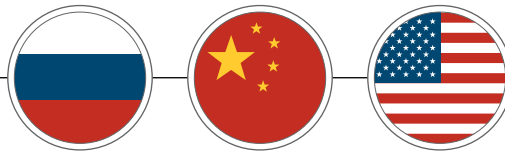




HOW GOES THE ARCTIC?

Zone of Peace or Military Tension?

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The Arctic region, typically known as bitter cold, remote and inaccessible, is the fastest warming place on Earth, both physically and politically. After more than two decades of the High North being mostly disengaged from traditional strategic concerns, the question of whether the Arctic might be viewed as an arena for military competition has reappeared. As the phenomenon of great power competition intensifies, this area of the world is becoming a testing ground for the world's new geopolitics. The authors presented in this issue laid out several matters that may contribute to great power competition and give rise to tensions in the region as well as noting possible mechanisms and institutions for cooperation.

The first major issue is climate change and its effects on the Arctic. There is no doubt the Arctic region is thawing enormously. Over the past 30 years, the Arctic has warmed at roughly twice the rate of the entire globe, a phenomenon known as Arctic amplification. This not only creates opportunities in terms of the region's accessibility, but it also creates security challenges. Security in the Arctic has traditionally been examined within nonmilitary frameworks. However, as access increases, key regional and global players are starting to vocalize their interest in this space. Beyond the exclusive economic zones of the Arctic Ocean littoral states, there have been disagreements about maritime boundaries and other rights in the region. To date, these have been resolved peacefully. But as the ice recedes, routes and resources are more easily accessed. Will this peace hold? The historically strong cooperation in the area of environmental protection among Arctic states has proved successful due to its neutral, nonpoliticized nature. Time shall tell if this region remains neutral.

The eight countries of the Arctic Council — Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia and the United States — have historically sought to promote the Arctic as a zone of cooperation. However, as Nataliia Haluhan notes in this issue of *per Concordiam*, this situation



The Sibir nuclear-powered icebreaker, part of Russia's Project 22220. Russia is investing heavily in Arctic-capable infrastructure. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

has shifted abruptly, mainly due to two factors. The first is conflicting great power policies, mainly between the U.S. and Russia. Both countries recognize the importance of the region and its effects on their strategic interests. The second issue is the growing attention paid by non-Arctic states such as China. All three great powers recognize the potential for greater economic activity within the region and are taking military steps to secure the economic advantage.

In particular, Russia sees new economic opportunities in terms of natural resources, trade and overall quality of life for its inhabitants. For example, in its Arctic strategy released in October 2020, Russia projected economic goals up to 2035. They estimate the Arctic share of Russian gross domestic product will grow from 7.2% to 9.6% and that

over 200,000 new jobs will be created in the Russian Arctic. Additionally, projections for liquid natural gas production jump twelfefold to roughly 91 million tons, and container cargo shipments, specifically on the Northern Sea Route, are predicted to increase from 32 million tons to 130 million tons. Moscow also expects a significant advance in building safety, security and port infrastructure on its Arctic coast. This development should bring advances in health care, education, access to internet coverage and other social infrastructure. All of this economic and social development could potentially increase life expectancy in the region from 73 to 82 years.

Militarily, Russia has reopened previously abandoned High North, Cold War-era military installations, and reinvestment in these facilities has grown. Additionally, incursions by Russian aircraft, naval ships and submarines into or close to other countries' Arctic spaces have become more frequent. Moscow has increased trans-Arctic radar coverage and developed systems for detection and jamming along the Arctic coast. Dr. Pál Dunay asserts that Russia is the ultimate

Arctic state, with more than 24,000 kilometers of border overlooking the polar circle and the North Pole. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the borders controlled by Moscow changed in the West and the South, but nothing changed in the High North. While Russia has clearly stated its economic objectives for the Arctic and moved resources toward those goals, it has also increased its military presence in the area. The question then begs to be asked: Will Russia continue a general atmosphere of cooperation in the region or move toward confrontation?

The next key player in the Arctic great power competition is China. As Dr. Elizabeth Buchanan points out, the Chinese are a potential spoiler in the unfolding Arctic great game. Calling itself a "near-Arctic state," Beijing has not been shy about advertising its interests in the High North. The assessment is that Beijing will not follow the strategic playbook it uses elsewhere (South China Sea, Belt and Road). In the Arctic, it will employ a hybrid model of its assertive policies. China recognizes this is not a lawless region, into which it can slip in and secure its own privileged shipping lanes and

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Two men stroll across the frozen harbor of Dikson Island, Russia, the world's northernmost city. The port, some 800 kilometers inside the Arctic Circle on the Kara Sea, is the gateway to the Northern Sea Route. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



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resources. It realizes that functional governance structures (Arctic Council) already exist and adherence to accepted international laws has been the norm. China's hybrid model will use cooperative, multilateral and environmental narratives to disguise its aggressive, assertive Arctic ambitions. Cloaking its strategic intent with the theme of cooperation, including its efforts to craft the Arctic as a global common, allows China to operate beneath the threshold of overt strategic challenge. If unopposed by the allied Arctic nations and the existing rules-based order, this model will add to China's influence and promote hard strategic competition.

The U.S. is the third key player in the Arctic. Until recently, the U.S. policymaking community was largely uninterested in the Arctic from a strategic standpoint. Not until then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech at the Arctic Council's ministerial meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, in May 2019 did Washington explicitly characterize the Arctic through a military lens and acknowledge hard security concerns in the region. While the term "climate change" was absent from his remarks, Pompeo not only singled out Russia for its military expansion in the region, but sharply lashed out at China for expanding its Arctic interests. When the U.S. released its Arctic Strategy in 2019, it stated the desired end state in the Arctic as "a secure and stable region in which U.S. national security interests are safeguarded, the U.S. homeland is defended, and nations work cooperatively to address shared challenges." The strategy outlines three strategic ways to support this end state: building Arctic awareness, enhancing Arctic operations and strengthening the rules-based order in the Arctic. Furthermore, the document declares that

The Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica sails past the American island of Little Diomedede, Alaska, left, and behind it, the Russian island of Big Diomedede, separated by the international date line on the Bering Strait and a distance of only 3.9 kilometers. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

the cornerstone of the U.S. Department of Defense Arctic Strategy and the U.S.'s greatest strategic advantage is its network of allies and partners with shared national interests in a rules-based order. With the change in presidential administrations in 2021, there are bound to be adjustments, but the overall theme of working with allies and partners to protect the rules-based order will remain unchanged.

The larger international system is changing, and it appears that the Arctic is changing with it. As the Arctic continues to melt, there is hope that by adhering to the rules-based order, this region will continue to be a zone of peace. However, the following issues are entangling the Arctic in an increasing great power competition: the rise of China and its unprecedented claims in the Arctic, as well as its self-declared status of being a "near-Arctic state"; Russian militarization of the Arctic waters; increasing economic and military cooperation between Russia and China; worsening tensions between Russia and the U.S.; and the global rivalry between the U.S. and China. How the dynamics of this strategic triangle unfold will certainly influence whether the Arctic remains peaceful and stable or possibly becomes the setting for a new "Cold" War. It is never easy or devoid of risk to predict the future. But given the current great power competition, the global order and that of the Arctic point toward an unpredictable, unstable and confrontational future. □