

Briefing Note

## Discussing Arctic Geopolitics in Bosphorus

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The book *Uluslararası İlişkilerde Arktik* (The Arctic in International Relations) edited by myself, and my colleague Adnan Dal was published in Turkey and analyzes the Arctic region's significance in the context of international relations.

Given Turkey's status as a non-Arctic state and its relatively recent engagement with the region, there exists a prevalent set of stereotypes concerning the Arctic in this country. These stereotypes include assumptions such as an impending conflict in the Arctic due to the increased accessibility of hydrocarbon resources resulting from melting ice or expectations that Turkey can easily derive economic benefits from its involvement in the Svalbard Treaty<sup>1</sup>. In light of this kind of stereotypes, this book concentrates on presenting critical viewpoints and perspectives that encourage a more nuanced understanding of the Arctic in Turkey and vice versa.

Furthermore, another contribution that the book strives to make is to enrich the Turkish academic discourse. The editors have meticulously attended to the selection of appropriate Arctic scholar terminology throughout the book. For instance, contrary to the prevalent usage of "North Pole" or "Arktika" in Turkey, the editors have insisted on the term "Arktik" to align more closely with global academic conventions. Additionally, while the term "minority" is well-understood by Turkish readers, it takes on a different connotation when referring to indigenous peoples. Consequently, the book has engaged in discussions regarding the relevant Turkish terminology for "indigenous peoples," thus enhancing the precision of language within the field. Obviously, this semantic debate has an impact on the angles of analyze and not just a discussion on words.

In terms of facilitating dialogue between scholars from Turkey and their counterparts from the Arctic region, this book offers another contribution to Turkish academic literature. Readers are provided with insights from both Turkish and regional perspectives, allowing them to comprehend diverse epistemological and ontological approaches to the Arctic. This inclusiveness ensures that readers gain access to a spectrum of viewpoints from scholars who have both insider and outsider perspectives on the region.

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The book launch event<sup>2</sup> took place in Istanbul on November 9th, 2023, and was hosted at the Istanbul Policy Center, which is situated in the historic heart of the city. Following the book launch, a seminar was conducted under the theme of "Discussing Arctic Geopolitics in Bosphorus." This seminar featured the participation of Lassi Heininen from the University of Lapland and Trym Eiterjord from the University of British Columbia and The Arctic Institute.

During the seminar, Lassi Heininen delivered a presentation focusing on Arctic geopolitics and Arctic security within a holistic approach. He highlighted the pivotal role of functional cooperation in the Arctic and its associated priorities, emphasizing that this form of cooperation played a crucial role in reshaping the region immediately after the end of the Cold War. Heininen also noted that the endeavors aimed at fostering constructive cooperation in the Arctic sometimes tend to be overlooked amidst the complexities of contemporary geopolitics.

Following Heininen's presentation, Trym Eiterjord discussed China's scientific involvement in the Arctic. He mentioned how science can be strategically leveraged to establish a presence in the region, and how expertise can become a significant factor in shaping governance mechanisms. Eiterjord expressed a keen interest in understanding how governments and research communities from outside the Arctic, such as those from Beijing or Ankara, perceive the Arctic in geopolitical terms and how they approach the region diplomatically.

During the discussion, the project involving Russia's scientific research station in collaboration with BRICS nations and Turkey was a subject of significant scrutiny. Participants considered the potential impacts of this project and how Norway would interpret the establishment of such a scientific base. Eiterjord stressed the importance of Norway's environmental regulations in Svalbard, suggesting that these regulations should be a key consideration.

A noteworthy observation made during the debate was the similarity between Turkey's recent actions in the Arctic and China's earlier engagement in the region. Eiterjord indicated that it might not be advisable diplomatically for Turkey to join a research base project with Russia in Svalbard. Lassi Heininen added that he was not surprised by Turkey's ratification of the Svalbard Treaty. This move could serve as a valid reason or justification for Turkey if it decides to reapply to join the Arctic Council, demonstrating its interest in and commitment to the Arctic region.

During the discussion, the topic of NATO expansion in the Arctic was critically examined. Some participants questioned the necessity of such expansion, drawing historical comparisons to the Cold War era when Finland managed to maintain its security without the need for physical barriers. From this critical perspective, the question arose as to why such measures are being considered now and Heininen reminded the saying "Don't try to fix something which is not a problem."

It was noted that NATO's decision-making might not take into account the nuanced history of Finland-Russia relations. Lassi Heininen argued that the process of militarization in the Arctic did not commence with NATO membership but rather began with bilateral military agreements, particularly those involving the United States. Furthermore, it was highlighted that NATO has played a relatively small role in the Arctic region. Canada, for instance, was cited as a country that was not enthusiastic about NATO's presence in the Arctic. While there are U.S. military bases in the Arctic, NATO does not have a significant military presence there.

## Homework for Turkey

Lassi Heininen's suggestion that Turkey should "do its homework first" likely implies that Turkey should thoroughly assess and establish its interests and objectives in the Arctic. This is in response to the question of why Turkey is seeking to engage in the Arctic, beyond scientific research, and what political motivations Ankara might have for its involvement.

As Eiterjord drew parallels what China did in its first engagement with the Arctic what Turkey is doing now, it appears that Turkey may be following a path of engagement through scientific collaboration, facilitated in part by cooperation with Russia. Turkey's engagement with Russian scientists and its plans for a Russian scientific research center in Svalbard suggest a growing partnership with Russia in Arctic activities. This partnership extends to economic endeavors, such as participating in electrifying drilling platforms and collaborating on icebreaker projects for Russia. However, it's important to note that Turkey's partnership with Russia in the Arctic differs from China and Russia's partnership, primarily due to Turkey's NATO membership.

In conclusion, Turkey does not yet possess a well-defined Arctic strategy. Its engagements in the Arctic vary, but Ankara lacks comprehensive planning. Turkey applied for observer status in the Arctic Council and was subsequently rejected. Remarkably, this rejection received little (actually not at all) attention in the Turkish media. This situation underscores two key points.

Firstly, Turkey lacks a structured plan for Arctic engagement. The Foreign Ministry has not provided any explanation for the reasons behind the application to the Arctic Council. When examining the 17-page report of the National Polar Science Program (2018-2022), it becomes evident that there is only one fundamental reference to the Arctic Council, as follows: "It is known that Turkish scientists started scientific studies on the Arctic in the 2000s. The first initiative regarding the Arctic as the Republic of Turkey was made by applying to the Arctic Council in 2015, under the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with the support of ITU PolReC. As of December 2017, the application result has not been announced."<sup>3</sup>

The second point highlights the limited public awareness of Arctic matters, which, in turn, results in insufficient efforts by both media and government in Ankara to address this issue. Given Turkey's Mediterranean location, it may not be expected to have a vested interest or established policy regarding the Arctic. However, the fact that Turkey submitted an application warrants a discussion on potential steps Ankara could take to enhance its position in Arctic affairs. During the seminar in Istanbul, Heininen emphasized that Turkey should first clarify its objectives for seeking Arctic Council membership, particularly considering the apparent lack of ambition regarding the Arctic in 2015.

Turkey is a member of the Paris Agreement, committing to efforts to combat climate change. It has set a target of achieving net-zero emissions by the year 2053. In alignment with these climate goals, Turkey's Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change is actively engaged in the development of climate legislation aimed at facilitating a green transition,<sup>4</sup> substantially increasing its emissions reduction target for the year 2030. This updated commitment raises the reduction goal from the initial 21 percent set in 2015 to an ambitious target of 41 percent<sup>5</sup>, aligns with Minister Özhasseki's reference to Turkey as a "green superpower"<sup>6</sup>. In the context of the blue economy, Turkey, as a maritime nation, has undertaken various initiatives. Within this framework,

Turkey has the potential to develop a strategic roadmap for engagement with Arctic Council projects.

Turkey's approach can be characterized as one of "entryism," where Ankara seeks to be an active participant in various regions without necessarily having long-term, structured ambitions specific to those regions. This approach spans from space endeavors to Arctic involvement. In the case of the Arctic, Turkey's engagement has been particularly noteworthy due to its close economic and scientific partnerships with Russia. However, it's important to note that this collaboration occurs within a backdrop of increasing divisions, primarily driven currently by military (NATO) and political (Gaza) tensions with Western Arctic states. In this complex geopolitical era, Turkey, situated between a politically constructed East and West (and now North), is likely to continue its tradition of adopting a multilateral approach started in 1960s, where Ankara understood that the only American alliance cannot be sufficient to ensure its success after the very infamous "Johnson Letter" warning Turkey that NATO will not protect it in case of a Soviet attack if Ankara intervenes in Cyprus.

## Notes

1. Ayaydin Eda (2023) "Interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty in Turkey" <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/interpretation-svalbard-treaty-turkey>, Accessed in November 2023.
2. The book launch was co-organised by Istanbul Policy Center and Novidies Media Culture- Art Inc.
3. National Polar Science Program (2018-2022), [https://kare.mam.tubitak.gov.tr/sites/images/kare\\_mam/ulusal\\_kutup\\_bilim\\_programi.pdf](https://kare.mam.tubitak.gov.tr/sites/images/kare_mam/ulusal_kutup_bilim_programi.pdf), Accessed in November 2023.
4. Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change of Turkey <https://csb.gov.tr/bakan-ozhaseki-iklim-degisikligi-ve-uyum-koordinasyon-kurulu-toplantisina-katildi-bakanlik-faaliyetleri-39893>, Accessed in November 2023.
5. UNDP <https://www.undp.org/turkiye/press-releases/turkiyes-business-leaders-embrace-green-transformation>, Accessed in November 2023
6. Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change of Turkey [,https://csb.gov.tr/bakan-ozhaseki-iklim-degisikligi-ve-uyum-koordinasyon-kurulu-toplantisina-katildi-bakanlik-faaliyetleri-39893](https://csb.gov.tr/bakan-ozhaseki-iklim-degisikligi-ve-uyum-koordinasyon-kurulu-toplantisina-katildi-bakanlik-faaliyetleri-39893), Accessed in November 2023.