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North Atlanta Treaty Organization Update No. 2
Increased Interest in the Arctic Region

“NATO has a clear interest in maintaining the stability, security and cooperation in the Arctic and therefore continually monitors the region for any presence, activity or behavior that might pose a challenge to the security and stability of NATO and its Allies,” – Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach¹

Introduction

The Arctic is the region surrounding the North Pole and is largely composed of three parts: the polar icecap, the Arctic Sea, and the northernmost territory of several Member States.² Issues involving territorial claims in the region and rightful access to the resources associated with claimed areas have existed for centuries. Most of these territorial disputes and contentions over existing landforms are still pending, having thus far remained too contentious to resolve. The powerful effects of climate change only exacerbate this problem, as changing climate transforms Earth’s landscape, creating conflicts in areas that were previously impenetrable. Increased global temperatures are causing the Arctic Ocean’s ice to melt and this is exposing unexplored landforms and granting access to untouched seafloors and continental shelves.³ According to a report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Arctic Ocean is highly susceptible to the consequences of climate change and is currently experiencing exponentially shrinking levels of sea ice during summer months.⁴ As a result, heightened interest in the Arctic has become more widespread, as Member States entertain the possibility of exploiting this area to further their own economic and geopolitical agendas.⁵

Economic and Geopolitical Gains

Owing to its previous inaccessibility, the Arctic Ocean has not been extensively mined for fossil fuels, and is estimated to contain up to one-fourth of the planet’s remaining oil and natural gas reserves.⁶ These resources reside under layers of ice, and represent the possibility of economic and geopolitical advantages to Member States which hold claims in the Arctic. As the consequences of climate change provide newer and safer access points to the Arctic region, it has increasingly become a popular target for economic exploitation, particularly in association with the shipping industry and the harvesting of natural resources.⁷ These natural resources are vast; an estimated 30 percent of the world’s undiscovered natural gas and 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves are located in the

¹ “The Military Committee heads north to visit founding Ally Norway,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, March 5, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_174181.htm?selectedLocale=en. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

² “The Northwest Passage,” Encyclopedia Britannica, August 1, 2016 <https://www.britannica.com/place/Northwest-Passage-trade-route>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

³ Marc Lanteigne, “The Changing Shape of Arctic Security,” NATO Review, June 28, 2019, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/06/28/the-changing-shape-of-arctic-security/index.html>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

⁴ Marc Lanteigne, “The Changing Shape of Arctic Security.”

⁵ “The Northwest Passage,” Encyclopedia Britannica, August 1, 2016 <https://www.britannica.com/place/Northwest-Passage-trade-route>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

⁶ “The Northwest Passage,” Encyclopedia Britannica.

⁷ “The Northwest Passage,” Encyclopedia Britannica.

Arctic.⁸ This has garnered the attention of many Member States, and disputes over territorial claims continue to rise.⁹

Additionally, the continued melting of Arctic ice has allowed for the creation of a new shipping route, commonly referred to as the Northwest Passage.¹⁰ The Northwest Passage shortens the trip from Japan to London to just 8,000 miles (from 13,000 miles via the traditional route through the Indian Ocean), making it cheaper to conduct commerce and increasing profits. Moreover, Member States outside the transpolar zone (the region of Member States with territory surrounding the Arctic Ocean such as Canada, the United States of America (USA), the Russian Federation, Denmark, and Norway) have also expressed increased interest in the Arctic, relying on this area to circumnavigate the globe more quickly than they could otherwise.¹¹

NATO, International Organizations, and Treaties

The earliest agreement regarding the Arctic ocean was the Svalbard Treaty, ratified in 1920.¹² This Treaty gave Norway official sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago, but also guaranteed equal use of the territory by citizens of all of its 41 signatory Member States.¹³ This equal-access statute was largely ignored at the time, as the region was frozen and largely impassable.¹⁴ However, with the region opening up for business, Member States are now able to cite this Accord as justification for their increased presence.¹⁵

The first Member States to stake their claims to the Arctic were the transpolar states.¹⁶ These Member States justify their claims to the Arctic through their interpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) and their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).^{17, 18} Throughout the Cold War, both the USA and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) began establishing multiple army and navy bases in the north in preparation for a potential conflict. This significantly heightened political and military tensions until the collapse of the USSR in 1991.^{19,20} The lull in the region after the Soviet collapse allowed for additional agreements to be formalized, such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), which aimed to continue to normalize relations and cooperation in the region.²¹ The Arctic Council (AC) was subsequently formed in 1996 through the Ottawa Declaration as a high-level forum for the facilitation of international cooperation in the broader Arctic, rather than just a focus on the Barents Sea.²² The Ottawa Declaration entrusted the AC with the ability to make recommendations and establish task forces to promote peace and security in the region.²³ The AC has become the primary international body of the Arctic, and now has a list of observers that include 38 Member States, intergovernmental organizations, and nongovernmental organizations.²⁴

⁸ Brandon Byrn, "Natural Resources of the Arctic Circle Revealed," American Association for the Advancement of Science, May 28, 2009, <https://www.aaas.org/news/science-natural-resources-arctic-circle-revealed>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

⁹ "The Northwest Passage," Encyclopedia Britannica.

¹⁰ "The Northwest Passage," Encyclopedia Britannica.

¹¹ "The Northwest Passage," Encyclopedia Britannica.

¹² "The Svalbard Treaty," The Svalbard Museum, <https://svalbardmuseum.no/en/kultur-og-historie/svalbardtraktaten/>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

¹³ "The Svalbard Treaty," The Svalbard Museum.

¹⁴ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment," NATO Defense College, 2019, 31-40. doi:10.2307/resrep19965.12. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

¹⁵ "The Svalbard Treaty," The Svalbard Museum, <https://svalbardmuseum.no/en/kultur-og-historie/svalbardtraktaten/>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

¹⁶ "The Northwest Passage," Encyclopedia Britannica, August 1, 2016 <https://www.britannica.com/place/Northwest-Passage-trade-route>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

¹⁷ United Nations General Assembly, *Convention on the Law of the Sea*, Dec. 10, 1982.

¹⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *Convention on the Law of the Sea*.

¹⁹ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment," NATO Defense College, 2019, 31-40. doi:10.2307/resrep19965.12. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

²⁰ Marc Lanteigne, "The Changing Shape of Arctic Security," NATO Review, June 28, 2019 <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/06/28/the-changing-shape-of-arctic-security/index.html>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

²¹ "About Us," Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation, <https://www.barentscooperation.org/en/About>. (Accessed January 5, 2020)

²² "About the Arctic Council", Arctic Council. <https://arctic-council.org/en/about/>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

²³ "About Us," Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation, <https://www.barentscooperation.org/en/About>. (Accessed January 5, 2020)

²⁴ "About the Arctic Council", Arctic Council. <https://arctic-council.org/en/about/>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

Current Situation

Tensions are once again rising as a result of continued geographical change and increased activity of different Member States in the region.²⁵ Russia, which has the largest EEZ in the Arctic, has invested heavily into the Arctic since the 2000s.²⁶ Soon after, the Member State staked a claim on a large part of the Barents Sea that extended up to the North Pole, an area also claimed by Norway.²⁷ The Varagnerfjorden Agreement resolved this boundary dispute in 2010, though Russia continues to operate as the primary power in the region.^{28, 29} In 2013, Russia reopened its Arctic military bases which had been closed since the fall of the USSR, and began training troops in Arctic warfare.³⁰ This activity has remained a prominent part of Russia's strategy regarding the Arctic and continues to escalate the situation.³¹

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is another Member State taking significant interest in the melting of the Arctic, as it sees opportunities for safer, quicker trade routes, as well as access to untapped, abundant natural resources.³² The PRC was welcomed as an official observer Member State of the AC in 2013, citing a history of research contributions to the study of the Arctic.³³ The PRC has also shown a willingness to extend their cooperation with Russia into the Arctic and, as a result, partially funds Russia's liquified natural gas initiative in the Yamal Peninsula.³⁴ Furthermore, the landmark Belt and Road Initiative, a series of Chinese infrastructure projects designed to increase economic activity, was expanded to include the Arctic passage in 2017.³⁵

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has also made advances toward the Arctic. In 2018, NATO Defense Ministers established a new joint-forces command center in Norfolk, Virginia, USA, with the express objective of increasing their defensive capabilities in the North Atlantic and Arctic regions.³⁶ By September of 2020, the NATO command center was declared operational.³⁷ In March 2020, the NATO Military Committee travelled to Bodø, Norway to visit the only Allied base north of the Arctic Circle, the Norwegian Joint Headquarters.³⁸ Subsequently, in June, Member States' aircrafts took part in an operation known as "Allied Sky," where aircrafts from NATO flew over every allied Member State and the Arctic Ocean as a means of showing their

²⁵ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment," NATO Defense College, 2019, 31-40. doi:10.2307/resrep19965.12. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

²⁶ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment."

²⁷ Marc Lanteigne, "The Changing Shape of Arctic Security," NATO Review, June 28, 2019, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/06/28/the-changing-shape-of-arctic-security/index.html>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

²⁸ Daniel Fjærtøft, Arild Moe, and Indra Øverland, "Space and Timing: Why was the Barents Sea Delimitation Dispute Resolved in 2010?," *Polar Geography* 34, no 3 (2011): 145-162, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2011.597887>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

²⁹ Daniel Fjærtøft, Arild Moe, and Indra Øverland, "Space and Timing: Why was the Barents Sea Delimitation Dispute Resolved in 2010?."

³⁰ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment," NATO Defense College, (2019) 31-40. doi:10.2307/resrep19965.12. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

³¹ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment."

³² Kai Sun, "Beyond the Dragon and the Panda: Understanding China's Engagement in the Arctic.," *Asia Policy*, no. 18 (2014): 46-51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24905275>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

³³ Sun, "Beyond the Dragon and the Panda: Understanding China's Engagement in the Arctic."

³⁴ Marc Lanteigne, "The Changing Shape of Arctic Security," NATO Review, June 28, 2019, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/06/28/the-changing-shape-of-arctic-security/index.html>. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

³⁵ Lanteigne, "The Changing Shape of Arctic Security."

³⁶ "NATO's New Atlantic Command Declared Operational," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, September 17, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_178031.htm?selectedLocale=en. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

³⁷ "NATO's New Atlantic Command Declared Operational."

³⁸ "The Military Committee heads north to visit founding Ally Norway," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, March 5, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_174181.htm?selectedLocale=en. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

power and presence in the region.³⁹ These actions were in response to increased Russian presence and represented the end of the Arctic's low-tension atmosphere.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The Arctic, once regarded as a frigid, impassable, low-tension region, is experiencing a shift away from the periphery of international politics and into the primary line of sight of many major world powers. As the ice continues to melt, the Northern Sea Route becomes increasingly accessible and further sought after. The 1994 UNCLOS Agreement created a shared system of laws regarding the possession and use of the world's oceans by recognizing the limits of coastal territorial claims by individual Member States offshore.⁴¹ However, this system has not and will not suffice in resolving all disputes associated with the Arctic region. The current resurgence in international focus on the Arctic, and the aggressiveness in establishing domain with military reinforcement is relatively new, with few established international precedents. As it stands, there is no decisive body for settling military matters in the Arctic, as the AC exists mostly to resolve economic, political, and environmental issues.⁴²

³⁹ "US Bombers to Overfly All 30 NATO Allies in a Single Day," North Atlantic Treaty Organizations, August 28, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_177662.htm?selectedLocale=en. (Accessed March 6, 2021)

⁴⁰ "US Bombers to Overfly All 30 NATO Allies in a Single Day."

⁴¹ United Nations General Assembly, *Convention on the Law of the Sea*, Dec. 10, 1982.

⁴² Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment," NATO Defense College, 2019, 31-40. doi:10.2307/resrep19965.12. (Accessed March 6, 2021)