
Geopolitics of the Arctic: Through the Lens of State Securitization

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Abstract. Owing to its vast deposits of mineral resources and its potential as a new sea-route that would connect the East with the Far East, the Arctic region had often been the subject of immense interest and speculations for the past four to five decades. However, as time went by, the “Scramble for Arctic” had only intensified the geopolitical dynamics between Arctic Five countries, who are vying to establish a strong foothold in the region either by peaceful or strategic means. USA and Russia are the two prominent players in the area; not to mention Canada and the newly entrant China. Using the theory of state centrism, we analyse the propensity for a resource war in Arctic from a geopolitical standpoint.

Keywords: the Arctic, Geopolitics, Cold War, Political Ecology, Environmental Degradation

Introduction

FOR A LONG TIME, THE ARCTIC WAS SHROUDED IN MYSTERY as the cartographers and map-makers struggled to put together facts into figure regarding this colossal behemoth of ice. Even about a century ago, the potential for Arctic as the “treasure chest” of natural resources and a sea-route was unbelievable at best, despite the North Pole expedition by an American named Robert Peary Sr. in 1909. With the passage of time and the development of better navigation and surveillance technologies throughout the twentieth century, the Arctic region slowly became more and more familiar to geologists, zoologists, environmentalists, and other fields of scientific and social science research alike. But every positive intention might cause a negative backlash, and such was the case of the countries surrounding the Arctic who funded these scientific and geological expeditions only for their national

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interest. The maritime claims by the countries comprising the Arctic Five, namely Russia, Canada, the USA (Alaska), Norway, and Denmark (Greenland) is only the tip of the iceberg and it has often led to some of the most high-profile diplomatic posturing in recent years. (Erokhin et al., 2018) The significant among those are the probabilities for a new Cold War, this time in the literal sense given that there are several causes of the scramble for resources in the High North. Despite having all the potential for a full-blown conflict, the Arctic Oil Rush (a pun on California Gold Rush) had proved to be more of a gradual and cooperative gesture between the Arctic states in the unlikeliest of senses. (Shoumatoff, 2008) But it is worth considering that all the countries are secretly surveying the Arctic hydrocarbon ‘treasures’ with a high level of caution instead of outright mobilizing military forces to claim them. Even though it is as clear as broad daylight that there can be misuses of power according to the perspective of traditional security, the non-traditional security perspectives of the competition for resources is not at all a new phenomenon, but rather a paradigm shift from colonization of the African and Asian territories by European powers to the resource rich far North. It has resulted in a unique grey area between the traditional and non-traditional security perspectives.

Methodology and Objectives

This article is a qualitative one in nature based on secondary literatures of both scholarly and semi-scholarly. For data, this article is heavily relying on relevant books, news articles, blogs, case studies, and journals etc. regarding the Arctic, Non-Traditional Security and Security Studies.

The state securitization of the Arctic has been already established by the scholars previously. The aim of this article is to revitalize the concerns once again and document the present conditions. So evidently, we decided to apply the State Securitization theory. It is a vital component of the umbrella term non-traditional security for the purpose of explaining the geopolitics of the resource war in Arctic. Coincidentally, it is very useful for explaining the supposed military ventures of the USA and Russia in the Arctic, although none of it accounted to any major conflicts as of yet. In order to accomplish this task, the next section will describe the State Securitization as theoretical framework.

State Securitization

Even before the competition for resources in the Arctic became that a big deal as it is today, Osborn in 1948 correctly predicted how the scarcity of resources could lead to full-blown future wars. It was a belief that was later integrated into IR's academic sphere, some four to five decades later. Osborn assumed that diminishing productive lands and increasing population pressures

are the main reasons why there are discords between nations and the causes for the individual countries' aggressive mentality. Evidently, it was written during the genesis of the Cold War era. However, Osborn correctly predicted all the resource wars we are currently facing now, as seen in Africa and Asia in the twenty-first century.

Idea of State Securitization

When the Cold War was drawing towards the end during the 1980s, a fascinating article was published by a highly influential journal *Foreign Affairs*. The report was authored by none other than US diplomat Jessica Mathews, who reiterated that states should re-emphasize the newly-developed threats posed due to depletion of resources. Having served in the National Security Council of the US government in the past, Mathews expressed her opinions regarding the rational thinking of Osborn, Falk, and the Sprouts, but in a more state-centric tone of the Realist analysis. While addressing the foreign policy implications of the effects of depletion of resources on the political stability of lower states, Mathews reiterated that environmental problems that have transcended state boundaries like climate change, deforestation, and ozone depletion, must become agendas of state concerns since they are the primary cause of regional instability. (Mathews, 1989) Even though it didn't receive much acclaim like Mathews' article, legendary diplomat of the US George F. Kennan already argued in the same journal four years prior to the publication of Mathews article about how the world faced two-pronged "unprecedented and supreme dangers," the former being nuclear war and the latter being the deadly effect of modern industrialization and overpopulation on the world's natural resources.

Due to the seeds sown by the writings of Mathews and Kennan in the decade of 1980s, a new dimension of IR inquiry came into being into the Post-Cold War era, forecasting that the heightened competition for resources would inevitably lead to wars, especially in the Less Developed Countries (LDCs). US journalist Fred Kaplan and Canadian scholar Thomas Homer-Dixon were the fore-runners of this field of study. (Homer-Dixon, 1994; Kaplan, 1994; cited in Hough, 2015) According to Homer-Dixon, "violent conflicts in many parts of the world occurred due to 'environmental scarcities'." (Homer-Dixon, 1994 cited in Hough, 2015) When Homer-Dixon/Kaplan's thesis was in full throttle, excess competition for those most precious resources led to a similar but significant "water wars" literature, emphasizing dry regions such as the Middle East potentially use access to water as a weapon. (Starr, 1991; Bullock & Adel, 1999 cited in Hough, 2015)

In an empirical study by Columbia University, similar in style to Homer-Dixon's research, it was found that countries affected by the El Niño/Southern Oscillation extreme weather phenomenon between 1950 and 2005 were twice

as likely to experience major civil or international conflict (i.e., causing at least twenty-five fatalities) as those countries which were not affected. Cases highlighted in the study included the fact that El Niño struck Peru in 1982 in the same year as the Shining Path insurgency took off. Civil wars in Sudan had flared up in parallel with the emergence of extreme weather conditions. The study concluded that 'when crops fail, people may take up a gun simply to make a living.' (Hsiang et al., 2011 cited in Hough, 2015)

Even though it later became a trend to link any resource scarcity with war, a significant dimension of the resource war literature resurfaced with passing time related to climate change. According to Pearman and Dupont, subsequent impacts of global warming has increased the possibilities of conflict in five main ways: resource scarcity, more significant movements of refugees within and outside the state boundaries, increased tug of war for the remaining resource sources, the effects of diseases and natural disasters and vast tracts of lands being rendered uncultivable and uninhabitable due to either inundation or water scarcity. (Dupont & Pearman, 2006 cited in Hough 2015) An empirical study conducted by Columbia University, even though it was quite similar in style to research conducted by Homer-Dixon, showed that the countries most affected by the El Niño (a type of cyclone of the Southern Hemisphere) between the years 1950 and 2005 were two times in the risk of experiencing major civil or international wars (i.e., causing at least twenty-five fatalities) than the countries not hit by it. This proposition can best be explained by the rise of 'Sendro Luminoso' (Shining Path) insurgents in 1982 in Peru, at the same time when El Niño struck Peru. A similar situation was experienced in the Darfur region of Sudan, the premise being draught instead of a cyclone. This study established that people may take arms to earn their livelihoods whenever crops fail.

Even though the State Securitization theory is handy for explaining the Arctic realist dynamics, it is not particularly helpful to identify and understand the human-centric environmental degradation of the Arctic. Despite such a major drawback, State Securitization theory is very useful in explaining the patterns of change in the geopolitical arena of Arctic pertaining to the imminent resource war, new Cold War, resource nationalism, high-Arctic politics and the potential for an all-out USA-Russia clash with the involvement of China as the partner of Russia in its ambitious Arctic "One Belt One Road" project, which will be explained in detail in the next part.

Changing Dynamics in the Geopolitics of the Arctic

The world's geopolitical landscape is very dynamic; it is being constantly changed due to clashes or reconciliation of national interests between states. In particular, new debates and various opinions regarding the newly available natural resources, environmental problems, sea-trade routes, and corresponding national threats surrounding the Arctic have arisen for the last couple of years owing to the melting of the sea ice. Over the years, due to the conflicting nature of inter-state views, the Arctic territories have become a vital component in the policymaking of the Arctic states and actors.

The Arctic "Treasure Chest"

A team of U.S. Geological Survey scientists in May of 2008 had the arduous task of estimating the potential amount of gas and oil deposits in the Arctic and how it would contribute in the distant future. What they discovered was an astounding one, as the sum of the mean estimates of new resources suggested that the Arctic itself accounts for 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 90 billion barrels of crude oil, and 44 billion barrels of liquefied natural gas liquids. All these alone constitute 22% of all the natural gas and oil deposits of the world. Moreover, it was estimated that 84% of these resources lie in offshore sediments. (Gauthier, 2011) Arctic ice shrinks to 40% of its original size in the summer season than it was some three decades ago. With global warming looming at large, the Arctic Sea will become completely free of ice during the summer season within the next two to three decades. The prediction regarding the melting of Arctic ice caps has also generated new dimensions for international trade. The rise of Asian consumer markets has raised substantial economic implications for potential maritime trade through the now frozen Arctic, reducing both the time and distance for transporting goods and services between the East and the West.

The potential gains expected to be found in the Arctic have made many offshore countries constituting the "Arctic Five" i.e. Russia, the USA, Canada, Norway, and Denmark (via Greenland), the region than ever before. However, one of the burning issues for the Arctic Five stakeholders is that much of the area falls under the United Nations Convention's jurisdiction *on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS III) of 1982. UNCLOS made a ruling that all countries have the right to gain access to the Arctic resources outside each of Arctic Five's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). (Czarny, 2015) Due to this ruling, many of the Arctic Five countries often work together to strengthen the legitimacy of their claim over the Arctic.

The New Arctic "Cold War"

It seems increasingly apparent that despite the ever-changing natural environment of the Arctic, the political and economic environment is not boiling as it was initially thought. Despite the way it was commented and reported upon, the USGS survey did not prove to be an epoch-changing discovery. Instead, the findings of the study were quite similar to the survey conducted in 2000. It could be said that it was one of USA's reply to the Russian robot flag-bearer's spectacle of 2007 in the Arctic, which put the Bush Administration at unease. According to Dodds, the Russian robot's North Pole flag planting exercise was really "an act of stagecraft rather than statecraft." (Dodds, 2010) Even Russia's Foreign Minister at that time, Sergei Lavrov, explained that it was indeed "a piece of exploratory showmanship comparable to the "Stars and Stripes" (the flag of the USA) being planted on the Moon in 1969". Despite the potential of a new Arctic "Cold War," it was widely overlooked that part of Russia's robotic exercise funds did come from Western Sponsors. (Baey, 2010 in Hough 2015)

In the last decade, NATO had undertaken major naval expeditions into the Barents region and organized large-scale exercises in the High North, near the North Pole. Many senior U.S. military officials and diplomats reiterated that the Russian activities that the Arctic constitute a significant threat, which requires a dynamic U.S. military response in the form of new capabilities and new deployments. (Goldstein, 2020) U.S.-Russian military tensions have been on the rise in nearly every geographic sphere over the last couple of years. Still, recently in 2020, Russia and China had embarked on a joint venture to extract natural resources in the Arctic, which the USA considers as a threat to its interests and the interests of its allies in the region. According to former U.S. Ambassador to Norway, Kenneth J. Brathwaite, the Chinese and Russians are everywhere in the Arctic, mostly the Chinese. Moreover, China's recent activity near the Norwegian northern coastal town of Kirkenes near the Arctic is particularly alarming. (Humpert, 2020) It is particularly aware of Norway's role in the region and the Arctic route for transporting goods in the European mainland.

Resource Nationalism

There had been a considerable rise of interest from the "super major" oil and lubricant companies over the years regarding the Arctic. However, it is not necessarily an indicator for a new type of "Black" Gold Rush. Instead, 'resource nationalism' had taken the front seat and therefore forced the super major oil and lubricants companies to look further into the Arctic owing to increased state sovereignty over the reserves of hydrocarbon resources. To look no further, the Russian government, in particular, had acquired a monopoly over the domestic

energy companies and foreign direct investment schemes as a result of centralization ever since Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin as the President of Russia in 1999. The expertise and equipment of super major companies are still required by the Russian government, as evidenced by the series of international cooperative ventures that were often at odds with Russia's nationalistic sentiments.

A thorough investigation conducted by the USGS warned that 'no economic considerations' were included in the ventures between Russia and super major companies; the deals were signed without any reference to development and exploration costs that would be crucial in many of the assessed areas.' (Bard et al., 2008) Of course, assessing energy opportunities is not merely about making estimates about the potential amounts of oil and gas under the Arctic icy and rocky terrain and then comparing those to other forecasts in the rest of the world. The costs of exploration, oil and gas extraction and transport are much different in the High North. The economic downturn the world has experienced in 2008 due to recession and in 2020 due to COVID-19 Pandemic has made such costs more critical. Most of the companies that had acquired licenses to drill for new oil or gas fields in the Arctic are still hesitant to start working. For example, the Shtokman LNG field project, a much-anticipated joint venture between Russian gas giants Gazprom, French energy company TOTAL and Norwegian company Statoil launched in 2007 in the Russian part of Barents Sea, has yet to commence operations due to the increasing risks posed in the project by the shareholders which have led to a series of postponements and finally, it was postponed indefinitely in May 2019. (Staalesen, 2019)

High Arctic Politics

Generally, foreign policy statements emphasize national interests and zero-sum characterizations of energy security since these are what foreign policy statements usually should convey and what most of us think of in the first place. Classical Realism, in most cases, often masks the intention of cordial, cooperative relations, and that is what is usually seen in this case with the "Arctic Five" countries. In some bizarre twist of events until 2020, the most challenging postures always came from neither Russia nor the USA, but from Canada. Still, this is more farfetched than reality. According to Grant in 2010, the claims of protecting the sovereignty in the Arctic by Canada is little more than "paper sovereignty," since no ice breakers were constructed and the Resolute Bay military base has not been established despite tough talks from Canada at that period. (Grant, 2010 cited in Hough, 2015) Moreover, the Canadian public's sentiments are much more sensitive about Canada's stake in the Arctic hinterlands than the rest of the world might think and appreciate. (MSGA, 2011) The Harper-MacKay

government won two terms in office from 2006-2015 using the "Arctic sentiments" of the Canadian people to their advantage. (Lackebauer, 2013)

It might seem downright obvious that the Arctic cooperation at the inter-governmental level could be viewed as justifying a Liberal model of IR. Still, it is also possible to view this through the lenses of English School thinkers and Neo-Realist thinkers if one assumes that the world's two superpowers (USA and Russia) have come to accept the balance of power scenario, which in turn effectively consolidated their influence in the Arctic region by playing "benevolent" roles in the Arctic Council, even though it drastically lowers their manoeuvre but helps reinforce the status quo from the prying eyes of rising powers like China and the E.U. from a distance. But the recent Russo-Chinese partnership in the Arctic is another new topic for discussion as it could seriously alter the balance of power in the region to Russia's favour.

U.S. Air Force Arctic Strategy to counter China's Arctic One Belt One Road

In the recently published U.S. Air Force Arctic Strategy published by the U.S. Department of Air Force in July 2020 only elucidates the U.S.'s strong stance for protecting its assets and national interest the Arctic region owing to the impending excellent power competition between Russia-China and the USA. (Secretary of the US Air force, 2020) The Strategy explicitly mentions the U.S.'s resort to increasing its military presence in the area by investing heavily in missile warning and defences and command, control, and reconnaissance (C3ISR) for defending the homeland. It also mentioned the strategic uses of the military bases in Greenland and Alaska should the need arise. Strong alliances and partnerships among Arctic nations were heavily emphasized, followed by overcoming the Arctic environmental challenges by introducing new training regimes for the Air Force pilots. From this standpoint, it looks as if the USA hastily increased its military might just to counter the imminent threat posed by the Sino-Russian Cooperation.

The first factor is that China considers Russia an "indispensable partner" should the Chinese wish to gain entry in the Arctic as a "near-Arctic" stakeholder. From this statement, China desperately needs an Arctic state to vouch for its activities in the region. And judging from the standpoint of the ongoing U.S.-China trade war and great power competition, Moscow quickly becomes China's infallible partner due to Russia's capability, global influence, and geostrategic location as its status as an "Arctic Superpower." Russia possesses the longest coastline of the Arctic and complete control of the Northern Sea Routes (NSR), a vital link between East Asia and European mainland seaports.

In the second factor, both Russia and China's demands towards each other are symbiotic. For Russia, it needs financing from China to initiate development schemes in its undeveloped Far North, especially along the North Sea Route. China puts utmost priority in making its presence in the Arctic legitimate with the Russian support and has little to no commercial considerations of its money being spent in the Russian Far North. As seen in the symbiotic process, the goals of these two countries are mutually complementary as seen in Russia's insistence that China invests in its Far North development schemes and China's ambition that Russia supports its presence in the Arctic.

Third, the Sino-Russia cooperation in the Arctic has existed in the economic, research, governance, and navigation arenas, with the military domain as a more remote possibility. While Russia continues to enhance its military presence in the Arctic, from ports to airfields, China has pursued a lower profile in its Arctic activities, prioritizing scientific research (which can also provide valuable intelligence opportunities), governance, energy, and shipping over challenging security issues. This is not only because China does not wish to pose itself as a challenger to Russia's traditional military dominance in the Arctic, but also because Beijing does not yet have a functional military force that can operate in the Arctic today. And as long as China and Russia remain on friendly terms, the Arctic does not directly threaten China, with Russia functioning as its shield and protector. This has enabled China to stick to a non-threatening approach to the Arctic. It is more likely that China will continue to advance its soft power approaches to the Arctic through a Polar Silk Road — the Arctic version of the Belt and Road Initiative — and carefully watch and take note of Russia's dual-use and hybrid capability development.

We have explained the changing geopolitical landscape of the Arctic in regard to its wealth of hydro-carbon resources, a new possibility of Cold War between the USA and Russia, resource nationalism of Canada, geopolitical ambitions of the Arctic Five member states in regard to the realist paradigm as well as the recent Chinese ventures in the Arctic through Russia's authorization and that being a grave danger to USA's national interest. All the contending issues point down towards one thing, and it is that the geopolitics of the Arctic is very unstable at best or anarchic at worst. Russia has literally downplayed USA by involving China as its partner in the Arctic expedition for resources, something which the USA is trying to overcome by militarizing Alaska. Whether it is a steppingstone for another major conflict is an interesting topic for discussion. But nonetheless, the USA being involved in a trade-war with China gives Russia the vantage points over the Arctic. (TASS, 2018)

Final remarks

The new prospect of 'Arctic Cold War' is now revived due to the USA and Russia's geopolitical interests in the cold Arctic region are problematic for the global North Pole's regional stability and towards the human habitation and fauna that dwells there. Every year the icecap is melting gradually. These are mere estimates and facts that could harm low-lying countries like Bangladesh or Maldives, which precariously lies several meters nearer to the sea-level. As the global temperature is like to increase by another 2 degrees Celsius by 2050, the North-West Passage in Canadian Arctic and the North-East Passage will be further navigable, making trade and commerce easier and timelier between the West and the Far East. But the million-dollar question is now who will reap the most benefit?

China had set its eyes on the Arctic for quite sometimes now and has already collaborated with Russia on multiple ventures about surveillance and access to the Arctic Ocean. The USA is not comfortable or approves of something due to the ongoing US-China Trade War, which started in June 2019. In all, we may not see a full-blown military war for the Arctic. Still, we will surely see US-China high-political confrontations in several international organizations like the UN and the Arctic Five (Russia as China's ally).

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