

Commentary

A new Cold War in the Arctic?! The old one never ended!

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There is a growing discussion over whether or not the security environment of the Arctic is re-entering a “new” Cold War. The crux of the argument is that the era of Arctic *exceptionalism* is coming to an end. This era has been understood as a period in which the Arctic region was one in which great power rivalries ceased to exist and created an environment in which cooperation and peaceful relations were the core norms. Since the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, there have been growing questions as to whether or not this cooperative environment will be preserved or if the growing tensions between Russia and the West will result in a “new” Cold War in the Arctic. The reality is that there is no new Cold War. Likewise Arctic exceptionalism never really meant the underlying security requirements of the two sides ever really dissipated. Instead what is happening is a *renewal* of the Cold War with the Arctic as a core location of competition.

At the heart of the problem is a geographical proximity of the Soviet/Russian and American location connected by the Arctic region. This is combined with the existing weapon systems that place a premium on the Arctic as the best staging location for strikes against each other. These two key variables are the reason the Arctic became a region of overwhelming strategic importance when the United States and USSR/Russia began to challenge each other’s interest in the international system. It is not about conflict over the Arctic but rather the use of military force from the Arctic which has given the region its geopolitical importance. What now complicates the most recent version of the strategic environment of the Arctic is the entry of China as a growing peer competitor to the United States and in the longer term to Russia. While the tensions between Russia/USSR and the United States have a long history, the arrival of China as a “near-Arctic state,” and its determination to challenge the United States’ position as the global hegemon means that there will soon be a three-way balance of power in the Arctic region replacing the historical bi-polar system making the region even more important and dangerous.

Both the USSR/Russia and the United States are required by geography and existing weapon technologies to place their most important and powerful weapons in or near the Arctic region. Specifically the Russian nuclear deterrent is predominantly located in the Arctic. This has been based on their long-range bombers and submarine forces. In order to protect these forces, the Soviet/Russian leadership have also been required to develop additional forces that are then needed to protect the original forces. Over time, the Soviet missile forces needed to be placed in northern locations. At the same time, the Americans also developed long-range bombers to be able to fly directly against Soviet targets by flying over the Arctic. They too placed their developing ICBMs to fire over the Arctic. Both sides also developed very extensive surveillance systems that would allow them to have warnings of attacks by the other side. Thus throughout the Cold War, the Arctic became one of the most militarized regions of the world.

With the end of the Cold War, many observers concluded that the end of tensions between the USSR and the United States would end the strategic importance of the Arctic. There were important efforts to reduce many of the nuclear strategic forces and a considerable reduction of the deployment of conventional military forces in the region not only by the USSR/Russia and the United States but also by most of the northern NATO allies such as Canada, Norway and Denmark.

The closest to which the United States and Russia were able to eliminate the central importance of nuclear weapons came in the 1990s under a number of nuclear weapon reduction agreements. Two of the most important were the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) (and the negotiations for the proposed START II and III) and the Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation (AMEC) agreement. START I saw the significant reduction of number of nuclear strategic and tactical weapons. At the same time, AMEC was a combined agreement between Russia, the US, Norway (and later the UK) to decommission a large number of former Soviet nuclear-powered submarines.

But while these programmes were successful in reducing the number of nuclear weapons and their launch vehicles from the Arctic, they did not void the commitment that both the United States and Russia had to their core security policy based on their nuclear deterrent. The Russians' economic collapse meant that most of their Northern Fleet and connected air assets fell into a serious state of disrepair. But at no point did the Russians seriously consider a policy of de-nuclearization or the elimination of their submarine-based nuclear deterrent.

Likewise, the Americans also reduced much of the forces based in Alaska and followed the reduction of their nuclear forces required by START. They also willingly contributed to the significant costs required by AMEC to assist the Russians in the decommissioning of their older nuclear-powered submarines. The Americans also became very distracted by a series of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq following the terrorist attacks on their soil in 2001. But at no point did the Americans ever move to renounce or diminish their core dependence on nuclear deterrence as their ultimate security policy.

What this meant is that throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, the Russian state was too weak to challenge the Americans, and the Americans became focused elsewhere, but the Arctic remained the core region of their ultimate security defence policy for the deployment of their nuclear weapon deterrent. The logic of nuclear deterrence (or illogic) is that as long as all potential adversaries were aware of this, they would not threaten either the US or Russia. Following the 9/11 attacks a debate

arose by which some suggested that deterrence was not effective against non-state actors, but the consensus remained that it was the ultimate defence against state actors.

As long as the Russian state remained weak and did not challenge American interests and actions, it appeared that the core logic of deterrence no longer formed the basis of the American-Russian security relationship. This seemed to be validated by the ability of the two countries to cooperate in the Arctic region. AMEC was only the first official sign of this new relationship. It was followed by the cooperation between the two states in a growing number of multilateral agreements and bodies such as the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), Arctic Council and so on – to name but the best known ones. It was the cooperation and peaceful relations within this seemingly new security environment that caused many to suggest that the arctic was entering a period of exceptional cooperation – i.e. the era of *Arctic Exceptionalism*.

However, while there were important positive steps in the Russian-American relationship, the fundamental security relationship did not change. The United States, along with the rest of the NATO membership, were surprised to find that at the end of the Cold War most of the former Warsaw Pact members and former members of the USSR such as all three Baltic States wanted to join the alliance. For some, this was the means of reintegrating into Europe and was seen as a means into the European Union. For others, such as Latvia who had suffered grievously under the occupation by first Nazi Germany and then the USSR, entry into the alliance was an obvious means of addressing their historic weakness against stronger powers. But the Russian reaction was to view the ongoing expansion as a threat to their security. Both the Yeltsin and Putin Administrations saw this as a threat to Russian security. This shows that the old concerns about western actions were not changed by the end of the Cold War. While Yeltsin did not act on these concerns, the drastic rise of oil prices at the beginning of the Putin administration allowed his government to begin rebuilding the Russian military.

This is where the logic of geopolitical environment leads back to the Arctic. Putin specifically declared at the 2007 Munich Security Conference that the West and specifically the US had taken advantage of Russian weakness to attack Russian interests. He declared that this would no longer be tolerated. This was then followed by a period of extensive Russian military rebuilding and modernization. The most important of these efforts was the rebuilding of the Russian nuclear deterrent. This included the resumption of long-range strategic bombers over the Arctic and the modernization and rebuilding of the Russian nuclear-powered submarine fleet within the Northern Fleet. Given the level of disrepair Russian forces had fallen, this process took some time to implement. As a result most western observers tended to view the statements coming from Putin about the return to great power status with some skepticism.

The United States also allowed much of its surface capability in the Arctic to shrink throughout the 1990s and 2000s. However, it remained committed to ensuring that its submarine forces retained their Arctic capability and demonstrated this to the world by “lending” their attack submarines (along with the British) to undertake scientific research in the high Arctic. The Americans also continued to upgrade their defences in the North against ballistic missiles. They continued to improve the capabilities of their anti-ballistic missile base at Fort Greeley and their radar system in Thule, Greenland. This occurred as they allowed almost all bases in Alaska to either be closed or downsized.

As the Russian efforts to rebuild its military continued to gain momentum, the Russian government became more assertive and more willing to use the forces that it developed in the Arctic region for purposes of power projection. When Russia used military power to seize territory in the Ukraine, relations with the West deteriorated substantially. The Russians then began to use the forces that they built in the Arctic as a means of projecting powers against the West. Thus Norway, Denmark, the Baltics and the UK as well as the two neutral powers – Finland and Sweden – have all experienced increases in instances of maritime and aerial incursions and interference by Russian forces. As a response, the Americans and their NATO allies have begun to increase their military activity in the region. The US has stood up the second fleets and have begun to operate north of the Arctic Circle. Thus, the logic of the ongoing security dilemma is renewed and accelerated.

Therefore in 2019, the two sides have both been strengthening and expanding their forces centred on their deterrent forces and those forces designed to respond to the other side's forces. Given that the two sides were quick to return to their Cold War position of antagonisms, it is clear that the hope of the Arctic exceptionalism period never really was based on an improvement of the core difference between the two, but was only the result of Russia exhaustion. Thus, the Arctic never really stopped being the core security geographic location for the two.

In 2015 it became apparent that this newest phase of the new strategic environment will be different in that the Chinese will become increasingly important in the region. Already a self-proclaimed "near-Arctic nation," China began to deploy surface naval forces in northern waters in 2015 in both the Bering Sea and northern European waters. If and when Chinese nuclear-powered submarines enter ice-covered waters the positions of both Russia and the United States will become much more complicated. While Russia and China are on good relations in the Arctic currently, there is no guarantee that this will continue into the future. Regardless, for Russia and for the United States the arrival of submarines from the world's second most powerful navy will provide for even more complications in this critically strategic location.

Thus it should be clear that the Arctic became one of the most important strategic locations as soon as the US and USSR/Russia became dominant in the international system. The development of weapons and their delivery systems that favored the Arctic means that this location will always be one of the most important and dangerous locations. Temporary decreases of the power of either the US or Russia may have the impact of making the region appear less significant. But unless there is some event that mitigates against the differences in core interests between the two states or if there is a technological breakthrough that renders the current strategic weapons system impotent, the Arctic will remain a critical point of competition. Thus it is not about an appearance of a new Cold War, it is simply the resurfacing of the "old" Cold War.