

Cooperation rather than confrontation: Security in the High North

by Sven G. Holtsmark*

Introduction

The following briefing summarises elements of the analysis and some of the conclusions of a *Research Paper* on High North security issues soon to be published by the NATO Defense College. The first part of the *Research Paper* presents an overview of some of the major topics that are likely to define the region's security environment in the coming decades. This includes an introduction to recent media coverage and policy statements, an outline of Arctic regimes and jurisdictional issues, and finally a brief discussion of Russia's stakes in the High North. The second part suggests some guidelines for how NATO and the Alliance's Arctic member countries should approach security issues in the region as part of a broader vision for handling relations with Russia.

Papers on the High North cannot avoid a brief discussion of geographic terminology. Most of the issues presented here pertain to the open sea and the continental shelves to the north of the five Arctic Ocean states: Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark (Greenland), and Norway. However, discussions of regional Security naturally must include the adjacent

mainlands and islands. Thus, the terms High North and Arctic as used in this paper roughly denote all areas to the north of the Arctic Circle. Iceland, considered an Arctic state although not littoral to the Arctic Ocean proper, has been one of the first countries to directly feel the impact of increased activity in the High North. A steadily increasing number of LNG (Liquified Natural Gas) tankers are passing through Iceland's Exclusive Economic Zone from Norway and Russia, and the



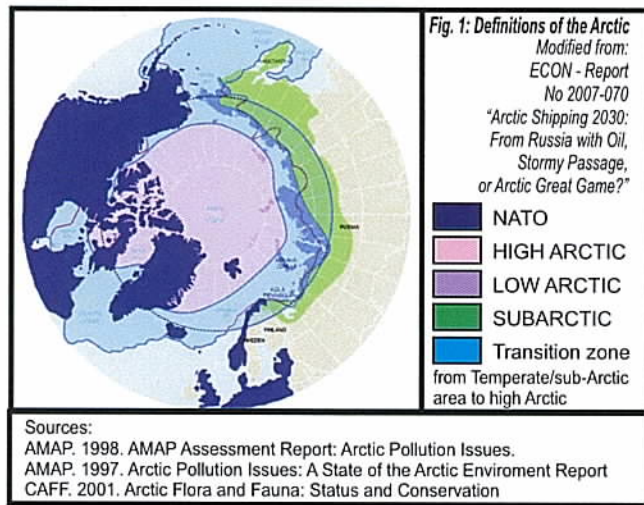
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number is set to increase in the years to come.



Western-Russian cooperation in the Arctic Ocean region as well as globally, is the key to Arctic stability and prosperity. Four of the five Arctic Ocean States plus Iceland, i.e. all except Russia, are members of NATO (figure 1). Thus, the relationship between Russia and the West will be the key to, and measure of, success or failure. For NATO the challenge will be to devise policies that recognise Russian concerns, while at the same time securing fundamental Western security interests. The West and NATO should be unanimous in their resolve to engage Russia in constructive cooperation over the broadest spectrum of security-related issues. The NATO Russia Council may be one important arena for constructive High North dialogue.

The paper argues against the widespread view that there is an ongoing "grab" for

territories and resources in the Arctic Ocean area. It denies the allegations that an avowed lack of "comprehensive rules" for living resources management and petroleum extraction, and an insufficient framework for the settling of territorial disputes may turn the Arctic into "a zone of clashing national interests." In fact, there are numerous factors that have the potential to promote cooperation rather than confrontation between the Arctic states. The paper supports the view, expressed by the Ilulissat declaration of the five Arctic Ocean states of 28 May 2008, that the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) presents an adequate overarching legal regime for the region. UNCLOS is supplemented by a number of multilateral and bilateral treaties and agreements impacting resource management, but also a large body of practice and rules developed e.g. under the auspices of the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

On the other hand, there are substantial challenges that all the interested parties, NATO included, will have to address. Although there are strong factors pulling the parties towards cooperation and common solutions, there are also substantial conflicts of interests and

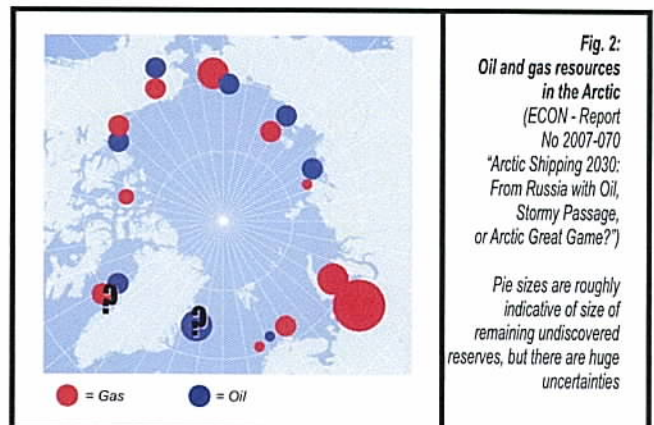
differences of perceptions. Returning to the key issue of handling relations between Russia and other actors in the Arctic, the aim should be to develop High North policies based on the premise that short term gains, apparent tactical “victories” or demonstrative political moves may in the longer run undermine the attainment of the ultimate aim of stability and prosperity in the High North. This aim can only be achieved within a relationship between Russia and the West characterised by predictability and mutually agreed regimes. The paper is in line with other recent analyses that emphasise the importance of clearly defined political objectives or “end states” as a prerequisite for effective policies.

Drivers of change and foundations of Arctic policies

Long-term security challenges in the High North are linked to the prospect and effects of climate change and the potential significance of still-unexplored Arctic petroleum resources. One of the effects of climate change is the possible opening of new Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) through the North-West and North-East Passages or directly across the Polar Basin. Another is the increasing accessibility of off-shore petroleum fields,

some of them in disputed areas. In the short term, however, the potential for local crisis escalation in the High North may be linked to fisheries management in disputed areas rather than to conflicting claims to petroleum resources. The following are some of the premises for the paper's conclusions and recommendations:

- Petroleum reserves in areas north of the Arctic circle may contain as much as 25 percent of the undiscovered global reserves (figure 2).



However, great caution is required in drawing policy implications from these numbers, since they are not the result of comprehensive geological surveys of the areas involved. Moreover, some of the most promising fields are within the littoral states' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), i.e. in non-disputed areas of the Arctic Ocean. Last but not least, there are no well-founded prognoses for when, or if at all, potential new or even some of the already-identified off-shore petroleum fields will

actually be exploited, notably those under present or possible future Russian jurisdiction.

- Likewise, huge uncertainties remain about when, or if, new Arctic SLOCs will be taken into large-scale use. Although ice coverage may recede, remaining drifting ice, in combination with a still limited sailing season, represents just one of many substantial technological, economic and environmental challenges.
- The littoral states, including Russia, are in agreement about the need for multilateral solutions to regional challenges. In most cases, framework regimes are already in place, so there is no need to start from a “blank sheet”. Moreover, important elements of change in the High North may have the potential to promote cooperation rather than confrontation between the Arctic Ocean states. This applies to living resources management and the handling of ecological implications of climate change. The prospect of new SLOCs in the Arctic Ocean may on balance have the potential of prompting the states in the region towards cooperative solutions to common challenges and threats rather than igniting interstate conflict.

- Economic factors as well create strong inherent interests that will tend to support stability and predictability in the area. Large-scale exploitation of technologically and environmentally challenging Arctic Ocean petroleum fields is only imaginable under conditions of regional peace and stability. This also applies to the transportation of oil and gas out of the region, and to the exploitation of mineral resources on the Arctic Ocean seabed. Moreover, security of demand is as important for the exporting country as security of supply for the importer. In line with this, the Russian Arctic strategy approved in September 2008 allegedly singles out maintaining the Arctic “as an area of peace and cooperation” as one of four major policy aims.

- In the West, alarmist scenarios are often linked to pessimistic predictions of Russian foreign policy behaviour. Certain aspects of Russian rhetoric and action give legitimate reasons for concern. Up until now, however, Russian statements and strategy documents regularly emphasise the primary role of international law and multilateralism in international relations. These elements of Russian foreign policy rhetoric should not be routinely dismissed as simple expressions of a fundamentally

anti-American and anti-Western agenda. It may well be that Russian policy makers realise that adherence to international law and collective solutions are in fact in Russia's own vital interest.

High North security challenges

With the end of the Cold War, the High North rapidly receded into the background in Western thinking as an area of potential armed conflict. The interests of the western major powers and NATO in the High North largely evaporated with the transformation of relations with Russia from confrontation to cooperation. The emergence of new "out-of-area" threats reinforced this trend, and so did the discussion and process of NATO enlargement. One highly visible effect was the shift of the point of gravity of NATO's command and control structure from Northern Europe towards the Mediterranean. Another was the absence, since the late 1980s, of major US surface vessels in the Norwegian Sea. This, of course, is not to deny that western countries, including United States, have declared fundamental strategic and other national security interests in the region.

The Russian perspective is different. The sharp decline of the Russian military posture in the High North (as elsewhere)

since the early 1990s did not substantially undermine the area's central role in Russian strategic thinking. Decisive elements include the Russian Northern Fleet's continued role in the Russian nuclear triad and the sheer weight of the massive military infrastructure on the Kola Peninsula. Despite numerous examples of military cooperation and contact between most importantly Russia and Norway in the Barents Sea region, Russia continued to express distrust of NATO intentions in the Arctic.

Moreover, in recent years Russia has repeatedly expressed ambitions to strengthen its military posture in the High North. Recent plans stipulate that the Northern Fleet will be expanded with major blue water capacities, including aircraft carriers. Starting in 2007, renewed training sorties of strategic bombers across the Barents Sea into the Norwegian Sea and North Sea and highly visible naval exercises added to the rhetoric. However, there are fundamental uncertainties about the prospects for Russia's long-term economic development and therefore also the ability to sustain these and other ambitious rearmament programs. Structural deficiencies in the Russian armed forces give additional reason for

doubt.

Some rather obvious observations may form a basis for political and military strategies for handling the security implications of change in the High North.

- First, apart from asymmetrical threats like terrorism and piracy, the possibility of interstate armed conflict in the region will in the foreseeable future be linked to relations between the Arctic Ocean states themselves.
- Secondly, Russia is the only non-NATO member of the five Arctic Ocean countries. Despite certain points of dispute between some of the remaining four, the NATO countries' community of interests over a wide spectrum of issues, including security challenges, will easily outweigh even substantial bilateral or multilateral disputes.

Thus, the state of High North security in the long run will be determined primarily by the bilateral and multilateral interaction between Russia and the other states bordering on the Arctic Ocean. This, in turn, implies that High North affairs will be intertwined with the broader picture of relations between Russia and the West. Moreover, relations with Russia in the Arctic may turn out to be one of the

determinants of the evolution of relations between Russia and the West in general. Thus, while maintaining stability and prosperity in the High North is important in and of itself, even more is at stake here.

With this in view, Western policy makers should set for themselves the ambitious aim of developing the High North into a source of stability, community of interest and cooperation between Russia and the West. The same applies to their Russian counterparts. The two sides ought to shift their focus from tactical differences to desired end states and shared objectives. The Arctic Ocean area, where numerous arenas for comprehensive cooperation are still open, represents a chance to put these guidelines into practise.

However, there are serious obstacles to be overcome and opportunities to be grasped:

- The western Arctic Ocean states, joined by the EU and NATO, should intensify their efforts to develop and maintain a unified approach to Arctic Ocean issues in general, and relations with Russia in the Arctic in particular. As an important first step, the western Arctic Ocean states should make every effort to find solutions to their remaining

delimitational and jurisdictional disputes.

- They must improve their skills in interpreting and finding appropriate responses to Russia's rhetoric and foreign and security policy behaviour. Of particular relevance and urgency, the Western states must clarify their response to a possible long term strengthening of the Russian military presence in the Arctic Ocean based on a modernising and expanding Northern Fleet. The challenge in this and other fields will be to devise policies that recognise Russian concerns but at the same time secure all sides' legitimate security interests.
- In the Arctic as elsewhere, it is in NATO's clear interest to make every effort to engage in political and military confidence building and cooperative ventures with Russia to supplement bilateral or regional arrangements. For instance, various security and safety challenges related to Arctic SLOCs may offer a wide field of areas of mutually beneficial cooperation, including surveillance and patrolling. NATO and the West should actively search for arenas of cooperation in which shared perceptions may prove stronger than disagreements or perceived "values gaps" on other issues.

- The Alliance's closely intertwined core functions in the Arctic remain surveillance and intelligence, and deterrence. The aim of surveillance and intelligence is to create a basis for adequate situational awareness, a key factor in the maintenance of regional stability. Deterrence works only if it has visible substance. It must be designed on the basis of conceivable conflict scenarios, and it must include credible contingency planning and a material basis for the management of crises that escalate to the use or the threat of use of military force. Local military asymmetries, particularly evident in the Barents Sea area, must be one factor in designing western approaches to deterrence and contingency planning.
- A low-key approach in times of tranquillity must be paralleled by demonstrations that national and NATO contingency planning includes updated scenarios for the collective handling of a wide range of crisis and conflict in the Arctic. In practical terms, the credibility of declarations of collective solidarity should be reinforced by an appropriate mixture of NATO-led military exercises, the proper preparation of designated military units, a continuous critical look at the adequacy of

existing structures for command and control, and other peace time preparations.

Concluding remarks

Managing relations between Russia and the West will be both the key to and the measure of success or failure in securing continued prosperity and stability in the High North. Full use should be made of hard-won lessons from the era of strategic confrontation during the Cold War, and from the ups and downs of Russian-Western relations since the 1990s. The West and NATO should be unanimous in their resolve to engage Russia in constructive cooperation over the broadest spectrum of security-related issues. The NATO Russia Council may be one important arena for High North dialogue.

All decisions must be guided by a firm intent to avoid a return to the chess-board reasoning of the Cold War, which presupposed that only one winner would be left on the field.

For NATO this will involve multiple balancing acts between demonstrations of allied solidarity and preparedness on the one hand, and the danger that they may provoke destabilizing countermeasures on the other.

All steps should be calculated in terms of

their long-term effect on High North security and stability, and they should be predictable and legitimate in terms of the Western countries' declared policy aims.

Military measures have the negative aim of avoiding the worst. Positive ambitions can only be achieved through dialogue, cooperation and compromise solutions to matters under dispute.