

This sample is of a policy brief we were asked to do for our final year undergraduate module 'Grand Strategy'. The task was to write a 2,000-word policy brief outlining a current affair and apply three of the theories covered in class. This assessment achieved a high 1<sup>st</sup> class mark of 77.

**To:** The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

**Subject:** Geopolitical implications of a melting Arctic

## 1. Background

Since 2007, the Arctic Circle has seen unprecedented levels of melting due to climate change and rising temperatures: as the Council on Foreign Relations recently reported, the period 2007-2012 has seen the lowest levels of sea ice since satellite imaging began, a trend "unmatched in recent human history".<sup>1</sup> This seasonal thaw presents serious difficulties for global politics as a whole and has the potential to seriously affect UK trade at a time of immense economic uncertainty, whilst also impacting on the UK's role as a prominent NATO member. Of particular note is the issue of Arctic shipping routes, and the opportunities that melting ice will bring to trade routes between Asia and Europe. August 2017 marked the first time a tanker successfully completed the route from Norway to South Korea via the Northern Sea Route without the assistance of an ice breaking vessel. If such trends continue, the Arctic has potential to become one of the principle trade routes between European and Eastern markets and thus represents a unique opening for the UK in terms of trade. At present, the Arctic nations are jockeying for economic, military, and political advantage in the region, with consequences that could reach the UK. Thus it is of paramount importance that the UK government become involved in the complex geopolitics that govern this region in order to exert greater influence in the formative decades to come.

The Arctic is of particular note for a number of reasons: firstly, it represents a unique situation wherein there is very little established international law governing the area. Only a few years previously these routes were assumed to be inaccessible and therefore no laws were required to govern the area. Yet as the ice recedes, new shipping routes are opening up for longer periods each year, and results in a desire to exert new levels of influence. With only a limited framework in which to work, the legal technicalities are very much in the hands of the nations

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<sup>1</sup> Masters, Jonathan. The Thawing Arctic: Risks and Opportunities. *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 2013.

involved and their respective interests. The issue is further compounded by the vast quantities of oil and natural gas expected to be found in the region: estimates suggest upwards of 90 billion barrels of oil and 48 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, accounting for approximately 22% of the world's remaining fossil fuel resources.<sup>2</sup> With stakes and potential profits so high, the likelihood of tensions escalating in the region is rising, and when combined with such a weak legal framework, a situation emerges that the UK would be wise to monitor.

Another aspect to consider is the potential advantages melting sea ice will bring to shipping routes. At present, voyages between Europe and Asia take approximately thirty days via the Suez Canal, covering a distance of 11,580 miles. Via the Northern Sea Route, voyages take nineteen days, covering a distance of 6,930 miles, with projections suggesting that this time could fall to eighteen days by 2045, and seventeen days by 2075.<sup>3</sup> As temperatures warm, scientists also predict that routes will stay open for longer periods each year, extending from the current three months to as high as ten or twelve months by the end of this century.<sup>4</sup> In addition, it is increasingly likely that the seas could be entirely clear of ice for at least half of each year, thereby reducing the need for icebreaking ships and lowering the costs of traversing the region.

## 1.1 The Global Reaction

Thus far, states have followed largely uniform policies in the Arctic. Under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, states are entitled to count the waters extending up to 200 miles from their coastline as their exclusive territory. However, Article 76 of the convention allows for states to claim sea territory beyond this limit if they can provide evidence of the presence of a continental shelf, defined as “the seabed and subsoil of the submarine areas that extend beyond its territorial sea throughout the natural prolongation of its land territory to the outer edge of the continental margin”.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, under Article 77, if a state's claim to this territory is approved, they gain access to all the resources available on the sea bed, including the right to any fossil fuel reserves, and maintain “sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring it and exploiting its natural resources”.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, these rights are

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<sup>2</sup> Brutschin, Elina & R. Schubert, Samuel. “Icy waters, hot tempers, and high stakes: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics of the Arctic”. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 16. p.147.

<sup>3</sup> Melia, N, Haines, K, and Hawkins, E. “Sea ice decline and 21st century trans-Arctic shipping routes”, *Geophysical Research Letters*, 43. p.9724.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.9724.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. December 1982. Article 76, Paragraph 1.

<sup>6</sup> UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, Article 77, Paragraph 1.

exclusive: “if the coastal State does not explore the continental shelf or exploit its natural resources, no one may undertake these activities without the express consent of the coastal State”.<sup>7</sup> In 1997, the UN established the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) in order to address the claims of states seeking to extend their sea territory; to date eighty-four claims from sixty-seven nations have been submitted to the commission, including ten directly related to the Arctic region.<sup>8</sup> Of these ten, the CLCS has issued recommendations relating to four areas, however the process is slow, and some decisions have taken upwards of seven years whilst others are still pending.<sup>9</sup>

For some nations, the commission is insufficient to cope with the pace of change occurring in the Arctic region, and are thus utilising alternate means of exerting their influence. One of the most prominent means of achieving this is through the establishment of military bases and the organisation of frequent military exercises in the international waters surrounding the Arctic and within home territories. Russia is a key proponent of this idea and a classic example of the exertion of both hard and soft power in the region – a policy that the Center for Strategic and International Studies has characterised as a “persistent duality of... belligerence and practical cooperation”.<sup>10</sup> The visible result of this policy is the frequent Russian military exercises occurring in the region: September 2014 saw the largest military drill in the post-Soviet era involving an estimated 100,000 servicemen, 5,000 pieces of weaponry, 1,500 tanks, 125 aircraft, and 70 ships over the course of six days.<sup>11</sup> In February 2015 it was announced that Russian nuclear submarines would be performing exercises in the waters beneath the North Pole, and in March 2015 the Northern Fleet was called to “full combat readiness” by President Putin in response to small scale drills planned by the Norwegian military.<sup>12</sup> The unannounced exercise involved over 45,000 troops, 41 warships, and 15 submarines, utterly dwarfing the 5,000 troops involved in the Norwegian drill.<sup>13</sup> In addition to these drills, the Russian government has announced its intention to invest over \$63 billion by 2020 developing Arctic

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<sup>7</sup> UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, Article 77, Paragraph 2.

<sup>8</sup> Submissions to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, pursuant to article 76, paragraph 8, of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Conley, Heather and Rohloff, Caroline. *The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. p.112.

<sup>11</sup> “Vostok 2014 strategic military exercises begin in Russia”. TASS. 19.09.2014.

<sup>12</sup> “Crews of nuclear submarines of the Northern Fleet prepared for campaigns under the Arctic ice”. TASS. 06.02.2015.  
Grove, Thomas. “Russia starts nationwide show of force”. Reuters. 16.03.2015.

<sup>13</sup> Conley and Rohloff. *The New Ice Curtain*. p.48.

infrastructure, whilst also announcing a \$91 billion dollar investment to construct an estimated 1,200 ships and maritime vessels by 2030 which are widely expected to be utilised in Russia's northern sea bases.<sup>14</sup> These instances are representative of a concerted effort by the Russians to strengthen both infrastructure and military capabilities in their sphere of influence within the Arctic, and suggest a long term objective of gaining a hegemonic monopoly over the North East Passage, and with it gain significant influence over transit routes and natural resources.

## **2. Practical Steps**

In light of the issues raised above, this brief suggests a three-part strategy incorporating the projection of both hard and soft power. These strategies are outlined below:

### **2.1 Liberal institutionalism**

The first layer of UK policy in the Arctic region should focus on the notion of liberal institutionalism; an idea put forward by Woodrow Wilson in the aftermath of the WWI through the creation of the League of Nations and advocated again by Franklin D. Roosevelt at the end of the WWII as a means of tying together the interests of France and Germany and thus ensuring European economic prosperity and a more enduring peace. In the present context, such an institution already exists in the form of the Arctic Council, which is formed of eight nations including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. The council also allows for countries outside the region to be granted observer status, wherein nations and non-governmental organisations can apply to observe and contribute towards the various projects that the council is involved in. Thirteen countries including the UK have been granted observer status to the council and it is of vital importance that the UK government utilise this opportunity to advocate for closer levels of cooperation particularly between Russia and other members, whilst simultaneously ensuring its own interests are pursued. This forum could also provide the opportunity to establish closer ties with other observer states, which since 2013 has included China, Singapore, India, South Korea, and Japan. The inclusion of states so far removed from the Arctic circle is indicative of the truly global nature of the issue, and suggests that interest is far reaching. Whilst the UK cannot directly vote on any of the council initiatives, it can still play a decisive role in ensuring the cooperation of all eight permanent members, encouraging mutual interests, and thus

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.48.

safeguarding the stability of the region. With a stable organisation at the forefront of Arctic politics, the region could benefit from initiatives such as investment in shipping structure resulting in safe passage of ships through the region, and adequate support in the event that vessels run into difficulty in the treacherous waters. Given the Arctic Council incorporates a vast majority of the UK's principle trade partners, the council could also provide an alternate forum for leveraging advantageous trade deals in the event of a disadvantageous deal with the European Union, and in doing so, propel the UK to a position of strength in both the transportation and energy sectors.

## **2.2 Backroom Diplomacy**

A second path that the government might consider is through Metternichian style backroom diplomacy: seeking once again to influence the geopolitics of the Arctic without becoming too obviously embroiled in the process. One way of achieving this is to utilise the UK's position within the UN to influence the outcome of the decisions made by the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. The UK is a permanent member of the Security Council and thus commands a certain level of influence within the UN and its subsidiary bodies. Whilst the commission is comprised solely of scientific experts and by implication stands largely aloof from politics, the UK, as a nation that has limited direct involvement in the Arctic region when compared to other permanent Security Council members such as Russia and the US, could be perceived as a neutral party by members of the commission. This would therefore leave the door open for the UK to influence a favourable outcome in many future territorial rulings, including claims by Denmark, Canada, and Russia that have yet to be resolved. The notable time gaps between nations submitting claims to the CLCS and a decision being made is perhaps indicative of the fine line the commission walks between maintaining its independence and trying to balance the ambitions of those countries whose interests conflict. The commission is without a doubt a pivotal player, and unique in its largely apolitical nature, yet it is a body whose recommendations could mean the difference between a Russian dominated Arctic which is unlikely to favour UK interests, and one where each nation holds a largely proportionate share of territory where the UK can align itself with long established allies such as the US and Canada.

## **2.3 Balance of power**

Whilst the above options are intended to ensure the UK's interests through the application of soft power, the scale of Russian military operations in the region requires the formation of a

robust contingency strategy. Russia has displayed beyond reasonable doubt its intention to dominate the Arctic and incidents such as the seizure of territory in Georgia in 2008, and Ukraine in 2014 serve only to reinforce the notion that Russia is very much a force to be reckoned with. If unchecked, Russia has the potential to dominate much of the Arctic region, and with it the trade routes and natural resources available. Therefore, the UK must be able to respond and use its global ties to create an alliance strong enough to counter its weight. However, the UK cannot achieve this in isolation: instead, the most viable source of military power available is through NATO which is comprised of many of the states whose interests also lie in the Arctic, particularly those who are already involved in the Arctic Council. In uniting the military strength of these nations, NATO holds the necessary military strength to effectively counter and perhaps deter Russian influence in the event of tensions escalating.

### **3. Concluding remarks**

At a time of economic uncertainty due to the ongoing Brexit negotiations, the Arctic represents a significant opportunity for the UK to reassert itself in a region that looks set to grow exponentially in political, military, and economic importance as the century progresses. It offers an alternate forum for the UK to reconnect with many of its principle trade partners, whilst also offering the potential to profit from newer, and faster trade routes to Eastern markets and preferential access to the natural resources that the region promises. It is thus essential for the UK to take a much more proactive role in region and utilise its existing ties to create new opportunities for the future.

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