

CIOR Seminar 2021

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The third and final day of the 2021 CIOR Seminar promised to keep the excitement of the first two days. Two guest speakers were waiting for the participants. Dr. Christoph Humrich, Assistant-Professor in International Relations and Security Studies and Associate Researcher at the Arctic Centre of the University of Groningen, and Dr. Michael Paul, security policy expert and Senior Fellow at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) shared their views on the Arctic and whether the area is at risk for future conflict.

Dr. Humrich first tried to capture the state of the region by distinguishing between warm peace, normal peace, cold peace, cold war and actual military engagement ("hot war"). Taking a historical perspective he reminded participants that the area has been no stranger to change: Having seen a lot of combat activity in World War 2 this era of a hot war was followed by the cold war in which military engagement is always threatened. From Gorbachev's Murmansk speech in 1987 towards the founding of the Arctic Council one could speak of an era of cold peace, followed even by normal peace in the region when cooperation between the regional states intensified (1996-2014) and military action seemed very unlikely. Then the Russian invasion of Crimea also left its traces in the high north, with tensions between Russia and the west being so high, that the normal peace gives way again to cold peace, meaning the military action in the area seems possible again. "Today we see new rising tensions and we need to be careful not to end up back in a cold war situation", Dr. Humrich said.

Importantly though, Dr. Humrich pointed out one key fact: In accounts of the Arctic scenarios have been envisioned in which regional conflicts escalate and then spill over into other areas of the world. But during the post-cold war period that -for various reasons - was not a very likely scenario. Yet as Dr. Humrich explained: "Today we look at the exact opposite scenario. Conflict in other areas is said to spill over into the Arctic."

He expanded on this by showing that rhetoric and perceptions of the region have often exaggerated the reality on the ground. One reason is an information bias, rooted in our media systems, where bad news make headlines. But also the military might have a bias as it is its task to focus on threats, sometimes leading to "institutionalised paranoia." But threat inflation can also be used for institutional reasons, as Dr. Humrich explained: "For the Canadian, Danish and Norwegian military, to name some examples, the security situation in the Arctic also have provided legitimization to ask for additional resources in the face of chronic underfunding."

Dr. Humrich also reminded participants of the complexity of geopolitics and the Arctic especially by pointing out that we often wrongly assume that geopolitical change in a region are also caused in the region. Instead we must on the one hand take a look also at factors beyond the Arctic. On the other hand, we need to understand that domestic changes within the Arctic countries, by contrast to their relations with each other, might influence their Arctic foreign and security policies. Government agencies and non-state actors within a country can have different goals and motivations and their competition and strategies for resource access

and attention can - like also shifts of public opinion or different parties in power - influence the respective perception of the Arctic, the following rhetoric and direction of policies.

This Dr. Humrich illustrated with an example: "From 2018 the US Coast Guard and Navy used a much inflated security rhetoric regarding the arctic to bolster their demand for new ice breakers, which was on the table already for two decades. They renamed the ice breakers into 'Polar Security Cutters' and explicitly explained this with the traction of security to get more funding from congress". Before the Trump administration had ventured the idea to repurpose money that the navy and coast guard secured in this way for the plans to build a wall on the Mexico border.

This example neatly highlighted Dr. Humrichs remarks about internal and global factors influencing the Arctic. "We need to avoid regionalism and statism bias. Arctic security is more complicated and more contingent on global and domestic factors than many observers suggest", he said.

Dr. Humrich closed his talk by warning participants to pay attention to rhetoric and perception: "NATO does not need an Arctic strategy, it's rather the North Atlantic (e.g. Greenland-Iceland-UK gap) they need to be worried about mainly. If you force the impression in Russia, that you're encroaching on the Arctic, the alarm bells go off in the Kremlin." He suggests that the Western states and the EU should seek cooperation with Russia in the Arctic and pointed out that there are plenty of low-cost opportunities for confidence building.

After a lively discussion with Dr. Humrich in the Q&A session, it was the turn of Dr. Michael Paul, security policy expert and Senior Fellow at the Stiftung Sicherheit und Politik (SWP), who introduced his paper "Arctic Security Environment in Flux: Mitigating Geopolitical Competition through a Military-Security Dialogue" to the participants ([Link to Article](#)).

Dr. Paul too started with the historical perspective and reminded participants that during the cold war too, the Arctic was heavily militarised. This changed with the Murmansk Initiative of 1987, which aimed to scale down military activity in the area and sparked a de-securitisation of the high north.

Following this period the eight arctic states saw a high potential for cooperation in the area, a spirit which ultimately lead to the creation of the Arctic Council. This body focused on sustainable development and cooperation in the area and signed the Search and Rescue Agreement as an example of interstate cooperation.

But, Dr. Paul points out, as the war against Georgia started in 2008, Russia re-started its long range air patrols into the Arctic and patrolled arctic waters with parts of its northern fleet. In this way, Russia reopened the militarisation in the region which leads to a security dilemma. Dr. Paul illustrated this by pointing out two strategically important points from NATO's perspective, called Bear Gap around bear island between northern Norway and Svalbard and the GIUK Gap between Greenland, Iceland and the UK. Near Bear Gap Russia announced an impact area for its strategic missile tests in response to the US deployment of strategic bombers to Norway.

As far as China's role in the region is concerned, Dr. Paul pointed out, that the country is being drawn into the Arctic by the tensions between Russia and the US. "China has established its interests in the region", he said and continued, "Sea routes have a huge impact on the economy and development of China and the arctic ocean has much less risk than the southern route through the Malacca Strait and the Suez Canal." Dr. Paul explained that Chinas modernisation of its naval forces could play a role in arctic security, as China is modernising its navy mainly to secure shipping lanes: "The Chinese Navy will likely

promote arctic equipment by the year 2030. The Chinese Navy could potentially play a huge role in the Arctic of the future.”

Dr. Paul ended his talk by pointing out that the Arctic is no longer unsusceptible to tensions from around the world. “The Arctic Region is in flux”, he said, “It is no longer immune to great power competition.” Dr. Paul advocated for an open dialogue and furthering cooperation with Russia to reduce tensions in the area and suggested reinviting Russia to the Arctic Security Council as a crucial step to rebuilding trust and cooperation for the future.

After a discussion of this talk it fell to former ambassador Philippe Welti, who had opened the 2021 CIOR Seminar two days ago, to deliver the closing remarks. He summed up the expert’s views of the last couple of days by stating: “We started with the question whether the arctic is a new area of conflict and I hinted at the possibility that the answer to that question might not be so dramatic.” There are a lot of factors that speak against a conflict erupting in the far north but, ambassador Welti pointed out, “We know that Russia has a tendency to engage in high risk and adventurism.” Mr. Welti also reiterated that there is a stark difference between the reality on the ground, political rhetoric and public perception: “If repeated often enough rhetoric can create conflict”, he warned.

Ambassador Welti finally reminded the seminar participants that the Arctics conflict potential, unlike in the South China Sea and in Taiwan, is very much in our hands. “We can control the rhetoric and lean on the Arctic Council as a first line of defence. The second line of defence is the existing security framework in Europe and the third is a dialogue with Russia.”

LTC (R) Hans Garrels called on all participants to share their new found knowledge: “It is on us as reserve officers to carry this knowledge to our respective governments and institutions. We have the privilege to look beyond a purely military perspective and we should share this view with those who need to hear it.”

With these words he concluded the 2021 CIOR Seminar. While the informal get together is dearly missed this year, we hope that the seminar can reconvene in person in Bonn next year.