

Forum: Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC)

Issue: Balancing Sovereignty and Cooperation in the Arctic Region

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Introduction:

The Arctic Region is one of two polar regions of Earth, located roughly 66 degrees north of the equator. In the past, expansion into the area was limited due to a perceived lack of economic and political value - other routes and areas were preferred as they provided more accessible transportation and comfortable climates. As such, the region was largely ignored by most nations. However, the Arctic region has become increasingly appealing to several member states in recent years. Multiple nations, including Russia, the United States of America, and Canada, among others, have attempted to expand their claims to areas of the Arctic — several of which were previously disputed — and utilize them, primarily for military purposes. However, it is important to note that militarization is not the only use of the region; due to climate change, better technology, and other political circumstances, uses such as energy and maritime routes have been accelerating in popularity for several states.

This issue is a pressing one. There have not yet been any physical conflicts between nations, but they are a looming possibility. While there exists an Arctic Council, formed in 1996, their main focus is environmental concerns, not territorial ones. The Council has remained silent on any territorial or security issues. This means that there are no broad legal structures or agreements to guide nations' actions, and leaves room for conflict. An area like the Arctic, in which economic benefits are quickly being discovered and acted on, is particularly susceptible to this. For these reasons, it is especially pertinent that delegates work to form said agreements and frameworks, so any disputes do not escalate into confrontations.

Definition of Key Terms:

- 1. Arctic Region:** The polar region is located in the northernmost parts of the Earth. It is enclosed by the Arctic Circle, a line of latitude located approximately 66° north of the

equator. The area includes the Arctic Ocean and adjacent seas, as well as parts of Canada, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, and the United States of America.

2. **Militarization:** A nation's preparation for conflict through supplying a place or organization with soldiers and military resources; specifically, utilization of land for military purposes. In terms of the Arctic region, this could include setting up or expanding military bases, as well as other military actions taken by member states.
3. **National sovereignty:** The power and right of a country to function through independent governance, free from external interference.
4. **Northern Sea Route:** The Northern Sea Route (NSR) is one of the main passages through the Arctic Ocean and is a shipping route running along Russia's Arctic coast.
5. **Northwest Passage:** The Northwest Passage, or NWP, is the second main passage through the Arctic Ocean. It is a sea lane between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans that runs along the northern coast of North America.
6. **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ):** An area of the sea in which a sovereign state has exclusive jurisdiction over exploration and utilisation of waters. As detailed in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, this typically extends to 200 nautical miles away from the nation's coast.

Background Information

Svalbard

It would be extremely repetitive to detail all of the disputes and issues related to sovereignty in the Arctic. However, the case of Svalbard is an important one to understand, as it was one of the first major Arctic disputes. The dispute was mainly between Norway and Russia, as the Svalbard archipelago was originally classified as a territory free of a nation, but several conflicts over sovereignty and mineral resources starting in the 17th century left it in need of a government. The situation was mostly resolved in 1920 through the Svalbard Treaty, which gave sovereignty over Svalbard to Norway — although there have still been minor disagreements over natural resources such as fishing rights. Many other territorial, island, and maritime disputes have functioned similarly since.

Extended Continental Shelf Claims

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, was established in 1994. Part of its conditions was that while EEZs typically extended to 200 miles from the coast, nations could submit claims for their zones to be expanded much further, provided that they could prove that the zone was a part of their continental shelf. States were allowed to file these claims for ten years after they ratified the UNCLOS. As such, several nations rushed to claim areas of the region soon after ratifying the convention, such as Russia in 2001 and Denmark (through Greenland) in 2006.

Arktika 2007

This was one notable event caused by extended continental shelf claims; part of Russia's claim to a large area of the Arctic included an expedition to the Arctic in August 2007, entitled Arktika 2007. During said expedition, the Russian Federation was able to plant a titanium flag of Russia on the seabed of the North Pole. As other Arctic states had filed contrasting claims, many of them were unhappy with this.

Current Situation

Climate change

Climate change has changed many of the circumstances surrounding the Arctic region. Ice caps are melting, and it has posed a significant threat to the biodiversity of flora and fauna in the region. The Arctic Council has placed the majority of their focus on resolving the impacts of climate change in the Arctic, as its topics consist of Arctic Peoples, Biodiversity, Climate, Ocean, Pollution, and Emergencies. The main issue with regard to the environment is global warming, which has resulted in a reduction of land and habitats. However, while this has had adverse effects on the environment, it has also had a positive side effect: transportation through the Arctic is much easier than before. This means that more nations have been drawn towards expanding their use of the region. In fact, tourism of the Arctic is another avenue that some nations have discussed.

Disputes

While there have been several territorial and island disputes over land in the Arctic, these have all been resolved, the last of which was settled between Canada and Denmark in June of 2022. Instead, the

primary tensions now arise from two main causes: rapid expansion of military bases and trade routes in the area, and minor disputes, primarily over waters. The main disputes that currently exist are the following.

The Northwest Passage

The NWP, while not as commonly used as the NSR, is still a route that receives a lot of maritime traffic. However, there have been disagreements between nations regarding the legal status of shipping through its waters. Canada classifies the NWP as being included in its internal waters, while other nations such as the United States and the Russian Federation claim that they should be considered an international strait. The issue stems from the nations' interpretations of the UNCLOS.

The Beaufort Sea

Along with the NWP, the United States and Canada have also been involved in a dispute regarding the Beaufort Sea, a wedge-shaped sea located between Alaska and the Canadian region of Yukon. These disputes have become more pressing due to the extent of natural resources such as gas and petroleum reserves located in the sea, as both nations see these resources as valuable.

Other disputes

Domestically, some Arctic states have been discussing the rights of their indigenous populations to the land and waters in the region. In addition to this, there have been minor disagreements on the rules applied to shipping lanes, and other debates such as those regarding the EEZ surrounding the Svalbard archipelago in Norway. These have mainly been limited in scope, and do not fully relate to the sovereignty of nations, but they may still be valuable topics to debate.

Utilization of the region

As mentioned above, the Arctic has recently been the site of rapid military expansion. Russia, Norway, Canada, the United States of America, and several other states have all moved to establish and expand their military presence there. Along with this, the Arctic is rich in oil, natural gas, and minerals. Recently, with newer technologies allowing for easier extraction of hydrocarbons and other resources, this has become a major appeal to states.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Russian Federation

Approximately 2 and a half million Russian citizens live in the Arctic region. As such, the nation has a large presence in the area. Their national interests include using the Arctic as a resource base for Russia, promoting the Northern Sea Route, and extracting oil and gas. In addition to this, Russia started rapidly expanding their existing military bases in the Arctic in 2022. They currently have more military bases in the area than NATO. This is despite their already heavily worked military, so it can be inferred that the nation plans to use the region as a key strategic location in upcoming years.

United States of America

The United States is another nation with a large military presence in the Arctic. It became an Arctic nation through its purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, which is the country's largest state. Prominent Alaskan industries include mining and petroleum production, as well as fishing and tourism. Some of the interests of the US in the Arctic region include security, cooperation with other Arctic nations, and sustainable development. During its second chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 2015 to 2017, the nation mainly focused on maritime protection, climate change, and improving social and economic development in the region.

Kingdom of Denmark

Denmark is a prominent Arctic state through its ownership of Greenland, the world's largest non-continental island. Greenland is also home to many natural resources, such as metals, rare Earth elements, and oil. The nation has an established military presence in the area and is the creator of the Joint Arctic Command, which aims to maintain Danish sovereignty over its territory in the region. Denmark held the chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 2009 to 2011, during which their main focuses were on cooperation between Arctic states and oil pollution, setting up a task force in order to deal with oil spills in the Arctic region.

Canada

40% of Canada's landmass is in the Arctic, and it has been the centre of several disputes in the Arctic region. Alongside this, however, the country also has military bases located in the area. In addition, Canada has held two chairmanships of the Arctic Council, during which socio-economic development, as

well as relations with indigenous peoples, were at the forefront of discussions. Indigenous rights are an especially interesting part of this topic, as their voices, while included in the Arctic Council, are often limited. Canada hoped to change this and integrate more indigenous perspectives into their discussions.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The United Nations has not had a large amount of direct involvement with the Arctic Region, especially when relating to sovereignty. The vast majority of UN involvement has been related to the environment, through actions by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) — although even this has mainly been limited to reporting on the actions of the Arctic Council. That being said, below are some relevant treaties and conventions that have greatly influenced the situation in the Arctic.

- Svalbard Treaty, 1920
 - While not created by the UN, the Svalbard Treaty signed by Norway and Russia in 1920 is an important one. It includes content on the regulation of demilitarization of the archipelago, taxation, environmental conservation, and Norway's sovereignty over the area. This could be used as a framework for some clauses.
- United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 16 November 1994
 - The UNCLOS is likely the most important convention with regard to the Arctic Region. It defines the rights and obligations of states with respect to their internal waters and details the processes for extending claims. Many of the disputes in the Arctic have been based on interpretations of the UNCLOS, so it is perhaps not as clear as it could be.

Possible Solutions

While drastic solutions may be tempting, delegates should remember when creating resolutions that the topic is to discuss balancing sovereignty and cooperation. Resolutions should be focused on international cooperation, and balanced solutions that consider both sides of any issue. Below are some examples of possible solutions to the issue.

- Expanding the scope of the Arctic Council to include military and security concerns. This would provide a platform for cooperation between the Arctic states, including indigenous voices - making it easier to implement other solutions and generally encouraging cooperation. It may also be beneficial to include other countries in talks.

- Increase the involvement of the United Nations in the Arctic region. This could be through setting up sub-committees to oversee and regulate things such as extraction of resources, as well as partial demilitarization if necessary. This is similar to the terms of the Svalbard Treaty but extended to other parts of the region. However, a solution like this might be more controversial than others, as some states may not want the added surveillance or regulation.

Bibliography

Useful Links

- <https://arctic-council.org/> — the Arctic Council’s website, useful for any environmental research as well as stances of the Arctic nations
- https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm — an overview of the UNCLOS

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