



THE FAST-CHANGING ARCTIC: RETHINKING ARCTIC SECURITY FOR A WARMER WORLD

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Afterword: Think Again – The Arctic¹

Lawson W. Brigham

Everyone wants a piece of the thawing Far North. But that doesn't mean anarchy will reign at the top of the world.

"The Arctic Is Experiencing a Twenty-first-Century Gold Rush."

Wrong. In August 2007, a minisubmarine carrying Artur Chilingarov, a Russian parliamentarian and veteran explorer, descended into the ice-covered sea at the North Pole, extended its robotic arm, and planted a Russian flag on the seafloor. The world's reaction was swift, and in some cases furious. "This isn't the 15th century," fumed Peter MacKay, then Canada's minister of Foreign Affairs. "You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say, 'We're claiming this territory.'"

Maybe not, but many countries are looking at the Arctic today with fresh eyes. Because of climate change, the Arctic Ocean's summer ice cover is now half of what it was fifty years ago. In recent years, Russian and Canadian armed forces have staged Cold War-style exercises in the Far North, and in the summer of 2009 a pair of German merchant ships conducted voyages across the relatively ice-free waters of the Northeast Passage, the long-dreamed-of trade route from Europe to Asia. And maybe the only thing heating up faster than the Arctic Ocean is the hyperbole over what's under it. "Without U.S. leadership to help develop diplomatic solutions to competing claims and potential conflicts," scholar Scott G. Borgerson wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 2008, "the region could erupt in an armed mad dash for its resources."

It could – but it won't. Anarchy does not reign at the top of the world; in fact, it's governed in a manner not unlike the rest of the planet. The region's land borders – shared by Canada, Denmark (which controls Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States – are all set and uncontested. Several maritime boundaries do remain under dispute, most notably those between Canada and the United States in the Beaufort Sea and between Canada and Denmark in Baffin Bay. But progress has been made recently in resolving even the thorniest disagreements: In April, after forty years of negotiating, Norway and Russia were able to forge an equitable deal for a new boundary in the Barents Sea, a continental-shelf area rich in fisheries and oil and gas reserves.

What about the part of the Arctic where sovereignty remains unresolved: the seafloor that Chilingarov tried to claim? Despite being covered with ice for much of the year, the Arctic Ocean is governed much like the rest of the world's oceans – by a maritime treaty that has been ratified by all the Arctic countries except the United States, which generally abides by its terms anyway.

Chilingarov's flag gambit was a clever bid for attention, but not much more than that. Although the resources of the Arctic seabed are likely to be partitioned among the five countries that could plausibly claim them, it won't be on a first-come-first-served basis. The world has learned a lot since the resource and land grabs of earlier centuries; for the most part, the only scuffles over borders and oil fields today are in regions that are badly destabilized already.

"Climate Change Is Driving the Transformation of the Arctic."

Not entirely. In recent decades the Arctic's average temperature has risen almost twice as fast as the rest of the world's. Sea ice is retreating, Greenland's glaciers are melting, snow cover is decreasing, and permafrost is thawing. Some Arctic communities are literally washing away into the ocean. These are unprecedented changes, and they have had profound impacts on the culture and way of life of the Far North's 4 million people, and especially its 400,000 indigenous residents.

But the transformation in how humans use the Arctic hinterlands is being driven as much by global economics and natural resource availability as it is by climate change. It is mostly the work of a few industries: natural resource

development (think oil and gas, minerals, and timber), marine tourism (think cruise ships), and fishing.

Regional warming has had little effect, positive or negative, on Norway's and Russia's extraction plans, which have been driven by global prices of oil and gas. The cruise ship industry's newfound interest in the Arctic, particularly the voyages now running along Greenland's west coast, is in keeping with the expansion of tourism to once-remote destinations everywhere. Arctic voyages are lucrative, in demand, and relatively safe (pirates are few and far between in Baffin Bay). As for fishing, fleets and some fish populations are moving north as Arctic and sub-Arctic seas become warmer and more navigable. But the fleets are also there because fish stocks in more temperate waters have been badly overfished – and not necessarily just because of climate change.

“The Arctic Is a Vast Storehouse of Natural Resources.”

True. The Arctic's resources may not be subject to an anarchic scramble, but that doesn't mean they aren't hugely valuable. The largest zinc mine on the planet, called Red Dog, is located in northwest Alaska. Across the Arctic in western Siberia is the massive Norilsk Nickel mining complex, the world's leading source of nickel and palladium and one of its largest copper producers. Canada's Baffin Island is home to one of the best undeveloped iron-ore deposits on Earth; European steel companies are already experimenting with ways to get the ore into their blast furnaces and envisioning a fleet of polar ore carriers that could deliver the mineral year-round. There are renewable resources, too: world-class fisheries in the Barents and Bering seas, and abundant fresh water elsewhere.

But the most valuable Arctic commodities, today and in the future, are likely to be oil and gas. In 2008 the U.S. Geological Survey released a report indicating that natural gas resources above the Arctic Circle could amount to 30 per cent of the world's undiscovered reserves; oil in the region was estimated at 13 per cent of the world's undiscovered supply. (Saudi Arabia, by comparison, has 21 per cent of the world's proven oil.)

Two Arctic states are already banking on the oil and gas reserves on their northern frontiers: Norway has developed the Snohvit gas field in the Barents Sea near the fishing-community-turned-industrial-port of Hammerfest and is shipping its output of liquefied natural gas to North America and Europe.

Russia has been similarly busy working the oil and gas fields of western Siberia and has recently started shipping oil from an offshore terminal in the Pechora Sea to Murmansk. But for the current global oversupply of natural gas, the giant Russian firm Gazprom would be making good on its longstanding plans to develop the Shtokman field in the eastern Barents Sea, one of the world's largest natural gas deposits. Greenland has also linked its economic and perhaps political future to offshore drilling, recently beginning work near Disko Island off its west coast.

Taken together, this means that the distant and once-economically unviable resources of the Far North will be linked to global markets more closely than ever before, playing an increasingly important role in the world economy. They constitute a new frontier of investment and industrialization and will add considerably to the fortunes of the countries that possess them. But these riches amount to an economic shot in the arm – not a fundamental game-changer – for the eight Arctic states, most of which are already major producers of oil, gas, and minerals. Arguably, the countries that stand to be most transformed by the Arctic resource boom aren't in the Arctic at all; they're emerging, resource-hungry economies such as China and India whose future development is likely to be fueled by the exports of the Far North.

"The Arctic Will Become a Shipping Superhighway."

Not so fast. As early as the fifteenth century, European monarchs and capitalists salivated over the idea of a navigable northern waterway that would allow them to reach the Pacific Ocean without a grueling sail around Africa or land crossing of Central Asia. Some in today's shipping industry are no less enamored of the prospect: By one (perhaps optimistic) estimate, bringing a container ship from Northern Europe to the West Coast of the United States via Canada's fabled Northwest Passage – whose deep-water route was ice-free for a few days during the summer of 2007 – could cut shipping costs 20 per cent. And the security challenges and threats (again, think pirates) would be minimal.

But just because ships will soon be able to traverse the Arctic doesn't mean many actually will. The Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route across the top of Russia have indeed been made navigable by climate change, but only for a few days or weeks a year. Although several climate models predict an ice-free Arctic Ocean for a brief period each summer as early as



FIG. 1. SEE ICE EXTENT, 2007. SOURCE: LAWSON W. BRIGHAM.

2030, they also project a mostly ice-clogged ocean in winter, spring, and fall through at least the end of the twenty-first century. No one predicts an ice-free Arctic Ocean throughout the year.

This means that an Arctic Ocean crossing, while theoretically possible, might be too difficult and costly to be worth the effort. The more ice along an Arctic navigation route, the slower the ship's speed, a factor that could easily negate the shorter distance gained by sailing across the top of the world.

Expensive polar-class ships – ice-breaking cargo carriers – would still be required for most operations. And many other economic details have yet to be filled in. The Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment released by the Arctic Council in 2009 found significant challenges and unanswered questions regarding the endeavor: Can it be economically viable as a global trade route if not conducted year-round? What are the risks assumed in Arctic navigation, and how will the marine insurance industry respond to them?

So, while modest volumes of cargo might be carried during the summers ahead, a majority of the Arctic voyages in the coming decades will be destinational: A ship sails north, performs an activity in the Arctic, and goes home. In other words, don't expect a new Panama or Suez Canal. And even this more limited activity will require adaptation. The real challenge will be the development of rules to protect Arctic people and the environment from the new marine traffic, wherever it's going.

"We Need a New Treaty to Govern the Arctic."

Not really. Do we need a new international system to make sure the Arctic's future is managed equitably and responsibly? That was what the seven countries with territorial claims on Earth's other polar region decided in 1959 when they set them aside to join five other countries in the Antarctic Treaty. Conceived at the height of the Cold War, the treaty reserved the uninhabited Antarctic for peaceful purposes, notably scientific research, banning military activity and prohibiting nuclear explosions and disposal of radioactive waste. Over a half-century later, it stands as a landmark of peaceful cooperation, demilitarization, and shared governance among the forty-seven countries that have signed.

It's highly unlikely, however, that the Arctic countries would ever agree to the same sort of comprehensive treaty for the North. All have huge economic stakes in the Arctic; some have centuries of sovereign claims to the region, and others still use its waterways for strategic purposes, even twenty years after the Cold War. And that's fine because we already have a diplomatic framework to deal with most of the Arctic: the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The treaty allows coastal states everywhere – not just those in the Arctic – to extend their seabed claims beyond their sovereign waters, but only after extensive scientific surveys and submissions of geologic data to the New York-based UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental

Shelf. It is a complex process, but an orderly one. And it isn't new: More than fifty claims have been submitted to the commission over the past decade. The International Maritime Organization, a UN agency, can also craft binding rules for shipping in the Arctic Ocean.

Then there's the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum (established in 1996) that brings the eight Arctic states to the table along with six indigenous groups (and other observers) to discuss environmental protection and sustainable development. The council is essentially toothless, at least in a legal sense: It's not bound by any treaties, and members have chosen not to deal with military and security issues, or even fisheries management. But it has nonetheless been a force for good, getting everyone in the habit of discussing the future of the region in a diplomatic setting. It has also conducted several pioneering assessments on climate change, oil and gas, and Arctic shipping. Look for it to take a more forceful role as Arctic relations become ever-more important. Already, it has a task force on search and rescue in the region, negotiating the first legally binding agreement among its members.

"Conflict Is Inevitable in the Arctic."

No, it isn't. The Arctic has been a geopolitical flashpoint before: During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union faced off directly in the region. But that was then. Today's Arctic is governed by eight developed states that arguably cooperate more than they have at any other period in history. International collaboration in scientific research, for instance, is at record levels in the Arctic today.

The looming Arctic resource boom doesn't threaten this stability – it reinforces it. States such as Norway and Russia have much to lose economically from Arctic conflict, as do the many non-Arctic countries and multinational corporations that will be among the eventual investors in, and consumers of, future Arctic ventures. No one is contesting anyone else's sovereignty in the region; in fact, the Arctic might one day play host to the emergence of a new sovereign state, Greenland, with the support and encouragement of Denmark, its long-time colonial ruler.

This isn't to say that saber-rattling hasn't happened and won't happen again in the future. Canada, Norway, and Russia have conducted military and naval operations in the region to showcase their capabilities and demonstrate their sovereignty. (The United States has been more modest in this regard,

though the U.S. Navy last fall did release a “roadmap” for the Arctic, emphasizing the need for military readiness in the Far North.) NATO’s role in the Arctic is uncertain and unfocused – five Arctic states are members, but three (Sweden, Finland, and Russia) are not – and the organization could go a long way toward reducing tension and building trust in the Arctic by promoting cooperation on matters of military security, law enforcement, and counter-terrorism there.

But none of this friction is beyond the realm of diplomacy. Even Chilingarov, the flag-wielding champion of Russian northern expansionism, understands the virtues of negotiation. When he met Chuck Strahl, Canada’s minister of Northern Affairs, in June of 2010, the first thing he reportedly did was invite his would-be adversary to a conference in Moscow: “The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue” (held in September, 2010). The two countries’ representatives have trumpeted their thawing relations in the Arctic, meeting regularly and even discussing plans to work together on mapping the seafloor where Chilingarov planted the Russian standard. The lesson is clear enough: The world has plenty of regions where serious conflict is a way of life already. Let’s worry about them first.

Note

- 1 Reprinted and adapted (with permission of the publisher) from Lawson W. Brigham, “Think Again: The Arctic: Everyone wants a piece of the thawing far north. But that doesn’t mean anarchy will reign at the top of the world,” *Foreign Policy* 181 (September/October 2010): 70–74; http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/16/think_again_the_arctic.

About the Contributing Authors

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CAITLYN ANTRIM is the Executive Director of the *Rule of Law Committee for the Oceans*, a committee of experts in international law and policy for the oceans. On behalf of the Committee, she provides education and outreach regarding the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the benefits of the convention to U.S. and global interests. Ms. Antrim focuses on national and international issues related to oceanic, continental, and polar resources and to the national and international regimes that affect their development

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WITH A FOREWORD BY
the Honorable Mead Treadwell, Lieutenant Governor of the
State of Alaska and an afterword by Dr. Lawson W. Brigham,
Distinguished Professor of Geography and Arctic Policy,
University of Alaska Fairbanks.

In the past three decades, summer Arctic sea-ice coverage has shrunk by more than a third. Whether or not this unprecedented decline (faster than anyone predicted) is evidence of global warming, the pace of change calls for a reassessment of our understanding of the region. The planting of a Russian flag on the Arctic sea-bed beneath the North Pole in August 2007 is symbolic of the high stakes involved as the Arctic opens up to oil and gas exploration, shipping, tourism, and increased human habitation. The transformation of the Arctic is driven as much by global economics and natural resource availability as it is by climate change.

There's a growing literature on the Arctic, but much of it emphasizes the climatological and ecological stresses and very little looks pragmatically at the military, defense, strategic, and macro-economic opportunities associated with the polar thaw. In this book, international scholars and military professionals explore the strategic consequences of sea-ice decline. Rather than a single national perspective, *The Fast-Changing Arctic* brings together circumpolar viewpoints from Europe, North America, and Asia for an integrated discussion of strategic, military, diplomatic, and security challenges in the high North.

The diverse nationalities and professional backgrounds represented in this book provide a broadly based forum for discussion of Arctic issues such as the feasibility of shipping through the Northwest Passage or the Northern Sea Route, sovereignty and territorial disputes, oil and gas exploration, fishing, coast guard responsibilities, and Arctic tourism. The contributors' analyses of efforts by governments and defense, security, and coast guard organizations to address current challenges make for timely and urgent reading. This is an important book for students of international relations, strategic studies, political science, and northern studies.

BARRY SCOTT ZELLEN is a specialist on Arctic security, sovereignty, and self-governance. He directs the Fast Changing Arctic project as a Senior Fellow at the Institute of the North and is a member of the board of directors of the Arctic Research Consortium of the United States.



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