

**SECURITY PERSPECTIVES IN THE ARCTIC REGION:
FROM COMPETITION TO COOPERATION OR CONFRONTATION?**

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***Abstract:** In the last decade, following the climate and environmental changes, the geopolitical and strategic importance of the Arctic Region has grown substantially. Global warming has rendered it more and more accessible from the economic, energetic, commercial and even touristic point of view, but on the other hand, this fact also represents a concern for some global, regional or state actors. Warming in the region has created a new space, important from the point of view natural resources, but a non-governed space, which a series of governments are willing to attribute to themselves. The situation tends to complicate because of territorial disputes, the activity and military presence in the Arctic region have grown, generating a more and more complex competition and rivalry, however this state does not necessarily suggest an imminent conflict. On the other hand, at present, the region does not have a security architecture generating a cooperation dynamics. The paper proposes a synthetic analysis and a prognosis on the possibilities of confrontation in the region, based on geopolitical, economic, military and non-military interests of the actors in the Arctic space in global context, using elements of PMESII matrix.*

Keywords: Arctic security, natural resources, economic interests, climate change, Arctic Council.

1. Introduction

The Arctic is experiencing rapid change, both as a physical entity and as a political concern. In the last decade, security reports and books have been elaborated about the Polar Region, among the most recent being Minori Takahashi, who in 2019, wrote *The Influence of Sub-state Actors on National Security: Using Military Bases to Forge Autonomy*, and in 2011, the United States Department of Homeland Security, through the Office of the Inspector General has issued a very large and consistent material entitled *Coast Guard's Polar Icebreaker Maintenance, Upgrade, and Acquisition Program*. Comprehensive assessments were

made on human development, economic outlook, maritime activity, climate change, pollution effects, ecosystem functionality, hydrocarbon reserves, and so on. These systematic reviews are based on scientific data or information provided by the eight Arctic countries or research institutes in the field. The accuracy of the data varies depending on the subject and the degree of interest of the states involved. What is certain is that the pace of change is so rapid that these evaluation reports become obsolete, to some extent, even before they are published.

The stakes and political controversies stem primarily from unconventional energy

resources, as oil reserves around the world are on the verge of depletion. The possibility of increasing human activity in the extractive industries, maritime communications, fishing, forestry, construction and civil and military infrastructure should not be neglected either. Against this background, controversies and dissensions have arisen between countries with major interests in the area. Currently, riparian states require certain privileges on and how much they should own parts of the continental shelf of the Arctic Ocean. In a certain context, these territorial disputes should not be ignored, as they can be, at some moment in time, the starting point of important conflicts. Russia, Finland, Norway and Sweden have already announced that they will deploy troops or increase the ones they already got there in order to defend their legitimacy in the Arctic[1]. They drew up plans for the necessary forces, including armaments, the place of deployment, the number of soldiers stationed and the required infrastructure. It can be stated, under these conditions, that the importance of the Arctic is growing in correlation to the economic and trade opportunities it provides.

2. Geographical complex

From a global perspective, until recently, the Arctic was considered an area of peripheral interest, from a geographical, economic, cultural and military point of view. There are several criteria for delimiting the Arctic.

The ancient Greeks defined the Arctic Circle as the "region under the Bear" (arktos), that is the one delimited by the constellation of the Great Bear [2].

As a starting point in the development of new directions of research, it is necessary to delimit the geographical region of the Arctic in order to better understand the opportunities and strengths for which the Great Powers are fighting for supremacy.

In 1997, the interdisciplinary Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program (AMAP), one of the five working groups of

the Arctic Council (AC), set up the region's architecture based on a national attribution compromise.

A 2008 European Commission report identified the Arctic as a source of tension, "with potential consequences for international stability and European security interests" [3]. This statement took place in the context of the underwater expedition undertaken by the Russian Federation at the North Pole in 2007, during which a Russian flag was implanted on the bottom of the North Frozen Ocean, at a depth of over 4000 meters.

The Arctic Circle is one of the five main terrestrial parallels. The Arctic region includes the area around the North Pole, the North Arctic Circle and the adjacent territories of the eight Arctic countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russian Federation, United States (Alaska), Canada (Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, including Baffin Island), Denmark (Greenland) and Iceland.

Of the 8 states with territories in the Arctic region, five are members of the European Environment Agency (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) and three of these are European Union Member States (Denmark, Finland, Sweden).

Historically, the island was a Danish colony until 1953, when it joined the "Community of the Kingdom of Denmark". In 1979, it was granted autonomous territory status, but its economy is still heavily dependent on subsidies from Copenhagen.

3. Legal and institutional framework in the context of economic interests

In this chapter, we will refer to the main legal document (the Spitsbergen Treaty) and the institutional forum (Arctic Council) governing the Region, as well as to economic issues that make this region an "apple of discord".

Also known as the Treaty of Svalbard, *the Spitsbergen Treaty* was concluded on 9 February 1920, initially with 9 signatory countries, namely the United States, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the

Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom (including the Dominions of Ireland, Canada, Australia, India, South Africa and New Zealand) [4].

Subsequently, other countries signed the Treaty in the first five years after its entry into force, including the Soviet Union in 1924, and Germany and China in 1925. Currently, both Norway and Russia benefit from the provisions of the Treaty concerning trade activities in the Svalbard Islands. The Treaty also generated a long-running dispute (which continues today) mainly between Norway and the Soviet Union (now Russia) over fishing rights in the region, starting with the delimitation of the continental shelf in the Barents Sea.

Passing on to the institutional framework, *The Arctic Council* is a high-level intergovernmental forum that aims to promote and ensure cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic states [5]; moreover, AC is “promoting cooperative activities to address Arctic issues”, as well as “full consultation with and the involvement of indigenous people and their communities” within the Arctic Polar Circle [6].

As of May 2019, 13 non-Arctic states have observer status. At the 2013 Ministerial Meeting in Sweden, the European Union applied for observer status, but was not granted it [7]. Thus, the European Union, together with Turkey, are in a waiting position.

Currently, the Arctic Council is about to expand its role and prerogatives to also deal with peace and security in the region, due to several arguments, such as territorial disputes, the modalities of application of the Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the directly expressed interests (such as of China) to extract natural resources from the area [8].

Economic interest in the Arctic region has emerged as the ice sheet has begun to recede, allowing relatively easy access to vital resources such as oil, gold and uranium.

Currently, about 10% of global oil production and 25% of gas production is in the Arctic, and 97% of this production comes from onshore fields in Russia and Alaska [9]. Out of the over 4,000 oil and gas fields around the globe, more than 400 have been discovered north of the Arctic Circle. Of these, 60 are extensive fields. The largest discovered so far is North Slope, Alaska, also containing the Prudhoe Bay field, with an estimated capacity of 25 billion barrels of oil. If there is no massive investment in the North Slope area by 2025, it will not be possible to extract enough oil to keep the Trans-Alaskan pipeline system operational. But obstacles to future exploitation are not only of physical nature. Recently, there have multiplied other types of impediments, such as political (both in terms of national policies and international relations), as well as economic and cultural (referring to the population and community)[10].

4. Clashing security interests of main actors involved in the Region

The changes in the Arctic Region have led to geopolitical tensions, but also to position takings, on the one hand, between the Arctic states and, on the other hand, between the Arctic and extra regional states. Hydrocarbons, which represent very necessary resources in modern industry, desired by all powerful states, can lead to misunderstandings or even conflicts between states.

As we are going to demonstrate further on, most states with interests in the Arctic Region have disagreements over who owns parts of the continental shelf of the Arctic Ocean [11].

A rare, if not singular, example of agreement in this region that is provoking controversies and growing tensions is that between Russia and Norway, in reference to the borderlines in the Barents Sea. The agreement was signed on September 15, 2010, after 36 years different standpoints, as they had been disputing an area of 176,000 km² and implicitly, the rights to

exploit its intrinsic resources; the area translates in 12 percent of the Sea, almost half of Norway's land surface. [12]

The United States and Canada, two neighbors with close relations, disagree over *territories of the Beaufort Sea*, a region of high interest for oil drilling.

Another example is the *Svalbard Archipelago*, northwest from Norway, the subject, as mentioned, of an international treaty signed in 1920. The treaty does not prevent *UK and Norway*, which are, nevertheless, friendly countries, from discussion on its interpretation. However, Norway does not consider that the Archipelago has its own continental shelf and this could lead to a conflict.

At the same time, *Russia and the United States* do not agree on *the maritime border from the Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean* - an agreement signed with the former USSR, but which has not been ratified by Russia.

All these misunderstandings and territorial disputes must not be minimized. The Arctic has been a theater of conflict since World War II. At present, many analysts consider it has become the epicenter of a second Cold War, in which climate change could be the deciding factor. To a certain extent, they can be the triggering point of important conflicts. As a matter of fact, Russia has announced that it will deploy troops in the North to defend its interests in the Arctic region. They could be stationed in Murmansk or Arhangelsk. However, other options are also considered. Other countries with interests in the area, such as Finland, Norway and Sweden, have created similar formations [1].

Despite the legal framework provided by UNCLOS, the warming of the region has created a new, mostly ungoverned, space that states are most interested to assure for themselves. This situation has increased military activity and presence in the Arctic, promoting regional competition and rivalry. The geopolitical framework has diversified, based on an increasingly complex reality.

Lately, there has been a belligerent rhetoric with contradictory messages from

politicians, followed by an increase in military deployments, including training and exercises, both national as well as in cooperation with other states. This does not necessarily suggest an imminent conflict, but highlights that the Arctic is becoming a new space for large-scale operations, which will generate an increased military presence.

The main actors involved are the three superpowers, the United States, Russia and China, but competition for access, control and use of resources in the region remains open. Recently, the European Union, together with the Member States of the Arctic Region, have declared a major interest in the development of the area. The new shipping routes are expected to affect West Africa and some Latin American countries.

Russia

The Kremlin has significantly increased its activity in the Arctic. The abandoned Soviet bases were reactivated, the existing ones were expanded or new ones were built. Russia has made no secret of the relevance that the region has for it. The Russian Maritime Doctrine of 2015 [13] considers the Arctic as a region of military conflict in the future [14]. In this case, a potential military conflict is not justified by a traditional *casus belli*, but by changes in environmental conditions [15].

This year (2020), on March 5, the Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the "Basic Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic to 2035." [16] The new policy paper defines Russia's Arctic interests, objectives and enforcement mechanisms for the next 15 years. It is published at a time when tensions between Russia and its Arctic neighbors are rising, just before Russia chairs the 2021 Arctic Council.

China

Like Russia, China has declared major interests and projects in the Arctic, perhaps even the most ambitious. In 2018, it launched its first Arctic strategy, which raised many questions. China has observer

status in the Arctic Council, describing itself as a "near-Arctic state." [17] China's border is actually about 1,500 km (900 miles) from the Arctic Circle, measuring from its northernmost point. The country has clear plans for the future regarding the Arctic, mapping for itself a kind of "Polar Silk Road", a goal that has already received funding of several hundred billion dollars [18]. So far, China has not invoked any international laws governing Arctic affairs and has offered significant investments in infrastructure to communities in the area, such as in the Yamal terminal, a Siberian natural gas exporter. The United States and other Arctic countries have expressed fear that China will use its investments as an excuse to ignore or reinterpret various laws and treaties that currently govern the Arctic. This is also supported by its behavior in the South China Sea, where maritime law has been circumvented.

USA

On August 16, 2019, *The World Street Journal* reported that US President Donald Trump launched the idea of buying Greenland [19], which sparked many comments and controversies. In fact, he is the third American president to suggest buying Greenland, after Andrew Johnson in the 1860s and Harry Truman in 1946. Of course, the reaction of the Danish officials has been vehement, stating unequivocally that "Greenland is not for sale." In 1979, it was granted autonomous territory status, but its economy is still heavily dependent on subsidies from Copenhagen. US officials believe Greenland is of great importance to US security. A defensive treaty between Copenhagen and Washington, concluded decades ago gives the US military almost unlimited rights in Greenland, where is located the northernmost US military base, Thule Air Base. Located about 1,200 km (750 miles) north of the Arctic Circle, the base includes a radar station that is part of the US early warning system for ballistic threats. The base is also used by the US Air Force Space Command and the North

American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) [20].

It should be noted that between 1990 and 2000, the Russian state was too weak to challenge the Americans, thus they focused their interests on other areas. The United States has thus allowed a large part of its surface capacity in the Arctic to be reduced, remaining engaged only by submarine forces. In 2015, China began deploying surface naval forces in northern waters, both in the Bering Sea and in northern Europe. After March 2014, when Russia resorted to military power to annex territories in Ukraine, its relations with the West have deteriorated substantially. The Russians began to use the forces they had set up in the Arctic as a means of projecting their power against the West. Thus, Norway, Denmark, the Baltic States and the United Kingdom, as well as the two neutral countries - Finland and Sweden - have experienced incursions and interference with Russian air and sea forces. In response, the Americans and their NATO allies began to increase their military activity in the region. The US has activated its 2nd Fleet, which is operational north of the Arctic Circle. In these circumstances, the logic of the security dilemma continues in the area of strategic interest of the Arctic [21].

5. Conclusions

In recent times, geopolitical and strategic competition in the Arctic has intensified. We appreciate that the Arctic remains an area of relatively low conflict and tension, although the region has a high economic potential and geopolitical stakes are significant, and the status of sovereignty is still unresolved. Although there are a number of disputes and conflicts of ideas, they are approached, for the most part, in a spirit of cooperation, not confrontation. As we have seen, as a corollary, all nations with interests in the Arctic Region have misunderstandings about who owns parts of the continental shelf of the Arctic Ocean.

It is considered that the biggest threat to peace in the area is not the Russian military

accumulation nor the Chinese investments, but the Sino-Russian cooperation and coordination both in the Arctic area and on the entire Eurasian continent. This process is taking place in an evolving political and legal environment, which aims to develop and strengthen Arctic governance, as the region becomes more accessible.

Against the background of global warming, the opportunity is created to change trade routes and the increasing exploitation of the North Maritime Route, which is shorter and

more profitable than other freight routes between Asia and Europe, trade changes estimated to reach hundreds billions of dollars.

However, there is the possibility that the existence of the Arctic Region as a topic of interest on the international agenda and the potential tensions Russia - USA / NATO for obtaining control, as well as amplifying China's engagement to be able to turn the region into a conflict zone of geostrategic importance.

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