

Addressing the Geopolitical Complexity of the Arctic Region

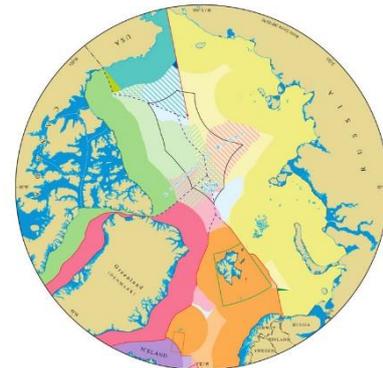
Forum: Security Council

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Introduction

The Arctic region, renowned as a home for polar bears, is facing geopolitical complexities ranging from border conflicts to maritime jurisdiction as an emerging frontier with a rich store of natural resources including gas, oil, and other minerals. For most of human history, the Arctic region was often neglected by nations due to its location, coldness, and the dangers of exploring. However, as more research regarding the reevaluation of the Arctic region has been done starting from the 1980s, the significance of preserving and exploring the Arctic region continuously received spotlight, resulting in the competition between nations for the Arctic region to exploit the land.

The unique features, including its environment, of the Arctic play a key role in its geopolitical complexity. Currently, the following eight countries have jurisdiction in different portions of the Arctic region: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, the United States, and Sweden. The terrestrial border and maritime jurisdiction disputes, which ignited among these countries due to the rich resources of the Arctic and the competition to exploit new Arctic routes, are becoming a serious political dispute. Many experts and organizations, including the National Geographic Society, are claiming that the Arctic is becoming the battle zone of the new Cold War.



An updated map of the Arctic Region created by the International Boundaries Research Unit (IBRU)

Background

How Climate Change is Related to the Geopolitical Complexity of the Arctic Region

Discussing climate change is crucial in debating the geopolitics of the Arctic region, as unlike Antarctica, which is a land 98% covered with ice sheets, it is an ocean covered with a thin layer of perennial sea ice. Therefore, with climate change and constant ice shifting and melting, defining the borders between countries is becoming a challenge. Even though climate change did open up unexpected opportunities to establish new shipping routes, the alarming rate of the loss of the Arctic ice is imposing a great danger to all nations. A recent study done by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) showed that the complete loss of Arctic ice would result in the average global sea level rising by 20 feet (6 meters). Another study conducted by the National Geographic stated such a rise would not only debilitate major cities including Boston and Shanghai but would also affect more than 200 million people by 2100.

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A large number of organizations have been established along with various multinational agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, signed to protect the Arctic Region by reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG); however, the issue still seems to get worse every year. According to the National Snow & Ice Data Center (NSIDC), in October 2020, the Arctic sea ice extent, which is the measure of the surface area of the Arctic ocean covered by the ice, broke the record low mark of 41 years of satellite record. Furthermore, in 2019, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reported that the yearly average sea surface temperature of the Arctic region was second-highest following the record low set in 2018.

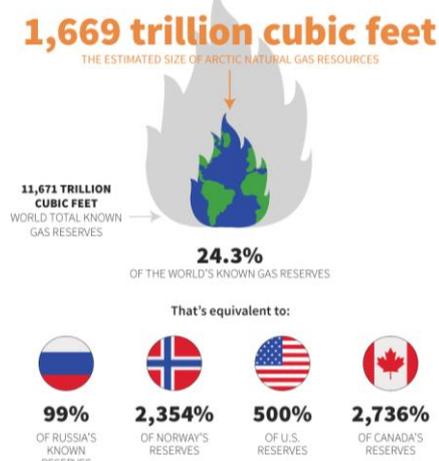
Why Countries Compete

The reason why the countries compete is because of the potential benefits and new opportunities that the Arctic region will present when developed. The biodiversity of the region can bring insightful discoveries when researched, while the richness of the natural resources can boost economies through exports. Before the ice began to melt, the Arctic was impenetrable. However, as the ice melted, new opportunities to discover the new shipping routes that cross the Arctic region were found. Creating new shipping routes has been becoming a competition since it would minimize the distance and time to travel and could become a very profitable shortcut that would foster the “backbone” of global trade, the marine time transport. Not only this, but the Arctic region could also be served as an excellent wireless communication relay base.

Significance of the Arctic Region

Even though media often portrays the Arctic region as a lifeless place, in reality, the Arctic region fosters biodiversity. The conditions in the Arctic region are indeed very harsh with extreme variations in light, short summers, and large areas of permafrost, but it still shelters more than 21,000 species. Many of the 21,000 species are unique to the region. However, the biodiversity of the Arctic region is currently under a threat due to climate changes.

The Arctic region is also rich in oils and natural gases. It is estimated that 90 billion barrels of oil would be lying in the Arctic region and that 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves are in the region. These are equivalent to 5.9% of the world’s known oil reserves and 24.3% of the world’s known gas reserves. The fact that the region contains an amount of oil that is equivalent to 5.9% of the world’s known oil reserves might seem small, but it is 500% of U.S reserves, 99% of Russia’s known reserves, and 2,736% compared to Canada’s.



Infographic showing the significance of the amount of natural gases stored in the Arctic

Problems Raised

Environmental Concerns

Since the sea ice in the Arctic region plays a key role in the ecosystems of the world, the loss of the sea ice would lead to destruction of food webs and balance of nature. The main cause that leads to the loss of the region is climate change. The increased amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere dissolves into seawater, and in consequence raises the temperature of the ocean and melts the sea ice in the Arctic region. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), with the ocean absorbing 93% of the excess heat from greenhouse gas emissions since the 1970s, the Arctic region has been warming up around 24% faster than a few decades ago. As the Arctic is a home of 21,000 terrestrial and marine species, the meltdown of the ice is threatening the wildlife of the region. Since many marine species rely on the ice of the Arctic region to hunt, rest, and escape predators, the meltdown has been affecting the whole marine food web in the Arctic Ocean. Furthermore, the meltdown of the Arctic region is resulting in a rise in sea levels. The NOAA reported that the global sea level average in 2014 was 2.4 inches (6.1 cm) higher than the average of 1993 and continues to rise about 3.2 mm each year. It may seem to be a small increase, but in fact, such an increase could lead to destructive erosion, storms, nuisance flooding, aquifer contamination with salt, and others. According to the IPCC, it was predicted that the sea level will rise between 26 to 77 centimeters by 2100 if the current trend continues. The National Geographic claimed that if all the ice melts, coastal states including Florida and island countries such as Bangladesh would be underwater.



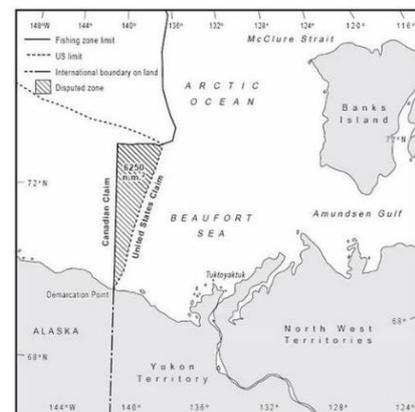
The home of polar bears is melting

Arctic Security

Two forms of security concerns exist in the Arctic region: military security and common security. While military security comprises of border and jurisdiction issues, common security focuses on combatting the threats of terrorism and environmental disasters in the region to achieve security of all nations involved. Due to the continuous border conflicts, more and more countries of the Arctic Council have been increasing their military activities in the Arctic region. As an example of a military exercise in the Arctic region, *The Guardian* explained that Russia strengthened military bases on the Kola peninsula in the far northwest of Russia in 2019. However, some experts have pointed out that “national military presence cannot solve issues that warrant international cooperation,” according to Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. For common safety, regulations to provide shipping protection and to mitigate environmental disasters including oil spills should be sought among the countries.

The Beaufort Sea Disputes

The Beaufort Sea is an outlying sea of the Arctic Ocean, located north of Alaska and Canada. The United States and Canada have been involved in disputes over the jurisdiction of the Beaufort Sea after it was found out that a mass amount of oil is under the region. The United States has been claiming that when determining the marine boundaries, the countries should follow the equidistance principle, which is a legal concept that states a nation's



A map showing Canada's and the United States' claims on the Beaufort Sea border disputes

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maritime borders should be a median line that is equidistant from the shores of neighboring nations. However, Canada has been referring to the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1825) to claim that marine boundaries could be drawn on the frozen sea as well. The differences in the two countries' methods of drawing the marine boundaries led to the creation of an overlapping region, leading to a dispute that continues today. The overlapping region in the Beaufort Sea became a problem as competition for exploiting natural resources and commercial fishing rose.

The Northeast Passage and the Northwest Passage

The Northeast Passage refers to a compilation of possible shipping routes between Europe and Asia along the northern shores of Russia, while the Northwest Passage refers to a series of shipping routes that connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through the Arctic region. Russia and the United States had a power struggle regarding the Northeast Passage – Russia claimed jurisdiction over the Northwest Passage; however, the United States claimed that the Northeast Passage falls under International Straits and therefore should be able to be utilized by all countries freely.



A map of the Northeast Passage (left) and Northwest Passage (right)

Canada and the United States also have been in conflicts regarding the Northwest Passage for decades. Canada claimed that the Northwest Passage includes passing their internal waters; thus, the ships using the route should follow Canadian regulations and related laws. However, the United States has been claiming the region to be International Straits. Recently, both countries constructed army bases along the coasts, and experts stated that in the worst case scenario, military conflicts may occur.

UN/International Actions

There were numerous attempts made internationally to slow down the melting of the Arctic. The effectiveness of the Paris Agreement was repeatedly questioned due to its failure to achieve its original purpose of establishing a universal agreement to limit the emissions of greenhouse gases, especially since the United States, one of the major emitters of greenhouse gases, formally withdrew from the Paris Agreement on November 4th, 2020.

To resolve the ongoing conflicts, the Arctic Council, which consists of the eight nations who have jurisdiction in the Arctic region, was founded in 1996 with the aim to promote cooperation and peace in the Arctic region. However, the Arctic Council is consistently criticized due to its incompetence. In May, the leaders of Inuit, one of the groups of indigenous people inhabiting the Arctic regions, had condemned the Arctic Council for its ineffectiveness of solving the problem of climate change. The limitations of the Arctic Council in terms of membership and what the group actually does are repetitively addressed by the critics.

The P5 Nations' Stances

China

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China accounts for approximately 27% of global greenhouse gas emissions. According to the Climate Action Tracker, China's Paris Agreement Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) is rated highly insufficient; however, experts predict that China's current policies are leading to a positive direction of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Even though China is just one of the observer states in the Arctic Council, China had proposed the Arctic Policy of China, showing their passion for involvement the Arctic region. The proposal also described how China would develop infrastructure, conduct scientific research, and excavate resources in the Arctic Circle. China claimed that they believe imposing such a policy is “champion[ing] for the development of a community with a shared future for mankind” and that it has more responsibility to improve and contribute to the situation in the Arctic region. China also claims themselves to be a “near Arctic-region,” even though the shortest distance between the Arctic region and China is 7,426 km.

France

France's carbon dioxide emissions had dropped 4.8% in 2018 by reducing greenhouse gas emissions from their transport sector. France is viewed as the one of the best performers in the European Union in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. Recently, France had passed a new law to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to a further extent and go carbon-neutral by 2050. France also has a national institute called the French Polar Institute, and in 2016, France had adopted the National Arctic Exploration Program, which delineates the actions they would take to explore and develop the Arctic region. In October 2019, France claimed that the Arctic region belongs to no one.

Russian Federation

Russia ranked fourth place in emitting greenhouse gases. Russia does have policies regarding reducing the emissions and pledged to reduce the emissions to at least 25% of the greenhouse gas emitted in 1990 by 2020. However, their policies had been rated critically insufficient by the Climate Action Tracker.

Russia, with the longest Arctic coastline, is a part of the Arctic Council and has been in several disputes regarding natural resources, including the current Northeast Passage dispute. In October 2019, it has discovered new islands in the Arctic region. It is also one of the countries that exercise great military activities in the Arctic. Many critics stated that Russia, China, and the United States are the main players in the new Cold War in the Arctic.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is one of the nearest neighbors of the Arctic region. As a neighboring nation, the United Kingdom showed the willingness to help combat long-term challenges. Since the United Kingdom borders the Arctic region, it has also shown sensitiveness regarding the border conflicts. In February of 2019, the United Kingdom deployed military troops to the Arctic region due to Russian threats near the border. The United Kingdom is very active in the scientific realms relevant to the Arctic region. In 2016, many critics criticized the United Kingdom for not doing enough to safeguard their greatest interest: scientific research.

United States of America

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The United States is a part of the Arctic Council as well and has been involved in numerous disputes with other countries. Currently, the conflict with Russia is intensifying as the new military base was set up last July by the United States. Numerous institutions from the United States are settled in the Arctic region.

Possible Solutions

1. Encouraging people to take small steps is needed. Much of the global population is aware of the environmental crisis going on in the Arctic; however, actions to engage individuals are insufficient. Governments facilitating public service advertisements and campaigns are desirable.
2. Governments providing subsidies for people utilizing alternative energy sources would be helpful as well. Tremendous research on alternative or renewable energy sources has been done in the past decade; however, the shift from coals to alternative energy sources has been a difficult challenge. To encourage the citizens to follow the positive trend, governments can possibly subsidize the installation fees of alternative energy generators such as solar panels.
3. Even though the Arctic Council already exists, membership is limited, and the actions they can take as a group is also restricted. Since the Arctic situation does not only involve the eight nations of the Arctic Council, but is also the world's reality that all nations must face, allowing other states to become involved as observers in talks is necessary.

Glossary

Greenhouse Gases: gases that trap heat in the atmosphere.

Indigenous People: ethnic groups that are the earliest known settlers of a certain area.

Inuits: a group of indigenous people that live in the Arctic region.

Nuisance Flooding: a high-tide flooding in coastal communities.

Aquifer Contamination: the contamination of groundwater when the pollutants are dissolved into them.

Permafrost: a thick layer of soil that remains frozen throughout an entire year.

Sea Ice Extent: the measure of the surface area of the Arctic ocean covered by ice.

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