

Future of Great Power Competition in the Arctic

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Abstract: The following analysis is about the Great power competition in Arctic to assess how the Arctic will evolve geopolitically to 2050, including its implications for Russian interests. Given the growing influence of China and the USA and their future strategic opportunities in the Arctic, Russia needs to increase its presence in the region of growing importance. This review is designed to spur new thinking and debate about the Arctic in Russia.

Keywords: Russia, USA, China, competition, Arctic region.

Introduction

Russian and Chinese activity carried out in the Arctic in recent years is causing a huge discussion in the United States regarding threats from these two near-peer competitors and steps needs taken (including with NATO allies) to increase U.S. presence in the region. In this context, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a groundbreaking speech in Rovaniemi, Finland in May 2019 where he proclaimed that this was «America’s moment to stand up as an Arctic nation» – this probably be done with urgency in order to recover from a «lost decade» of policy stagnation in the Arctic – and that «the region has become an arena of global power and competition» [5].

As for China's growing activity in the Arctic, its emergence in the Arctic began with scientific exploration and economic motives. Chinese officials periodically declare that they will not interfere in the sovereign affairs of the Arctic states, but China will certainly be present in the region. But what about by 2050? Would China’s initial economic and scientific investments in the Arctic pose a threat to the Russian presence in the Arctic? Can an increased US presence in the region cause problems for Russia and China? And, of course, what measures should be taken by Russia to maintain the level of its presence in the future?

Main body

Chinese vision for the Arctic. Since May 15, 2013 China became a permanent observer to the Arctic Council. From this date, China, a self-declared «near-Arctic state», substantially accelerated its economic and scientific presence across the circumpolar Arctic, and in subsequent years, China has started to collaborate with Russia in military exercises in the Arctic.

An additional incentive for China to intensify its Arctic policy is that the Arctic states seek to recognize China's rights regarding its continued access to the high seas of the Central Arctic. China took a significant step toward actualizing its Arctic ambitions when it specifically mentioned its development of a “blue economic passage” that will promote trade “to Europe via the Arctic Ocean” as part of its Belt and Road Initiative [8]. China has stated then that its role in the Arctic is one of respect, cooperation, and win-win activity [3].

The announcement emphasized China's willingness to explore for potential resources while also «encouraging Chinese enterprises to take part in the commercial use of the Arctic route». As a result, with the release of its first Arctic white paper in January 2018, China has increased its scientific and economic footprint in the region [2].

With China's announcement in January 2018 to expand its Belt and Road Initiative to the Arctic, the Polar Silk Road was launched. According to estimates by the Chinese Institute for Polar Research, Arctic routes will account for 5 to 15 percent of China's foreign trade by 2020 [7]. Moreover, China now has two polar-class icebreakers, and it announced plans to construct a nuclear-powered icebreaker, which would make it the second country after Russia to have one in its inventory.

Having gained access to the Arctic and expanded its scientific and economic presence, China is now actively seeking to finance infrastructure projects in the Arctic countries to expand trade links between Arctic ports and mainland Europe. The most notable example is Chinese investment in the Russian Port of Sabetta and the Yamal LNG Project along the eastern coast of the Yamal Peninsula. China is also in talks with Finland, Norway, and Russia to lay a 10,500 km high-speed telecommunications cable connecting Europe to Asia across the Arctic Ocean [4].

To date, it cannot be said that China's activity in developing the scientific and economic potential of the Arctic, as well as financing infrastructure projects in the Arctic countries, is a threat to Russia's interests in the region.

United States' vision for the Arctic.

Since the Cold War, the United States has been the least active and least assertive of the littoral Arctic nations and has lacked a clear, comprehensive and consistent Arctic strategy. US administrations have not treated the Arctic region as a US national security priority on a par with Europe, Asia and the Middle East or pursued comprehensive or well-resourced policies towards it.

However, 2019 became the year that the United States started viewed the Arctic through the lens of Great power competition and fully recognized the increased military and economic presence of Russia and China. This policy shift was encapsulated in Secretary of State Pompeo's speech in Rovaniemi, Finland.

Secretary of State Pompeo struck the right note in his Arctic presentations, which emphasized the administration's commitment to environmentally responsible behavior, scientific research, improvement of the livelihood of indigenous peoples, and reduction of carbon dioxide emissions. This leaves no room for doubt – for USA, the Arctic is becoming a strategic area of activity [6].

The United States, as a global actor, seeks to pursue an independent policy in the Arctic region. The United States is the only Arctic G7 country that has not ratified the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This could lead to controversy when delimiting the continental shelf and the Arctic seas (primarily with Russia) and «unties his hands» for many provocative steps.

According to many American experts, the US presence in the Arctic may take the form of a powerful security polar cutter, deep-sea port, scientific observation center, sustainable economic investment or significant investment in achieving diplomatic results in the format of multilateral negotiations.

This will require the development and positioning of increased U.S. security and infrastructure assets, a significant increase in U.S. Arctic diplomatic presence and activity, the strengthening of in situ science and research, and the promotion of economic opportunities across the circumpolar Arctic, as well as a reorganization of the U.S. government to restore American leadership in the region.

Security remains the main priority of Washington in the Arctic. Across the region lies the shortest route for potential missile and air strikes on America from the northern hemisphere. As a result, Washington plans to further strengthen missile defense and aviation forces. But the practical possibilities of the USA in the Arctic are still small: 1-2 icebreakers versus 14 Russian. While there is no program for the development of the region: recently, Trump abandoned his initial plans for the construction of new icebreakers [1].

However, in the foreseeable future, it is highly likely that the United States will strengthen its economic and military capabilities in the Arctic in order to maintain parity of forces with China and Russia - the two main near-peer competitors of the United States for influence in a transforming world.

Revitalizing US policy in the region will require greater attention and strategic initiatives from Russia if it wants to remain the first number in the region. A definite strategy of action will also need to be adopted in relation to US-China rivalry.

Conclusion

Summing up, there is no doubt that today the Arctic occupies a strategic position in the foreign policy doctrines of many countries. This region is rich in minerals, strategically important in terms of defense potential. Probably in the next decade a real Great power competition for this region will unfold.

We will point out the need for Russia to adopt its strategy to a potential conflict of interests with the United States and China in the Arctic region. In the rapidly changing world, Russia needs to understand that military activity can be added to China's current scientific and economic presence in the Arctic by 2050. This may be dictated by the protection of the Silk Road trade, infrastructure in the Arctic countries and as a reaction to the growing U.S. activity in the Arctic.

Another danger for Russia may come from US actions. Starting in 2019, the Pentagon regularly updates the state Arctic strategy and works on the commissioning of new icebreakers. However, the United States has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Russia can only retain its position and emerge victorious from Great power competition by acting proactively, effectively assessing risks and opportunities, increasing its presence in the Arctic.

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