

## Arctic security – zero sum or working together?

By Clive Archer

Ever since a group of Russian researchers planted a Russian flag at the North Pole in August 2007, there has been increased interest in the strategic importance of the Arctic region. Given the wide blend of issues involved in the international relations of the Arctic, will there be attempts to grab an advantage by one state or more, or will the region become one of cooperation mixed with a certain amount of peaceful competition?

### Background

The Arctic region had strategic importance during the Cold War when NATO and the Soviet Union faced each other across the Arctic with aircraft, missiles, navy ships and surveillance stations. A major change came in 1987 when Gorbachev put forward in Murmansk proposals for cooperation in the Arctic. Though the arms control side of the Murmansk initiative was seen as one-sided by NATO states, scientific and environmental cooperation did bear fruit. Soon a network of institutions was established to encourage and coordinate such cooperation in the Arctic and, by 1996, an Arctic Council was created as an over-arching body for such activity.<sup>1</sup> The end of the Cold War and of the Soviet Union ended military confrontation in the region.

However, within twenty years of the Murmansk initiative, the Arctic Sea was again becoming an area of strategic activity and of Great Power contention. Press and academic articles warned of potential conflict there.<sup>2</sup>

The main impetus for new interest in the Arctic region is threefold. First, the effects of global warming on the Arctic have led to increased concern for the indigenous communities and about environment degradation. They have also meant that the region could be opened up more for resource exploration and for transport. Secondly, as Russia has renewed its naval fleet and built up its forces after the decline of the Yeltsin years, concern has been expressed about Russian intentions in the area.<sup>3</sup> Finally, legal issues have come to the fore. There are several jurisdictional disputes concerning the division of the seas and sea-bed in the Arctic seas. The United States and Canada disagree about the status of the straits; Norway and Russia have a long-running disagreement over the Barents Sea; Canada and Denmark have a tiff about Hans Island near Greenland. The UN Commission on the Law of the Sea, of which all the states around the Arctic are signatories except for the US, has a process whereby states can claim sea-bed beyond a 200-nautical mile zone. The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, that received arguments from states concerning their claims, has asked for submissions by mid-

2009, encouraging scientific and diplomatic activity by the Arctic states.

### The strategies

As a result of these factors, most Arctic states have issued Arctic strategies over the last few years. One of the first was Norway, concerned about the development of resources in the Barents Sea and also about the growing Russian presence. The balance seen in Norwegian policy is common to most national Arctic strategies. Concern for environmental degradation is matched by a wish to develop resources in a sustainable way. There is a support for international cooperation, especially to solve any jurisdictional disputes, together with a stress on asserting sovereignty and a presence in the area.<sup>4</sup>

Russia's new Arctic strategy was agreed in September 2008. The region was seen in economic terms with its resource reserves and Northern Sea Route contributing to Russia's economic development. This resource base had to be protected and Russia's borders secured. The maritime Arctic zone was to be defined both by national legislation and international agreement. Some see this as part of an assertive Russian policy and that '(c)onsidering that energy is a primary instrument of Russia's power, clashes are most likely to occur in regions where energy is to be won or lost. The Arctic is such a region.<sup>5</sup> However, Russia's Arctic strategy does value international cooperation, and government spokesmen have stated their preference for solving Arctic maritime disputes by agreement.<sup>6</sup>

The US Arctic strategy was issued during President Bush's last days in office.<sup>7</sup> The National Security Presidential Directive 66 again stressed the need for sustainable resources and to protect the environment in the Arctic. It emphasised national security and homeland security interests such as missile defence, maritime presence and maritime security operations. It also called upon the US Senate to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea as the international legal basis for advancing US interests in the Arctic and called for active international cooperation to solve problems.

Denmark's main consideration in its Arctic strategy is the changing environment and close cooperation with Greenland. Also of note is the European Union's involvement in the Arctic. The November 2008 Communication from the European Commission on the EU and the Arctic region stressed protection of the Arctic environment, sustainable use of resources and the development of multilateral governance. All the above strategies have been issued in the last few years and have emphasised "soft security issues" –

<sup>1</sup> See David Scrivener, *Environmental Cooperation in the Arctic: From Strategy to Council*, Oslo: The Norwegian Atlantic Committee, Security Policy Library No.1, 1996. The members of the Arctic Council are Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States. See also the Arctic Council web-site at [http://arctic-council.org/section/the\\_arctic\\_council](http://arctic-council.org/section/the_arctic_council)

<sup>2</sup> See for example, 'Leading article: The next colonial scramble' *The Independent*, 25 July 2008, Christopher Mason, 'US and Canada bury hatchet to curb Russia's Arctic bid', at [www.FT.com](http://www.FT.com), August 18th 2008, Scott Borgerson, 'Arctic Meltdown The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2008 at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20080301faessay87206/scott-gborgerson/arctic-meltdown.html>

<sup>3</sup> The Economist, 'The Arctic contest heats up: What is Russia up to in the seas above Europe?', at [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com), October 9th 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Kristine Offerdal, 'Norway: new building blocks in the North. March 2009', *Geopolitics in the High North* at [http://www.geopoliticsnorth.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=84:arctic-strategy-documents&catid=1:latest-news](http://www.geopoliticsnorth.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=84:arctic-strategy-documents&catid=1:latest-news)

<sup>5</sup> See Marcel de Haas, 'Russia's Arctic strategy – challenge to Western energy security', *Expert Article 373, Baltic Rim Economies, Bimonthly Review 4*, 2009, pp.20-21.

<sup>6</sup> Katarzyna Zysk, 'Russia: Arctic Strategy. September 2008', *Geopolitics in the High North* at [http://www.geopoliticsnorth.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=87:russian-national-security-strategy&catid=1:latest-news](http://www.geopoliticsnorth.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=87:russian-national-security-strategy&catid=1:latest-news)

<sup>7</sup> The White House, 'National Security Presidential Directive and Homeland Security Presidential Directive, January 9 2009' at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2009/01/20090112-3.html>

the environment and resources – rather than traditional military “threats”.

#### **Conflict or Cooperation?**

How might the Arctic states deal with the challenges facing the Arctic region? These can be summarised as utilising the area’s resources while protecting its fragile environment, and maintaining national interests whilst negotiating international agreements.

The Arctic Council is a major instrument of international cooperation. Its membership includes states with territory within the Arctic Circle, with six groups of Arctic indigenous peoples as permanent participants and a range of non-Arctic states and international organisations as observers. The Council is likely to be more active in the scientific and environmental areas.

Bilateral and multilateral negotiations are needed for jurisdictional questions. The work of the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf is crucial and it is important that the US ratifies the Law of the Sea Convention and becomes part of this process as soon as possible. In May 2008 the five states bordering the Arctic Sea – Canada, Denmark (for Greenland), Norway, the Russian Federation and the United States – agreed the Ilulissat Declaration whereby they pledged to solve their Arctic legal disputes by using the law of the sea, and to cooperate over protecting the marine environment. However, they rejected the notion, floated by the European Parliament, of an Arctic treaty similar to that covering Antarctica.

The Arctic has recently attracted increased attention. This could lead to a new grab for resources and to conflict, but so far all Arctic states have acted with restraint and have expressed the intent to solve problems peacefully. Urgent attention to the Arctic environment is required by these countries, and other interested parties. The institutions of cooperation are in place; national action is now needed.

Professor Clive Archer is an Emeritus Professor at the Manchester European Research Institute, and is a participant in the Norwegian research programme, GeoPolitics in the High North, run by the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, Oslo.

*Clive Archer*

*Emeritus Professor*

*Manchester European  
Research Institute*

*Manchester Metropolitan  
University*

*England*

