

Maritime Stability Operations

China: Bullying Their Way Into the Arctic

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Maritime Stability Operations

Stability operations are defined as various interagency missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside of the United States. These operations are conducted to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.¹ In short, stability operations can provide support to governance. Stability operations can range in size from involving a few people to scores of thousands of people.² Embodying a whole of government approach, stabilization includes all instruments of power – diplomatic, information, military, and economic. As such, the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of State, USAID, and other civilian organizations frequently interact.³

Maritime stability operations are a subset of larger stability operations which take advantage of the freedoms that operating from the sea and operating under maritime law provide.⁴ Maritime stability operations are divided into two types, crisis response and steady state.⁵ Crisis response stability operations come in the form of civil support operations, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance (FHA), and disaster response. At the behest of the National Command Authority, maritime forces must be prepared to implement stability operations anywhere in the world.⁶ Steady state stability operations are typically conducted by geographic combatant commanders in the form of exercises,

port visits, or peace operations. Steady state stability operations can also be conducted and/or led by a nation state with interests in the region. What follows is an example of steady state stability operations focusing on sovereign claims and providing a safe environment with minimal security tension in the Arctic.

Arctic Opportunities

Operating from the sea offers a great deal of flexibility in how and where maritime operations can be conducted. In recent years, climate change in the Arctic region has resulted in a significant reduction in the amount of sea ice (Figure 1). The reduction in sea ice has opened up sea lanes that had previously been un-navigable and now provides access to high-seas fishing grounds. The opening of sea lanes has proven to be a benefit to shipping companies by shortening the time necessary to transport goods from Asia and Northwest America to Europe and vice-versa

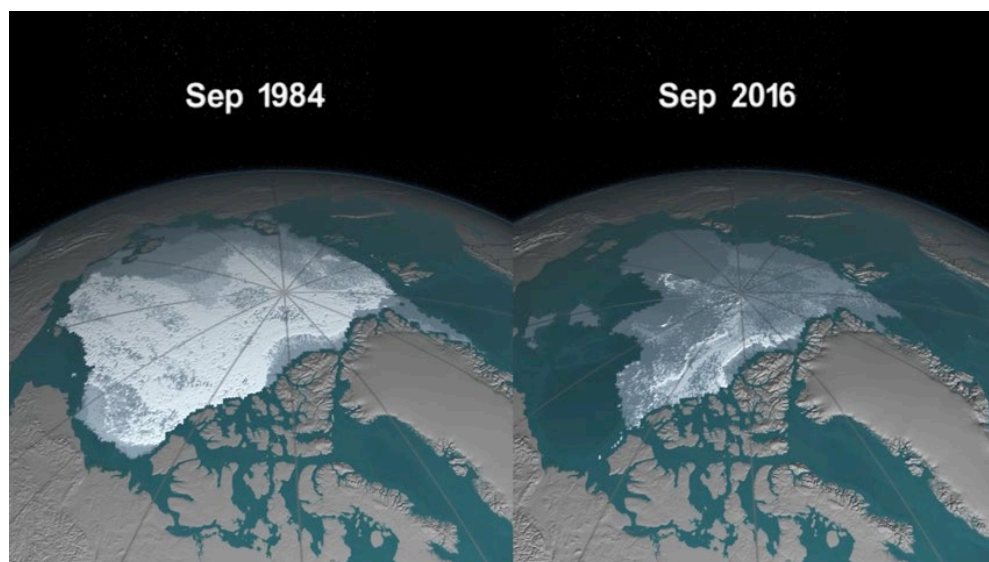


Figure 1. <https://fox2now.com/news/nasa-releases-time-lapse-of-the-disappearing-arctic-polar-ice-cap/>

as depicted by the red dashed route (Figure 2).

Even though the reduction of polar ice has made fishing and shipping transport via Arctic waters viable, it has not made the region's shipping lanes reliable.⁷ The Northwest Passage and Northern Sea Routes are only open (as it stands now) in the summer months and even then, there is the constant threat of icebergs, ice floes, and heavy weather which is made worse by the warmer weather.⁸

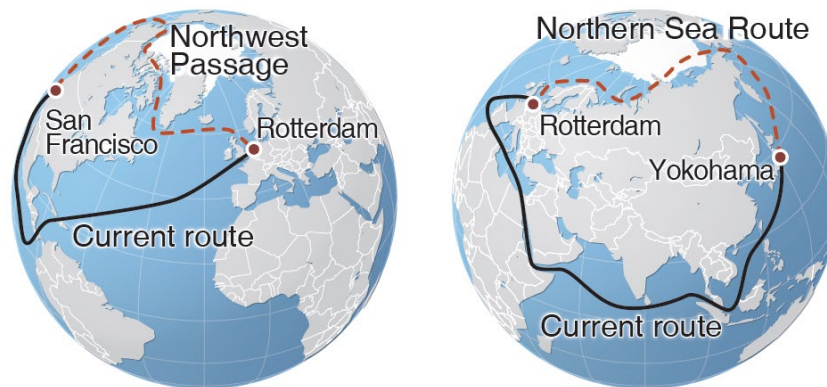


Figure 2. <https://www.grida.no/resources/5244>

Furthermore, the Northern Sea Route has many shallows that large super freighters cannot travel due to the threat of running aground (Figure 3).⁹



Figure 3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-37286750>

Consequently, Arctic sea lanes are unlikely to provide unfettered passage for major shipping year-round. However, the Arctic does have abundant resources, such as natural gas and oil. Regional shipping supports oil and natural gas rigs and their infrastructure and regional shipping that loads and takes the harvested resource to market. This commerce will continue and may increase in the coming years.¹⁰ The US Geological Survey estimates that the Arctic holds approximately 90 billion barrels of undiscovered oil which is about 13 percent of global estimates and 30 percent of the Earth's undiscovered natural gas.¹¹ This increase in regional shipping and resource mining may cause regional instability in the Arctic as China, Russia, and the United States and its Arctic State partners compete to ensure their interests are attended to in this newly marketable portion of the Arctic.¹²

Arctic Governance

Many governments are eager to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the opening sea lanes and natural resources available in the world's smallest ocean. This eagerness can and may lead to regional instability.¹³ The potential for instability was foreseen several years ago and resulted in the Ottawa Declaration of 1996 that formed the intergovernmental forum known as the Arctic Council.¹⁴ This regional governing council's permanent membership consists of Iceland, Russia, Canada, the United States, the Kingdom of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. The council's governing focus is scientific, environmental, and practical. It focuses on the Arctic people, biodiversity, the climate, the ocean, pollutants, and emergencies.¹⁵ The council has thus far been successful in governing the region with regard to its focus areas. However, now that the region is becoming more accessible, governance has become and will continue to be more challenging especially since the Ottawa Declaration explicitly prohibits the council's influencing military security.¹⁶

Russia's Interest

A great deal of attention is being focused on Russia's increasing activities in the Arctic and rightly so since Russia is an Arctic nation with approximately one-fifth of its territory found north of the Arctic Circle.¹⁷ Russia is also home to the largest Arctic population.¹⁸ Russia has made it clear to the international community that it has core economic interests in the Arctic and will defend them, even building icebreakers with cruise missiles and deck guns to patrol the frozen waters. Russia, with 7,000 miles of Arctic coast, sees the region as both a security liability and a key to its long-term

economic prosperity.¹⁹ Russia is investing heavily to enhance its Arctic defense and economic sectors, with a resultant multilayered militarization of its northern flank. By modernizing its military capabilities and posture, particularly the Northern Fleet, Russia aims to improve command and control, infrastructure, and joint force employment to project power and defend its northern approaches.²⁰ Russia has also been partnering with China on many economic projects in the Arctic. However, even though Russia is now amenable to China's involvement in economic projects in the Arctic, it is unlikely to welcome any significant increase in Chinese political influences.²¹

United States' Interest

The United States became an Arctic nation with the purchase of its 49th State, Alaska, from the Russians in 1867.²² The United States has varied interests in the Arctic, including national and homeland security, environmental protection, sustainable development, promoting cooperation and collaboration with the other Arctic nations, involving indigenous peoples in decisions that affect them, and supporting and promoting scientific research across the region.²³ The US goal for the Arctic is a secure and stable region free of conflict where its interests are safeguarded, its homeland is protected, and the Arctic States work cooperatively to address shared challenges.²⁴ Without sustained American naval presence and partnerships in the Arctic Region, peace and prosperity will be increasingly challenged by Russia and China, whose interests and values differ dramatically from those of the United States.²⁵

China's Interests

The instigator of de-stabilization in the Arctic region is China. China is an official Arctic Council observer nation and considers itself to be a collaborative partner with the Arctic nations.²⁶ Even though China is located 1,844 miles (3,000km) (Figure 4) from the Arctic Circle, it has declared itself a “near-Arctic” state and in 2018 it published its own Arctic strategy.²⁷ In response to this self-declaration, former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, dismissed China by saying, “There are only Arctic States and non-Arctic States. No third category exists--and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing.”²⁸



Figure 4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46386867>

China's interests in the Arctic are clear; it wants to have access to the natural resources available in the region; and it wants to take advantage of the Northern Sea Route.²⁹ Using the Northern Sea Route is more than 2,500 miles (4,000km) shorter than

the Suez Canal route for the delivery of goods to European countries, so taking advantage of the Arctic route makes logistical and financial sense for China.³⁰ But can China destabilize a region when it only has a transient footprint in and through its partner, Russia, who is a true member of the Arctic region? With the exception of investments in several Arctic nations, a satellite base station in Sweden, and a research base in Norway, it seems as though China's immediate interest is economic.³¹ There are however, many countries that are concerned that even though China's Arctic policy does not specifically address it, its long-term strategy involves a military build-up as well.³² Russia and China are working together to expand Arctic infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route, facilitate resource extraction, and increase their maritime domain awareness, through methods including joint military exercises and research centers that could inform future economic development efforts.³³ Moreover, increased Chinese-Russian military cooperation in the Arctic risks sparking an arms race with the other Arctic powers and NATO accelerating militarization of the region.³⁴ The only legitimate claim to anything in the Arctic for China is fishing with the high-seas fishing grounds. Even then, China must understand that in order to fish these high-seas fishing grounds it must follow the guidance and direction of the Arctic Council in order to maintain the fragile Arctic ecosystem.

Bullying Its Way Into the Arctic

Former US Secretary of State Pompeo stated in 2019 that China's aggressive actions in the Arctic could turn the region into a "New South China Sea."³⁵ The Chinese claim sovereignty over "virtually all South China Sea islands and their adjacent

waters.” Its claims in the South China Sea are “sweeping” and more expansive than those of any other rival claimant, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines. While China has not been specific about the extent of its claims, it uses a “nine-dash line” depicted (Figure 5), which “swoops down past Vietnam and the Philippines, and towards Indonesia, encompassing virtually all of the South China Sea,” to delineate its claims.³⁶ China traces its claims to the South China Sea back to the Western Han Dynasty.³⁷ Thus, Beijing’s regional claims begin as early as the 2nd century BCE, when Chinese people sailed in the South China Sea and discovered some of the region’s land features. China does not have the same claims in the Arctic.

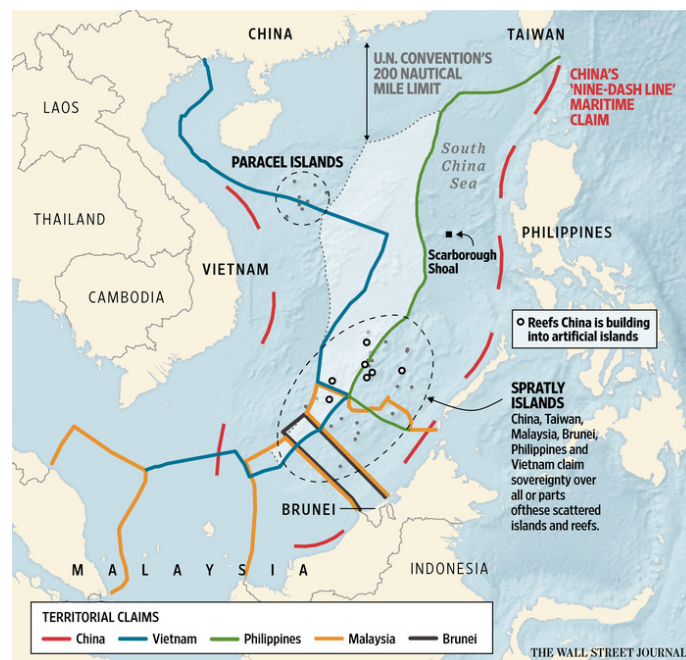


Figure 5. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-claim-to-most-of-south-china-sea-has-no-legal-basis-court-says-1468315137>

Former US Secretary of State Pompeo's concerns are certainly well founded, but the Chinese government would have to use its partner, Russia, to assist in establishing a foothold in the region, as currently it does not have a claim to any natural resources in the region. Nudging its way into the Arctic might be an often used Chinese ploy in other parts of the world, however, the United States, NATO, and the Arctic Council are adamant that China shall never become a permanent member of the council's governing body, as evidenced in the 2018 Arctic policy white paper.³⁸ At present, China is spending its seemingly endless supply of money to buy its way into the region through real estate deals, building schools, setting up research facilities, and even offering to build international airports in various Arctic state locations.

Maintaining Stability

It can be argued that stability, and in particular regional stability, is more of a measure of effectiveness than an end state. It cannot be an end state as it takes continuous effort to maintain. If a form of stability is reached, it cannot be assumed that it will remain in place. Regional stability comes about as a result of solid policy, constant collaboration, and constant vigilance by the governing body. In the case of the Arctic Council, the governing body is focused on scientific exploration, the environment, and preserving the indigenous Arctic peoples' culture and not national security, which as it is becoming apparent, is a topic of growing concern among most Arctic States not to mention many members of NATO.³⁹

Of all the members of the Arctic Council, only two, Sweden and the United States, have mentioned security as part of their governing goals. Sweden mentions that

its goal is to maintain a policy that results in minimal security tension,⁴⁰ while the US goals have a more active tone and come across as the United States taking the lead in maintaining a stable and secure Arctic region free of conflict.⁴¹ It is these “line in the sand” type comments that blur what the Arctic Council stands for and are more statements of national interest even though they seem necessary to be stated as Russia and China continue to militarize the region under the auspices of protecting their national interests.

For the United States to exercise its rights of ensuring regional stability in the Arctic as a member of the Arctic Council, and as the world’s preeminent superpower, it must develop a robust fleet of Navy and Coast Guard ships and aircraft that can patrol and police, when appropriate, unimpeded by ice and other environmental hazards associated with the world’s smallest ocean. The United States must be able to have continuous access and, because of this, it must have its own ships and bases capable of providing that access. An example of why this is necessary occurred in late 2020 in the Arctic fishing grounds off the coast of Alaska. Several fishing boats were fishing in US fishing territory located in the Bering Sea when they encountered Russian warships conducting military exercises.⁴² Instead of the Russian naval fleet giving way to the fishing fleet, it issued orders to disperse and allow the Russian ships to continue their exercise.⁴³ When several fishing fleet captains called the US Coast Guard to report this activity, the Coast Guard’s response was, “... just do what they say.”⁴⁴ If the US Coast Guard or US Navy had a fleet on permanent patrol in the area, the response would more likely have been much different. If the Russian Navy believes it can conduct

maneuvers with impunity, it might be because it knows there are no US maritime assets in the area to police its activities.

The US Coast Guard's ice breaker fleet is fast approaching the end of its operational service life. The Coast Guard's medium icebreaker Healy and heavy icebreaker Polar Star service lives come to an end concurrently in 2030 and must be replaced.⁴⁵ The reliance on Russian heavy ice breaking ships is untenable for the US military or US-led maritime stability/security mission. In 2020, the Trump administration directed the Defense, State, Commerce, and Homeland Security departments to look at financing, building, and/or leasing medium and heavy ice breakers for persistent use in the Arctic, as well for Antarctic region security missions.⁴⁶ In April 2019, the U.S. Coast Guard announced it had signed a \$746 million contract for the construction of its first polar security cutter which will be the first of several new heavy icebreakers. The fiscal year 2021 budget submission noted the Coast Guard will fully fund a second polar security cutter, according to a Congressional Research Service report.⁴⁷ This direction is a clear indication that the United States does have serious concerns about Chinese and Russian activities in the Arctic region. Due to these activities, the US Navy will be postured to deter aggressive behavior, keep the seas free and open, and assure allies (NATO) and partners of our long-term commitment to preserving peace and advancing shared interests.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Stability in the Arctic region is at best as fragile as the Arctic ecosystem. The Arctic council has done a superb job governing the region from a scientific standpoint.

However, as noted, the change in climate is bringing forward many new challenges regarding Arctic shipping lanes and natural resources. It is frustrating to note that the Council lacks the authorities necessary to ensure non-Arctic States, and some of the Arctic States themselves, do not turn the Arctic Ocean into a military battleground in order to protect their interests. It is understandable that Arctic States, who have interests in the natural resources and shipping lanes now becoming available due to a shrinking polar ice cap, want to protect their interests. As long as protection of those interests is left to the Arctic States themselves, militarization of the region seems inevitable.

The Arctic States' struggle for natural resources in the Arctic is gaining momentum and so is the desire to protect their sovereign territory from others. If the Council waives and adopts an appeasement policy, China will leverage ownership of land and facilities to justify permanent membership in the Council, which will allow them to increase their military presence in the region in order to protect their stated interests. The United States must assert its leadership in the Arctic Council to put China in check regarding its claims to natural resources and therefore its sovereignty in the region. The United States must insist that only Arctic States can claim sovereignty over the land, sea, and air that is rightly theirs. China cannot claim sovereignty because it built some facilities or funded some research program in the Arctic. U.S. naval forces and their NATO partners must operate more assertively across the Arctic Region to prevail in day-to-day competition in order to protect the homeland, keep Arctic seas free and open, and deter coercive behavior and conventional aggression.⁴⁹ The Arctic

States and particularly the United States and its NATO allies, cannot allow China to bully its way into a region where it has no sovereign claim.

Endnotes

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