US is Trying to Intensify Competition for the Arctic

In the old days, the great powers divided the world according to the old rules of sovereignty. Whoever was first to plant their flag owned the land with its resources if there was an opportunity to protect it. Today, while the polar ice in the Arctic melts at an unprecedented rate, the world’s leading global actors continue to view this region as a no man’s land, actively seeking to seize it, despite the change of eras and the prevalence of international law over cowboy conquest. As a result, the region has become an active arena of competition in recent years.

According to scientific forecasts, by 2040, the Arctic Ocean will be completely free of ice in the summers. This circumstance has already made it possible to create two new shipping routes: the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which runs along the Arctic coast of Russia, and the Northwest Passage, which runs through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. Thanks to these routes, transport routes of goods between Europe and Asia will be reduced by 40%. And since 90% of world trade is carried out by sea, even a slight increase in the use of these routes will have a significant impact on the global economy.

The increased interest of many countries in the Arctic in recent years comes from the fact that (according to not yet complete forecasts) it accounts for 3% of the world’s oil reserves (90 billion barrels), 30% of gas fields (19 trillion cubic meters of gas and 44 billion barrels of condensate), as well as significant deposits of uranium, rare earth minerals, gold, diamonds, and fisheries.

During the Cold War, the Arctic was at the forefront of the struggle between NATO and the Soviet Union. There were many military bases and various military equipment in that area. While the USSR was alive, the Arctic was conditionally divided into sectors, along the meridians converging to the pole, passing tangentially through the
eastern and western borders of the Arctic nations. In this situation, the USSR and Canada became the wealthiest owners of the Arctic territories. Even little Denmark was not offended since the giant island of Greenland belonging to it allowed to lay claim to the third largest piece of the “Arctic pie.” After the collapse of the USSR, this hostility in the Arctic initially seemed to subside. Many military facilities were dismantled. In 2010, the issue of the maritime border between Russia and Norway was also settled. However, in recent years, relations between the West and Russia have cooled again. There is a return to the positions of the Cold War although the ice barrier separating them gradually melts.

Even though there are few apparent precursors to a full-scale conflict in the Arctic, the geopolitical rivalry in this region between old enemies and new competitors is noticeably intensifying, primarily through the fault of the US. Starting off with the territorial claims recently intensified by the US and emphasized promotion of the idea that the Arctic is a "common land." To deal with territorial issues objectively, the US is related to the Arctic only through Alaska, while Russia, Canada, or Norway have more significant Arctic areas and have greater territorial and legal rights in the Arctic than the United States.

The development of the Arctic is a natural and vital process for Russia. The country's future depends on it. One-fifth of Russia's territory is located beyond the Arctic Circle. That is why the Russian authorities attach great importance to the development of the Arctic region, the creation and development of a single national transport and logistics infrastructure - the Northern Sea Route.

China has also begun to show a noticeable interest in the Arctic recently, realizing the potential gain from the development of the NSR jointly with Russia and the exploitation of the natural resources of this region. To this end, Beijing sends icebreaker ships there and conducts civilian research in the northern latitudes. Thus, Xuelong 2, the newest Chinese icebreaking research vessel, completed the 12th Chinese expedition to the Arctic in September, having overcome about 15,000 nautical miles and completed a significant list of research tasks related to climate change, environmental protection in the Arctic, and collection of samples. A new shipbuilding complex was erected in Bolshoy Kamen, Primorsky Krai, with the participation of China and representatives of other neighboring countries in the Asia-Pacific region. At this shipyard, Rosneft has recently begun the construction of the first ice-class shuttle tanker Valentin Pikul with a deadweight of 69,000 tons.

However, the US, having emphasized strengthening its military potential in the Arctic, reacts very jealously to Chinese activity in the region. "China is trying to play a prominent role in the Arctic, but at the same time violates international norms and rules. There is a danger that China's predatory economic activities will be repeated in the Arctic," says a US federal government report published in June.

But by its actions, not Beijing, but Washington is creating the ground for a hybrid war in the Arctic. Its direct evidence is the appointment of Randy "Church" Kee, a retired US Air Force major general, as Senior Advisor for Arctic Security Affairs of the Department of Defense's sixth and newest regional center to ensure a "stable, rule-based order in the Arctic." Thus, the US has created its own center of military control in the Arctic, whose purpose is to ensure a comprehensive American presence in this region with the aim of militarily ousting Russia and other states “undesirable for the US” from the Arctic. In April, General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced that the Arctic would become a region in the future, where Russia, China, and the United States will compete.

To gain a military advantage in this region, as follows from many publications of the American media, the United States intends to intervene more actively in the areas of responsibility of other countries in the Arctic, i.e. Canada, Norway, and Denmark. In particular, by increasing control over Greenland despite Denmark's sovereignty over this territory. At the same time, one should not forget that in 2019, former US President Donald Trump had already insisted on buying this island from Denmark so that the Americans could place military bases there, but Denmark refused. Perhaps, shortly, the United States will again press on this issue.

Under an agreement signed in April, the United States will use four large military facilities of the Norwegian Armed Forces in the Arctic and build its military facilities at Ramsund.

In this context, and the context of the US military aspirations in the Arctic, the recent incident should be mentioned involving the incursions of US Navy destroyer USS John C. McCain into the Peter the Great Gulf, which is part of the Russian inland Sea of Okhotsk. This incursion is like an experiment with a simultaneous demonstration of American disregard for the Maritime Boundary Treaty.

In the circumstances outlined, undermining Russia's policy in the Arctic, discrediting the activities of the Russian
authorities in the establishment and use of the NSR has recently become the main goals of Western propagandists. Information countermeasures in this area have intensified significantly because, following international rules, Russia assumed the Chairmanship of the Arctic Council for two years in 2021, which will allow it to advance its priorities in the development of the Arctic.

One of the main theses of Western Russophobic propaganda was the alleged unacceptability of Russia's sole control over the NSR, which, in particular, was voiced in the report of RAND Corporation "Exploring Gaps in Arctic Governance", and at the NATO summit in June 2021. The main emphasis was on Russia's control over the NSR, which Russia founded and has been developing; it allegedly should belong to the international community to "avoid armed conflicts." It looks like a veiled threat from the Western world to Russia.

In addition, the United States and its henchmen Western propagandists have recently begun to emphasize that supposedly "economically insolvent Russia cannot afford to develop the Arctic in full fledge." In particular, the report of the Carnegie Moscow Center titled Russia in the Arctic—A Critical Examination has been unequivocal in this respect.

Another area of criticism of Russia's activities in the Arctic is the environmental direction.

The tendency to increase competition between the West and Russia in the Arctic will undoubtedly continue in the coming years. But Russia is significantly ahead of the United States in this confrontation today. First of all, by its peaceful policy of developing the Arctic and inviting other countries, including the United States, to join Moscow in such actions at various international forums. In addition, Russia already has the necessary resources to protect the entire Arctic territories of the Russian Federation and ensure their security. In particular, the icebreaker fleet and military equipment are being improved. The appropriate infrastructure is being created for the full launch of the Northern Sea Route. Modern conditions are being provided for the life and work of people participating in the development of the Arctic.

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