

Ice, oil and influence: the strategic stakes of Arctic sovereignty

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The Arctic region is fast becoming a geopolitical hotbed of interest. Extreme changes in weather are reshaping the Arctic landscape – once viewed as an isolated, icy expanse. The warmer climate has unveiled new sea shipping routes



and revealed a bounty of previously inaccessible natural resources, including oil, gas and minerals – attracting the attention of the world’s superpowers.

Stakeholders in the Arctic: a complex mix

Eight countries – Canada, Denmark (through Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States (through Alaska) – own land in the Arctic. Five of those possess full sovereignty over their seas extending 12 nautical miles north of their respective coastlines. Beyond this, the waters of the Arctic Ocean are treated as international waters. Article 57 of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) outlines that a country can request an exclusive economic zone up to 200 nautical miles from its own coastline from where it can explore, exploit or preserve natural resources. Recent adjustments to this clause allow coastal states to extend the zone to 350 nautical miles, very close to the international waters of the Arctic which are not claimed by any specific country. To seek approval for these requests, countries must present analysis and samples from the seabed floor of the zone in question. Norway, Denmark, Russia, Canada and the US have already made claims. Competition over these new coastal routes and the region’s untapped treasure of natural resources is creating a breeding ground for disputes and potential conflicts.

The race for resources: oil, gas and minerals

Analysis of the region suggests that the Arctic Sea floor is rich in oil, gas and minerals and there has been tremendous interest from the Arctic states and surrounding powers wanting to make their official claims. Some areas are subject to ongoing dispute – including the Barents Sea and Svalbard continental shelf (with overlapping claims by Russia and Norway) and the Beaufort Sea (US and Canada). This international interest brings with it fears of impending environmental risk to the fragile Arctic ecosystem, especially where resource extraction is concerned. New shipping routes – like the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage – present threats to existing wildlife and pose important questions about environmental protection, maritime safety and sovereignty.

Indigenous concerns

Indigenous communities who have lived in these lands for millennia are facing threats from the melting ice and the prospect of military and industrial activity. The rights of these communities has prompted discussions regarding the governance of the Arctic. Arctic Policy on sustainability and the environment is currently co-ordinated by the Arctic Council which consists of the eight Arctic states and six organisations who act as Permanent Participants to represent Arctic Indigenous Peoples. While UNCLOS provides a limited legal framework, it has not been ratified by all the Arctic nations.

Emerging security concerns

The Arctic's geopolitical significance is underscored by a surge in the number of military bases, state-of-the-art surveillance systems and military manoeuvres conducted by Arctic states, in particular Russia and the US. Since 2007, Russia has built 475 new military structures in the Arctic which is the only region in the world where it has military supremacy. Russia's most recent exercises were conducted in January 2022. Following Russia's conflict with Ukraine and sanction violations, there are fears that the Arctic's patchwork governance structure is in jeopardy and that a free-for-all attitude will unfold.

NATO's recent exercises and declarations highlight the strategic importance now attributed to the region by Western military powers and their allies. These developments have escalated tensions, introducing concern over potential conflict in a historically peaceful region.

Conclusion

The Arctic will soon find itself at a crossroads, balancing co-operation and conflict. The Arctic Council's observance of international laws such as UNCLOS and maintenance of a co-operative framework bode well – but the allure of untapped resources, military advantage and industrial gain could lead to dispute. History reminds us that greed and power will be at play.

The considerable militarisation of the Arctic region complicates matters, emphasising the need for diplomatic preparedness. Balancing territorial claims, resource extraction, environmental concerns and Indigenous rights will be pivotal. The Arctic is no longer a remote and dormant frontier – it has become a chessboard for global powers and it is sounding a clear early warning for stakeholders.

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