

# **Geopolitical issues and International Relations of the Arctic**

**by Ambassador Anil Wadhwa**

During the cold war, the Arctic held a prominent place in the political and military standoff between the two superpowers. The 1990s saw various regional and cooperative initiatives in the Arctic. The Arctic Council was formed in 1996, to coordinate a common strategy for states, communities and natural resources that were affected by changes in the Arctic circle, and the five founding members, known as the Arctic five- Canada, Norway, Russia United States and Denmark were serious about preserving order in the region. Arctic states have shown a preference for a stable political environment in which they maintain dominance in the region. This is supported by the importance attributed to the Law of the Sea and the specific agreements signed under the auspices of the Arctic Council.

Security dynamics in the Arctic have remained anchored to the subregional level: the Barents Sea/Strait area, even the Baltic Sea region. Of the different parts, the European Arctic is undoubtedly the most active and the most challenging. The contested or unclaimed areas of the Arctic which states have wished to acquire are the US versus the Russian Federation in the Bering Sea, the US versus Canada in the Beaufort Sea, and Canada versus Denmark in the Davis Strait. Canada and Denmark were involved in a dispute over Hans Island in the Nares Strait, but this was resolved in the summer of 2022 with an agreement to split the island in half. Canada also considers the Northwest passage to be part of its own waters while most other states view the passage as an international Strait but has not initiated any legal proceedings. Russia and Norway resolved the Strait but the Barent sea in 2010, even as they still dispute fishing rights in the exclusive economic zone around the island of Svalbard. Following the Russian flag planting in the north pole sea bed in 2007, to claim the Lomonosov ridge, there was some talk “the great Game in the North” and the “scramble for the Arctic”. In reality, states bartered for unsettled territories in a peaceful manner after the Arctic states signed the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration committing themselves to peaceful cooperation, and even events such as the Ukraine crisis in 2014 had a very marginal spill over in the region. Due to these reasons, for long, analysts have debunked the notion of resource wars in the Arctic, due to the sheer size of the area, the difficulties of access in a difficult terrain, and the fact that the Arctic states already have ownership over most of these areas, through the Law of the Sea regime.

Over the past decade, the melting of the ice, as a consequence of climate change has enhanced the strategic rivalry among the great powers – Russia, United States and China in particular. Arctic melting is expected to reveal under water marine resources and new shipping opportunities, which has led to a fear of interstate hostility in a scramble for new territories. Fears have also resurfaced of long-term interstate conflict potential in the Arctic in order to gain access to petroleum and minerals, renewable marine resources, or shipping lanes in all of which new possibilities have opened up. This has not been helped by the fact that after the Russian ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine in February 2022, the cooperation by 7 Arctic States with Russia has been suspended under the auspices of the Arctic Council starting March 2022. Russia also intends to tread a path solely dictated by its own interests. In February 2023, it amended its Arctic policy up to 2035, released earlier in March 2020. The rest of the Arctic States and the US see this as its intent to reestablishing its military power, where it can basically do so unobstructed, given that its northern fleet is based in the Kola peninsula, housing strategic submarines. In their view, it is not the melting of the ice that has spurred

Russian military emphasis in the Arctic – it is the importance of the Arctic for Russia’s more general strategic plan, ambitions, and a way to circumvent western sanctions.

In this situation, Russia finds itself driven in the arms of China which has been the biggest gainer. China is one of the 13 observer states in the Arctic Council, but has been pushing itself as a ‘near Arctic state’ where the expansion of its power in soft and hard terms is being used. Observer States can only put forward proposals through an Arctic Council member State, and China has been strengthening its Arctic collaboration with Russia, from energy to science and defense, as climate change opens up the prospect of a viable northern sea route and turns the Polar region into another front for the US China rivalry. China wants to become a “Polar power” by 2030. The Russians are also testing the new route through a cargo of crude oil crossing the Atlantic Ocean and arriving at the Chinese province of Shandong reducing transport time by 30% and also cutting own freight costs. As pointed out earlier, Sino – Russian collaboration has been strengthened also by the disruption in the functioning of the Arctic Council, as its seven member states- Canada, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are boycotting cooperation under its auspices due to the Russian action in Ukraine. In September last year Russian and Chinese ships conducted joint operations in Alaska. Recently the two countries held a joint naval and air exercise in the Sea of Japan – a major route between China and the Arctic Ocean. China has assiduously entered into numerous science and environmental cooperation projects as well as expeditions which are open to observers in the Arctic Council. Some of these have raised suspicion of espionage and activities related to military intelligence, like the research station built in Koruna, in Sweden in 2019. In 2018, Finland thwarted a Chinese attempt to buy an airport in Lapland through the State-owned Polar Research institute based in Shanghai. This year, the proposal by the same institute for deploying underwater devices in a large scale in the Arctic Ocean for communication and navigation positioning has come under scrutiny and opposition given the possibility of the Chinese using nuclear submarines clandestinely under the Polar ice. However, the growing isolation of Russia, western sanctions and denial of technology, especially in hydrocarbon exploration and extraction, is increasingly driving the bear in the dragons embrace in the Arctic, like elsewhere. Increasing dependence of Russia on China, for its export revenues, technology deficits and supply chains, will enhance China’s leverage, and force Russia into an uncomfortable acquiescing partnership which may result in enhanced Chinese military presence in the Arctic.

These developments have forced the US to see the Arctic as another arena where the competition between the US and China is increasing. The Trump administration had gone so far as to state publicly that China wants to create another situation like the South China sea in the Arctic. Although the rhetoric might suggest otherwise, for the USA, the Arctic has served primarily as a location for missile and defense capabilities, surveillance infrastructure, and a limited number of strategic forces. It is important also for the US navy and coast guard, although the US is yet to invest significantly in Arctic capabilities and infrastructure. The Arctic Ocean presents the shortest missile flight trajectory as well as submarine passage between China and Europe and North America. If the Sino- Russian cooperation in the Arctic increases at the pace we are currently seeing, the United States will have to invest substantial resources to maintain a security balance in the region.

Finally, it is important to also mention the Indian interest in the Arctic, which is a crucial area for its scientists, as it influences its monsoons which directly impact the agriculture sector. The rising sea levels due to the melting in the Arctic also threaten India’s 1300 plus island territories. The Arctic melting helps in understanding the glacial melting of the Himalayas, home to India and the regions perennial rivers, which sustain a majority the population of India. India has had a permanent research station in the Arctic since 2008, and has undertaken 13 scientific expeditions to the Arctic. The Arctic region can help in meeting India’s energy security, and shortages in critical minerals.

“India’s Arctic Policy – building a partnership for sustainable development” was released on 17 March 2022. As an observer in the Arctic Council since 2013, India, therefore, would like to push for greater say for observer states, avoid great power rivalry to the detriment of common good, contribute to the best of its ability in checking Chinese aggressive activities in the region, and would like to work with the Asian and other observers in this endeavor.

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