



DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

Briefing papers by Ernie Regehr, O.C., Senior Fellow in Arctic Security

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The 2015 Arctic Yearbook

The fourth annual [Arctic Yearbook](#) is now available, focused on the theme of Arctic governance. Scholarly papers explore governance at local, sub-national, regional levels, followed by a section on Security and Geopolitics. A wide collection of commentaries and briefing notes completes the volume. Scholarly, on-line, and peer reviewed, the yearbook “seeks to be the preeminent repository of critical analysis on “the state of Arctic politics, governance and security.”

Among the offerings on traditional national and international security in the Arctic are insightful articles (reviewed below) on the Russian Arctic and the Arctic as a security community.

The Preface sets the tone on discussions of relations between Russia and its Arctic neighbors in light of changing international dynamics: “Despite stressful changes tied to global geopolitical pressures and dramatic climate change, cooperation continues to be the theme in dialog, actions, and outcomes in the Arctic. The world’s ability to set aside sharp policy differences experienced at lower latitudes, in order to work together at the higher ones is, perhaps, a testament to the special value the world places on the Arctic.”

These questions of how events outside the Arctic influence behavior and relations within it, or whether relative harmony in the Arctic can have positive spillover effects beyond the region, are directly and indirectly explored in several of the contributions.

A Latvian scholar¹ offers an informative account of how the most senior Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, portray Russia’s roles and interests in the Arctic to foreign and domestic audiences. Through an analysis of statements, speeches, and other texts by Russian officials, the author examines Russian self-portrayal under five themes: the Russian national interest, attitudes toward international cooperation, perceptions of other countries’ strategies, views on militarization, and symbolic actions.

The study finds that Russians certainly do stress the importance of the Arctic for advancing to its strategic interests and for promoting a sense of national pride. In domestic contexts, the Arctic is portrayed as increasingly central to future prosperity, and therefore requires attention to reliable governance and security arrangements. Mr. Putin, for example, has pointed to the “return” of Russia to the Arctic, along with an emphasis on developing and maintaining, as the author puts it, access to “all the levers for the protection of security and national interests there.”

Beyond the kinds of interests that any state would pursue, the Arctic has importance for Russia in articulating a sense of special destiny. And when that attitude is linked to the annexation of Crimea, the author acknowledges, non-Russians in the region might be understandably concerned. The Chair of the Russian Arctic Commission is quoted as making the direct link (speaking to a domestic audience in 2015):

“Last year was a historic event – the restoration of the territorial integrity of Russia, a reunion with Sevastopol and the Crimea. This year there is a new look, a powerful new emphasis on the development of the Arctic. These are things of the same order.”

But author Ieva Bērziņa points out that when speaking to foreign audiences both the tone and substance are different. The case is still made that Russia will protect its interest in the Arctic, but the emphasis is on “Russia’s willingness to act within the framework of international legal norms.” Bērziņa thus concludes that “Russia’s national interests in the Arctic” are shown to include a “political ambition to be the leading power in the promising region,” but also that there is an “understanding of the need for international cooperation and respect for international legal norms.”

When commenting on international cooperation directly, important differences between portrayals to domestic and foreign audiences are identified. Domestically, the tone can include an “arrogance” that claims a kind of defiance of what others may think of Russian action and presence in the Arctic. But for international audiences, the focus is “on the importance of international cooperation, mutual understanding and peaceful solution of the problems.” Thus, for international audiences the emphasis is on “a harmony of interests” in the region. The Arctic Council is valued clearly in that discourse, and Arthur Chilingarov, special representative of the President on the Arctic, even concludes that “Arctic development could actually melt the ice between Russia and the West.” And when Canada’s John Baird, as Foreign Minister, proclaimed that Canada would defend its sovereignty against the Russian threat, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, responded:

“There are accusations flying about that we are trying to make a land-grab during a latter-day gold rush. This is nonsense. We don’t want the Arctic to become an arena of conflict.”

On the militarization question, Russia is inclined to portray its military activities in the region as being in response to others – portraying NATO as the one bent on fomenting conflict. The US submarine presence in the region is raised, as is the British naval presence and western aircraft patrols. The Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev is thus seen to conclude “that in such circumstances Russia cannot just watch war preparations by foreign countries near its borders.” On the other hand, the Senior Arctic official Anton Vasiliev gives quite a different take on Russian military presence in the Arctic. He portrays it as focused on preventing illegal border crossings and illegal immigration, and as combating organized crime and terrorism.

The author concludes that while Russian domestic discourse on the Arctic emphasizes the strategic importance of the Arctic to Russia, foreign oriented discourse emphasizes cooperation and works at maintaining favorable relations with Russia’s Arctic partners. The broad conclusion of the paper is that “it is much more likely that the Arctic could serve instead for Russian-Western rapprochement rather than becoming the next geopolitical hotspot.”

Along the same lines, a paper by a research fellow of the Arctic University of Norway’s Centre for Peace Studies² concludes that the Arctic region has come to reflect a key feature of an international security community. Namely, the people of the region can realistically “maintain dependable expectation of peaceful change.”

While the paper documents Arctic behavior that demonstrates a decline in levels of trust within the region, it nevertheless concludes that European centred tensions have not affected the Arctic to the point of ending its development as a genuine security community, although the process has probably been slowed, or perhaps even halted, for now. But the concluding analysis is that the Arctic will be able to get beyond “its role as a subplot of the tensed European security environment” and become again “a proving ground for restoring trust and mutual confidence.”

The author offers four lessons to be learned from recent turns toward greater tension in the Arctic as the result of conflict and tensions in other regions. The first is to recognize that the Arctic is not immune to spillover effects from other regions, even though this does not lead to fears of actual armed conflict in the region. The second lesson is that as military contacts are curtailed due to that spillover, economic, environmental, and human dimensions of interaction need to be preserved and strengthened.

Related to that, the third lesson points to the importance of strengthening the role of civil society and indigenous people in fostering cross border cooperation. And fourth, the military dimensions of relations between states in the region need throughout to emphasize cooperation, in part by developing confidence building interactions and shared rules of engagement. All states in the region are of course members of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and as such should take their obligations under it seriously, especially in areas such as “the prior announcement of and the invitation of international observers to future large-scale military exercises in the region.”

The Yearbook also includes a number of much briefer commentaries. At least two are on similar security themes. In one, two Professors from St. Petersburg State University³ conclude that “serious international experts do not see any particular alarming trends in Russia’s military behavior in the Arctic in the Aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis.” They bolster their argument by quoting the American Admiral Robert J. Papp:⁴ “Everything we have seen [Russia] doing so far is lawful, considered and deliberative. So we’ll just continue monitoring it and not overreact to it.”

On the other hand, a former NATO official⁵ is not nearly so sanguine. He laments the absence of a “NATO High North Security Strategy” and offers proposals to upgrade NATO’s presence, including the expansion of NATO air policing out of Keflavik, Iceland. He calls for increased NATO support for search and rescue, but he does propose cooperation with Russia on the latter.

In the introduction to the 2015 Arctic Yearbook, an overview of “Governance and Governing in the Arctic,”⁶ the authors make an interesting point about the unusual characteristics of governance in the Arctic – characterizing it as generally less hierarchical and more decentralized. Consultation and engagement are highly valued, and the pursuit of consensus is the prevailing style (which often means it is also slower). The military is extensively involved by virtue of its job creating presence and the infrastructure it brings. Arctic governance also involves examples of self-governance and other arrangements linked to indigenous peoples. Arctic governance heavily engages the knowledge community (scientists, academics, environmentalists, NGOs). On this latter point, the authors ask: “Is there any other region in the world where scientists play such a high profile role in policy shaping, from shipping regulations to resource development.” And they might have added to that the role of scientists in providing the data on which continental shelf boundary decisions will ultimately be made.

The yearbook is accessible, without cost, at its dedicated website, <http://www.arcticyearbook.com/>. It is an extraordinary resource, covering a very broad range of topics and issues, and includes a useful timeline of key events over the past 12 months. The Arctic Yearbook is indeed what the editors hoped it would be, that is, a repository of critical analysis on Arctic politics, governance, and security. In other words, it is well worth the visit.

Notes

¹ Ieva Bērziņa, Senior Researcher at the Center for Security and Strategic Studies, Latvian National Defence Academy, “Foreign and Domestic Discourse on the Russian Arctic.”

² Benjamin Schaller, “The Arctic Security Community: Proving Ground or Sub-Plot of a tensed European Security Environment.”

³ Alexander Sergunin and Valery Koyshv, “Russian Military Activities in the Arctic: Myths and Realities.”

⁴ Formerly Commander of the US Coast Guard and now the US State Department Special Representative to the Arctic.

⁵ Maarten de Sitter, “NATO and the Arctic.”

⁶ Lassi Heininen, Heather Exner-Pirot, and Joël Plouffe, “Governance and Governing in the Arctic: An Introduction to the Arctic Yearbook 2015.”