



After Ukraine:

KEEPING THE ARCTIC STABLE

The greatest challenge to the stability of the Arctic actually comes from outside the region itself, but there are still strong reasons to be optimistic about security in the Arctic region.

The present state of affairs in the Arctic must be considered benign, even after the onset of the Ukrainian crisis. The basic reason for this is interests. While global warming is a threat to wildlife and ecosystems, it is not necessarily a bad thing in economic and political terms: resources that were once inaccessible gradually become more accessible. Most of the resources that are relatively easy to extract are found in territories that have already largely been divided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Overstating conflict over resources in the Arctic is not helpful. States should refrain from threats and create an atmosphere of trust. This will also make the region more resilient to the emerging security dilemmas.
- Leaders should seek domestic consensus for an Arctic strategy. This will make it harder to use the Arctic as venue for retaliation against slights suffered elsewhere, and discourage cheap domestic gains on the Arctic.
- Small states have a great interest in strengthening Arctic institutions and the Arctic Council.

“Tough talk” on the Arctic can be dangerous, and make reconciliation difficult. It is often easier to mobilize domestic pressure for a tough line, than it is to dismiss it.

New economic opportunities in the Arctic need not destabilize the region. Some of the richest and most easily accessible deposits are found in uncontested territory – the lion’s share in Russia. Therefore, Russia actually has the greatest interests in a stable region of any Arctic state.

And extracting them requires stability. Add to this that on average all Arctic states including Russia, have behaved unaggressively in the region, creating a security environment based on mutual trust and goodwill. This has been aided by the increasing influence of the Arctic Council and by the de facto acceptance of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the basis for negotiations by all parties.

The most potent threat to this benign state of affairs comes from outside the region: Will politicians give in to the temptation of using the Arctic as a game piece in unrelated conflict between Arctic states or, perhaps even worse, seek to exaggerate differences in the Arctic for domestic political gain? These two issues should obviously be avoided. Seeking to commit both governments and oppositions in each Arctic state to consistent and stable national Arctic strategies might be a way to do so.

Intraregional challenges of the Arctic

The emergence of new Arctic opportunities lies at the heart of any argument about conflict potential in the region. The possible gains are primarily oil and gas as well as new sailing routes north of Canada and Russia. But the size of the prize should not be overestimated. The Arctic remains an extremely difficult place to extract resources with problems ranging from harsh weather, icebergs and the large depths of some of the sea zones believed to hold oil and gas resources. Similar reservations can be made regarding shipping: the Northwest and the Northeast passages are still closed for large parts of the year. Transit remains weather dependent and is still hazardous without expensive icebreaker support.

New economic opportunities in the Arctic need not destabilize the region. Some of the richest and most easily accessible deposits are found in uncontested territory – the lion’s share in Russia. Therefore, Russia, often singled out as a potential Arctic troublemaker, actually has the greatest inherent interests in a stable region of any Arctic state.

Arctic future stability still faces challenges such as the disagreement over the Lomonosov Ridge between Russia, Denmark and Canada, complicated by the possible presence of oil and gas (albeit deep below the Arctic Sea) and the fact that the area contains the symbolically important North Pole. However, recent history suggests that such clash-of-interests based problems are not insurmountable. The track record for interest clash resolution in the Arctic is quite good, with the 2010 Norwegian-Russia Barents Sea agreement marking the most prominent of agreements reached in this respect in recent years.

While disagreements over the status of the passages remain unresolved, they too are manageable. The Northwest Passage is the least developed and the primary opponents here, the US and Canada, are long-time friends. The Northeast Passage offers a potentially more dangerous setup, as it possibly involves the US, the EU and China on one side and Russia on the other. However, it is unlikely that any of these states will pick a fight with Russia in its own backyard. Conversely, Russia not only currently has de facto control of the passage, but also an inherent interest in the stability needed to develop the passage into a competitive maritime alternative to the Suez and Panama Canals.

A final intraregional problem is the danger of the emergence of an Arctic security dilemma. Some academics are warning against such a development, especially in the light of the recent Russian efforts to rejuvenate their aging Arctic fleet. However, this danger too is not to be overestimated. One reason is that rhetoric actually matters in this regard. Thus, while especially Russia and Canada have launched certain aggressive outbursts regarding the Arctic from time to time, especially Russian rhetoric has actually been much more conciliatory in the Arctic than on many other issues in world politics. Finally, a security dilemma in the Arctic is less likely than many other places on the globe for the simple fact that fighting in the Arctic would be very expensive due to distances and weather hazards.

The dangers of spill-over

The greatest threat to Arctic stability comes not from dynamics native to the region; the Arctic is far more likely to be destabilized from the outside. The most recent example of such a threat is highlighted by the current Ukraine crisis between Russia and the West. While Russia has largely attempted to keep the Arctic out of the conflict because of their oil interests, the West has begun to use the region to hit Russia where it hurts. Most seriously in the latest rounds of sanctions that targeted, among other areas, Russian drilling interests in the Arctic. While it is up to experts of the Ukraine crisis to judge the impact of such sanctions on Russian behaviour in Ukraine, politicians and civil servants in the West would do well to consider the potentially stark costs associated with such moves, if they thereby inflict lasting damage to the security dynamics in the Arctic.





Just as dangerous as such direct spill-over is indirect spill-over which is translated through public opinion. This risk is especially potent in Arctic countries such as Canada and Russia, where the Arctic itself has been ingrained into the national consciousness. In such a situation not only governments, but also oppositions suddenly face the temptation to try to shore up domestic support through “tough talk” on the Arctic. Such manoeuvres are extremely dangerous, because they can make later reconciliation much more difficult. It is often easier to mobilize domestic pressure for a tough line, than it is to dismiss it.

Norms and regulations matter

The Arctic is not the next Wild West. Rules and regulations are already in place to handle most of the challenges of the region. The most important forum diplomatically remains the Arctic Council, which has managed to gain steadily in influence in recent years, not least through the brokering of binding agreements such as the 2011 Search and Rescue agreement and the 2013 Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response agreement. Being a mostly “soft” law organisation understood more as a forum for countries to discuss their differences than as a formal judicial actor, these two agreements speak of a maturing

Arctic Council gradually taking on more responsibility. Especially for the small states in the Arctic Council, this development is much to be desired since such legal development in the region might make it easier for them to deal with the larger Arctic countries. The Arctic countries, after all, include both Russia, the top regional power, and the US which, despite a certain disinterest in the Arctic, remains the world’s sole superpower.

Nevertheless, the power of the Arctic Council remains quite limited and mostly informal and it has so far refrained from engaging in security politics altogether. This means that bilateral diplomacy remains a central component of Arctic conflict resolution. But even in bilateral negotiations rules exist. This is especially true when it comes to the division of economic rights in the remaining undivided sea zones. Thus, all Arctic states have so far agreed to follow UNCLOS as the basic founding principles for such division. In fact, even the US, who has yet to ratify UNCLOS, has decided to follow these guidelines in practise.

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