

The New Contestation

The Arctic region is emerging as the site for another Great Game

WILLEM BARENTSZ (ANGLICIZED as William Barents) (c.1550-1597) was a Dutch navigator, cartographer and Arctic explorer. William Barents made three voyages to the arctic in search of the Northeast Passage (more commonly known as the Northern Sea Route (NSR)). During the first two expeditions he reached as far as the Novaya Zemlya and the Kara Sea. The search for the Northern Sea Route was motivated by the desire to establish exclusive Dutch rights to a shorter trade route between Europe and the East.

During his third Arctic voyage, in 1596, he discovered the Spitsbergen archipelago. Barents died soon thereafter, during the return voyage, in 1597. This discovery sparked intense human activity on the then uninhabited archipelago. The fjords around the islands became the scene of heated international competition for sovereignty and for access to the rich whaling waters around the archipelago. This, in a sense, marked the beginning of the geopolitical manoeuvres in the Arctic that continue to this day.

Barents's expeditions helped expand the world's understanding of the Arctic. In 1853, the former Murmean Sea was renamed the Barents Sea in honour of William Barents. Barentsburg, the second largest settlement on Svalbard, the Barents Island and the Barents region are other places named in his honour. The first successful NSR voyage was completed only much later—towards end of the 1870s.

The Spitsbergen archipelago was termed the 'terra nullius'—no man's land. By the end of the nineteenth century, intense whaling activity led to the exhaustion of whale and walrus stocks around the islands. Soon, interest in the islands waned and they lay forgotten. Only a few Norwegian hunters continued to take minor advantage of the vast, distant and uninviting archipelago of ice.

This changed after the discovery of natural resources on the islands at the beginning of the twentieth century. Coal deposits discovered on the islands attracted investors and miners in such large numbers that, to resolve competing interests, establishing the rule of law became a pressing imperative.

The Spitsbergen Treaty of 1920, which granted sovereignty over the Spitsbergen archipelago (including the Bear Island) to Norway served to address this need for the rule of law. In 1925, Norway assumed sovereignty and changed the name of the archipelago to Svalbard—the original Norse name.



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***OMNIPRESENT PRESIDENT** Vladimir Putin was sworn in for a new six-year term at a Kremlin ceremony that was boycotted by the United States and many other Western countries due to #Russia's war in Ukraine*

However, very soon, the high cost of transporting coal to the markets in Europe led to most of the coal mines being abandoned. Since the 1930s, Norway and Russia are the only nations maintaining a mining presence in the archipelago.

For Russia, its interest in mining coal in Svalbard served/ serves as a cover for maintaining vigil at the entrance to the Barents Sea and the gateway to the Kola Peninsula where Russia's Northern Fleet is based.

Geopolitical Contestations

Ever since a significant melting and contraction of the summer ice cover over the Arctic Ocean became observable, the Arctic region has been an area of geopolitical contestation and conflict. The contestations are over offshore hydrocarbon/mineral resources, disputed continental shelf rights and the control of prized sea lanes—the Northern Sea route and the Northwest Passage (NWP). In 2007, the dispute over continental shelf rights flared up when Russia, using a deep-sea submersible, dropped a titanium casket containing a Russian flag on the Arctic seabed at a depth of 4,200 metres below the North Pole.

Today, the Arctic is a region of much geopolitical uncertainty. The search for a sea route through the Arctic has been a long-cherished quest for mariners looking for a shorter sea route between the markets in the west and the east. However, the impenetrable ice which covered the Arctic Ocean for much of the year had put paid, over centuries, to all efforts to find a sea route through the Arctic.

The Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, in 1906, became the first to successfully transit the NWP. It took Amundsen three years to complete the journey, relying heavily upon the Canadian Inuit to survive during the winters. The first ship to transit the NWP, in a single season (in 1942), was the Canadian ship St. Roch, captained by Henry Larsen.

Besides the Northwest Passage, the search for a Northeast Passage/ Northern Sea Route to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans commenced as early as 1525. Tsar Peter the Great, of Russia, commissioned several expeditions through the region. By the seventeenth century, a continuous sea route from Arkhangelsk in the Russian north to the mouth of the Yenisei River in the Kara Sea had been opened for trade and transit. The first voyage across the entire NSR was accomplished by Swedish explorer Baron Adolf in 1879. Later, Roald

Amundsen became the first explorer to circumnavigate the Arctic Ocean when he completed a transit of the Northeast Passage in 1920.

Global warming and the consequent shrinking of ice cover, over the last few decades, has made the Arctic more accessible, prompting nations to reexamine their arctic strategies. The Arctic, as a shipping route, holds immense potential. The shipping route from East Asia to Northern Europe, via the Suez Canal, is about 11,200 nautical miles. Through the NSR, it is about 6500 nautical miles, and the shortened distance reduces travel time on a Kobe to Rotterdam voyage by 12–15 days.

Not surprisingly, it is not only the Arctic states that recognise the strategic importance of the region. China's Arctic White Paper of 2018 recognised the potential of the Arctic and described it as a 'Polar Silk Route' that could be a part of China's global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Clearly, given the Arctic's geostrategic location and the increasing accessibility of its waters, the region is poised to gain salience for trade, offshore mineral/ hydrocarbon resource utilisation, fishing, tourism and military activity.

Militarisation of the Arctic

Arctic strategists have long described the Arctic, rather tritely, as being 'high in the north but low on tension.' However, the renewed geostrategic interest and increasing military activity in the region are giving rise to concerns. Russia has a well-thought-out Arctic policy in place, as evidenced by its reopening of several Soviet era bases and deployment of newer, more capable military assets to the region. The establishment of the Russian Arctic Command, in 2014, has led to the setting up of new bases to house Russian forces. Also, the Russian forces (and the Nato) have broadened the scope and complexity of military exercises in the region.

Russia is constructing new icebreakers, including a combat icebreaker armed with 'Kalibr' missiles. Russia maintains a fleet of around 40 icebreakers including seven nuclear powered icebreakers. The Russian icebreaker fleet is significantly larger than the other icebreaker fleets since Russia requires reliable icebreaking capability to enable the passage of its naval assets based in the region and to keep commercial shipping traffic moving. Limited basing options have meant that Russia has had to base its most potent strategic naval assets in the Arctic, making the Russian Northern Fleet its largest (with reportedly forty-plus submarines and over thirty-five surface ships).

Predictably, Nato's response to heightened Russian activity in the region has been to ramp up its presence in the Arctic and pay increased attention to improving Nato's operational capabilities. Trident Juncture, the largest Nato military exercise in the Arctic since the end of the Cold War, conducted in 2018, involved over 50,000 Nato personnel, 275 aircrafts and 65 ships. In September 2020, Nato reestablished the Nato Atlantic Command.

The participation of USS Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group in the exercise saw a US Carrier Strike Group operating north of the Arctic Circle for the first time since 1992. The exercise helped prove interoperability of the participating Nato forces, hone their cold weather skills and demonstrate a credible deterrence. Russia responded by conducting overflight of Nato warships and sending notices of missile exercises off the Norwegian coast.

There is now heightened military activity in the region, with both sides citing the other's action as justification for the deployment of additional forces. Fortunately, the military activities have, thus far, not been at the levels seen during the Cold War. However, the warming of the Arctic will lead to differences in the types of military activities that can now be expected. During the Cold War, submarines and early warning/ monitoring systems formed the bulk of the military activity in the Arctic; with the reduction in the summer ice cover, greater surface activity will now be seen.

The Competing Interests in the Arctic

There is palpable tension in the Arctic between the five Arctic coastal states (Russia, the United States (US), Canada, Denmark (Greenland) and Norway) and the eight members of the Arctic Council (AC). The Arctic Eight—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the US are all members of the AC, a forum for coordination on Arctic matters. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the coastal states have sovereign rights.

However, the picture is complicated by the claims staked by countries such as China which has declared itself as a "near Arctic" state, and other interested countries such as India, Singapore, etc. Everyone, seemingly, has legitimate political and economic claims on the Arctic.

Russian Interests: Russia's long-term goal is the restoration of its great power status. Russia is pursuing a multi-pronged approach to secure this goal. It is doing this by first ensuring that its interests in the Russian Arctic as a resource base are secured. Russia also wants the international community to recognise its claims on the undersea territory beyond the 200 nautical miles Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)limit. Next, Russia hopes to develop the NSR and have it recognised as national waters and increase traffic manifold by 2025. In the pursuit of its great power ambition, Russia has also instituted wide-ranging military reforms and has begun a major build-up of Russia's conventional and strategic forces in the region.

Nearly 60 per cent of Russia's seaborne nuclear weapons are under the command of the Northern Fleet based in the Kola Peninsula in the Arctic. As the ice recedes, the submarine fleet will lose its protective cover that helps it stay hidden. This will require Russia to establish robust anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capability, entailing the basing of ships with long range missile capability in the Northern Fleet, radar stations, air defence bases and additional airstrips along the Russian arctic coast to cover the length of the NSR. All these measures will help protect Russia's strategic assets in the Arctic and deter Nato ships and aircrafts from entering the region. Russia's military build-up in the Arctic is heavily focused on balancing US/Nato military capability in the region.

It is estimated that the Arctic holds over 30 per cent of the world's remaining underground natural gas resources. The Arctic is also estimated to hold 13 per cent of the known remaining oil resources (an estimated 90 billion barrels of oil). A major portion of that (84 per cent) is estimated to be offshore and 60 per cent of it in the Russian Arctic (almost 412 billion barrels of oil). Russia estimates that 90 per cent of these oil and gas reserves are located on the Siberian continental shelf with 67 per cent in the western Arctic, the Barents Sea and the Kara Sea. Clearly, Russian economic interests in the Arctic are significant. However, it is in Russia's interests to ensure that the Arctic remains a zone of peace and cooperation if it is to benefit from the resources in its territory.

The US' Reluctant Presence: The US purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867. However, surprisingly, the US has often



been described as a reluctant Arctic nation. The US had no icebreaker fleet to speak of, no UNCLOS membership and no grand Arctic strategy. However, this changed in March 2015 when the formation of the Senate Arctic Caucus was formally announced. The Caucus is intended to be a group to discuss issues related to the Arctic among members of the US senate and the staff of the defence, science, commerce, trade, environment and maritime affairs departments.

The US' arctic strategy has largely remained reactive. The reactive nature of the US' actions in the Arctic keeps it from formulating a comprehensive strategy for the region. Instead of a consistent policy to help secure the American Arctic, US actions are often a reaction to non-Arctic events. Most Arctic bills that become law are part of other military and economic initiatives rather than Arctic-specific legislation. This is probably because the representation of Alaska is limited to two senators and one representative, limiting Alaska's political voice. This can be corrected if a greater effort is made to connect Arctic security issues to national security concerns. This would motivate senators and representatives from every state to participate in Arctic-specific legislation. Additionally, the US needs to invest significantly more in Arctic infrastructure including in icebreakers for the Coast Guard.

Canada's Shifting Arctic Priorities: Historically, Canada's geopolitical concerns in the Arctic were focused on sovereignty and security. However, over time, the meaning of Arctic sovereignty and security has itself evolved owing to changes in international law, international relations and military technology.

Arctic security can no longer be associated only with conventional military threats. The end of the Cold War helped move Canada away from focusing only on threats arising from Soviet/Russian military incursions. During the Cold War, Canada's approach to security in the Arctic was focused on countering potential Soviet aggression. The chief security concern, then engaging Canada, was the likely use of Arctic airspace by Soviet bombers flying to targets located to the south of Canada. To safeguard against this possibility, the US and Canada set up the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line comprising 57 early warning radar stations (most of them located in Canada). The Canadian and US militaries also jointly worked to acquire cold weather fighting capabilities. However, Canadian military activity in the region wound up in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Canada's military is now more attentive of the emerging challenges of receding Arctic ice cover, rather than its earlier excessive focus on intruding Russian bombers and submarines.

Sovereignty has for long been the central concern in Canada's Arctic policy. With the Arctic waters poised to become navigable, Canada's sovereignty concerns largely relate to the NWP. Canada's position on Arctic sovereignty and the NWP has been contested by the US and several European governments. The US believes that the NWP is an international strait. According to existing law, ships enjoy the right of passage through such straits. If transit through the NWP

is governed in accordance with this law, Canada would lose its powers to regulate shipping and to enforce Canadian laws and pollution prevention measures.

Canada's Arctic policy can be expected to remain responsive to changes in circumstances that could potentially affect maintenance of national sovereignty and regional security.

Norway's Arctic Geopolitics: Norway has always been seen as a standard bearer of multilateral cooperation in the Arctic. Such cooperation is essential for sustainable development in the region. The commitment to sustainable economic growth in the Arctic is centred on developing offshore and marine resources and maritime industries. Norway has also been successful in maintaining bilateral cooperation with Russia on environmental issues, fisheries management and cordial people-to-people interactions in the Barents Sea region. Simultaneously, Norway has pushed for the delineation, within the framework of UNCLOS, of the extent of marine boundaries over which it enjoys sovereignty.

In the early 2000s, there was a marked shift in Norway's approach to the high North. The Arctic began to be viewed not merely as a regional economy but as the driver of its national economic growth. This has led to tension between its commitment to multilateralism and the unilateral enforcement of its sovereign rights in the Svalbard archipelago. The increasing international interest in the Arctic has only served to strengthen Norway's resolve to pursue its sovereign prerogatives within the framework of UNCLOS and the Arctic Council. The Arctic environment is threatened both by increased economic activity and the tussles over sovereignty. Prevailing circumstances require Norway to again assume the role of the Arctic's standard bearer.

Denmark's Arctic Policy: Denmark's Arctic policy is strongly influenced by the Danish imperative to use the Arctic and Greenland to bolster its relationship with the US. The US' interests in Greenland are driven by military concerns. Greenland is important geopolitically due to its geographical location between North America, Northern Europe and Asia.

During the World War II, the US established a significant presence in Greenland. The Agreement for the Defence of Greenland, signed in 1941, provided the US with substantial rights to use the island's territory for military purposes. In the initial stages of the Cold War, Greenland was the staging-base for US strategic bombers—due to the short flying time to the Soviet Union. Once intercontinental ballistic missiles came to replace strategic bombers as the main delivery vehicle for nuclear weapons, the utility of Greenland to US military interests diminished. Greenland then began serving a defensive purpose and US early warning radars began being based in Greenland. However, since 2016, the US' approach to the Arctic has again undergone transformation in response to the escalation in global geopolitical and military competition with Russia and China.

However, this cosy Denmark-Greenland-US arrangement is beginning to experience some stress following Greenland's assertion of its autonomy and sovereignty. Increased autonomy from Denmark has prompted Greenlandic society to demand a voice in its own geopolitics. The Greenlanders now demand an active role in influencing decision-making and a fair share of the benefits accruing from their geopolitical significance.

While Denmark is accommodative of US interests in Greenland, Denmark is also cautious about not giving away anything that might compromise Danish sovereignty on the island. At the same time, Denmark cannot allow Greenland to gain all the advantages or to violate the constitutional boundaries that define the Kingdom of Denmark.

Other Arctic Stakeholders

China articulates its interest in the Arctic as being derived from the status of the Arctic as a global common. China rejects the Arctic coastal states claims to sovereign rights over the Arctic. China's White Paper of 2015 presents China's maritime interests and rights in the region. The key Chinese interests in the Arctic are resources, shorter transit times and security. Among China's Arctic interests, the foremost BRI. The BRI links to the Arctic via the NWP/NSR. China has christened this as the Polar Silk Road.

Over the last decade, the European Union has also evinced an interest in the Arctic and has earnestly attempted to articulate a coherent policy to approach the neighbourhood to its north.

India's approach to the Arctic is heavily influenced by its experience in the Antarctic. Its Arctic policy takes into account the warnings of melting ice, the likelihood of a navigable NWP/NSR, the simmering regional territorial disputes, and the global interest in the region's resources. India advocates that non-Arctic countries should push for a treaty that, like in the Antarctic, reserves the region primarily for scientific research.

Singapore is not a nation that anyone would intuitively think of in any discussion on the Arctic. It does not have any territorial claims on the Arctic. It also does not have any direct interests in exploiting the region's natural resources. Singapore is most seriously concerned about the opening of the NSR and the NPR which would directly affect Singapore's status as the pre-eminent transhipment port. Any redirection of global shipping traffic away from Singapore would severely impact its economy.

Foretelling the Arctic's Future

The Arctic strategies of the five coastal states, the members of the Arctic council and the other interested states are evolving in step with the opening up of the region due to the warming of Arctic waters. The increasing accessibility of the region's resources is attracting the attention of global stakeholders.

In the coming decades, this increased attention will likely lead to greater military and commercial activity in the region in an attempt by the global stakeholders to protect their territorial and economic interests.

In addition to the hydrocarbon and mineral resources, economic interests include the likely opening of new shipping routes. However, given that for the foreseeable future ships will need to contend with several operational complexities, Arctic shipping numbers will likely remain low. Most of the increase in shipping traffic will be in support of resource extraction.

Russia being the largest Arctic coastal state and with the most developed Arctic infrastructure, its waters will see the most shipping activity. As the Arctic opens up further, fishing fleets and tourists will follow. However, even the most optimistic forecasters will agree that the Arctic's waters will not become busy shipping lanes anytime soon. Any escalation of geopolitical tensions and the consequent upping of militarisation in the region would again slow down the growth of commercial activity.

The costs and stakes of operating in the Arctic are high. The smallest misperceptions have the potential to cause discord, spark conflict and to derail any progress made through cooperative multilateralism, on the economic and environmental fronts. II