

US and Russia stir up political tensions over Arctic

Heavy-hitting US politicians enter debate about the future of the far north, fuelling concerns about a new cold war

UTV (Feat. Rob Huebert)

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July 6, 2011

The seventh ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council in May looked like it would be a mundane affair with its focus on signing a new search-and-rescue agreement and handover of the chairmanship to Sweden.

But the atmosphere in Nuuk, Greenland, was electrified by the first appearance at such a forum of the United States courtesy of secretary of state Hillary Clinton, secretary of the interior, Ken Salazar, and a host of other heavy-hitting politicians.

The message was loud and clear. The US is putting itself at the centre of a debate about the future of the far north at a time when a new oil and mineral "cold rush" is under way as global warming makes extraction more easy.

And being the US, the soft diplomacy was backed up with a bit of symbolic hardware. A few weeks earlier two nuclear-powered submarines were sent to patrol 150 miles north of Prudhoe Bay, Alaska.

Meanwhile the Russians – also part of the eight-nation Arctic Council – were happy to push off the agenda any look at whether countries such as China could gain observer status.

The appearance of the US navy comes as the Russians are said to have increased missile testing in the region and its neighbour Norway has moved its main military base to the far north.

Meanwhile China has started to make political and commercial overtures to countries such as Greenland which are rich in rare Earth minerals needed for mobile phones and other hi-tech equipment.

The competing commercial and other opportunities on the Arctic continental shelf are complicated by the lack of a comprehensive agreement on who owns what. Many countries are in the middle of submitting competing land claims to the United Nations as part of its Law of the Sea Convention – a treaty as yet unsigned by America.

Canada and others were also disturbed when Artur Chilingarov, a veteran Russian polar explorer, placed a flag on the Arctic seabed in 2007.

He told reporters his mission was to show the Arctic was Russian, adding, "we must prove the north pole is an extension of the Russian landmass."

Canada, which is particularly sensitive about its polar borders, took exception to the Russian move, seeing it as provocative, but Moscow dismissed the furore.

The Kremlin insisted it was just a theatrical gesture by a scientist hired by private companies to make the descent in two mini submarines. But it was also telling that the following year Chilingarov – also a member of the state parliament – was awarded by the government a new title: Hero of the Russian Federation.

Flamboyant gestures aside, concerns about a new cold war – if not just a cold rush – have led academics such as Rob Huebert, a professor of political science at the University of Calgary, to warn in a recent paper prepared for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute that "an arms race may be beginning".

Huebert says he has heard the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, talking of the need to establish a "zone of peace" in the Arctic but sees contrary actions as well.

"Notwithstanding the public statements of peace and co-operation in the Arctic issued by the Arctic states, the strategic value of the region is growing. As this value grows, each state will attach a greater value to their own national interests in the region. The Arctic states may be talking co-operation, but they are preparing for conflict."

Meanwhile Admiral James Stavridis, Nato's supreme allied commander in Europe, in a forward to a recent Whitehall paper published by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies in London, argued: "For now, the disputes in the north have been dealt with peacefully, but climate change could alter the equilibrium over the coming years in the race of temptation for exploitation of more readily accessible natural resources."

The US naval admiral believes military assets, such as coastguards, have an important role to play with international co-ordination in the area – but mainly for specialist assistance around commercial and other interests.

"The cascading interests and broad implications stemming from the effects of climate change should cause today's global leaders to take stock, and unify their efforts to ensure the Arctic remains a zone of co-operation – rather than proceed down the icy slope towards a zone of competition, or worse a zone of conflict," he added.

Meanwhile Huebert points out that Norway – traditionally pacific but still a Nato member – has not just opened a new ultra-hi-tech operations centre located one kilometre inside a mountain at Reitan in the far north.

Oslo is also spending unprecedented money on new military hardware, not least five top-of-the-range frigates. The class of vessel is called Fridtjof Nansen, after the famous polar explorer, which perhaps indicates where the navy plans to deploy them.

The Norwegians have also re-established large-scale military exercises in the far north. Exercise Cold Response has taken place most years since beginning in 2006 and has involved upwards of 10,000 Norwegian and Nato troops, according to Huebert.

The country's key consideration appears to be its relations with Russia, its large and unpredictable neighbour.

Even Grete Faremo, the Norwegian minister of defence, noted last year that Moscow had resumed military activities adjacent to the Nato nation's borders.

"That is why it is important to strengthen co-operation with Russia in areas including defence. At the same time we must allow for the possibility that situations may arise in which we have conflicting interests," she said.

But optimists say the fears are exaggerated and point to positive developments, not least Norway agreeing a mutually acceptable boundary line with Russia dividing up the Barents Sea.

An international partnership between Russia, Norway, the United States and United Kingdom has been quietly and successfully working away at decommissioning nuclear submarines and tackling other radioactive waste problems in the Kola Peninsula and Arkhangelsk regions of Siberia.

One former foreign minister told the Guardian: "We want to avoid complacency but all this alarmist talk of meltdown should be shunned. The Arctic is quite pacific. It is not a place of turmoil but an area of low tension."

But Paul Berkman, director of the Arctic Ocean geopolitics programme at Scott Polar Research Institute, believes the deluge of books and features highlighting potential problems cannot be dismissed as melodrama.

"You have to ask why are these alarming and alarmist headlines being written and it may be there is unfinished business from the Cold War."

"There is no room for complacency and while tensions are low there is opportunity to openly address the risks of political, economic and cultural instabilities that are inherent consequences of the environmental state-change in the Arctic Ocean."

Putin has made positive noises about the far north and also dismissed the "scary" rhetoric.

"We think it is imperative to keep the Arctic as a zone of peace and co-operation," he told an Arctic forum in Moscow last year. "We all know that it is hard to live alone in the Arctic ... We have heard futuristic predictions threatening a battle for the Arctic" ...[but] the majority of scary scenarios about the Arctic do not have any real basis."

In the summer of 2008 the Russians resumed surface naval patrols in the Arctic and last year they sent two nuclear missile-carrying submarines into the same waters to test launch weapons.

These actions come at a time when Moscow has been increasingly staking its territorial claims to the wider far north.

Huebert says: "It is clear ... that the Russians have embarked on a much more assertive use of military force in the region by taking various actions – missile test launches near the pole, the sudden and substantial resumption of the long range bomber patrols and the voyages of their surface units into the disputed zones."

Claims on the Arctic floor truly hinge around the sovereignty of the Lomonosov ridge, an underwater mountain range stretching from Greenland to Russia.

This was where Chilingarov landed and this is the area over which Russia has been pressing a case under the Law of the Sea Convention.

Meanwhile the Canadian foreign minister, Lawrence Cannon, voiced confidence his nation would win the territory. "We will exercise sovereignty in the Arctic," he told his Russian counterpart in talks in Moscow.

Inuit leaders are already concerned that the talk of industrialisation and mineral wealth in the Arctic will increase tension.

Aqqaluk Lynge, former president of the indigenous peoples forum, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, described himself as "nervous" about current developments.

"There is a military build-up and an increase in megaphone diplomacy – if only from Canada. We do not want a return to the cold war."