

CIOR Seminar 2021

Daily Report, Day 2

23rd of February 2021

Paul C. Strobel (Bundeswehr)

After a successful first day, anticipation for day two of the 2021 CIOR Seminar ran high. Two exciting talks waited for the participants. Dr. Duncan Depledge, Lecturer in Geopolitics and Security from Loughborough University introduced the CIOR Seminar participants to the geopolitical situation in the far north and Dr. Pavel K. Baev, Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO) and Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Brookings Institute, took a deeper look at Russia's security posture in the Arctic.

To start the second day, Dr. Depledge set the scene by reminding participants that the Arctic is not in fact the vast cold emptiness so many of us think about when we hear about the region. Despite the region being dominated by water and ice, it has been inhabited for thousands of years.

The population usually is part of one of the sovereign states surrounding the Arctic. The US, Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia organise in the Arctic Council, which aims to further cooperation in the area and also offers a seat for representatives of the indigenous people living in the high north. The Arctic Council works on consensus and excludes military and security matters because they are considered to be too divisive.

Dr. Depledge reminded the seminar participants of the statement of former secretary of state Mike Pompeo, who called out Russia's and China's aggressive behaviour in the region. Pompeo's remarks reflected a broader shift in the US from their status as a "reluctant arctic state" to one who is heavily involved in the area.

With the Arctic now firmly on the US radar, Dr. Depledge highlighted three main interests for the US in the far north. Firstly, there is homeland defence, mainly aimed against the missile threat from northern Russia. The second US concern is Chinese commercial and scientific infiltration, which they fear might be an excuse for a long term military build-up in the area. Thirdly, Dr. Depledge stated: "The Arctic increasingly links the US to the rest of the world. They don't necessarily look at this space as one to conquer and hold but as one they want to secure passage through." And linking this potential field of conflict to one area that is very high on NATO's agenda, Dr. Depledge continued: "A crisis in the Baltics will undoubtedly also have consequences for the Arctic and vice versa."

Speaking about Russia's strategy for the region Dr. Depledge stated three main goals for the Federation: Extraction of natural resources, keeping NATO away from their territory and projecting naval forces globally. From a military perspective, Dr. Depledge explained: "What Russia doesn't want is a) encirclement and b) a fight in the Russian arctic. So what they want to do is ensure NATO stays in the North Atlantic."

As far as China's role in the Arctic is concerned, Dr. Depledge called for caution. "We often hear that China is trying to buy its way into the high north. But Chinese investment has faced several hurdles and has even been blocked on some occasions. . We also hear that China is seeking a military presence in the region but with little hard evidence." What China does do however is trying to expand its reach by diplomatic and mostly scientific means. Dr.

Depledge explained: "What China ultimately wants is geopolitical influence. So if and when the Arctic becomes more important, China wants to be in a position where they have a say in matters. They don't want to be excluded." Science and some economic investment in the area are their way to make sure they have a seat at the table.

After a lively discussion with Dr. Depledge the Seminar reconvened for the second talk of the day with Dr. Pavel K. Baev of PRIO, who took a more detailed look at Russia's role in the region.

Right from the beginning Dr. Baev emphasised: "Russia is THE arctic superpower. In the rest of the world it may not be able to keep up, but as far as the arctic is concerned they are a superpower and they are very proud of that position." This, Dr. Baev showed, is emphasised by the attention the far north gets from Putin personally and the strong public feelings about the Arctic in Russia.

Dr. Baev detailed two tracks of Russia's arctic policy: Firstly collaboration based on politics and economic development in the area and secondly a strong military build-up.

Concerningly, Dr. Baev pointed out, the collaborative spirit hasn't sown any major rewards for Russia recently while the military aspects have. "On the military track, confrontation feels good for Russia. The more NATO activity in the north, the more Russia emphasises the need for a military build up there", Dr. Baev explained the security paradox in the region.

Particularly the nuclear super-concentration on the Kola Peninsula is a great concern in this regard. A high concentration of ballistic missiles and nuclear submarines in the area are not only dangerous in a direct military sense but have proven accident prone in the past with catastrophic consequences often only narrowly avoided. But, as Dr. Baev explained, "Russia sees risk taking as a strategic advantage vis a vis a reluctant west."

One risk Russia might be tempted to take in Dr. Baev's opinion would be a Crimea-style invasion of the Norwegian territory of Svalbard, which would guarantee Russian access to the western seas. With the island being demilitarised Dr. Baev raised concerns about its security and NATO's ability to protect and retake it, should conflict arise.

But Dr. Baev also pointed out that Russia is currently distracted and preoccupied in other strategic theatres which are a lot more pressing. His hope is that Russia's presidency in the Arctic Council this year will further the collaborative spirit of Russia's engagement in the Arctic. Dr. Baev pointed out that Russia's position in the Asia-Pacific is extremely weak and although China isn't currently pressing at these weaknesses, we don't know how this situation will develop over time.

With regards to China's activity in the arctic itself, Dr. Baev pointed out: "China is not interested at all in the Russian military build-up in the Arctic. What they want is access, trade and economic value."

Like the first day, the second day also ended with a very lively discussion among seminar participants, with participants linking together the two lectures and furthering their understanding of the Arctic and its strategic ramifications.