineating borders.<sup>40</sup> Compromise was thus possible in geopolitically less tense days, but appears doubtful today.

However, developments need to be qualified. Military capabilities remain below the levels of the height of the Cold War. Much of the current remilitarisation, particularly by Russia, is compensating for the previous decline in investments and infrastructure. Russia's new and reactivated bases are mostly small and isolated.<sup>41</sup> Most facilities have a potential civilian-military dual-use purpose for search and

rescue, resource extraction or securing transport routes. And, in the end, the Arctic remains highly inhospitable and remote to conduct warfare.

### *3.2.2 Geopolitical spillover into the Arctic*

While actual warfare in the Arctic is unlikely and states are committed to existing legal frameworks, increased geopolitical tensions are likely to affect the region. The dispute between Russia and the West since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has had immediate and long-term influence on contacts and cooperation. As five of the eight member states of the Arctic Council are members of NATO, with a further two, Finland and Sweden, closely aligned, growing antagonism between Russia and the West is translated to the Arctic.

Tensions have had an economic dimension. Western sanctions imposed as a reaction to Russian actions in Ukraine included a ban on the provision of loans and technology needed for the exploration of Arctic oil and gas fields. Accordingly, Russia had to put on hold several such projects and China's stakes in them increased.<sup>42</sup> Tensions particularly had an effect in the military realm. While joint military exercises were called off – which severed military-to-military ties both at national and local levels –, parties stepped up the show of force and increased the number of patrols and border violations. Russia demonstrated its power in June 2018 with a large military exercise, to which NATO responded with its largest exercise since the end of the Cold War, involving 50'000 troops<sup>43</sup> and with the first US-led naval exercise in the Barents Sea since the end of the Cold War, in May 2020.<sup>44</sup>

The fact that the Arctic is still a region at the periphery could work in two ways in that regard: not being the focus of geopolitics and inhospitable for warfare, it could escape much of the recent tension. At the same time, precisely because the Arctic arena is perceived as more peripheral than, say, Ukraine, it could end up being abused because the price of hostilities would be less disastrous than elsewhere. States may deploy combat troops, hold snap military exercises based on hostile scenarios or states may violate national waters or airspace to send political signals. Any such actions entails considerable unintended risks through misunderstandings or accidents, including environmental damage, as evidenced by

explosions in three different Russian military facilities in 2019 alone.<sup>45</sup> On top of antagonism between Russia and the West, a number of powers in Asia have voiced increased interest in the Arctic based on strategic and commercial interests. China's ambitions need to be taken most seriously. It has framed itself as a "near-Arctic state". China's influence in the security realm is difficult to assess at this stage, though. It has increased its fleet of icebreakers and its stakes in infrastructure and resource extraction projects in the High North, which is a particular challenge for Russia.<sup>46</sup> However, China considers Russia a close strategic partner and has strong economic links with Europe.<sup>47</sup> It may thus serve as a moderating voice interested in stable seaways and resource flows.

### The Arctic as an exceptional space unharmed by geopolitical tensions is no more.

#### 3.2.3 *Influence on Arctic (non-)cooperation*

Thus far, all parties in the Arctic have worked through the Arctic Council and stated their commitment to the UN Law of the Sea. Canada, Denmark, Norway and Russia have all submitted their territorial claims in the Arctic region within the UNCLOS framework. Nonetheless, the Arctic as an exceptional space unharmed by geopolitical tensions is no more. At the margins of the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in May 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticised Russia and China for their "aggressive behaviour" in the region.<sup>48</sup> These unusually confrontational remarks do not bode well for the Arctic Council, which depends on collective decision-making. Members may threaten to or indeed abandon such fora and thus severe means of dialogue even further, or they may disregard legal dispute settlements mechanisms.

The threat of current dynamics leading to such moves is exacerbated by the fact that there is no high-level intergovernmental platform to discuss matters of hard security. While the Arctic Council proved to be crucial to discuss aspects of soft security, showcased by the 2011 agreement on aeronautical and maritime search and rescue,<sup>49</sup> it explicitly excludes military security. The Arctic Security

Forces Roundtable, comprising 12 nations including all Arctic states, only meets every two years and is thus too loose a structure to face the challenges at hand. Russia did not participate in the 2018 meeting.<sup>50</sup> Other fora like the NATO-Russia Council have largely been paralysed since 2014. There is thus no translation of the cooperative spirit at the Arctic Council to any discussions on hard security. ●

## 4. A Swiss Vision for the Arctic

Switzerland can perceive the Arctic as offering opportunities for sustainable policies and multilateral cooperation.

Switzerland should recognise these risks to the environment as well as to peace and security outlined above. At the same time, Switzerland can perceive the Arctic as offering opportunities for sustainable policies and multilateral cooperation. Thus, as Switzerland and the Arctic are closer than one would think, we put forward a vision for the Arctic. This vision aims at safeguarding research cooperation, which forms the foundation of Swiss actors' current approach to the region and the Arctic Council, but goes beyond it.

Switzerland's prosperity and stability is based on the functioning of the global economy, on trusting relations between states without barriers and sanctions, and on the free flow of goods and people on land and on sea. The eased access to Arctic waterways offers an opportunity for shortened routes to and fostering trade with the Asia-Pacific. However, increased commerce in the Arctic should be

pursued in line with efforts to mitigate climate change and concerns for the local environment. Switzerland is above-average affected by global warming.<sup>51</sup> To mitigate climate change, the extraction of fossil resources should be minimised. In particular for those fossil resources where sovereign rights are not defined yet, a common agreement to not extract them would benefit the global climate.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, to which Switzerland subscribed, include climate action, life below water and on land, and sustainable consumption and communities. Hence, the risks for oil spills and similar disasters should be minimised. This relates to the extraction of resources but also to respective infrastructure and trade. Only vessels meeting highest environmental standards should circulate in the Arctic regions. Finally, the infrastructure that is newly built for the local population but also for the aims of new industries and tourism should be constructed in line with ambitious sustainability targets. The environmental impact of increased military activities and presence, including nuclear-armed forces, must be minimised.

Switzerland's prosperity and stability is based on the functioning of the global economy, on trusting relations between states without barriers and sanctions, and on the free flow of goods and people on land and on sea.

In terms of peace and security, Switzerland is geographically far from being a littoral state to the Arctic. However, as a small state without the means of a great power, Switzerland relies on a cooperative spirit and a norm-based order. Potential security threats in the Arctic endanger all of these Swiss interests and the goals it embraces.

Given increased sea traffic, Switzerland has an interest in more cooperation and communication between states and communities to avoid accidents that could disrupt navigation and trigger escalation dynamics. The antagonists in the Arctic include nuclear-armed states projecting power beyond the region and could threaten global and thus Swiss security. Moreover, a militarisation and potential military confrontations in the Arctic would involve important partners for

Swiss security, namely NATO countries and the Nordic states, with which the Swiss Armed Forces have close ties.<sup>52</sup> Avoiding tensions in the Arctic could promote a cooperative spirit on security in Europe and the stability of Switzerland's partners, possibly beyond the region.

Thus, a Swiss vision for the Arctic entails that geopolitical spillovers into the Arctic are prevented, disagreements are settled within international legal frameworks like UNCLOS, and local disputes in the Arctic are not used for wider propaganda or nationalist purposes. Were disputes to arise despite all best efforts, they should be negotiated and mediated with a regional focus and may be facilitated by third parties, such as Switzerland with its good reputation as an impartial actor. Ideally, the Arctic is kept free of offensive military capabilities and exercises of combat units, following the spirit of the Treaty of Spitsbergen or the Antarctic Treaty, for example, which declare these regions demilitarised zones.<sup>53</sup> Foreseeable increases in military and coast guard activities in the Arctic should serve only narrow, local security interests as well as the protection of communities, critical infrastructure and the freedom of navigation.

Our vision imagines the Arctic as we would want it to be. It pictures the Arctic as an anchor of stability, an area of free navigation and research, of the legal settlement of disagreements, of mitigating the effects of climate change for the sake of local and global populations, of limited military activities and a pragmatic, norms-based approach to security challenges. As such, the region could serve as an example for governance in a spirit of cooperation and multilateralism. ●



## 5. Switzerland in the Arctic: Ways of Engagement

Working towards realising such a vision, various Swiss actors have different channels of engagement.

Working towards realising such a vision, various Swiss actors have different channels of engagement. The FDFA represents the Swiss government in the Council and at related meetings. A full-fledged Swiss Arctic Strategy - a format reserved for contexts and issues of crucial national importance - seems disproportionate. However, a strategic Swiss approach on matters related to the Arctic would be warranted. Such a whole-of-government approach could take the shape of a White Paper across all departments dealing with Arctic-related tasks. It could inform policy-making in and collaboration across the respective federal departments and agencies, e.g. FDFA/EDA and its Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC/DEZA); the State Secretariat of Education, Research and Innovation (SERI/SBFI); the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS/VBS); the Federal Office of Transport (FOT/BAV); and the

Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN/BAFU). As such, the Swiss government could, in a coherent manner, dedicate more attention to this region and increase its engagement. We specifically elaborate on two major ways to this end, within the Arctic Council and the OSCE, while suggesting further options at the international and national levels as well.

### 5.1 Fully Engage Through Arctic Council Working Groups

The working groups execute the programs and projects mandated by the Arctic Council Ministers. They elaborate content and propose policy guidelines. The actual implementation of such policy recommendations depends on the member states, which is why some observers criticise the format of the working groups.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, currently, the working groups can influence the agenda setting of the meetings and shape the focus of the Council.<sup>55</sup>

Swiss researchers are involved in three working groups - the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) and the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG). Their participation allows Swiss researchers to direct attention to scientifically important issues and challenges, and to suggest policy solutions. The current Swiss Polar Policy by the related foreign ministry desk (Sectoral Foreign Policies Division, SFPD) has the goal to promote measures to cope with environmental problems. At the same time, it aims at making Swiss polar research better known.<sup>56</sup> Although the influence of observer states is considered very small,<sup>57</sup> Swiss delegates can, based on findings and suggestions of the Arctic Council working groups, raise concerns and ideas in their official statements at the observer meetings and in the Warsaw Format meetings, a dialogue forum primarily for observers of the Arctic Council.<sup>58</sup>

In order to address specific research areas, the Swiss delegates to the Arctic Council may propose the establishment of a new working group.<sup>59</sup> Given the chronic underfunding of the current working groups, Switzerland may (core) fund such a new working group.<sup>60</sup> The challenge of the current groups is twofold. First, to not address too many subtopics, which would impede the detailed assessment and progress of specific challenges. And second, to address concrete issues and deliver tangible solutions. Thus, it could be fruitful to

allocate research topics to a new working group instead of further increasing the workload of existing groups.

For example, the SDWG's current work includes all topics regarding sustainable development of the region and is considered the "human face of the Arctic". However, such broad activities bear the risk of straining the group. At the same time, reports, guidelines and workshops may not lead to a measurable improvement of human development indicators.<sup>61</sup> Given the Swiss expertise related to alpine and glacial environments, the initiation of a working group focused on sustainable infrastructure may directly benefit the local population (e.g. contributions with respect to potable water and sanitation) as well as carefully accompany the infrastructure development and maintenance.

The working groups can influence the agenda setting of the meetings and shape the focus of the Council.

Second, in addition to an intensified exchange with scientists and ahead of formal Council meetings, we encourage further and broadened regular meetings with stakeholders in business and civil society (based on the annual exchange "*Landsgemeinde der Arktis*" and akin to the meetings of the Swiss delegation to the UNFCCC COPs). Such exchange allows Swiss delegates to learn about concerns and ideas by non-governmental organisations, associations and economic actors and governmental offices being interested or affected by developments in the Arctic region and could be integrated in the Swiss official position.

## **5.2 The OSCE as a Platform to Discuss Arctic Security**

In his speech at the margins of the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the Arctic Council cannot afford the "luxury of focusing almost exclusively on scientific collaboration, cultural matters, and on environmental research" anymore.<sup>62</sup> He is right in raising an inevitable issue while, in our opinion, implying the wrong solution. Military matters and geopolitics should remain excluded from the Arctic Council charter.<sup>63</sup>

In an effort to safeguard the largely cooperative spirit at the Arctic Council, and given other fora like the NATO-Russia Council are too charged and the United Nations too wide in scope, Switzerland may suggest another institution. It is one that was designed as a platform for East and West to seek minimal consensus in highly sensitive and tensely disputed issues: the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

To this day, there appears to be a tacit agreement not to involve the OSCE in Arctic matters. This can be attributed to the desire not to create duplications with the Arctic Council as well as to deal with issues largely on a bi- or minilateral basis, as opposed to a cumbersome consensus-based organisation of 57 participating States. However, given bilateral ties across the Russian-Western divide are severed, the OSCE as an inclusive platform may offer a rare way to deal with matters of hard security. Were tensions to escalate further and threaten remaining areas of cooperation in research or environmental policy, Switzerland may suggest activating this forum on Arctic matters as well.

The OSCE has some obvious advantages in that regard. All Arctic states are members of the OSCE. The organisation gathers regularly, has a permanent structure in Vienna, and has some established touching points with the Arctic that could be built upon, such as the Special Representative on Arctic Issues of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. The OSCE has an existing record of working with partner states, which may even help bring in important actors like China, a non-OSCE member and non-Arctic state, as an observer. Furthermore, the OSCE is not narrowly concerned with only Europe but the entire space of its participating States, which would include the Arctic. It builds on a comprehensive security concept – dealing with the politico-military, the economic and human dimension of security – which suits both Switzerland's approach as well as the challenges in the Arctic. In its existing security agreements, the OSCE does not seek an unrealistic reduction of military capabilities or activities. It focuses on increasing transparency and predictability about capabilities and doctrines through mutual visits, exchanges of information, and verification mechanisms.<sup>64</sup>

The OSCE has reached agreements for continental Europe in that regard, such as the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty or the

OSCE's Vienna Document. A stable Arctic may require extending their coverage or the (re-)establishment of similar formal or informal arrangements on confidence- and security-building measures, even of a military code of conduct. Such agreements would ultimately be aimed at building trust in the field of military security and increase transparency in the Arctic.<sup>65</sup> They could foresee mutual visits of maneuvers or joint military exercises in non-combat activities like search-and-rescue or against pollution or oil spills. Essentially, an "OSCE Tromsø Document" - or, if Switzerland sponsors negotiations and emphasises parallels between the Alps and the Arctic, an "OSCE Zermatt Document" - could complement the OSCE Vienna Document. It would include a naval component<sup>66</sup> and tie Arctic security to European security, a link that exists on the ground anyway given the states involved.

The suggested agreements are highly ambitious in today's context, given the currently low level of formalised arrangements in the Arctic and the apparent unwillingness to discuss Arctic matters in the OSCE. However, Switzerland has chaired the OSCE twice as one of its most committed members. It is a non-aligned state having good bilateral relations with all countries involved, as well as at the OSCE working level in Vienna. As such, it can be an advocate for an involvement of the organisation on Arctic concerns.

### 5.3 Further Ways of Engagement

There are multiple additional ways of engagement with respect to a strategic approach to the Arctic at the international and the national level. As a basis for such engagement, Arctic matters should receive more consideration in relevant government assessments and reports like the Federal Council's Foreign Policy Report and Security Policy Report, or the DDPS' National Risk Assessment, or Foreign Policy Visions like AVIS2028<sup>67</sup>. A White Paper, as outlined above, could capture Swiss activities in and interactions with the Arctic across departments. We consider such efforts necessary to fulfil the stated goal of Switzerland's 2019 Polar Policy to follow and anticipate political developments in the Arctic.<sup>68</sup>

At the international level and at the request of parties involved, the Swiss government can offer its Good Offices, facilitation and mediation, for example, in negotiations on emerging disputes around

territorial claims. Such activities would be based on Switzerland's large credibility as a trusted, impartial actor for international peace that is sensitive to different parties' concerns and changing contexts. On top of that, many other traditional mediators, such as the Nordic states, are Arctic states themselves and thus drop out as impartial facilitators. Switzerland could encourage discussions in various formats at the intersection of governments, experts and civil society, such as at the Arctic Circle Assembly. To do so, Swiss actors could partner with NGOs and representatives of local and indigenous communities. International Geneva could organise inter-community meetings as a space for constructive dialogue on territory, resources and cultural preservation.

**At the international level, the Swiss government can offer its Good Offices, based on Switzerland's credibility as a trusted, impartial actor.**

Finally, Switzerland, through the departments of Foreign Affairs and Defence, may have – albeit limited – means to play a constructive role in the design and conduct of multilateral military exercises in the Arctic. It has participated in previous, NATO-led exercises and could encourage the involvement of Russia as observer or participant in similar exercises. Exercises in which the Swiss Armed Forces consider participation should not involve scenarios that either side could consider hostile.

With regard to international climate change negotiations,<sup>69</sup> the Swiss government could facilitate the elaboration of a joint declaration on the impact of climate change on the Arctic and a commitment by the Arctic states to ambitiously mitigate global warming. For example, Switzerland aims to co-organise a pavilion at the UNFCCC Conference Of the Parties in 2020 (COP26) for the second time, in order to address issues and challenges with respect to the cryosphere (i.e. the frozen water parts of the Earth system). In an effort of "science diplomacy", formal and informal exchange of Swiss researchers and delegates with officials from Arctic states could facilitate a first step towards such a declaration.

At the national level, the Swiss government could try to actively involve the private sector. The design and testing of technologies and materials satisfying requirements in the Arctic is not only necessary but offers new business opportunities. Supporting the link between Swiss institutions involved in polar research and innovative firms or startups could promote both: scientific evidence and cleantech business solutions. Furthermore, more awareness at the Swiss government level on Arctic matters could inform the conduct of business actors involved in projects in the Arctic, including the financial sector, about environmental and security risks.

Through all these platforms and underlying analysis, the Swiss government would be able to establish a basis for a comprehensive and adequate understanding of and engagement with the Arctic regions. It could build on its existing participation in international formats as it deepens its activities in Arctic Council working groups or as it proactively considers the OSCE a forum to address Arctic security matters. Domestically, it could foster a whole-of-government approach to the Arctic and expand ties with different actors who care about this region, such as businesses or civil society. Through these efforts, Swiss actors can do two things: they can contribute to the sustainable, peaceful Arctic that our “Swiss Vision for the Arctic” foresees, and they can change awareness by acknowledging the many links between Switzerland and the Arctic. If perceptions shift accordingly - and our paper can be a part of efforts towards that end - the Arctic will be “as close as you think”. ●

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