

The Race that Never Was?

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, AUG 20 2012

The last decade has seen the proliferation of interest by states in regional organizations, human security, environmental issues and an array of other concerns, but perhaps none has captivated the intrigue of global actors as the high north. To some, the Arctic represents the unknown, new opportunities, and the future; to others, the Arctic represents little more than a barren and frozen region that matters little in the grand scheme of world affairs.

Regardless of one's own perceptions of the Arctic, states have identified the region as a priority both in terms of their hard and soft power calculations. Of course, not all states in the world have articulated Arctic interests, due to obvious geographical considerations and also accessibility issues, but those states with territorial claims in the Arctic, and some of those that do not, have expressed growing interest in that hinterland throughout the last ten years.

Arctic states, namely Canada, the US, Russia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Denmark, have been very active in asserting their claims over Arctic territory in recent years, and their respective northern strategies have all included soft and hard power variables. This comes as little surprise, as the impact of global warming has allowed for greater access to the region, thus providing the impetus for competition surrounding shipping and trade routes, but most importantly, the potential for underwater resource extraction. States never, and I mean never, act without some sort of potential benefit involved, so when it comes to the Arctic, the proverbial carrot is the driving factor.

Other states, like India, China, France and the UK have also begun to express interests in the high north, for many of the same reasons as Arctic states, though they do not have direct or legally identifiable territorial claims. Also prevalent are multilateral institutions attempting to govern the politics and law of the Arctic, such as the Arctic Council and UNCLOS.

More recently, however, state interests in the Arctic appear to have waned. States are still announcing new projects, developments or missions in the north, but the impact of the 'Great Recession' compelled many Arctic-interested states to slow or completely halt their plans for northern extension. Prior to the recession, Norway was interested in investing heavily in air force technology, Denmark was prepared to spend on naval development, and Canada created a multifaceted northern strategy that would see human, environmental and military development in the region.

In most cases, these projects have yet to see reality, because the chest-bumping bravado of Arctic states was deflated when there was no money to fund such initiatives. Further, it was highly unlikely that states like Canada, Norway and Denmark were prepared to substantially invest in defence technologies when they had previously been known for small-scale, though specialized, military deployment.

To date, the only state that has taken its Arctic claims seriously enough to invest, deploy and test, is Russia. The Russians have been extremely active in the Arctic, having released a new class of submarine that will be very effective in Arctic conditions, tested a new series of missile, and as of last week, announced further Arctic investments that will include amphibious vehicle capability. Many states claim sovereignty over areas of the Arctic, but very few are actually capable of enforcing such claims if the situation called for it. All expect for Russia, that is.

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This naturally begs the question, was the so-called *Race for the Arctic* much ado about nothing?

Arctic states, and Arctic-interested states, would all love to benefit from the suspected underwater resources in the high north, and would also like to see their spheres of influence extended without it costing too much. This is the modus operandi of rational actors. Even so, desire rarely translates into capability, and thus we would need to look for which states have the ability to defend sovereignty claims. China and India, as emerging great powers, may have the capabilities but they have no territorial claim to make; the US has shown relatively little interest in the Arctic, so it is content to allow Canada to pretend like it is able to protect its claims; and most other Arctic states are too limited in terms of military capabilities to take seriously.

As a fiercely proud Canadian, it pains me to say that the “race” is, and always has been, rhetorical. For instance, Canada’s Prime Minister Stephen Harper will return to the Arctic again this week for photo ops, military flyovers, and to ‘participate’ in Canadian Forces exercises in an ongoing public relations campaign, but this is not expected to translate into any actual spending or northern development.

As far as anyone can tell, the Russians have used the Arctic as a test ground for their reemergence to great power status and have done so quite successfully. The race, if there ever was one, may have come to an end without many people noticing.

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Read more from Robert W. Murray’s e-IR blog: Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality.

About the author:

Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary’s Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta’s European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.