

Sweden's Approach to Arctic Policy: Balancing Economic Interests, Security Concerns, and Indigenous Rights

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This article evaluates Sweden's Arctic policy approach, focusing on the country's efforts to balance its economic interests, security concerns, and the rights of indigenous populations in the region. Sweden's Arctic strategy prioritizes sustainable development, environmental protection, and collaboration with Arctic states and indigenous communities. However, the article highlights the challenges of balancing these different components of the policy in an overarching policy model. Analyzing various academic and policy sources, the article provides an outline of the Sweden's security challenges and concerns in the region, including rising tensions between NATO countries and Russia and the potential for increased militarization and environmental harm; it also scrutinizes Sweden's economic interests and the potential risks and benefits that are associated with economic development in the area. Drawing on analyses of security concerns and economic interests, the article emphasizes the need to take into account the perspectives and concerns of indigenous peoples in the region. Despite the identified tensions, Sweden's regional strategy nevertheless represents the robust model for regional policy.

Keywords: Arctic policy, economic interests, security concerns, indigenous rights, public policy

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Introduction

Sweden as one of the Nordic countries has a long tradition of engagement in the Arctic region. The country pursues a comprehensive regional strategy and participates in regional and international forums dedicated to Arctic governance and cooperation. However, the country's strategy in the region and its policies need to address a wide range of security concerns, encompass a variety of economic interests, and uphold the rights of indigenous people – issues that quite often are in conflict with each other.

The Arctic region's significance has been increasing as climate change accelerates and access to natural resources becomes easier. The region with such power players as the United States, Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia is increasing its geopolitical importance due to its strategic location, large natural resources, and potential for offering shorter trade routes and faster transportation. This shift is also affecting many non-Arctic countries, e.g., Ukraine, and means new geopolitical tensions among major states and redirection of world trade routes. Countries that have interests in the region, both Arctic and non-Arctic, have been competing for a share of new opportunities, leading to complex challenges and conflicts.

Geopolitical competition has been taking place in the region with the unique ecosystem and affects people who historically have been relatively isolated. As a result, Sweden's policy approach to the region has been dealing with this new complex situation offering an intricate model that entails balancing economic, security, and environmental considerations. Sweden has adopted a broad Arctic strategy – Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region (Government of Sweden, 2020) – that strives to reconcile its interests in variety of realms. The strategy includes several key priorities that reflect its approach to regional development: promoting sustainable development in the region through the stimulation of economic activities; ensuring security and stability both in terms of interaction with other states and eliminating internal challenges; and lastly preserving the unique ecosystem and protecting the rights of indigenous peoples.

The security dynamics in the region are sophisticated, with growing interest and activities of Arctic and non-Arctic countries, especially the United States, China and Russia among others. This creates security concerns for Sweden, particularly regarding potential military threats from adversaries, while also potentially pushing it away from neutrality, which has been one of the features of Sweden's security policy. Sweden, which would have preferred to pursue its traditional policy of regional cooperation for a peaceful and stable Arctic, has to take measures for strengthening its military capabilities in the area, including the construction of a new naval base in the northern city of Luleå and joint ranks with other like-minded states, especially member-states of the European Union.

Valuable natural resources and the capacity for new transportation routes lay the foundation for Sweden's economic component of the regional policy. The Arctic's mineral deposits, such as iron ore, copper, gold, and diamonds are attracting the attention of the Swedish industry. The melting ice cover in the Arctic transforms world trade and increases competitiveness while offering Sweden an opportunity to be part of logistic hubs, especially concerning trade with countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Responsible economic engagement that Sweden has been relying upon recognizes the importance of protecting the unique cultural tradition, the rights, and interests of indigenous peoples as a keystone for sustainable development. For mitigating the effects of climate change, the country is committed to encouraging renewable energy solutions and is involved in international efforts to protect the Arctic environment.

Sweden's modeling of Arctic policy has been extensively studied in academic literature. In general, the academic literature highlights the complex and multifaceted challenges that the country faces in balancing its economic interests, security concerns, and commitments to environmental sustainability and indigenous rights in the region. Scholars have usually praised Sweden for its efforts to promote sustainable development and protect the rights of indigenous peoples in the Arctic (Coninsx, 2022). However, there have been critical voices criticizing the country for not doing enough to address the challenges posed by climate change and security threats in the region (Larsen et al., 2022).

A couple of challenges for Sweden's Arctic policy can be identified based on the literature analyses. The first cluster is formed by the need for reconciling its security concerns with its commitment to promoting international cooperation and dialogue in the region. The second cluster is defined by the need to reconcile the country's economic interests in exploiting the region's natural resources with its allegiance to environmental protection. Finally, Sweden's vow to protect the rights of indigenous peoples in the region presents a third significant challenge in balancing its economic and security interests.

This article focuses on these three challenges in the country's regional policy, emphasizing the efforts to balance its economic interests, security concerns, and indigenous rights. Part I provides an overview of Sweden's economic interests in the Arctic with a focus on the exploration and exploitation of natural resources and infrastructure development for shipping routes. In Part II, attention is paid to the country's role in regional security cooperation, including its participation in NATO's Arctic activities and its relationship with Russia. Part III discusses efforts to incorporate indigenous perspectives into regional policies with a focus on a legal framework for indigenous rights in Sweden, the challenges faced by indigenous communities in the region, and Sweden's efforts to promote indigenous rights and engage with indigenous communities.

Through an analysis of these three areas, the article argues that despite this tensions Sweden's regional strategy present the robust model for responsibly and sustainably engagement in the region.

I. Economic interests in the Arctic

Historically Sweden prioritized the Baltic Sea and Finland for a regional engagement but then developed a clear Arctic strategy, first published in 2011 during its Arctic Council rotating chairmanship. Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region has been subsequently renewed. The new regional strategy claims that "Sweden is an Arctic country... therefore has a particular interest in and responsibility for promoting peaceful, stable and sustainable development and contributing to constructive international cooperation in the Arctic" and that "the "Arctic is facing both new opportunities and severe challenges" (Government of Sweden, 2020: 5).

"The economic part" of the strategy refers to the economic potential of the Arctic and significant business interests in the region with "Swedish companies conducting extensive activities in the Arctic, primarily in the Swedish Arctic region" (Government of Sweden, 2020: 48). Economic interests in the region include many areas such as natural resource extraction as the area is rich in minerals, oil, and gas; maritime transportation; tourism and renewable energy production. This provides new opportunities for economic activities.

Large mining companies, such as Boliden and LKAB, extract iron ore, copper, zinc, and other minerals from northern Sweden, including the Arctic region. Boliden, one of Sweden's

largest mining companies, operates the Aitik mine near Gällivare, one of Europe's largest copper mines. In addition to copper, the Aitik mine also produces gold and silver with the company planning to expand its production capacity. Boliden is also exploring and developing other mineral resources – nickel, zinc, and lead with ongoing exploration projects in northern Sweden.

LKAB, a state-owned mining company, is the other major player in the Arctic mining sector which has been operating in the Arctic region for decades. The company's activities primarily focus on extracting iron ore. Within the Arctic Circle in northern Sweden, there is one of the world's largest modern underground iron ore mines. This Kiruna mine supplies much of the world's high-quality iron ore. LKAB also operates a couple of plants, which process the iron ore for use in the steel industry. Swedish companies are also conducting activities for oil and gas exploitation in the Barents Sea.

The oil and gas sector in the region allures energy companies worldwide. According to a report by Reclaim Finance, an NGO focused on linking finance and environmental justice, there are 20 "Arctic expansionists" oil and gas companies in the Arctic which account for 99.3% of the new oil and gas fields under development. The report suggests that oil and gas production in the region is set to increase by 20% (Reclaim Finance, 2021). Conversely, some projects have been canceled due to political conflicts, for instance, Russia had massive plans for extracting shale gas from the Arctic, but joint projects with Equinor (Norway), Shell (Anglo-Dutch), and TotalEnergies (French) were aborted due to the Kremlin's war efforts in Ukraine.

Sweden's economic interest in the Arctic goes beyond natural resource development and includes trade and transportation. The Northern Sea Route, a shipping route through the Arctic Ocean with the potential to be the fastest between Europe and Asia, attracts the most attention. Historically, Sweden financed and fully backed the initiative of the Finland-Swedish explorer A. E. Nordenskiöld to conduct a complete passage from west to east. Nowadays, the route may serve as a link with a key trading partner, China, with many Swedish private companies directly involved in trade and production there.

Notably, in 2018 Sweden's government announced its intention to invest in the construction of a deep-water port and expand ports on Sweden's west coast to facilitate this trade. Sweden has also invested in research and development related to Arctic technology, including icebreakers. For instance, Sweden's Viking Supply Ships has built a series of ice-class vessels specifically designed for Arctic operations. Although the economic benefits in the region are immense, they are also a source of concern, primary because of the negative impact on the fragile regional ecosystem. This growing environmental concerns has been combined with increased tensions and conflicts among Arctic states over resource ownership, which may exacerbate existing security competition in the region.

Nevertheless, the development of new technology also helps to promote Sweden's commitment to environmental sustainability and its attempts to reduce carbon emissions. New Arctic technology expands to renewable energy and energy-efficient solutions for buildings and transportation. For example, the Swedish Energy Agency is quite active in decarbonization efforts, with Swedish electricity production comprised of around 40% hydropower, 39% nuclear, 11% wind power, and 10% combined heat and power fueled predominantly by renewable sources. Sweden's policy aims at 100% renewable power by 2040 and net zero carbon emissions by 2045 (IRENA, 2020).

The Swedish approach to balancing economic interests with other factors is complicated and ongoing. The policy dilemmas i.e. prioritizing mining efforts vs preserving grazing lands,

do not always have obvious solutions. In the far north, there are almost uninhabitable lands, primarily used by the Sami, an indigenous population estimated to be around 20,000 people living in Sweden, which may have economic value. On the other side, it is well-known that “the Arctic’s harsh conditions and its sheer vastness require major investments in infrastructure, production sites, and workforce to develop business opportunities” (Gosnell, 2020).

Swedish scientists and policy experts are righteously sounding the alarm about the extreme impact that the mining industry is having on Sami reindeer herding, including its economy, culture, and environment. A recent study by Larsen et al. highlights the environmental, economic, and social-cultural impacts of Sweden’s poorly regulated mining industry in north-western regions populated by indigenous Sami people. The negative impact ranges from direct and indirect land dispossession, and degradation of pastures to economic effects such as loss of animals, and increased workload on the Sami people; from social and cultural effects such as psycho-social stress, anxiety, frustration, and fatigue to constrained opportunities for Sámi youth to continue traditional herding livelihoods, and the undermining and loss of traditional Sámi knowledge of the land (Larsen et al., 2022).

The extent of these practices suggests that the Swedish government has not yet fully committed to preserving the well-being of its indigenous people and natural environment, especially if it means economic sacrifices. The case of Northland Resources exemplifies the potential risks and challenges associated with economic development in the Arctic region. Northland Resources, a Swedish mining company, operated in the far north, specifically in the Kaunisvaara iron ore deposit near Pajala, close to the Finnish border. The company was established in 2008 and initially generated optimism among local communities and Swedish industrialists due to the potential for high wages and increased tax revenue.

Despite initial support from the government, the company failed to deliver on its economic promises and caused significant environmental damage. The fact that the failure was partially due to external factors, such as the catastrophic fall in world iron ore prices, doesn’t undermine the results of improper or illegal business practices. Northland Resources was eventually accused of illegal business practices causing significant environmental harm. In 2015 the company went bankrupt, but the local community was left dealing with the environmental damage. The Northland Resources case serves as a cautionary tale of classic industrial-era exploitation and the cost to the environment.

Despite many setbacks, Sweden has been leading in promoting sustainable development in the region. Another case of a greenfield steel plant construction in Boden by 2024 may give a positive example of a way out of the obnoxious dilemma. H2 Green Steel, a private Swedish company founded in 2020 by Northvolt, a large manufacturer of green solutions for automobiles, is spearheading the project. The steel plant is expected to be a state-of-the-art technological achievement that uses fully integrated, end-to-end digitalization, electricity from fossil-free sources, and green hydrogen instead of coal, resulting in reduced emissions.

H2 Green Steel aims to revolutionize steel production by using green hydrogen produced from renewable energy sources, which is a significant departure from the traditional coal or coke method that emits significant amounts of carbon. For the project financing the company has enlisted investors with an environmental conscience, including Scania truck manufacturer, SMS group, BILSTEIN GROUP, EIT InnoEnergy, Altor Fund V, and IMAS Foundation. This sustainable industry will bring substantial tax revenue to the local budget, allowing Boden to prosper. The proliferation of similar development projects in other Arctic nations could help protect the environment and attract more investments to the region. The company has also

emphasized its commitment to working with local communities and addressing any potential environmental concerns.

II. Security Concerns

The melting of the polar ice caps opens up new geopolitical opportunities having exacerbated security concerns. As early as 2010 Admiral J. G. Stavridis, then Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, warned that global warming and a race for resources could lead to conflict in the Arctic. He stated, “For now, the disputes in the north have been dealt with peacefully, but climate change could upset the equilibrium over the coming years in the race for the exploitation of more readily accessible natural resources” (The Guardian, 2010).

The augmented military presence in the region could intensify tensions leading to conflicts between nations, as well as other security threats. The former President of Iceland, O. R. Grimsson, famously likened the Arctic to discovering a new Africa (Cryopolitics, 2015) with major powers competing for influence and seeking to secure their interests in the region. The result is a buildup of military capabilities and advanced weaponry.

Sweden is highly acute of these new dangers. The Arctic region is severely underdeveloped, with indigenous peoples unable to propose and impose their strategic vision of the region. There is also no possibility to make the Arctic an exception to other hotspots on the world map in international competition. As the former Finnish Minister of Foreign Affairs T. Soini famously stated it, “You cannot put a do-not-disturb sign upon the Arctic” (Coninx, 2022). Numerous nations are currently in a hurry to conquer the region, following their predecessors’ narratives of a ‘great game,’ ‘scramble,’ or ‘race for resources’ (Kragh, Åsberg 2017).

Sweden’s traditional security stance can be summarized as “non-aligned in peacetime to stay neutral in wartime” (Wedin, 2007: 38). Until recently, Sweden had a reputation among other European nations as an ‘awkward partner’, meaning that it was even initially reluctant to join the EU. However, in a highly globalized world with the ascension of new regional powers, such a strategy seems a bit old-fashioned. Russia’s unpredictable and revanchist behavior has further strengthened the stance of those in Sweden and Finland who advocate for their rightful place in NATO.

Consequently, Sweden desired to preserve its strategic and decision-making autonomy, and maintain a sense of uniqueness has been diminishing over time. Even before 2022, Sweden’s strategy in the region was described as ‘quid pro quo’ or ‘delicate balancing’, nowadays Sweden has developed a partnership with NATO in the region and their joint Arctic activities are a crucial aspect of its security strategy. The country has joined NATO’s Arctic security exercises, including the annual Cold Response drills, which aim to improve readiness and interoperability in the region. Sweden also participates in NATO’s other initiatives such as the Cooperative Airspace Initiative for monitoring and protection of airspace or sharing of security information.

Sweden’s engagement with NATO in the Arctic reflects its commitment to promoting stability and security while collaborating with other countries to address common challenges. Joining NATO remains the most strategic decision for Sweden to strengthen its position in the Arctic. However, this has not been a straightforward path for Sweden. In 2023 Sweden has yet to overcome Turkish opposition to its NATO membership. This accession situation presents a delicate balancing act for Sweden both in the internal domain and internationally as it must balance Turkey’s veto over its stance on human rights and democratic values.

The decision to join NATO is a result of changing security environment and a change of heart towards Russia. Sweden – Russia relations are complex with many mingled historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. Still, Sweden attempts to preserve engagement with Russia and seeks to promote dialogue and cooperation on regional security issues despite Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and territorial claims in the Arctic region.

However, Russia's belligerent stance may lead to further militarization in the region. Russia with its vast border territory, regards the Arctic as its own territory. One of the prominent demonstrations of this stance was planting a Russian flag on the seabed of the North Pole, declaring "The Arctic is Russian" (Pike, 2020). Such actions raise concerns about territorial disputes and the probability of conflict in the region.

Sweden has regularly reported submarine sightings in its territorial waters and has also expressed concerns about Russia's military buildup in the region, as demonstrated by the regular full-scale military drill conducted by Russia. The recent drill in April 2023 included some 1,800 soldiers, up to 15 ships, and 40 aircraft. As a justification for its actions, Russia pointed out "the security of Russia's merchant marine and sea lanes such as the Northeast Passage" (DW, 2023). In response to Russia's military activities, NATO has been conducting a series of military drills in the Arctic as well, including the biannual "Cold Response" exercise, which in 2022 involved about 30,000 personnel, including Sweden and Finland, 220 aircraft as well as 50 ships (NATO, 2022).

Until recently the Arctic competition remained in the background of the international politics. However, after Russia's 2022 aggression in Ukraine, the Arctic has once again entered public discourse, with strong voices represented by Sweden and Finland. Their inclusion in NATO provides more resources to counteract Russian (and possibly Chinese) behavior in the region.

These renewed Swedish geopolitical concerns still need to be balanced with other security challenges. The internationalization of military activities could cause unintended incidents and serious damage to the fragile Arctic ecosystem, in addition to hard security risks. These problems are too recognized by conflicting parties, e.g. Russia so apparently for propaganda purposes (TASS, 2022).

In the new geopolitical situation, the principle of "Arctic exceptionalism," which means that the Arctic should remain a region of international peace and cooperation, has substantial difficulties to be operational. The indigenous peoples of the region are already suffering from intensified economic activities prompting many experts to voice serious doubts about the sustainability of the Arctic region in the current geopolitical and ecological environments.

Counting this "new" security challenge is extremely difficult as it requires a common solution by many opposing parties. One way is to tap various regional and international forums related to Arctic governance and cooperation. Sweden actively participates in such forums and acknowledges that addressing the challenge requires a collaborative approach. The Arctic Council, The European Union, Nordic cooperation, Barents cooperation, and the United Nations framework have been employed by Sweden for promoting a secure and sustainable development agenda.

It is important as well that all stakeholders, especially indigenous communities, are participating in decision-making for the good of regional communities. From a Sámi perspective, there are also cooperation mechanisms between the four Arctic states of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia. The three Sámi Parliaments and the Russian Sámi as observers have created a Sámi Parliamentary Council (SPC). Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region

states that the overarching aim is to strengthen borderless cooperation between Sámi and speak for them as one voice internationally (Government of Sweden, 2020: 17).

III. Indigenous perspectives in Sweden's Arctic policies

Sweden's strategy for the Arctic region acknowledges the importance of perspectives and the rights of indigenous peoples. The Sami, Nenets, and Komi peoples live in Sweden's part of the Arctic region. The largest group is the Sami people, spanning across Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. They have a unique cultural heritage and way of life arranged around fishing, hunting, and reindeer herding.

In Sweden, the Sami number around 20,000 and have been recognized as a minority group with specific rights, including rights to their lands and resources, to practice traditional reindeer herding, e.g. a Reindeer Husbandry Act. According to this Act, only a person who is a member of a Sámi reindeer herding village can hunt and fish within their Sámi reindeer herding village's area (Rennäringslagen [The Reindeer Husbandry Act], 1971).

In Girja's case, the rights of the Sami people to control their traditional lands and resources were recognized by the Swedish Supreme Court decision (Högsta Domstolen [Swedish Supreme Court], 2020). Initially the District Court in Sweden's northern city of Gällivare ruled that the Sami reindeer herders had the exclusive right to hunt and fish on their traditional lands and that the Swedish government had improperly granted these rights to others. The court ruling is the first recognition of the Sami people's exclusive right to control their lands. It also raises awareness of the ongoing struggle for indigenous people's rights.

Recognizing the rights of the indigenous people Swedish government has also attempted to involve local communities in the decision-making process. Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region calls for engaging with indigenous peoples in the region, increased consultation, and cooperation with Sami communities. Many institutions have been established to facilitate rights and encourage cooperation, such as the Swedish Sami Parliament and the Arctic Council's Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat. For instance, the Sami Parliament has the power to decide on matters that affect the community in Sweden, including land and water usage, education, language, and cultural issues.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of Sweden's incorporation of indigenous perspectives in its Arctic policies remains a subject of debate. There have been substantial criticisms for insufficient inclusion of Sami communities in decision-making processes at the national level related to Arctic development. There are also ongoing controversies and debates over Sweden's legal obligations to protect the rights of the Sami people, particularly concerning resource use and preserving their land. Some Sami activists and organizations argue that the Swedish government is not doing enough to protect their traditional territories from development activities in the Arctic region (Civil Rights Defenders, 2021).

Traditionally indigenous communities depend on natural resources for their survival, but economic activities and intensifying climate change are posing significant challenges. The warming is causing permafrost to melt affecting the way of living, and damaging homes, and infrastructure. The melting ice is also reducing hunting and fishing opportunities for indigenous people. At the same time, the natural environment and traditional practices are in many ways connected to the cultural heritage of indigenous communities. The impacts of climate change and "civilized economic activities" threaten the risk of cultural erosion and loss of traditional knowledge. Beyond the traditional way of life, many indigenous communities face significant

economic marginalization and encounter many obstacles in employment opportunities and accessing education and healthcare. Limited economic prospects results in high levels of poverty among indigenous people.

Despite Sweden's efforts to promote engagement with indigenous communities and include their perspectives in its Arctic policies, tensions persist due to differences in opinions regarding the balance between cultural preservation and economic development and security concerns. Among the main issues on the economic side that create tension between state policy and indigenous rights is the matter of resource extraction. Economic interests require the development of its oil and gas reserves, which has negative consequences on the environment and indigenous communities. Many indigenous communities find themselves in new disrupted grounds unsuitable for traditional livelihood.

Sweden's security policy and indigenous rights are two important issues that can be also in tension with each other. Security policy in the region, especially a new round of military activities inevitably affects the living of indigenous peoples. The announcement of Sweden's intention to increase its military presence in the region alarms indigenous communities. For instance, one of the Sami associations even sued the Swedish government over a planned military exercise in the northern county of Norrbotten.

Balancing economic, security and indigenous priorities can be challenging but Sweden tries to navigate these tensions to ensure that "a prosperous Arctic region contributes to our [Sweden's] country's security" which promotes "peaceful, stable and sustainable development in the Arctic" (Government of Sweden, 2020: 1).

Conclusion

Sweden attempts to balance economic interests, security concerns, and indigenous rights within its approach to Arctic policy, but tensions remain. While Sweden's comprehensive Arctic strategy prioritizes sustainable development, environmental protection, and collaboration with Arctic states and indigenous communities, its security policy and economic interests sometimes clash with the rights of the indigenous people. To ensure sustainable and equitable policies in the Arctic, it is crucial to prioritize environmental sustainability and work with local communities to protect their rights.

Sweden's economic interests in the Arctic have led to both successful and failed ventures, nevertheless highlighting the importance of sustainable development. For instance, the Northland Resources mining project caused severe environmental damage and economic instability, whereas H2 Green Steel's innovative steel production plant in Boden provides a promising solution to reduce the carbon footprint of the steel industry while benefiting local communities. Sweden's efforts to engage with Sami communities reveal differing perspectives on the balance between economic development and cultural preservation.

The Arctic region is facing growing security concerns due to both enhancing geopolitical tensions between major powers and the consequences of climate change. Rising tensions lead to changes in Sweden's traditional security "non-aligned" stance and joining NATO. This potential for increased militarization represent a growing concern. However, there may be a danger that Sweden's Arctic policy may not adequately address the security concerns of the region having prioritized hard security over security-related challenges for indigenous communities.

Growing security concerns reflect also environmental consequences associated both with increased military activity in the region and resource extraction, which inevitably affect indigenous people. For ensuring sustainable and equitable policies in the Arctic, it is vital to defend the principle of “Arctic exceptionalism”, a way of keeping the Arctic region as a zone of international peace and cooperation. Sweden has gone a long way to put indigenous perspectives to regional decision-making mechanisms, however, the effectiveness of these efforts remains a subject of debate.

The highlighted tensions in balancing economic interests, security concerns, and indigenous rights in Sweden’s approach to Arctic policy do not undermine the fact that Sweden has developed a comprehensive strategy seeking to engage with the region responsibly and sustainably. This model is worth attention for Ukrainian policymakers as a framework for balancing economic development, and security concerns with environmental protection and cultural preservation.

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