

NOVEMBER 20-22, 2009

ARCTIC SECURITY: THE NEW GREAT GAME?

— Daniel P. Fata

For centuries, the Arctic region, a vast and frozen area sitting atop the Earth and rich in natural resources, has been largely free of commercial and military traffic. The Arctic nations of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States have long maintained that this region, which covers more than 30 million square kilometers and equals one-sixth of the world's landmass, should remain peaceful and conflict-free. However, in recent years, the region's isolated existence has come under threat due to a marked increase in commercial and fishing traffic as well as a move by at least one littoral state to stake a national claim to part of it.

The region's littoral states as well as China, Japan, the EU, and others have begun to look at the Arctic as an area for possible new transit routes, energy supplies, and fishing grounds. Growing fossil fuel needs and depleted national fisheries are forcing countries to look for new areas of resource wealth. Some have even dubbed the Arctic a "frozen" or "northern" Saudi Arabia when it comes to potential oil and gas reserves.

Climate change and innovations in technology (including seabed mapping, GPS, and transportation) are making it easier for countries and private companies to explore the Arctic. And while many are looking at the Arctic as an area of opportunity, the littorals are quite concerned about the national security implications of a navigable sea lane or "Northwest Passage" through the Arctic and northern Canada, connecting the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans.

They are focused on what this may mean in terms of increased military vessel and commercial shipping traffic, environmental damage, smuggling,

trafficking, as well as the corresponding increase in national-level expenditure of resources necessary to monitor and possibly react to such activities in the Arctic.

Russia plants a flag

To add confusion and anxiety to the mix, the Arctic remains a disputed maritime area, meaning that no one nation formally owns parts of the frozen territory. Nor have international boundaries formally been agreed upon. In fact, some countries continue to maintain overlapping and disputed boundaries within the region. In 2007, Russia laid claim to parts of the Arctic seabed—a first in world history and an act that has been challenged by Canada, the United States, and Norway. On October 30, 2009, Russian officials said they would begin undertaking a three-year extensive research effort to map the Arctic seabed in order to justify its territorial sovereignty claim, something that may well encourage other nations to do the same.

These developments have raised security and environmental concerns about the region and have helped bring attention to questions of whether the Arctic can remain an area of cooperation and, if so, how collective resources should be applied to address the developing trends and threats. In May 2008, the five circumpolar littorals signed the Ilulissat Declaration, in which they officially declared their aim of keeping the Arctic as a region of peace and cooperation and of settling overlapping territorial claims. To date, though, no clear, enforceable game plan or implementing mechanism has been agreed to actually provide for such an outcome. How the littorals and the international community bring about such cooperation—and avoid bureaucratic inertia in addressing this issue

or, worse, allow competition among nations to take hold—will be the key to maintaining the world's northernmost reserve as an area for peaceful and cooperative interaction.

Grounds for Competition

The changing environmental situation in the Arctic has been well-documented in recent years. It is believed that there has been a 39 percent decrease in seasonal (meaning summer) ice coverage during the past two decades. The continued overall decrease in multi-year ice is expected to continue, and some have predicted that the Arctic could be seasonally ice free by summer 2030.

The melting of multi-year ice has increased the likelihood that large vessels will have the ability to sail during summer months into previously non-navigable Arctic waters. As NASA reported on September 3, 2009, “The northern, or preferred, route through the Northwest Passage has been navigable a few times, and it appeared wide open in satellite imagery in 2007. The route that [Roald] Amundsen followed has opened periodically since the turn of the 21st century.”

The Amundsen route was again opened in August 2008. On September 12, 2009, the first of two German-origin commercial cargo vessels, owned by the Beluga Group, successfully sailed the Northwest Passage and delivered goods to Japan, South Korea, and Russia. The ships each saved 4,000 kilometers from their journey and thus demonstrated to the world that navigating a northern commercial shipping route is possible.

In addition to a possible increase in commercial traffic, there is concern that fishing trawlers from around the world may descend upon the north Pacific and attempt to exploit the newly-navigable waterways in order to harvest the (likely significant but as yet undocumented) fish stocks resident in the Arctic. Finally, as the World Wildlife Foundation has noted, the Arctic holds the world's largest remaining gas reserves and some of its largest undeveloped oil reserves and is seen by the oil industry as the “final frontier for hydrocarbon development.” Such a claim is supported by facts provided in July 2008 by the U.S. Geological Survey, which found that “the area north of the Arctic Circle has an estimated 90 billion barrels of undiscovered, technically recoverable oil, 1,670 trillion cubic feet of technically recoverable natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of technically recoverable natural gas liquids in 25 geologically defined areas thought to have potential for petroleum.”

Security challenges

With this much potential resource wealth, the likely future volume of shipping and fishing traffic and other activities—such as exploration and drilling—could be exponentially higher than today. The risk of resource competition among neighboring states as well as non-littoral parties is also high. These factors translate into at least three immediate threats that are increasingly on the agendas of the littoral states. These include environmental damage, military missions, and illicit activity.

Foremost in the minds of those seeking to protect the Arctic from resource exploitation and environmental damage are the concerns that too much activity in this fragile and understudied ecosystem could result in permanent changes in animal species and the broader environment. Experts most frequently cite the fact that increased maritime activity could likely result in an acidification of the waters, air and water pollution, and the introduction of new species of organisms and life that would be transported by ships into the Arctic.

The concern over the consequences of increased naval traffic during summer months is even more justified given the lack of proper monitoring and surveillance equipment by the littoral nations as well as inadequate search-and-rescue capabilities. This has made many extremely nervous about what the response would be—and by whom—should a ship (passenger, cargo, or oil tanker) run into problems. Even more alarming is what would happen if a passenger vessel sank or an oil tanker ruptured and no one knew it had happened until hours or possibly days later.

The opening up of northern sea lanes and the quest to formally claim parts of the Arctic seabed as national territory has also increased the possibility for a militarization of the Arctic region. Current military activities—such as airborne reconnaissance and submarine patrols as well as military escorts of icebreaker-led seabed mapping exercises—are not always transparent to neighboring nations and may well send the signal that the Arctic is no longer an area destined to remain peaceful and cooperative. And with so much potential wealth at stake, the possibility for unintended but still rapid escalation of military activity cannot be ruled out.

It is also quite possible that, with an increase in commercial maritime traffic in northern waterways, clever traffickers may also seek to exploit the vast openness of the Arctic region to attempt to smuggle illicit goods such as drugs, weapons, and

people into the littoral states' territories. Given the current paucity of monitoring devices and personnel that can patrol the vastness of the Arctic region, such undertakings by traffickers and criminals, while likely expensive and time-consuming, may not be so difficult to execute.

Taking Arctic responsibility

If these are the dynamics at play in the Arctic, who has responsibility for ensuring there is a cohesive strategy to address the challenges and opportunities that are emerging? Clearly, the littoral nations bear the bulk of the burden and responsibility for such tasks. Each nation has its own sets of rules and policies to consider and follow. However, for decades a few common institutions have been coordinating littoral policy toward the Arctic. These organizations include the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council as well as international organizations that include both littorals and non-littorals such as NATO, the EU, the North Atlantic Coast Guard Forum, and the United Nations.

Their primary role has ranged from discussing security and the environment to maritime and trade issues as well as organizing workshops and occasional joint exercises. The UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) is often referred to as the document that guides legal cooperation in the Arctic along with various fisheries and environmental agreements. The upcoming Global Climate Conference in Copenhagen will also be a key opportunity for nation states and other parties to raise their concerns about developments in the region.

The U.S. government has paved the way in proactively limiting the industrial fishing of nearly 200,000 square miles of U.S. waters in the northern Pacific area until more scientific studies can be conducted to better understand how fragile the environment is. This move by the United States to develop a comprehensive approach toward the Arctic has been conducted by two successive presidential administrations. During the past year, both the EU and Russia have also announced their own Arctic strategies and Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Canada continue to push for greater attention and effort to be exerted on Arctic security issues.

Fostering cooperation, not competition

As nations and individuals consider what steps need to be taken to prevent the Arctic from becoming the next "great game," the following

suggestions would seem to encapsulate important elements of any sensible approach:

- Conduct comprehensive, multidimensional studies to determine the current state of the Arctic region and assess the greatest risks to the environment in the coming years.
- Resolve outstanding border disputes. As noted by Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Store at a NATO Seminar in Reykjavik in January 2009, resolving existing border disputes among the Arctic littoral nations "could release a huge potential for long-term cooperation" and "would make it possible to ensure long-term energy supplies and energy security."
- Develop areas for joint cooperation and hold joint annual exercises among littorals, non-littorals, and international organizations such as NATO, the EU, and the UN in maritime disaster response, air and sea rescue, and scientific exploration (including seabed mapping and oil, gas, and fisheries evaluations).
- Insist on greater transparency, information sharing, and intelligence sharing in relation to all forms of military activities. Consideration should be given to establishing a clearinghouse for tracking all such military traffic and information. Alternatively, the Arctic Council could take this on as a key task.
- Notify littoral governments of commercial and military ships traversing national waters in the Arctic. The Canadian Prime Minister announced in 2008 that all ships should notify Canadian government agencies before entering Canada's internal waters. Such a move is critical for transparency as well as for ensuring that the responsible Canadian entities are tracking vessel movements within Canada's waterways and stand ready to assist in the event that distress or disaster occurs. Such a policy should be insisted upon by all circumpolar littoral states, and a clearinghouse should be established to track such data.
- Create incentives for public-private international partnerships to assist with the myriad of needs associated with tracking developments in the Arctic region. The private sector—both corporations and NGOs—bring a good deal of expertise and resources to the table. There are many that are interested in the Arctic. Such actors should be seen as enablers and force multipliers in carrying out a collective and cooperative Arctic strategy.

Quite possibly, the greatest achievement of the littoral states with regard to the Arctic has been their ability thus far to keep the region peaceful and relatively tension-free. Their collective effort to bring attention to the dynamically changing environment in the north is certainly noteworthy. But it is not enough. The littoral parties, working with non-littorals and international organizations, must seek to ensure that the Arctic remains characterized by much of the status quo in terms of peace and cooperation and that the region does not become an area for competition, resource exploitation, and environmental ruin. Such a goal cannot be accomplished without

proactive measures being taken by the littorals as well as key international organizations. The risk of doing nothing could very well have far-reaching environmental, economic, and military consequences, some that we may not yet even be able to comprehend.

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