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## **Global Powers and the Arctic: Growing Cooperation or Contestation?**

*By Viji Menon*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*While global warming opens up the Arctic to more commercial and military activities, there is the possibility of more development and investment in the region, but also increasing potential for rivalry between the major powers. There is concern among Arctic states that such tensions will detract from peaceful cooperation to deal with the effects of climate change.*

### **COMMENTARY**

WITH GLOBAL warming and the thawing of the Arctic ice expected to accelerate for the foreseeable future, there is potential not only for exploiting much of the world's remaining undiscovered reserves of oil and gas, plus huge deposits of minerals in the Arctic, but also for increased major power competition.

Having paid little attention to the Arctic for a long time, the United States is now concerned about the military intentions of Russia and China in the Arctic, and has indicated taking a more active role to counter their activities. The other Arctic states are however wary about focusing on military issues as the Arctic has hitherto been an area of peaceful cooperation.

### **Russia and China in the Arctic**

According to experts, with the Northern Sea Route along Russia's northern shore already navigable — albeit not easily — during certain times of the year, Russia is also reportedly establishing a string of seaports along its northern coastline. Militarily, it has moved to reopen some abandoned Soviet-era military installations and place new facilities and airfields in its northern territory. Earlier this year, Russia put an anti-

missile defence system in the region. In August this year, Russia launched a missile capable of carrying a nuclear weapon from a submarine near the North Pole.

With its economic and naval power on the rise, China has increased its activities and engagement in the Arctic region since gaining observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013. It published its Arctic strategy in a White Paper in January 2018. This Paper declared China to be a “Near-Arctic State.”

It identified China’s interests as access to natural resources and sea lines of communications ((SLOCs), and the development of oil, gas, mineral resources and other non-fossil energies, fishing and tourism in the region. It said China would do so “jointly with Arctic States.” It also indicated that it would encourage enterprises to build infrastructure and conduct commercial trial voyages, paving the way for Arctic shipping routes that would form a “Polar Silk Road.”

### **US Approach to the Arctic**

Under the Trump Administration, intensified activities of the major powers seem to shape how the US deals with the Arctic. In a combative speech in Finland in May 2019, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, said that all were welcome to share in the Arctic’s wealth, but raised doubts about the aims of Russia and China.

With regard to China, he questioned its claim to be a “Near-Arctic State” in its White Paper, declaring that “The United States and Arctic nations welcome transparent Chinese investment that reflect economic interests, not national security ambitions. China’s pattern of aggressive behavior elsewhere will inform how it treats the Arctic.”

Pompeo also accused Russia of reopening military bases closed after the Cold War and modernizing its powerful Northern Fleet. He described these actions as “part of a pattern of aggressive Russian behavior in the Arctic.” He also disclosed that the US is concerned “about Russia’s claim over the international waters of the Northern Sea Route, including its newly announced plans to connect it with China’s Maritime Silk Road.” Pompeo stated that since China and Russia were militarising the Arctic, America’s security and presence in the region needed to be strengthened.

The speech was a prelude to the Pentagon’s Arctic Strategy published in June 2019 which focused on “China and Russia as the principal challenge to long-term US security and prosperity.” In the strategy paper, the US also expressed its concern about sea routes claimed by Canada and Russia, both of whom consider them domestic rather than international waterways. As in the Pacific, Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) in Arctic waters are apparently under discussion.

Presently, the US Navy has only a minimal presence in the region--only a few US Coast Guard aircraft are deployed in the Bering Strait and the Arctic, but it is reportedly planning to procure new ships, such as ice-cutters, for polar operations. The US has also lately participated in training exercises for submarines in extreme cold-water conditions.

### **Other Players in the Arctic**

Other major players in the Arctic such as Canada, Sweden and Iceland have been critical of the US approach to the Arctic. While welcoming greater US engagement in the region, they have indicated that they did not share US concerns about China's and Russia's activities in the Arctic.

Canada has welcomed China's objective to work constructively with other Arctic states to make positive contributions to the region. Canada also feels that the Canadian Arctic could benefit from some Chinese investment. Sweden's ambassador for Arctic Affairs has been quoted as saying that China's plan to invest in a Polar Silk Road "is really very much welcome."

Russia, on its part, is interested in Chinese investment in Russian port infrastructure along the Arctic route. Overall, based on the mutual interest expressed by Russia and China to further develop economic cooperation, it is likely there will be more involvement of Chinese companies in various projects in the Russian Arctic.

Denmark has also not been supportive of the US approach, and President Donald Trump's offer to buy Greenland earlier this year (promptly rebuffed by Denmark) did not help matters. Greenland is strategically important to the US for its military and its ballistic missile early warning system, as the shortest route from Europe to North America goes via Greenland. Its strategic centre in the Arctic is its Thule Air Force Base in Greenland.

Apart from Greenland's strategic importance to the US, there is speculation that President Trump's offer was a reaction to China's increasing interest in Greenland as part of the "Polar Silk Road." Chinese companies are already dominant in the mining industry in Greenland because of its rare earth deposits and other minerals. Denmark, however, has kept a close watch on this with security considerations in mind.

### **Flashpoint for Tension?**

It is clear that as commercial and military activities by the major powers increase in the Arctic, there is the possibility of increasing major power contestation in the region. President Trump's rejection of climate change and its adverse consequences has convinced the other players that US policy initiatives vis-à-vis the Arctic will open the region to intense strategic competition and open contestation akin to the Cold War of the past.

The other Arctic states, who like the US, are all members of the Arctic Council, are concerned that such tensions, could distract attention from peaceful cooperation aimed at seeking solutions to and adapting to the effects of global warming.

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