

Climate change, a catalyst for Arctic cooperation



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Environmental challenges should be a priority for all players in the region, outweighing military and economic issues

It is tempting to view the current geopolitics of the Arctic through the lenses of the ‘great power competition’ and inevitable conflict of interests. Interestingly, the current geopolitical scenario is, to a certain extent, mirrored in the Arctic region as well. This is mainly about the **growing tensions between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies and Russia**.

There are eight countries that have direct access to the Arctic resources, i.e., Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States. In 2013, **six Observers joined the Council**, including China, Japan, India, Italy, South Korea, and Singapore, bringing their total number to 13.

Security concerns

By the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical tensions and security concerns in the Arctic were almost forgotten. In October 1987, during a visit to the Kola Peninsula, Mikhail Gorbachev, then Secretary-General of the Soviet Communist Party, acknowledged the end of the Cold War era and promoted a ‘zone of peace’ in the Arctic.

The perceived ‘harmony’ was broken in 2007, when the **Russian explorers planted their flag** on the seabed 4,200m (13,779ft) below the North Pole to articulate Moscow’s claims in the Arctic. This move was certainly viewed as provocative by other Arctic States, and the Canadian Foreign Minister,

Peter MacKay, said “this is not the 15th century”, and “countries cannot just go around, plant their flags, and claim the territories”.

The regional tension increased after the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014. Consequently, relations between the U.S. and Russia reached their lowest point again. The rhetoric of the bilateral mistrust was transferred ‘up to the North’ and created anxiety among other stakeholders in the Arctic.

After the events in Ukraine in 2014, Russia has been increasingly viewed as a ‘rule-breaker’, ‘revisionist power’ and an ‘untrustworthy player’. Besides, Russia’s intention to re-establish the military might of its Northern Fleet also creates the security concerns and features prominently in the Norwegian foreign policy. On the other hand, some Russian military experts believe that the Barents Sea can serve as the launching area for a western seaborne attack; therefore, the Russian Navy should ensure the readiness of its anti-submarine forces in the Arctic Ocean.

The eco-dimension

In the last decades, we have been confronted with the multiple ‘wake-up calls’ that are related to climate change; and these calls are getting louder. The summer of 2021 would be recorded in history as one of the most devastating seasons of our times, when ferocious floods and wildfires were destroying communities in many parts of the world. Due to the environmental transformations, natural catastrophes occur unexpectedly — on an unprecedented scale, and in unusual geographic locations. For example, the extreme heat in North America or wildfires in Russian Siberia (Yakutia), where the winter temperature can be below minus 40°. The Arctic region also bears the brunt of climate change. At the same time, it provides a platform for scientific research that can help to get to the bottom of natural calamities around the world.

Keeping in mind the existential threats, the environmental challenges should be an absolute priority for all players in the Arctic region. These considerations should outweigh military and economic issues and unite countries for the sake of eliminating the potential (and real) dangers attributed to climate change.

According to **The World Climate and Security Report 2020** (the first report of the Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate and Security, or the IMCCS), ‘the Arctic is warming nearly twice as fast as the rest of the planet with consecutive record-breaking warm years since 2014... The Arctic is likely to begin experiencing ice-free summers within the next decade, with summers likely to be completely free of sea ice by mid-century’.

There should be concerted efforts to minimise the adverse effects on the fragile Arctic ecosystem. A good example to be highlighted is the recent case of a Norwegian drilling project; it was taken to the European court by the group of environmentalists. Their main argument is that the negative impact of mining activities can spread beyond the continental shelf of Norway.

The geopolitical vs strategic

The environmental transformation and rapid ice melting have also opened up new opportunities in the region, which includes trans-Arctic shipping routes. These opportunities have inevitably attracted all stakeholders in the region, both the Arctic and non-Arctic states. China, for example, with its self-proclaimed status of a ‘near Arctic state’, has been actively engaged in various projects across the region.

The importance of the Arctic region for China mostly stems from its energy security issues and the need to diversify shipping lanes. Transport routes from China to Europe through the Arctic are not only much shorter but also free from the challenges associated with the Malacca Strait and South China Sea. In the latter case, China will continue facing a backlash from many Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members, supported by U.S. forces.

Given the significance of the region, the Arctic will continue to draw increased attention. Apart from pursuing national interests, participating nations should also be concerned about the future developments in the region and their larger implications for humanity.

Hence, they should refrain from mutual provocations, excessive militarisation, and *quid pro quo* tactics. All the Arctic actors should have a

long-term vision and strategic goals as compared to immediate short-term gains. Instead of creating a potential battleground that is reminiscent of the Cold War, the parties concerned should utilise their expertise and create the required synergy to achieve shared goals. Climate change and its dramatic consequences must be a catalyst for Arctic cooperation.

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