Arctic: The New Front

The Arctic: Potential for Conflict amidst Cooperation

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Changes in the Arctic topography due to climate change have resulted in the region, which erstwhile was remote with little accessibility, to being accessible with potential natural resources and attractive navigable sea areas. The prospects have also influenced the strategic contours of the Arctic and brought in many actors that view the region as a resource-rich area with viable commercial interests. The Arctic attraction has gained significance as an economic goldmine with estimates indicating the region to hold about 22 per cent of the undiscovered, technically recoverable resources in the world. The approximate breakdown as per a US Geological Survey report is about 13 per cent of the undiscovered oil, 30 per cent of the undiscovered natural gas, and 20 per cent of the undiscovered natural gas liquids in the world. About 84 per cent of the estimated resources are expected to occur offshore.¹

The Arctic is considered a stable region due to tacit understandings, mutual trust and well established mechanisms that exist between the Arctic nations that are based on international law, existing frameworks and diplomatic overtures. However, there are underlying stress points that cannot be ignored and these include overlapping maritime claims, interpretation of the laws involved (specifically UNCLOS), a growing dependency on the region to fuel national energy and a slow militarisation of the region brought about by nations shifting focus on their Arctic military capabilities and capacities. These stresses could threaten the prevailing peace and stability and lead to a possible conflict where national interests, especially sovereignty issues, clash. This article will examine the growing, albeit slow militarisation that could lead to potential conflict despite the growing cooperation in the Arctic.

Maritime claims and differences

‘Ownership of the Arctic is principally determined by ownership of land in the Arctic, by scientific data, by the international law of the sea and by the domestic law of Arctic states’.² However, the issue of unsettled maritime borders is significant and needs closer examination. Some of the difficult and emotive issues are the Danish–Canadian disagreement over Hans Island, the Canadian–US differences on the Beaufort Sea as well as the differing views on the status of the Northwest passage, the US–Russia dispute in the Bering Sea and the Lomonosov Ridge between Canada, Russia, and Denmark. Although Russia and Norway settled the 40-year-long dispute over the

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Svalbard archipelago, it is a bilateral agreement in a multilateral environment. This agreement cased as a model in application of international law could, however, be contested should any other littoral state in the region feel that it impinges on its interests. Interestingly, the US maintains that the ‘Northwest Passage and the Northeast Passage are international straits that ought to be governed by international laws of the global commons’. The position of the US is severely diluted due to its non-ratification of the UNCLOS and could become an impediment in any future dialogue on sea passages in waters under the jurisdiction of other Arctic nations. The legal interpretations could turn into potential conflict points if not resolved especially if nations deploy their military assets to enforce their sovereignty and jurisdiction in their waters.

**Militarisation**

Given the intent and capabilities of the Arctic littoral states, militarisation in the region has been limited, perhaps mainly to keep tensions at low ebb. In this ‘controlled military environment’, any major thrust towards developing capabilities and capacities could be viewed as provocative and quite naturally upset the prevailing tranquility. Policy statements of some of the Arctic states clearly lay emphasis on peace and cooperation. For example, the Russian Federation (Russian Federation, 2008) refers to the ‘maintenance of the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation’ and the ‘maintenance of the peace and stability in the Arctic region’. The Arctic Region Policy of the United States (United States, 2009) encourages ‘the peaceful resolution of disputes in the Arctic region’. By contrast, neither ‘peace’ nor ‘peaceful’ is mentioned in Canada’s Northern Strategy (Canada, 2009). Canada, as discussed below, apparently lays emphasis on enforcing its sovereignty in the Arctic region.

**Canada**

In 2007, the Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the expansion of the existing deep water port of Nanisivik, Baffin Island and an army training base at Resolute. Both these places are strategically located on the Northwest Passage route. The cost of expansion of the naval base was estimated at USD 100 million. In addition, Canada is looking at adding eight ‘armed’ ice-breakers, with the first expected delivery in 2014. In order to enhance its surveillance capability, Canada in its document the ‘First Defence Strategy’ proposes the acquisition of 10 to 12 maritime patrol aircraft to replace the Aurora fleet from 2020. The proposal also includes sensors, unmanned aerial vehicles, and satellites that will form part of its broader surveillance system. Therefore, protection of Canada’s Arctic sovereignty appears to be high on the priority list. As the Canadian Prime Minister stated in 2007:

Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty over the Arctic. We either use it or lose it. And make no mistake, this Government intends to use it. Because Canada’s Arctic is central to our national identity as a northern nation. It is part of our history. And it represents the tremendous potential of our future.

However, issues relating to costs, financial resources and environmental concerns have resulted in Canada looking at utilising the port in summer specifically
as a refueling base. Notwithstanding this limitation, Canada has been conducting annual exercises named Operation NANOOK since 2007. This exercise is ‘an annual sovereignty operation that takes place in Canada’s Arctic, shows the government’s commitment to protecting and demonstrating control over the air, land and sea within our jurisdiction’.\textsuperscript{7} Until 2009 these exercises were conducted by the Royal Canadian Navy and Coast Guard. The exercise in 2010 also included ships from the US and the Danish navies. It evoked some sharp reactions, particularly from Russia, which called it ‘Sabre Rattling with a commercial interest behind it’.\textsuperscript{8} NANOOK 2011\textsuperscript{9} was a joint operation of the three services and the Special Forces, as well as ships from the US Coast Guard and Danish navy. This exercise had two components; the second part comprised of only Canadian agencies and included a simulated major air disaster and a simulated maritime emergency exercise. NANOOK 2012 expanded participation and included observers from the UK along with the US and Denmark.

**Denmark**

Denmark’s claim as an Arctic nation and access to the area is via Greenland. This accessibility places Denmark with a coastline closest to the North Pole. From being a colony, Greenland has evolved into a status of self-rule. Although autonomous it is still supported by Denmark in areas of defence, foreign policy and sovereignty issues. Greenland provides Denmark with the powers to deal with Arctic issues.\textsuperscript{10} An opinion prevails that Denmark does not have an Arctic Policy. However, in June 2009, the government issued the ‘Danish Defence Agreement 2010–2014’,\textsuperscript{11} followed by the ‘Danish Defence Agreement 2013–2017’\textsuperscript{12} in November 2012. The earlier document called for combining of the Greenland Command and the Faroe Command into a joint service Arctic Command in an appropriate location. It also called for designation of an Arctic Response Force from the existing Arctic capabilities of the Danish Armed Forces. The current document (2013–2017) covers interesting aspects that emphasises the Danish military Arctic outlook:

- Setting up the Arctic command headquarters in Nuuk, Greenland.
- Establishment of an Arctic preparedness force in order to complement the efforts of the defence in the Arctic, and also to be able to assist the preparedness in Greenland, when needed.
- Drawing up, by 2013, a concept for the arrangement, training and exercise activities, as well as for deployment.
- Ensuring adequate education and training, as well as implementing the necessary training sequences to maintain the capacity for deployment in the Arctic region.
- Carrying out a comprehensive analysis of the future tasks of the defence in the Arctic
- Analysis of future tasks and surveillance tests in the Arctic including conduct of surveillance tests in the Arctic area through 2013 and 2014 (this included testing of unmanned aircraft vehicles).

The emergence of these issues in Denmark’s defence policy could also have a connection to the Hans island dispute with Canada. Hans Island is a small island in the middle of the Nares Strait that separates Canada’s Ellesmere Island from Greenland. In 2005 Denmark apparently tested the Canadian resolve by occupying the island. Earlier it had sailed ships to the island. The Canadian response was diplomatic protests
and sending of their troops in July 2005 in the company of the Canadian Defence Minister. Although a joint statement was issued in September 2005 regarding efforts to reach a solution, the dispute still simmers.

The recent development indicates that Denmark is assessing and building its capabilities in the Arctic to ‘enforce the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark and to ensure the continued existence, integrity and safety of the nation’.

**Norway**

Norway was the second nation to submit its extended continental shelf claim to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) and the first nation to get its claim recognised. Notwithstanding the settlement with Russia over the Svalbard, Norway has shown a shift in its strategic orientation towards the Arctic. This is reflected in its shifting of military assets like ships and fighters northward, relocation of the joint operational headquarters from Stavanger in the south to Bodo in the north (just above the Arctic Circle), relocation of its Army Headquarters further north to Bardufoss from Oslo and shifting of its Coastguard headquarters to Sortland. Norway is the only NATO member to have a land border with Russia and therefore understands the requirement of constructive engagement as a useful Arctic policy tool. In a world of high technology driven connectivity and given the size of Norway such a shift of command centres and headquarters can be deemed more than symbolic as it emphasizes the interest and concerns Norway puts on protecting its sovereignty in the Arctic.

**Russia**

Although Russia has the second longest coastline in the Arctic region after Canada, the contours of the coastline with less indentations and proximity to the Northern Sea route accord it two distinct advantages. First, easier access to the region and second, an inherent ability to exercise control over the Northern Passage route. Not surprisingly, Russia is being viewed as ‘the most determined and assertive player in the region’. Six recent Russian actions help understand this:

- Planting of a Russian flag in the Arctic seabed in 2007.
- Issuance of the ‘National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020’ document in May 2009. Although stressing the need for cooperation the also indicates:
  - Setting up of a specialised Arctic Force.
  - The importance of a continued military presence.
  - The use of military force to resolve any competition for energy.
  - That the Northern Sea Route is considered a national transportation route under Russian jurisdiction.
  - Any efforts to change that legal status of the Northern Sea Route would be considered a threat to Russia’s national security.

Some past actions are also indicative of the Russian intent to use military force should the need arise:

- Firing of cruise missiles over the Arctic in an exercise in the summer of 2007.
Reinforcement of its Northern Fleet to cater for additional exercises in the summer of 2008.
Testing of new electronic equipment and precision weapons.
Resumption of Arctic patrols for the first time since the end of the Cold War.

In addition, there are reports of two army brigades to be created and based in the Arctic. These brigades may also include paratroopers and helicopter regiments.

**USA**

Having not ratified the UNCLOS, any US move towards militarisation in the Arctic could be seen as blatantly brushing aside international norms and rules. Non-ratification excludes the US from engaging in any legal dialogue regarding sovereignty issues and would also question its intent. Therefore, it is perhaps for this reason that the National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD 66) and Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD 25) issued in January 2009 looks at the following military issues and not at a specific military force for the Arctic:

- Missile defence and early warning.
- Deployment of sea and air systems for strategic sealift.
- Strategic deterrence.
- Maritime presence and maritime security operations.
- Ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight.
- Preventing terrorist attacks and mitigating acts that could increase the US vulnerability to terrorism in the Arctic region.

While the directive specifies that ‘The United States has broad and fundamental national security interests in the Arctic region and is prepared to operate either independently or in conjunction with other states to safeguard these interests’, it also lays down a strategy that would require ‘the United States to assert a more active and influential national presence to protect its Arctic interests and to project sea power throughout the region’.

It appears that the US, presently, will not increase its military presence except for its maritime assets or shift closer to the Arctic as other nations have done. Another issue is that the Arctic Region is looked at by two military commands—Northern (NORTHCOM), and European (EUCOM), a realignment brought about in 2011. This division could dilute its Arctic mandate and the sequester directive recently brought into force could further affect the US Arctic policy. Although NORTHCOM was allocated the responsibility for the Arctic and coordination with both US and foreign agencies since 2011 the vast geographical extent of the Arctic and the spread of US assets across the two commands facing different challenges could make the task of NORTHCOM a difficult one.

**Conflict or cooperation**

As per the Ilulissat Declaration adopted in May 2008 the five Arctic nations discussed above agreed to abide by the legal frameworks governing the region, specifically UNCLOS, and settle disputes peacefully. However, the dual track of ‘talking cooperation’ and ‘slow militarisation’ does raise questions about the intent behind the militarisation especially when there are existing disputes, pending decisions on claims
for maritime zones and extensive natural resources therein. Nations could argue that the militarisation is to protect and patrol the existing land and maritime zones and also those areas that are slowly becoming accessible, but the possibility regarding the use of force to protect ‘sovereignty’, especially of disputed areas, and use in times of clashing national interests would always be an underlying aspect. The issue could become complicated when non-Arctic nations commence entry into the region. Therefore, although no requirement for a new legal framework for governance was felt during the meeting in Ilulissat it is perhaps time for a code of conduct regarding the use of militaries to be discussed. This could reduce the threat of conflict while enhancing cooperation.

Notes

15. Heather Conley and Jamie Kraut, no. 3, p. 25.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
22. Ibid.