

The Arctic: A New Frontier for Militarisation and Great Power Competition

Synopsis

Following the existent power struggle and competition to become the hegemonic power throughout the 20th century, the world order changed significantly after the Cold War's demise. However, the end of the cold war helped usher in a new era of polarity in terms of the global power dynamic. Power dynamics have changed, so have the avenues of animosity. With the growing insistence by great powers in the current world order always gain the upper hand; these powers have now diverted their focus towards the arctic due to the aftermath of climate change and the region's growing strategic importance.

The evolving world order and why the Arctic matters

This constant strife for power has often led to change in power dynamics and created power vacuums. However, in international politics, power vacuums don't necessarily persist for too long, as a newer power always takes its role, forever shifting hegemonic status. This often leads to more contemporary forms of hostilities between different factions through different avenues. The most recent such standoff is the Cold War, which started from an ideological battle and eventually evolved into something much bigger, following great power competition.

Be that as it may, even throughout all these struggles and hostilities, one region, in particular, has enjoyed geopolitical stability, cooperation. The region in consideration is the Arctic, a region referring to the five Arctic coastal states, including Canada, Denmark (with Greenland and the Faeroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Russia and the United States or the eight full member states of the Arctic Council. This is a region where great powers have, to a certain extent, refrained from engaging, giving it an accolade of "exceptionalism." it is, although, necessary to mention that the arctic itself, has enjoyed this "exceptionalism" stemming from several factors, such as lack of economic opportunities, previous inaccessibility into the region, and overall lack of knowledge about the resource-rich region, alongside the fact that the arctic was also a region which was highly militarized by the Soviet Union.



Image1: Alarming loss of Arctic sea ice [Source: Physorg]

However, these are environmental times, with the dire consequences of climate change looming over our heads. The implications of climate change have reached far and wide and continue to do so, with the arctic facing possibly the most damage due to climate change. Nonetheless, with the polar ice caps melting and the loss of arctic sea ice at the rate of 13 percent per decade, new opportunities have surfaced associated with the arctic. There are several reasons as to why the Arctic has emerged as a region of paramount importance:

1. The Arctic is a region filled with resources, holding massive quantities of minerals, including phosphate, bauxite, iron ore, copper, nickel, and diamond. The Arctic Circle is also believed to storing reserves of 90 billion barrels of oil, 1670 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids¹. This massive reserve of resources associated with the Arctic, alongside modern-day technical capabilities, has made the arctic very lucrative for exploration among modern powers. This also leaves room for brewing contestation between significant forces.
2. The strategic position of the arctic between the actors in the global political context does pose itself as a critical location of concern and consideration for the great powers.
3. With the ice melting, the Arctic is starting to highlight an establishing maritime route, with connectivity and substantial economic benefits. This area can garner significant infrastructural investments and developments, although the environmental cost of these practices is bound to be astronomical.

¹ Turunen, E., 2021. *Resources in the Arctic 2019 | Nordregio*. [online] Nordregio. Available at: <<https://nordregio.org/maps/resources-in-the-arctic-2019/>> [Accessed 13 June 2021].



Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Arctic Institute, Business Insider, Canadian Army, Scandinavian defense forces
 Designed by Meehyun Nam-Thompson and Matthew DeMell

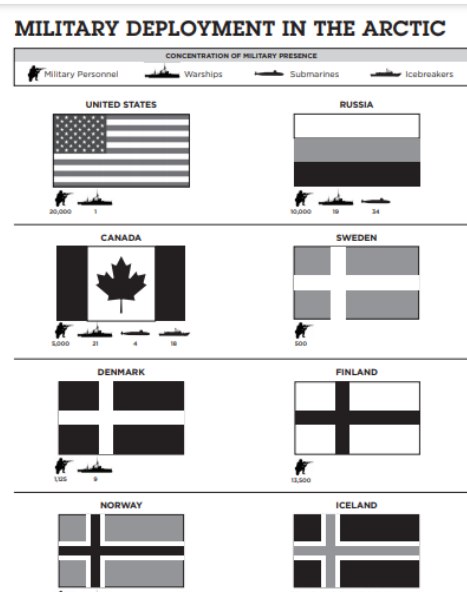
4. With the sudden economic growth spurt of china, and the decline in the U.S.'s influence around the globe, the Arctic upholds substantial national and regional interests in the region, with both countries often hell-bent on having a dominant position in the arctic.

The emergence of the issue, current scenario and future implications

The genesis of this whole complexity is touted to have been triggered by one particular event, when Russia planted a titanium flag in the arctic seabed through two submarines in 2007, reinstating their "claim" in the region due to their proximity in area. This alarmed the west significantly, setting in motion a very gradual arming and militarization of the region, by countries with stakes in the Arctic such as Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and the U.S., alongside primary interest even from NATO regarding strategic developments in the arctic region. These actions have garnered a very sharp reaction from Russia, starting the growth of animosity and the eventual militarization of the area.

Russia's dominance in the north, with its northern fleet based in the Kola Peninsula, reinstates its claims. Ambitions and strategic plans

Missing from the global context for a significant amount of time, China is finally starting to emerge as an actor in the arctic region. China has been claiming to be a "near-Arctic state," a situation that demands involvement from Beijing. As china is still continuing to broaden its influence around the globe, the Arctic



Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Arctic Institute, Business Insider, Canadian Army, Scandinavian defense forces
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will be only one of many regions where China's presence and interaction will ensure the extension of its diplomacy and both soft and hard power implications.

The presence of these two actors has necessitated the engagement of the United States as it wishes. Arctic has a considerable stake for America, especially considering the skirmish between U.S. and China between Greenland and Iceland. America, through its policy papers and diplomatic behavior, has made it abundantly clear what it thinks of the issue about the Chinese investments² in the mineral resources of Greenland, Iceland's Geothermal energy, and willingness to develop a 'data silk road' through a joint venture. Washington took the Chinese attempt to buy a defunct naval base³ and eagerness to build a new airport in Nuuk, the capital city of Greenland, so seriously that the then U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis had to jump in to pressurize Danish government to halt these initiatives, claiming that the United States committed itself to these projects. Further, it is driven the United States to a state of constant paranoia that investments could boost up the economy of Greenland to an extent that it'll look for autonomous authority over itself and free from Denmark. This will have a major setback to the U.S. security commitments in the region and its military base in Thule⁴.

For the U.S., The arctic has been a prime location for missile defence capabilities, surveillance infrastructure, and the region for stationing a limited number of strategic forces. It is also important to the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, although the USA has yet to invest significantly in Arctic capabilities and infrastructure. Notwithstanding, that would possibly change soon enough considering the ever-growing presence and influence in the region.

So far, security implications in the region have primarily remained at a more regional and sub-regional level, although considering the developments that ought to change soon enough. Russia's previous concerns regarding the Chinese interest region were considerable. However, the convergence of these two major powers is likely due to their willingness and intention to counter the United States in the area.

The perceived future concerning the arctic regarding this great power competition is significantly bleak due to the underlying indications of growing tensions between the actors and the underlying stakeholders in the region. The arctic is heading towards becoming rather turbulent, a problem which could be exacerbated by the fact that there are currently no broad political agreements or comprehensive legal structures which can provide the room for the systemic development of the region or conciliate political disagreements over Arctic

² Goodman, S & Freese E, 2018. *China's Ready to cash in on a Melting Arctic*. Foreign Policy, 1 May, Available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/01/chinas-ready-to-cash-in-on-a-melting-arctic/>>. Accessed on 13 June, 2021]

³ Saxena, A., 2021. *The Return of Great Power Competition to the Arctic | The Arctic Institute*. [online] The Arctic Institute. Available at: <<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/return-great-power-competition-arctic/>> [Accessed 13 June 2021].

⁴ Ibid

resources or sea lanes, leaving room for opposing ideals, spurring territorial disputes and increasing hostilities between the major players.⁵

The future, however, doesn't necessarily show the possibility for any long scale confrontations between the relevant players because the damage will be far more significant than that of the achievements. Be that as it may. It is almost certain that the Arctic is heading towards becoming a region for confrontation, tension, race for dominance and resumed great power competition.

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⁵ Gadiloke, N., 2021. *Militarisation of the Arctic Region*. [online] Spsnavalforces.com. Available at: <<http://www.spsnavalforces.com/story/?id=227>> [Accessed 14 June 2021].