



Original research article

# Icy waters, hot tempers, and high stakes: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics of the Arctic



Elina Brutschin\*, Samuel R. Schubert

Webster University, Vienna, Austria

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 15 September 2015

Received in revised form 19 March 2016

Accepted 21 March 2016

Available online 8 April 2016

## Keywords:

Arctic

Geopolitics

Geo-economics

## ABSTRACT

The Arctic, a vast and uninviting region that encompasses about six percent of the Earth's surface and an estimated 22% of the world's undiscovered fossil fuel resources, is rapidly becoming one of the critical geopolitical issues of our time. Much of its resource trove is located under the region's disputed international waters. Working from a region-centered perspective, combining old and new geopolitical theories, we examine whether the Arctic's special characteristics make circumpolar state cooperation more or less likely in an economic and politically sustainable fashion. We systematically assess the correlation between economic and military activities by putting together descriptive spatial and temporal data on new oil and gas projects, shipping routes and activity, icebreaker orders, submissions to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), and different types of military activities of the five Arctic littoral states. We find substantial evidence of increased Arctic investment and trade transit followed by militarization. This allows us to claim that economic interests drive military activity in the Arctic rather than purely classical expansionist explanations.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

The Arctic is rapidly becoming one of the critical geopolitical issues of our time. It is a vast and uninviting region that encompasses about six percent of the Earth's surface and an estimated 22% of the world's undiscovered fossil fuel resources. Much of its resource trove, an estimated 90 billion barrels of oil and 1670 trillion cubic feet (ca. 48 trillion cubic meters) of natural gas is located under the region's disputed international waters [87]. The driving force behind renewed interest in the Arctic is the unprecedented melting of the region's sea ice, opening prospects for deep sea drilling and new trade routes and amplifying tensions over the final delineation of international borders (exclusive economic zones) and the economic and environmental sustainability of the region's coastal communities. In a recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Relations on US-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, the authors of the study point out that the developments in Ukraine have significantly changed the geopolitical landscape from the climate of dialogue to serious concerns over the US national security [15]. Existing and overlapping claims to the energy rich spaces of the region together with recent geopolitical tensions lead

us to ask an important question: what are the possible explanations for the dynamics of military activities in the region?

Although the literature on contemporary Arctic geopolitics is replete with detailed studies of the various factors that explain state interests and behaviour including symbolic positioning and sovereignty discourse [19,26,43,82] as well as material risk and opportunity [4,9,25,30,40,64], the answer to what explains the dynamics of military activity in the region is far from certain; and an analysis with more recent data is missing. Numerous outstanding territorial disputes have been resolved or taken up by international or regional organizations and bodies in recent years. Still, the days of demonstrative flag planting and rapid base building are not far gone and growing militarization and a palpably heightened rhetoric do not quite assuage concerns that future conflicts may overshadow the climate of cooperation. There are serious reasons for apprehension including Russia's interests in the context of its tense energy relationship with the EU and the conflict in Ukraine, Canada's exclusive claim to the disputed Northwest Passage, and US claims to the Beaufort Sea.

As "one of the last human frontiers" [61], the Arctic lends itself to be analyzed from a geopolitical perspective, where geography is one of the key explanatory variables. While classical geopolitics looks into the strategic relevance of territory and resources [1,49,78], critical geopolitics looks into how space is narrated and how this affects states' foreign policies [20,39,86]. We find that

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [elina.brutschin@webster.ac.at](mailto:elina.brutschin@webster.ac.at) (E. Brutschin), [samuelschubert30@webster.edu](mailto:samuelschubert30@webster.edu) (S.R. Schubert).

analyses applying one of these perspectives in the Arctic context have certainly contributed to a better understanding of the Arctic politics. However, we concur with the criticism raised elsewhere that both perspectives do not put enough emphasis on economic factors that shape policies [55]. Therefore, we apply a geo-economics perspective [16,48,57], which assumes that states' behaviour is driven by economic interests.

In order to deepen our understanding of the causes of cooperation and conflict in the Arctic and contribute to the literature, we collect publicly available descriptive data pertaining to the Arctic region, with some data reaching back to the 1960s until most recently, and systematically analyze it over time and space. We are particularly interested in the relationship between economic interests and military activity. Specifically, we examine whether military activities in the Arctic are conditioned by growing economic interests or vice versa. We do this by taking a region-centered perspective, relying on geo-economics as a theoretical framework. By incorporating a diverse set of geo-referenced variables we systematically analyze the dynamics of geopolitical competition over Arctic resources to understand the role of economic factors. We thus follow recent calls in the literature to add a geographic dimension when analysing energy related issues [52,74]. In so doing we do not suggest that the spatial mapping of economic and military activities shows directional causality. There are far too many intervening variables that play a role in explaining state behaviour in the region including governance structures [89], Canadian sovereignty aspirations [43], ideological and historical relevance for Arctic states [40] and global power shifts [59] just to name a few (for a more detailed overview see Ref. [10]). However, the relationship between economic and military activities is a persistent feature of globalization and a core tenet of international relations theory. A better understanding of how it is playing out in the Arctic serves to enhance existing and future research on the hyperborean region.

## 2. Literature review

The available literature on the Arctic region has expanded substantially over the last decades, particularly in regard to the economic and political implications of its melting ice cover. Given the wide variety of scholarly and non-scholarly literature on the region's importance to security – a specified search of 'Arctic Security' returns over 40,000 hits in Google and almost a 1000 in Google Scholar – it seems helpful to lay down some parameters of what we are investigating. Bruun and Medby provide an excellent overview of the scholarly debates on Arctic geopolitics by grouping them into the following themes: Historical Legacies, Governance, Knowledge, Inhabitation and Utilisation [10,p. 915]. Although all of the themes are equally insightful, our particular interest lies within the utilization theme, which pays attention to the prospects of commercial activity in the Arctic [10,p. 921]. We find that the foci of the literature related to commercial activities can be usefully divided into four broad categories: (1) general analyses of the region's resources and geo-economic importance, (2) prospects and implications of new shipping routes, (3) the consequences of Russia's re-militarization and (4) the role and interests of geographically-distant new state actors, specifically those from Asia.

### 2.1. General analyses and geo-economic importance

In the most general sense, the Arctic space addressed in the literature refers to the territories (surface and subsurface) found above the Arctic Circle 66°, 32 min north of the Equator. However, some analyses also include the territories of the Sub-Arctic region [6,32]. Long seen as a strategic location for commercial shipping [2,7,8,23],

submarine routes [33,68,71], and natural resources [30,32], the region is straddled by countries with Arctic Ocean coastlines. Russia, Canada, the United States, Denmark via Greenland, and Norway constitute the core five circumpolar states while smaller parts of Finland, Iceland and Sweden also extend into the area. All of these states with the exception of the United States have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides a legal framework for, among other things, extending territorial claims.<sup>1</sup> This latter point is important, as each of the five circumpolar states have been entangled in territorial disputes at least once since 2000, including three involving the US and two over the Lomonosov and Mendeleev Ridges between Russia, Denmark and Canada. According to a 2009 study conducted by Ebinger and Zambetakis, "each country claims that the ridges are natural geological extensions of its territory, and each is collecting geological data to support its claim" [21,p. 1228].

The literature is divided on how to understand and interpret the most important factors at play north of the Arctic Circle. On one hand, Arctic disputes are more than territorial in the material sense. These include scholarly debates over the meaning of maritime space and the shifting focus of security concerns. An example of the former is: should the Northwest Passage be considered an international strait or the territorial waters of Canada? An example of the latter is: which provides us a better understanding of the Arctic security environment, the classical spatial-strategic approach or a human security paradigm that includes "a broader political and environmental constituency" [31]? Dittmer et al. explore this discussion through a discourse analysis arguing that Arctic geopolitics is in fact "emerging as a discourse [...] via the dynamic assembly and networking of multiple elements across a wide variety of sites" [19,p. 1], i.e. growing claims and counter claims from state and non-state actors via formal and informal platforms are changing the meaning and value estimations of the region. Similarly, Strandsbjerg argues that the Arctic is contested because of changing and unstable geographical conditions resulting from a concept of sovereign borders that "depends on a stable and determinate spatiality", but must be understood and conditioned by the "assemblage of people's relationship to land" [83,p. 819]; a view that assumes greater integration of indigenous peoples and their economies. Yet while the establishment of Inuit Circumpolar Council (2009) illustrates the growing importance of non-state, non-commercial actors, Ebinger & Zambetakis [21,p. 1219] make the valid observation that "these communities have gained limited measures of political power" and "have yet to exploit their economic potential".

On the other hand, Arctic disputes can be seen as an age-old material competition for resources. Henderson and Loe [32] who, for example, look into the potential of Arctic oil development, find that exploration is being driven by resource scarcity and energy prices. Interest in the region will fluctuate with markets and respond to gluts and droughts. For the moment, most developments remain closer to shore in the Norwegian continental shelf and the Kara Sea and involve international commercial cooperation. Taking a somewhat different approach, Harsem et al. [30] points out that resources explain the heightened interest in the region. However, examining geological variables below ground and political and economic variables above ground, he finds that the distribution of resources (oil off Alaska and gas nearby Russia) does not necessarily set the stage for conflict on material grounds.

Similarly, Ebinger & Zambetakis [21,p. 1228] claim that "in contrast to alarmist rhetoric by some conservative think tanks, relations among the Arctic powers have thus far been character-

<sup>1</sup> Two consecutive US presidents signed Directives to join the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. See Ref. [21].

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6558147>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6558147>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)