



ARCTIC: IS IT US Vs. RUSSIA ONCE AGAIN?

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Recent statements made by President Vladimir Putin to Russian students on 03 December, this month have emphasized the antagonism between Russia and US over interests in the Arctic region. Putin stated that though cooperation and partnership should be developed between Russia and US, the US submarines present in Arctic cannot be discounted as their very presence is synonymous to deployed missiles.

He further mentioned that US missiles take 15 to 16 minutes from the Barents Sea in the Arctic to reach Moscow which is major cause for Russian wariness to US military presence in the region¹. Arctic and Russia have also been in news recently due to the international furor over Russia's arrest of 30 Greenpeace activists in September this year. Greenpeace activists aboard their *Arctic Sunrise* vessel had tried to scale the Prirazlomnaya platform, Russia's first offshore oil platform in the Arctic operated by the state-owned firm Gazprom. Russia had initially accused the protesters of piracy but later softened the charges to hooliganism and the 30 activists were released in late November in return for a bond of \$5 million.

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The Arctic Circle comprises of the Arctic Ocean and parts of Canada, Russia, the United States (Alaska), Denmark (Greenland, Faroe Islands), Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. The foremost political body managing the Arctic Circle is the **Arctic Council** comprising of the above mentioned eight Arctic nations and organizations representing the six indigenous populations. There are currently 12 non-Arctic states that have been given observer status by the Arctic Council to attend the meetings but are granted no voting rights and have minimum participation in the Council projects and Working Groups. Seven of them are European states- France, Germany, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom and Italy. The other five are Asian states- China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore

and India. European Union though having applied for observer status is an ad-hoc observer as its entry is opposed by other Council members on account of its ban on hunting seals and increased participation of NATO in Arctic matters. The Arctic now goes beyond the purview of state actors as transnational companies and international multilateral institutions have also become major players and serve as observer organizations in the Arctic Council.

In mid October this year, the Kremlin announced that Moscow wants to spend \$63 billion by 2020 on its Arctic program. This is likely since Russia has a lot at stake in the Arctic region, perhaps more than any other Arctic nation. Russia covers almost half of the latitudinal circle with 1/5th of Russia's landmass north of the Arctic Circle. In 2011, out of 4 million inhabitants of Arctic, roughly 2 million lived in arctic Russia thus making it the largest arctic country by population. It is also estimated that as much as 1/5th of Russian GDP derives from north of the Arctic Circle. 25% of the nation's total exports come from the region. Furthermore, according to recent estimations by the US Geological Survey in 2009, the Arctic area contains some 30% of the world's undiscovered natural gas and about 13% of the world's undiscovered oil. The undiscovered natural gas is believed to be mainly found in Russia. In some estimates as much as 70% of the gas is concentrated in the Russian sector. Siberia alone is estimated to hold oil reserves equal to the Middle Eastⁱⁱⁱ.

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Also the region's central role in Russian strategic thinking and defense policy is evident from the strong military footholds of the Russian armed forces in the region. Following the downturn in Russian economy after the 2008 global recession and the fall in energy prices, the Arctic region assumes even greater importance since Russia's international position and influence in world affairs currently depend entirely on its energy reserves and maybe its nuclear arsenal. Maintaining and modernizing the nuclear component has been given the highest priority in the state armaments programs for the period 2007-2015 and 2011-2020. The Russian perceptions of external threat, combined with nationalism and resentment about the "humiliating" loss of great power status in the 1990s, together with the quest for international prestige and influence through reliance on

shows of strength, have been central elements of the strategic culture under Putin^{iv}. Because all other arctic countries bordering the Arctic Ocean are members of NATO, which is still perceived as having an anti-Russian bias, Russia is cautious of their military plans for the region. This is evident in Putin's recent statements since Russian strategic culture evidently seems more focused on a state's military capability rather than its political intentions.

The belief that the military is an important element of the process of reconstituting the country's international standing has resulted in increased attention and funding for the military, and in greater use of the armed forces. In the "Concept for Use of the Navy in Peacetime for the Period upto 2020" declared by Ministry of Defense in January 2007, Russia will step up its naval presence in "operatively important regions" in different parts of the world^v. The Arctic has also been included among the regions defined as strategic. In June 2008, the Northern Fleet based on the Kola Peninsula in the Western Arctic resumed its routine and active presence in the Arctic. Though the Arctic was not a preoccupation for Russia in the 1990s, Russia placing its national flag on the seabed of the Arctic Ocean in 2007 and resuming its long-range aviation (LRA) strategic bomber flights over the Arctic after a gap of 15 years same year was a symbolic turning point of Russia's perception of Arctic in their strategic matters.

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Further in 2007 the Arctic ice cover receded to the lowest levels known since satellite measurements began in 1979. Due to the receding ice cover, the opening of routes such as the Northwest Passage, the Northern Sea Route, the Bering Strait, and even a transpolar route across the North Pole were seen as potentially revolutionizing the global transport system. The Northeast Passage shortens the distance between the Asian and Western European ports by more than seven thousand kilometers and thus provides summer competition with the Suez Canal. All this was almost a wakeup call for American authorities to focus on the Arctic region owing to the striking renewed visibility of the Russian armed forces in the region in contrast to the previous long stagnation and decay

during the 1990s. Therefore in late 2007 the National Security Council and the Department of State began co-hosting a series of White house level meetings to develop a new US Arctic Policy to protect US Arctic land & sea along with minerals and oil and gas deposits located under the seabed. Since the ability to operate unimpeded in the Arctic Ocean was essential to maintaining US nuclear deterrence, the US interests in the Arctic were grounded in advancing strategic deterrence and *freedom of navigation* to ensure global strategic mobility and tactical maritime and aerospace maneuverability^{vi}.

The Arctic is one place where US definitely lags behind Russia as evident from US's serious lack of icebreakers where as Russia has more number of icebreakers than any other nation. Russia has six nuclear ice breakers, four of the heavy Arktika class and two of the shallow draft Taymyr class. Hence while the US enjoys an unparalleled submarine capability for operating in ice-covered waters, the nation has fairly minimal capability to operate above the ice in the extreme Arctic climate. Arctic activities are viewed by Congress and the American people as peripheral to more pressing domestic and foreign policy needs. Further as the harsh environment of the Arctic Ocean precludes conventional threats, US is more or less a reluctant Arctic power at the moment because of the Shale Boom back home. All of the Arctic states are in good standing with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), except the United States though even Washington observes almost all of the provisions of the convention. Moscow also reached an agreement with the United States in 1990 on maritime boundary delimitation along the Bering Strait, the gateway connecting the Pacific Ocean to the Arctic Ocean. In 2011, the Council member states concluded the Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement, the first binding treaty concluded by the Council.

At present the Arctic shipping season is of unpredictable length, dependant on changing climate patterns. Estimates as to when the Arctic routes could become viable range from one to three decades, obviously depending on what sort of shipping is envisaged. However the likelihood that the Arctic will emerge as one of the key global sea lines of communication (SLOC) is no longer contested. But for much of the shipping industry, notably the vast volumes of global container traffic that depend on just in time schedules, the uncertain ice conditions will still preclude the use of Arctic SLOC for some time. However conciling those emphasizing ecological norms and regulation and those

emphasizing sovereign rights and exploitation both within states and between states, is a major pressure point. The tensions could become acute in situation of failure of multilateral agreements on both the delimitation of the Arctic and the ecological standards. And disagreements over issues in other regions may have ripple effects on perceptions of security between US and Russia in the Arctic. However despite the riches hidden under the ice, as the retired US Navy Admiral James Stavridis wrote in Foreign Policy "the likelihood of a conventional offensive military operation in the Arctic is very low^{vii}."

Endnotes:

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ⁱ The New Zealand Herald; Putin says Russia needs to beef up Arctic presence dated 4th Dec, 2013 available on http://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=11166536

ⁱⁱ Wikipedia available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Arctic_circle.svg

ⁱⁱⁱ US Energy Information Administration; Russia available at <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=RS>

^{iv} Kraska, James (ed.), 2011, *Arctic Security In An Age Of Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press

^v *ibid*

^{vi} *ibid*

^{vii} FP National Security; [Russia Preps for Arctic 'Dominance' With Nuclear Icebreakers and Polar Warships](http://killerapps.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/11/06/russia_prep_for_arctic_dominance_with_nuclear_icebreakers_and_polar_warships) dated Nov 6, 2013 available at http://killerapps.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/11/06/russia_prep_for_arctic_dominance_with_nuclear_icebreakers_and_polar_warships_0