

The Arctic: A New Area of Conflict?

NATO's reserve officers discuss the threat from the far north with international experts

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With former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo calling out Russian and Chinese aggression in the Arctic, US Marines and strategic bombers deploying to Norway, with Russia testing nuclear propelled cruise missiles just miles off the North Cape and China supposedly infiltrating Arctic harbours, some say that the Arctics peaceful days are over. But is the far north really turning into a new area of conflict as the political rhetoric of recent years suggests? Are the melting ice caps revealing new threats to our security? NATO's reserve officers met online to discuss this question with high-ranking international experts and drew some interesting conclusions.

Instead of hearing the buzz of an anticipating audience, the 2021 CIOR Seminar kicked off on Monday the 22nd of February with a crackle of the participants laptop loudspeakers. Lieutenant Colonel (R) Hans Garrels, chair of the CIOR Seminar Committee, welcomed the 64 participants from 19 different nations from his home office in the Netherlands. Due to the coronavirus and its restrictions this year's seminar of the Interallied Confederation of Reserve Officers, the NATO-affiliated association of the alliances reserve officers which is better known by its French acronym CIOR, had to take place online. This did not stop the attending reserve officers from the various NATO countries from immersing themselves in an area that very few had ever been exposed to: The Arctic.

Setting the Stage

Former ambassador and long-time CIOR friend Philippe Welti from Switzerland introduced this years' topic to the seminar participants and reminded them of the special nature of this region: "The Arctic consists mainly of water, some of it frozen." In fact, the Arctic is the smallest ocean in the world and an area that, historically speaking, has not produced much conflict potential in recent history despite seeing high levels of militarisation during the Cold War. But it is an area that has recently re-entered the focus of security and military strategists around the world and has in recent years been subject to a political rhetoric that suggests the areas peaceful days are over.

This change in perception is rooted in a significant change, which might upset what some call the strategic balance in the north: Climate change. With the ice caps melting previously unreachable natural resources have become accessible and new routes for shipping are slowly opening up, possibly changing the regions strategic equation.

Natural Resources as a "matter of survival"

The seminar thus started with a surprise. The expert speakers agreed that the supposed hype about near unlimited natural resources in the Arctic is largely exaggerated. At least when it comes to oil. As Nikos Tsafos, Deputy Director and Senior Fellow of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) pointed out: "The big plans for oil exploitation in the Arctic were foiled by the changing oil market with falling prices". Oil extraction in the Arctic simply isn't profitable. In Russia's case the imposed sanctions after the invasion of Crimea added to this stress.

This is not necessarily the case with natural gas, however. With the ice caps melting and new gas fields becoming more accessible, Russia has embarked on a huge new development effort for gas extraction in the area. A project that relies on the shipping of LNG

gas from ports in the Arctic and pipeline transport to Europe. Mr. Tsafos pointed out the strategic significance of this to the seminar participants: “All the project we get fussed about, like Nord Stream, Nord Stream 2, pipelines through Ukraine, all of that is gas from the Arctic.” But interestingly Russia’s drive north is less a matter of economic ambition, but one of necessity. “The geological decline of the older gas fields in the region is so stark, that they have to go to the Arctic just to keep production steady. The move north is a matter of survival for Gazprom and the state.”, Mr. Tsafos pointed out.

The Arctic Superpower and the Military Perspective

An interesting insight in a country, that historically sees itself as the Arctic superpower. And with some justification, as expert Dr. Baev, Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO) and Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Brookings Institute, pointed out to the seminar participants: “In the rest of the world Russia may not be able to keep up, but as far as the Arctic is concerned, they are the regional superpower, and they are very proud of that position.”

Dr. Baev sees two main tracks of Arctic policy in Russia: Firstly, its extensive economic development plans in the area and secondly a military build-up. With respect to the military aspects Dr. Baev pointed to two main issues in the region. The nuclear super-concentration on the Kola Peninsula, just next to NATO member Norway and EU member Finland, and the fact that Russia feels more comfortable in a confrontational stance with a willingness to take certain risks. “Collaboration hasn’t sown very great rewards for Russia in the past but military strength has. In this sense, Russia sees risk taking as a strategic advantage vis-à-vis a reluctant west.”

Dr. Baev raised concerns about a Crimea-style occupation of the Norwegian territory of Svalbard as a possible example of such a willingness to take risks and called into question NATO’s ability to protect or retake the islands if necessary. Expert Dr. Christoph Humrich from the University of Groningen also warned participants: “If you create the impression in Russia that you’re encroaching on the Arctic, the alarm bells go off in the Kremlin.”

Expert in security policy Dr. Michael Paul, Senior Fellow at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin illustrated the security paradox in the area. While Russia first re-started its long range air patrols in the arctic after the 2008 war in Georgia and started patrolling the Arctic Sea with its Northern Fleet, they respond drastically to NATO activity in the area. When the US deployed strategic bombers to Norway for the first time, Russia responded by creating an impact zone for its strategic missile tests right in the strategically important Bear Gap, between the North Cape and Svalbard. “The Arctic region is in flux. It is no longer immune to great power competition”, Dr. Paul concluded.

All experts agreed that in order to reduce the conflict potential of Russia in the area, an honest and cooperative dialogue with the Arctic superpower is needed. The Arctic, they stated, is an area rich in opportunities for low cost cooperation and confidence building. Dr. Humrich cited the Nord Stream pipeline projects as an example, which especially the US sees as a threat to European security. The pipelines would work both ways in ensuring cooperation between Russia and Europe: “Often we look at Nord Stream and think we will be dependent on Russia and it’s easy to forget that they too would depend on us, as customers.” Dr. Michael Paul

The Spill Over

When thinking about potential conflict in the Arctic, one envisages a scenario where military forces clash there first, and the conflict then spilling over into other theatres. In reality however, the experts agreed, the opposite scenario is far more likely. As Dr. Humrich pointed

out: “Conflict in other areas is likely to spill over into the Arctic.” This was confirmed by Dr. Duncan Depledge, Senior Lecturer in Geopolitics and Security from Loughborough University, who linked this potential field of conflict to one area that is currently very high on NATO’s agenda. He stated: “A crisis in the Baltics will undoubtedly have consequences for the Arctic as one major supply line.”

Free Passage

It is exactly this supply line, which makes the Arctic increasingly important for NATO due to its role as a potential transit route for forces traveling from the US to their European allies. Dr. Depledge hinted not only at the military importance of free passage through the Arctic Ocean, but also at its economic significance: “The Arctic increasingly links the US to the rest of the world, so they look at this space as one they want to secure passage through.”

For Russia too securing passage through the icy waters is one key interest. “From a military perspective”, Dr. Depledge pointed out, “what they don’t want is a) encirclement and b) a fight in the Russian Arctic. So, what they try to do is projecting force into the Atlantic.” However, military passage is not Russia’s main concern.

As Mr. Tsafos had pointed out the Russian gas projects in the Arctic, and particularly its development of LNG gas capacities relies on shipping. For this purpose the Russian government not only made available significant tax breaks for the gas companies, most notably Gazprom, but also supplies ice breakers to the private companies – some of them nuclear powered.

China in the Arctic

The focus on shipping in the Arctic Ocean brought to attention another key player in global politics: China. Expert Nikos Tsafos pointed out: “The LNG development in the far north was largely financed by Chinese money.” The hope of the Chinese being that by 2027 the northern route to China will offer year around passage for ships accompanied by ice breakers. This route would half the time needed for ship exports from Russia to China.

China’s role in the Arctic is contested but the country has repeatedly reiterated its interest in the far north. Dr. Depledge pointed out that there isn’t much evidence of China buying its way into the Arctic and that we don’t see a military effort either. “What China does do however is trying to expand its reach by diplomatic and scientific means”, Dr. Depledge explained and summarised: “What China ultimately wants is geopolitical influence. So if and when the Arctic becomes more important, China wants to be in a position to have a say in matters. They don’t want to be excluded.” Science and some economic investment in the area, most notably the Russian LNG project, are their way to make sure they have a seat at the table.

Dr. Paul of SWP however urged the seminar participants to look further into the future. “China has established its interests in the region and sea routes have a huge impact on the economy and development of China.” While they look at the Arctic Ocean as a passage with much less risk attached than the southern route through the Straits of Malacca and the Suez Canal, Dr. Paul pointed at the modernisation of China’s naval forces to secure its shipping lanes: “The Chinese Navy will likely promote arctic equipment by the year 2030. They could potentially play a huge role in the Arctic in the future.”

A Case of Rhetoric Irresponsibility?

Overall various limitations to the conflict potential in the area became obvious. With the potential for natural resources being limited by the global markets and no significant territorial disputes in the area, it seems that the Arctic is not the most likely area for conflict to arise.

However, the seminar participants noted the stark difference between the regional strategic facts and the political language surrounding the Arctic. Ambassador Philippe Welti called this “a case of rhetoric irresponsibility” and warned: “Conflict will erupt if you speak often enough about it.” With world tension increasing steadily, China taking a deeper interest in the Arctic and Russia being prone to spouts of adventurism, the Arctic may still find itself embroiled in conflict, even if it first starts elsewhere.

It’s in Our Hands

Ambassador Welti closed the three day long 2021 CIOR Seminar by reminding participants that unlike regions like the South China Sea and Taiwan, the Arctic’s conflict potential is very much in our own hands. “We can control the rhetoric and lean on the Arctic Council and the existing security framework and start a dialogue with Russia.” CIOR Seminar Chair Lieutenant Colonel (R) Hans Garrels reiterated this point and 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.”

With these inspiring words, the CIOR Seminar 2021 ended with a simple click on a button, leaving participants hoping that next year they can see each other from face to face again and shake hands to say farewell.