



Northern Research Forum
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The Changing Geo-Politics of the North

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The circumpolar North has been described on a spectrum ranging, from a colonial external point of view, from a periphery to an internal image of a homeland of peoples with their identities. In classical geopolitics the North was seen as a reserve of natural resources and military space for patrolling and testing. The industrialized, militarized and divided circumpolar North of the Cold War, however, started to thaw in late of 1980s as a result of increased interrelations between peoples and civil societies, as well as international cooperation and region-building by states. This more human approach of geopolitics meant, on the one hand, increased stability and decreased military tension, and, on the other, a wide and deepening, mostly multilateral, international cooperation with both intergovernmental and civic organizations and forums, such as the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, the Arctic Council, the University of the Arctic and the Northern Research Forum. As a result of these developments, the circumpolar North has become a stable and peaceful area.

All this has meant a significant change in northern geopolitics, which is clearly indicated by the following main themes, or trends, of circumpolar geopolitics and international relations in the early 21st century (stated by the Arctic Human Development Report 2004): first, the increasing circumpolar cooperation by indigenous peoples' organizations and sub-national governments; second, region-building with states as major actors; and third, a new kind of relationship between the circumpolar North and the outside world, demonstrating that the North has relevance in world politics. Each of the above, *per se*, indicates and reflects a significant change, and putting them all together the picture is more a complicated and multi-functional process than used to be the case in the colonial days.

However, neither international relations nor geopolitics remain unaltered, and consequently, the geo-strategic importance of the region is growing, with significant geopolitical, socio-economic and environmental change occurring in the North with regard to certain factors, such as strategic energy resources, energy security and climate change.

The North in world politics - growing global interest turns toward the North

Indeed, the North of the 21st century is not isolated, but closely integrated into the current world of globalization and part of the international system. For example, we could easily relate two of the above-mentioned themes of circumpolar geopolitics to the context of globalization due to the fact that cooperation between indigenous peoples' organizations can be interpreted to be global and the relationship between the North and the rest of the world is global. Furthermore, individuals, societies and governments are impacted by similar global problems and challenges, and the growing demands placed upon them by the rest of the globe - all of which transcends the traditional distinction between a core and a periphery.

As a stable, advanced and innovative region, the circumpolar North has seen positive developments within the Northern Hemisphere as well as in world politics: Within the region, a number of innovative political and legal arrangements have been developed, while a certain devolution of power has also taken place. The diversity of northern nature and northern cultures is remarkable. The Arctic is used as a parameter of climate change, and correspondingly, the circumpolar North has become a global "workshop" for (multidisciplinary) research on climate developments which has made the North academically interesting. Finally, there is a growing worldwide economic and political interest in the circumpolar North.

Growing interests of the unified states

Apart from the circumpolar North being a focus of growing global interest, the eight arctic states also demonstrate a growing, national interest in the region and its resources. For this there are certain geographical, geopolitical, legal and historical reasons. Whereas for centuries the arctic states maintained a colonial policy toward their northern peripheries, nowadays they have concentrated their national interests on the North, and some of them have a special Northern agenda and policy. Consequently, in northern regions there exists a recognition of the politico-cultural legacy of state colonialism as well as a firm residue of 'national interest' by a state.

At present, however, this is not the whole picture, since there are also international governmental organizations and major powers from outside the region which take an interest in the North. For example, the new Northern Dimension is interpreted to mean a common policy of the European Union (EU), the Russian Federation,

Iceland and Norway in Northern Europe. In addition, northern issues are finally being given a higher priority on the EU's agenda and matters relating to the north have been an important concern of the United Nations (UN) for years; for example, the UN has special duties in the region through the UN International Law of the Sea. Major powers from outside the region, such as the UK, France, Germany, China, Japan and South Korea are taking a growing interest in many aspects of the North, such as in scientific research, a field which allows the waving of a "flag", particularly in the IPY 2007-2008.

All this raises a number of questions, e.g. whether the governments of the arctic states are ready for a thorough discussion on relevant issues, such as mass-scale utilization of basically untapped natural resource endowments of the region, existing disputes and energy security in the context of institutionalized international cooperation like the Arctic Council and the United Nations. Or will there be more traditional responses and solutions, such as increased emphasis on national defence in Northern regions?

Main indicators of a geopolitical change

All this indicates that in the circumpolar North significant and rapid environmental, geo-economic and geopolitical change is occurring. As a result of this, northern regions and seas have become a target area for the growing economic, political and military interests of central governments of the arctic states as well as of major powers outside the region and trans-national companies. A major attraction in this regard are on one hand, the huge (mostly potential) deposits of oil and natural gas in the region and the potential contribution of northern sea routes for global shipping; besides, activities aimed at ensuring energy security are an important element in national foreign policies.

With a view to the above, broad scenarios for the future have been established, trying to foresee what will happen in the North. It may be more relevant and useful, however, to identify the precise factors and dynamics which are indicative of changes in northern geopolitics. Consequently, I have listed the following geopolitical factors/dynamics to be regarded among the main indicators of a multi-functional change in, and growing global interest toward, the North in the early 21st century: National sovereignty which is endangered by climate change; military presence for the defence of sovereignty; utilization of natural resources, emphasizing strategic energy resources; (global) energy security; transportation and logistics indicating a revolution in global shipping and trade; technology; global (environmental and security) problems such as climate change; flows of globalization through the increased transportation of goods; established international cooperation in response to a growing need; education and science in combination with traditional knowledge due to new challenges; and climate change *per se* bringing uncertainty into the societies, politics and governance of the region.

These issues will be much discussed in the sessions of the Fifth Open Assembly of the Northern Research Forum in September 2008 in Anchorage, Alaska. Discussions in the plenary sessions under the themes of "The New Geography of a Warming North", "The Accessible Arctic in the Global Economy", "The Future of Northern Cooperation" and "Leadership in Conditions of Uncertainty", as well in roundtable and project sessions, are expected, on the one hand, to concentrate on key factors and dynamics indicating changes in the North and northern geopolitics. On the other hand, the debate is expected to highlight particular the matters relating to the role of research and the social relevance of science, as well as the interplay between politics and science.

Conclusions

At the beginning of the 21st century, the strategic importance of the North is growing and becoming high on the agenda in geopolitics and economics, both in the Arctic states and major powers outside the region. Furthermore, due to a growing need for, and even competition over, energy resources, there has been a steep rise in competition and claims on northern sea areas and shelves. As a result of these developments, there is a growing and obvious need for fundamental discussion and negotiations on these issues and challenges. It has become an urgent question on which platforms these discussions will be conducted, either in the context of some *ad-hoc* coalitions, such as the five littoral states of the Arctic Ocean, or in the context of the institutionalized landscape, such as the Arctic Council and conferences of Parliamentarians of the Arctic?

Further, due to a growing and obvious need for fundamental discussion and open dialogue, the interplay between science and politics might help. One potential stage for open discussion and dialogue on relevant northern and global issues, as well as the implementation of this interplay, is the Fifth Open Assembly of the Northern Research Forum. Based on our discussions and analysis, some starting points of the Open Assembly might focus on the following conclusions and/or hypotheses: The circumpolar North is a stable and peaceful area with institutional, international cooperation, and the region has relevance in world politics. There is an increase of the geo-strategic importance of the region due to, on the one hand, an emphasis on geo-economics and the importance of global problems such as climate change, and on the other, growing interest among the arctic states and major powers outside the region in the huge energy resources and the potential share of more accessible arctic regions in the global economy.

Finally, and following from the above, significant geopolitical, socio-economic and environmental changes are occurring in the North with relevant consequences, such as conditions of uncertainty, bigger risks to the environment and human security, threats to local autonomy and sovereignty. These developments have given rise to traditional responses by individual governments, reducing the impact of multilateral cooperation, when actually there is a need for broader and deeper international cooperation both within the region and on a global level.