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The Arctic – a hot topic



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“The Arctic is too often mistaken for a mass of ice, while there are over four million people living there. They are suffering from climate change effects disproportionately to the rest of the world... It is crucial to understand that what happens in the Arctic does not stay in the Arctic.” Torill Eidhseim of Norway, outgoing OSCE PA Special Representative on Arctic Issues, 30 September 2021

A new piece of land was recently discovered in the Arctic that nobody had ever seen. Separately the specially designed Swedish icebreaker Oden, carrying a hi-tech scientific team, travelled through Arctic ice never before visited by human beings. This as part of a larger multi-year study programme on climate change effects in and beyond the Arctic. Few have until now taken to heart that the Arctic is the region in the world most adversely affected by global warming. However, it is now a topic at COP-26 in Glasgow.

The Arctic Ocean (or Sea) may be the smallest ocean in the world, but so far little has scientifically been known about it – and this despite its key global impact. The accelerating melting of our Polar cap gradually affects the whole world. Cooperation, rather than competition, is clearly required to face the common Arctic challenges. But to date international competition, rather than strategic joint action on Arctic issues has dominated – and it could easily get worse. International interest in the Arctic is rapidly growing.¹

The leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation in the Arctic has for 25 years been the Arctic Council, currently chaired by the Russian Federation². Its other seven members are Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the United States. Russian policy is, however, just to count itself, Canada, US, Norway and Denmark (because of Greenland) as “real” Arctic states. 13 non-

¹ Even UAE recently contracted Delo Group of Russia to assist the emirates in the Arctic.

² RF has the chair for 2021-2023.

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Arctic states are Council observers, including China³, which considers itself a “near Arctic state” and politically is Russia’s only real partner on the Council. The Council’s secretariat is in northern Norway.

Several associations of indigenous peoples permanently participate in the work of the Council and its formal work indeed focusses on indigenous Arctic peoples, biodiversity, climate, the ocean and pollutants, and on emergency cooperation in this sparsely populated and vulnerable region. This it does through a number of joint technical projects for the common good of the region. So far, so good.

However, the melting ice and with it the opening up of new and more economic global shipping lanes via the Arctic and its sub-zone raises a number of larger and contentious geostrategic issues. Russia symbolically placed its flag⁴ at the bottom of the sea by the North Pole in 2007 with unrecognised claims of sovereignty over the wider area.

So, the race for the Arctic has been on for some time, including about control of the northern shipping lanes. There are three main routes connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans: The Northeast Passage, The Northwest Passage and the less important Transpolar Sea Route, plus the Arctic Bridge between Canada and Russia and the so-called Northern Sea Route (NSR), which is within Russia’s economic zone from Novaya Zemlya to the Bering Strait.

For Russia navigation along its northern coast has been important since Tsarist and Soviet days. The Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) in a recent study⁵ of Russia’s present ambitions in the Arctic towards 2035 highlighted future exploitation of natural resources in the Arctic Zone’s (AZ) as a primary strategic aim of Moscow with its renewed investments in the AZ. Development of the NSR itself and of the ports and the communities along the northern coast are of key importance both economically and militarily to Russia.

An example of this Russian strategy is an ambitious project to connect the Murmansk region in north-western Russia with its large military installations with Vladivostok in the East via a fibre-optical underwater cable. A range of socio-economic development projects are also planned, all aimed at tackling the historic challenge of integrating the Russian Arctic Zone with the rest of the country; for increasing its national security and for exploiting the new military opportunities that global warming brings to the Arctic. The study underlines that “*the Arctic is definitional for Russia’s self-image and identity*” - and Moscow clearly sees its new Arctic strategy as part of its overall confrontation with NATO and the West.

Russian budget constraints may well hamper these plans by the Kremlin. US and EU economic sanctions on some of Russia’s energy projects have already had a negative effect on some of these development plans in its Arctic zone.

³ The other observers are France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Poland, India, South Korea, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland and UK.

⁴ The one-meter titanium flag was put on the underwater Lomonosov ridge, which Moscow claims to be connected with the Russian continental shelf.

⁵ “Russia’s Ambitions in the Arctic Towards 2035” by Dr. Pär Gustafsson, October 2021 (FOI Memo: 7624).

The Biden administration clearly has its hands full at home and is not seeking any confrontation in and over Arctic issues. COP26 and President Biden's strategy on countering climate change is currently focused on constructive dialogue and international cooperation on global issues rather than confrontation, including over the Arctic. This entails reaching out to Russia, China and others on technical issues, such as managing environmental degradation, emergency ice-breaking capacity⁶, search and rescue at sea and similar cooperative operations.

However, US and Canada and its northern NATO allies, and friendly countries, are now also strengthening their Arctic and sub-Arctic military capabilities. Canada has, somewhat belatedly, recruited its *Inuit* population to help monitor and guard its northern anti-ballistic missile radar installations, for a long time left unmanned, and is increasing its previously limited naval patrols of its northern territorial waters. Non-NATO countries like Finland and Sweden are beefing up military cooperation with NATO allies in their northern regions, where Swedish sub-Arctic warfare training programmes are now in demand at its re-established Lapland ranger regiment.

So, will we post-Glasgow and after the planned summit meeting of Presidents Xi and Biden see more constructive global cooperation generally - and more specifically on Arctic questions? Global warming mitigation aside, one aspect that will hopefully develop over time is free, unhindered and environmentally safe commercial navigation along the new Arctic sea passages. At best that could save both on energy waste and overall transport costs from, say, China to Europe. It should ideally be in everyone's best interests.

However, a further militarisation of the Arctic and the Arctic zone in Russia, followed by natural NATO responses to this, regrettably seem more likely. The Russian Northern Fleet already comprises substantial land forces and is now being further strengthened to be able to protect the exploitation of the natural resources of the region, including seabed raw materials. Many older Russian naval and air force installations there have recently also been refurbished and modernised, all part of the current Arctic strategy to 2035 to tie the area more closely economically - and militarily - to the vast Russian landmass.

Add to this China's already demonstrated interest as a "near Arctic state" with its rapidly growing naval capability, already so aggressively on display in the South China Sea - and the risks for confrontation and military incidents in the Arctic are likely to grow.

Unlike the Antarctic, where activities formally are regulated internationally by the Antarctic Treaty⁷, no such treaty so far exists for the Arctic. One could hope that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which has very detailed provisions, will be strictly applied in the coming development of the Arctic. If applied and followed in good faith UNCLOS, complemented by similar adherence to the International Maritime Organisation's (IMO) conventions, could ensure a respectful and collective use of the Arctic by the international community for the common good.

⁶ Generally speaking in short global supply.

⁷ Signed in Washington in 1959 by the 12 countries whose scientists had at that time been active in and around the Antarctic.

However, present realities in our multipolar world, including the weakening of genuine multilateralism and respect for international law would indicate more troublesome Arctic scenarios.

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