

Geopolitics and diplomacy in crises and conflicts



The United States of America and Russia in the Arctic: The Climate change as a source of international conflict in a geostrategic setting

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I. Introduction

The problems linked to climate change, and the renewed political and economic interests of coastal and non-coastal states, have made the Arctic region appear as a strategic place on the chessboard of the major powers.

The partial melting of the ice pack due to global warming has made the Arctic an economic opening coveted by several major powers, notably the United States of America, Russia, Canada, Denmark and Norway, which are the five Arctic riparians, but many others not riparians, such as China, European Union, and so on. Garcin, T. (2014). If, on the contrary, the Antarctic has been managed by the Washington Treaty since 1959 and the Madrid Protocol since 1991, the Arctic is managed by this group of five, also known as the "Arctic five" Anne Denis. (2019) with an Arctic Council made up of eight countries (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, United States). Escudé, C. (2017).

However, as this territory does not belong to the lands of any of these great powers, with the economic potential that it abounds in and because of its geostrategic situation, each of these powers is trying to appropriate these millions and millions square kilometers. It should be noted that in 2007 Russia planted its flag at the bottom of the sea through its scientists. Øverland, I. (2011). If Russia goes so far as to take this region as their own with a purely national name (The Russian Arctic), this shows the strategic and economic importance of the Arctic for the Russian Federation.

The limits of the Arctic are still a matter of debate, which is why we reserve the right to make exact figures, but this does not prevent us from using estimated figures in order to get out of the imagination and not remain in space.

The Arctic is a region of the earth located at the North Pole. According to the definitions, its limits are different, but globally, the region is included north of the Arctic Circle" A is not to be confused with the Arctic Ocean, which is delimited over an area of 13 million square kilometers and more than 4,000 meters deep. (Futura Science)

What is happening in Arctic is problematic since Russia has reportedly threatened to use force against vessels that fail to abide by Russian regulations, while the US Department of Defense DoD in his last report from 2019 plan to increase the US military activity. (DoD report, 2019) and this is preoccupant since it can lead to a manifest conflict.

However, the United States and Russia have a cross-land and cross-sea vision for this region, which contains 13% and 30% of the world's oil and gas reserves respectively, a passage that would reduce the length of sea journeys between Europe and Asia by at least 15 days, not to mention the diamonds, gold and other rare earths found in its subsoil. Anne Denis. (2019). Currently, this zone, which has become geostrategic, a domain of military competition, raises security issues long excluded from the agenda by the Arctic Council. If there is something that troubles, it is to know in what interest the United States and Russia are fighting for the Arctic. Scientific curiosity, using theories of international relations as instruments, especially with approaches based on national interests, leads to try to add some elements to the puzzle in order to identify the main issues at stake.

The hypothesis would be simple but also complex in view of the research question answered by this work, it suffices to remain within the logic of realism and strategic geopolitics; there one would already have projected on the interests aimed at by these two great and historic powers in the Arctic to the point of raising tensions. However, what is most important and deserves special attention is the set of answers that this work provides.

II. In which scope can this race be included?

The analytical interpretation of our work requires a theoretical framework that serves as a reference in order to study and answer our research question in detail.

The realistic theory of studying things as they are in a descriptive way in an anarchic world where each state puts forward its national interests in terms of power, which obviously makes war inevitable, seems to us to be more than adequate since we are dealing with the question of interests between two powers.

On the other hand, authors who have worked on the theory of geopolitics underline that it is a theory of pure political economy or social wealth theory. Walras, L. (1896). For this case study

following the research question that I am trying to understand by providing elements of answers, given that in such a case there is no answer but rather answers, the two theories (realist theory and the geopolitical approach) make a good marriage to produce such a solid work.

International relations are the work of selfish actors, above all states, which are even the main actors, knowing that there are other non-state actors. These states seek to maximize their national interest in an anarchic environment where there is no global authority to prevent the use of force. Misunderstanding about certain political projects leads or can lead to escalation. If I use the same words as Jean Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, who said that states do not define international relations and national interest concepts in the same way and do not draw the same conclusions from them, he reflects on the logic of continuity without unity. Jeangène Vilmer, J. (2013).

III. Russia in the Arctic

With the Bolshevik regime, major research projects in the Arctic took place following the numerous exploration expeditions that had taken place long before during the Tsarist period, long before the Arctic was strategic as it is. Marchand, P. (2008).

However, if Russia has not been interested in the Arctic since the end of the Cold War in order to attract more attention, this has not been the case for the last ten years, when the Russian government has made the occupation and exploitation of the Arctic one of its priorities. (For example, the 2008 law on foreign investment in strategic sectors favored the exploitation of the plateau by national oil companies (Gazprom, Rosneft, Zarubezhneft) with the ultimate strategic objective of maintaining its position as the main power there. The Arctic is taken by Russia as a potential source of development because it is "the main strategic reservoir of natural resources" Zysk, K. (2017). "Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic up to 2020 and beyond (Medvedev 2009). This document was signed by President Dmitry Medvedev in September 2008 and published by the Russian Security Council in March 2009. "Øverland, I. (2011).

While the policies of maintaining peace in the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation, the protection of the ecological systems of the area are in the above-mentioned document, an emphasis is placed on natural resources as a national interest of Russia without forgetting the

policy of promoting the northern seaway as an international waterway but under Russian jurisdiction, which in my humble opinion is paradoxical, because what has an international connotation should be governed by an international law, treaty, charter or other instrument that has received the consent of the stakeholders.

The northern region, Siberia and parts of the Russian Far East are where most of the oil and gas extraction takes place. More than 80% of natural gas reserves and over 70% of oil reserves are in the Arctic part of the country. Natural gas is by far Russia's most lucrative export. Nevertheless, the north-east of the Caspian Sea is one of Russia's other oil regions but of lesser importance. "The Arctic covers a total of 21 million square kilometers. It represents 15% of Russia's territory, 20% of its GDP and 10% of its oil and gas revenues. Half of the Arctic coastline is controlled by Russia and the Russian Arctic regions contain more than 60% of the country's mineral and energy resources" Hohmann, S (2017)

The Russian Arctic regions are of major importance in terms of the domestic economy, they feed the Russian budget and it is precisely these regions that allow for the redistribution of the budget to more sensitive regions with few resources. In a way, they guarantee an internal balance within Russia, which gives them a triple economic, political and geostrategic function.

The Arctic is proving to be a better route for the transport of commercial products "The Northern route" to Asia, the same route used for the transport of Russian products to "Europe", a market which shows low demand but also competition from other foreign multinationals. Projects to redirect the gas pipelines are underway. Hohmann, S (2017)

The current President of Russia is scratching the surface by establishing strong cooperation links with neighbouring countries. A policy behind which lies a project to extend Russia's territory by taking possession of more than a million square kilometers between the Lomonosov and Mendeleïev submarine ridges, which is not a given as it requires the agreement of all the neighbouring countries. (Baev, P, 2012.p5). From this, it is also important to understand that it is not astonishing that there are tensions, disagreements and divergences over such a policy towards a country like the United States of America, bearing in mind that a considerable part of the Arctic resources are located in Russia, since a large part of the Arctic waters belong to it. Whatever the outcome of existing or foreseeable territorial controversies over Arctic waters,

Russia being the largest country in the world and the country with the longest Arctic coastline, it will inevitably be the main power in the Arctic territorially.

IV. The United States of America and the Arctic

The United States of America were not always bordering the Arctic, it is from March 1867 that they bought Alaska from Russia for 7.2 million dollars that it had the same title as the bordering countries that we quote in the previous points. The main objective of this strategic zone for America was not to exploit the wealth of the region but rather to serve the Americans to have a better angle of control on the other side of the world (Russia). In the 1971's "the Arctic was thus considered at that time as an icy backyard of the two great nuclear powers, a strategic deterrent space where the two blocs faced each other."Calmels, C. (2018).

After the Cold War, as there was more tension, the United States displayed a disinterested attitude towards the region by not giving priority to Arctic governance policies in which other riparian countries were more involved. It was in the 2000s that the United States of America began to become remarkably involved in the governance of the Arctic region, in the main forum of the region, the Arctic Council.

However, by following the same line of thought we can try to understand the backbone policy on which the strategies adopted by the United States of America in the Arctic are based. It is important to note that the United States of America is seeking openness and transparency in the governance of the region. As the only one of the five countries bordering the Arctic that has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which is one of the main instruments that govern the Arctic, because being largely oceanic, we can easily understand the doubts and claims that the United States of America is putting forward in the organisation and governance of the Arctic region. The United States considers UNCLOS to be derived from customary law. "Non-ratification marginalizes the United States about the issue of the enlargement of the continental shelves of its neighbours. Indeed, only states that have ratified the Convention can submit a submission for the extension of their continental shelf to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), a body established by the Convention to provide advisory opinions to member states". Calmels, C. (2018).

However, if the United States of America is among the club of five that are Arctic riparians, this does not prevent it from having less power in the Arctic Council since it has not ratified UNCLOS, which gives it the role of a guest, commentator, inactive observer to requests for extensions of continental shelves, which then causes a great problem in a region where geostrategic parameters are increasing from day to day like the Arctic.

The United States of America does not agree with the policy of closure, which characterises Arctic governance at the Arctic Council in favour of the coastal states. Note that the US main strategies in the Arctic via his DoD is based on three principles:” Building Arctic awareness; Enhancing Arctic operations; and Strengthening the rules-based order in the Arctic.” DoD, (2019)

However, the United States also has a stake in this, because although it seeks to secure the region: the indigenous people, the researchers who carry out research there, and the strengthening of cooperation between the riparian states as we find in the national strategies and in the defense strategies of the United States of America for 2013 (Hanne, H. (2014)), it also seeks to have control over the organization and governance of the Arctic. Why would the United States seek to become the world's policeman in such a multipolar world? It seeks and claims accession to UNCLOS, which is considered by the administration as necessary to claim continental shelves extending beyond the coast of Alaska, which would contain large quantities of oil, gas, and other resources.

Nevertheless, Hanne tells us that, as far as the US economy is concerned, "Arctic Alaska would have the second largest reserves of oil and natural gas after the West Siberian Basin, 29.9 billion barrels of oil and 5.9 billion barrels of liquefied natural gas. There would also be strategic metals and rare earths: oxides of iron, zinc, nickel, coal, graphite, palladium, etc. "Hanne, H. (2014)

We can see to what extent the Arctic represents a strategic zone with a major interplay of interests between these two great powers as well as other powers that also keep an eye on the Arctic.

V. Common difficulties to both powers in the region

Although the two great powers are pursuing the countless resources of the Arctic with vast investments in financial, military and technical means for the protection and exploitation of these resources, there are several constraints despite the presence of the best icebreakers in the world (that of Russia) linked to changes in the weather, the cold and the nights are almost permanent. If not the nights, the cold is permanently there with lower averages than anywhere else in the world. The lack of infrastructures, in a climate that is so unfavorable to human life, makes the region hostile to both man and materials, causing a complex logistical problem. Hanne, H. (2014).

VI. Conclusion

Two diametrically opposed visions are emerging between the United States of America, which considers that navigation in international waters, i.e., the oceans and seas, is based on a very broad freedom and that the Arctic Ocean is no exception to the rule, and countries such as Canada and Russia, which take these waters as part of their sovereignty, as if they were internal water. So, you will have understood that there is a misunderstanding, which makes relations in the Arctic region conflictual. While the United States of America claims freedom of movement on the Northern Maritime Routes (NMR) and to be part of decision makers in the region, Russia is seeking to profit more and more from the region that it largely takes for its own (Russian Arctic) by exploiting gas, oil and other minerals. For the United States, an agreement with Russia to ensure the safety and security of maritime links in the area is a win-win game, with the development of new trade routes.

As climatologists show through studies conducted on the phenomenon of global warming that the Arctic region would be completely passable by 2070, we can lay a basis for thinking in the opposite direction of slowing down the exploitation that I can call geo-political-economic exploitation of the region by states that see it as the first line of economic interests rather than ecological protection.

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