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## Vying for Power in the High North

The pool of nations scrambling to control the Arctic's natural resources and ice-free shipping routes may soon grow. Jody Ray Bennett considers what impact emerging powers such as China might have not only on Arctic security, but also on how the international system will resolve future territorial disputes in the High North.

By Jody Ray Bennett for ISN

Just over two years ago, ISN's Security Watch [reported](#) on the evolving geopolitical dynamics shaping the Arctic policies of the United States, Canada, Denmark and Russia. Since then, the High North has remained relatively free of geopolitical tensions. However, that might be about to change.

On 06 August 2012, Russia announced that it plans to [build a string of naval infrastructure hubs](#) along the Arctic's Northern Sea Route. According to the report, Security Council chief Nikolai Patrushev confirmed that, "[A]uthorities have drafted a list of 'key double-purpose sites in remote areas of the Arctic seas along the Northern Sea Route' to enable 'temporary stationing of Russian Navy warships and vessels operated by the Federal Security Service's Border Guard Department'".

A Wired.com [report](#) picked up on the motive: "The logic behind Russia's Arctic bases is seductive. The thinking goes like this: As global warming causes the northern polar ice to recede — and one day disappear during the summer months — nations like Russia, Canada, Norway and the United States will scramble for the bountiful deposits of oil, gas and minerals hidden beneath, sparking an Arctic resource war."

### Conflict Unlikely?

However, even as the Arctic powers—Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States—[remain](#) "at odds over how to divide up the region," arctic warfare seems unlikely.

"At the moment there really are no overriding security concerns in the Arctic. However, with the likelihood of increased arctic transits by ships of many nations, the littoral states, particularly Canada and Russia, do not want to allow practices that might constitute 'customary law' such as passing between islands off the coast and either country's mainland. Once that sort of watchfulness begins, each action is likely to prompt a responsive action by one or more of the other states," Boston University's Michael T. Corgan told ISN Security Watch.

"Where there had not previously been a need to consider security matters that would in any case have been handled by existing coast guard forces, now more serious threats are a possibility though a

remote one as yet. An early buildup of security measures in the Arctic regions can serve to allay charges that the state doing so is reflexively and perhaps provocatively "mirror imaging" another state's actions as happened during the Cold war with nuclear weapons proliferation," Corgan explained.

For Russia, transit through the Arctic will likely occur in checkpoints that reside on or nearby its dual-use bases. According to the [United States Naval Institute](#), many of Russia's emergency rescue centers found in Arctic transit lines could easily serve as a naval military base:

"While Patrushev's announcement did not specify exactly where the new naval bases would be, his specific terminology 'dual use,' has led most Russian analysts to speculate that these bases will be *co-located in the 10 new 'emergency-rescue centers' whose construction was announced in November*. These 'rescue centers' will be located across a broad swath of Russia's north at Murmansk, Archangelsk, Naryan-Mar, Vorkuta, Nadym, Dudinka, Tiksi, Pevek, Provideniya, and Andyr. Although some of these locations (such as Vorkuta) are not at all suitable for naval bases, being too far inland or too far from navigable rivers, several others are ideally placed to service military vessels transiting through or operating in the Arctic."

### **Setting Global Standards**

Despite this, the scramble for energy resources seems to take precedent over hard-lined military and security measures in the Arctic, and regional powers are ramping up efforts to interpret international legal norms in their favor.

"Of course there are resources in the Arctic and increased exploration suggests there might be considerably more than is now estimated, especially with regard to energy. With deadlines for states to claim continental shelf areas approaching, there is some urgency to establish defensible hydrographic data to substantiate any claims that might be made, especially as they are likely to overlap potential claims from other states. The Russian claims to the Lomonosov Ridge are the most salient example. The whole matter of just what is a continental shelf remains one of the murkier ones in the Law of the Sea," Corgan told ISN Security Watch.

Indeed, as claims in the Antarctic region remain unresolved and unsettled, new legal battles taking place in the South Atlantic have the chance to set precedent for future Arctic claims. States with increasing global power—even those with non-Arctic borders— are paying close attention to such precedents and how Arctic claims will be handled.

"Precedent-setting also figures in to the matter of Arctic claims as the Chinese are most interested in how Arctic claims are settled. Though there is no disputed above-water land areas in the Arctic as there are in the South China Sea, the resolution of continental claims disputes in the Arctic will surely be considered precedent-setting for the much more volatile claims in the South China Sea. International negotiations will be watched over, and to the extent possible, influenced by those with interests elsewhere," Corgan told ISN Security Watch.

### **Looking to the Future**

Indeed, China's strategic interest in the Arctic extends beyond competing territorial claims. Currently, the Chinese icebreaker and research vessel [Xuelong](#)—or "Snow Dragon"— is on its [fifth voyage](#) through the Arctic. Moreover, in 2004 China established its first Arctic station. According to state officials the Yellow River station at Ny-Alesund, Norway, enables China to perform and enhance its scientific research and cooperation across the Arctic region. However, both undoubtedly reflect that China is attempting to gain a foothold in the High North, despite being a non-Arctic state.

Beijing's increasing interest in the Arctic may also prove influential upon future attempts to resolve territorial disputes among the Arctic states. As a bona fide Arctic power, the United States geo-strategic calculations will also impact upon the successful management of regional issues. But, as Michael T. Corgan reminds us, the United States is not a signatory to the Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOSIII), something that "complicates the climate for resolution of conflicting claims and disputes."

As a result, the foundations may have been laid for a rhetorical Arctic Cold War played out against a backdrop of continuous single and joint military exercises by all the Arctic powers, but particularly Russia. Indeed, Moscow's attempts to increase its military foothold within the Arctic may result in more joint exercises and coastal patrols involving the United States, Canada, and North European states. These military exchanges will be used to balance the perceived threat from Russia, which is scheduled to deploy amphibious vehicles to the region once its dual-use naval bases are prepared.

Adding a further dynamic to the politics of the High North is the prospect of more territorial claims determined by and precedents set through international legal norms. As China best demonstrates, this may provide further opportunities for non-Arctic states to bolster their influence and safeguard other interests across the region. This, in turn, demonstrates that interest in Arctic region by an array of local, regional, and international actors is at an all-time high, even in the absence of threats to security.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[The Arctic: Thaw With Conflict Potential](#)

[From Meltdown to Showdown? Challenges and Options for Governance in the Arctic](#)

[Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress](#)

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