Tensions Flare in the Race for the Arctic

For the longest time the Arctic has been perceived as a low military or strategic priority. Outposts in this part of the world would typically be limited to Arctic research, early warning, and meteorological stations. Nevertheless, the big race for the Arctic started as early as in the twentieth century, when various states started to claim lands around the North Pole. Thus, by the mid-1920s, the Arctic was already divided into different sectors by the US, USSR, Norway, Canada and Denmark, with the North Pole serving as the frozen divide between these claims. But after the adoption of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1982, the situation underwent a drastic change – those actors who laid claim in the Arctic became the Arctic states that received an exclusive right to use resources and territories in this part of the world. However, the United States refused to ratify this convention later on.

Recently, the regional game has begun to evolve rapidly, since rising temperatures associated with global warming are contributing to a decline in sea ice. Less ice means that previously unreachable hydrocarbon resources can now be accessed and transported along a new ice-free Arctic shipping route.

It’s been pointed out that two such routes, the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which runs along Russia’s north coast, and the Northwest Passage, which threads through Canada’s northern islands, are already under development. As for the prospects of trade along these new routes, experts remain divided on the issue.
So far, there’s been no more than a hundred commercial ships traveling along the Northern Sea Route annually. Moscow is hard at work establishing the necessary transportation infrastructure to make this route a viable alternative to other transportation corridors. It aims at developing critical infrastructure in the NSR, including ports, search-and-rescue centers, route administration, ice-breaking capabilities, oil spill response capabilities and so on.

As for the Northwest Passage, it runs along the coast of Alaska, then passes countless islands of the Canadian archipelago. Essentially, there’s no finished transport infrastructure elements along this route. Also, the temperature is considerably lower in these waters, which means there’s more ice that makes this route less viable, which means that the NSR has a number of competitive advantages over it.

It must be mentioned that the official status of Arctic sea routes is a matter of strategic importance, since some unfortunate incident in this region can have far-reaching consequences for the principle of freedom of navigation.

It’s noteworthy that the ice extent of the Arctic reaches 8 million square miles. As for the much-touted undeveloped riches of the Arctic, nobody is sure what may be hidden behind its glaciers. Some argue that no less than 13% of the world’s undiscovered oil (90 billion barrels) waits under these barren lands. That’s enough to satisfy the global demand for gasoline for a couple of years. There’s estimates that claim that the Arctic holds 30% (669 trillion cubic feet) of the world’s undiscovered natural gas. Some of these estimates were backed by the US Geological Survey report released back in 2008. Understandably enough, these evaluations caught the attention of national governments in the Arctic Circle, since we’re speaking about trillions of dollars in untapped reserves.

However, it’s been pointed out that most of the known reserves are located onshore or within a coastal state’s exclusive economic zones (EEZ), so there is no dispute over ownership.

It’s common knowledge that under international law all countries have exclusive use of the resources in and under the ocean within 200 miles of their territory. The continental shelf extending from dry land into the ocean grants the country occupying it resources underneath.

Only a handful of countries have direct claims to Arctic territories. Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States all have land north of the Arctic Circle. At the same time, China has also been trying to embark on a quest for influence in the region by describing itself as a “near-Arctic state,” but its ambitions have so far been hindered by the fact that it doesn’t actually have any territory there.

It’s been pointed out that the Arctic is transforming and re-emerging as an important region. New economic prospects in energy, mineral and maritime transport sectors offer significant opportunities for traditional Arctic states, some of which are already active players in the region, and some of which are slowly turning their attention towards the Arctic.

It’s of little wonder then that states are developing strategies for ensuring their firm foothold in this region of the world.

Russia has a legitimate vested interest in the economic development of the Arctic, just like it’s interested in ensuring security across its vast expanse. For instance, it has been seeking ways to project its sovereign authority in its wide Arctic region through improved border control, to provide safety and security especially along the Northern Sea Route, and to maintain credible forces to secure critical infrastructure for years.

Analysts say that these activities are prudent, given the importance of the North to Russia’s future economic development plans and the increasing permeability of Russia’s vast northern borders and the anticipated increase in commercial shipping along Russia’s north as Arctic sea ice melts.

While Russia seeks to modernize and project hard power in the Arctic, it is a pragmatic player that has relied on international cooperation to maintain stability conducive to economic activity in the region.

Back in the Cold War days, the Arctic acted as a frontier between NATO and the Soviet Union, and was peppered with military bases and expensive hardware. When in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR mutual hostilities eased up, most of these assets were dismantled. However, these days relations between the West and Russia have frozen over yet again, the both sides are edging back toward a Cold War footing.

Under these circumstances, it’s a worrisome development that the new Arctic Doctrine presented at the end of the last year by the US Department of Defense was aimed at blocking Russia’s NSR, with military brass putting an emphasis on the Arctic playing a pivotal role for US national security. It’s clear that this doctrine is aimed at
weakening the strategic competitors of the United States – Russia and China in this part of the world. Washington seems to be really worried by the Northern Sea Route, as it is convinced that this project is an attempt undertaken by its strategic opponents – Moscow and Beijing – to capture strategically important areas in the northern latitudes.

At the same time, it should be noted that in recent years the United States has been really vocal about its primacy over the Arctic, while putting an emphasis on its security considerations. It is important to mention that some of the elements of the American architecture of strategic deterrence, like missile defense systems and early warning posts have already been relocated to the Arctic. In addition, according to US military experts, Washington is convinced that the Northern Sea Routes is not just a route that can sustain the global economy, but also a path that can allow the US military to quickly transport its troops around the globe.

Last year, the White House made an attempt to make Canada forget about its exclusive right to the Northwest Passage guaranteed by the UN Convention, and now it is trying to make its NATO allies force Russia into abandoning its ambitions in the Arctic, which could lead to a truly dangerous situation. The key question is whether current geopolitical tensions will permit that scenario to come to fruition.

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