**Arctic Circle Conflict of Resources among Major Powers**

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# Abstract

*This paper focuses on the current conflict involving territorial disputes and claims in the arctic and the involvement of non-bordering powers in the conflict as well. The resources present in the arctic such as oil and natural gas will also be discussed. Furthermore, this paper has also analysed the narratives presented by important actors such as the USA, Russia and China and their aims in the Arctic Circle. Moreover, sea laws regarding the arctic have been discussed and how the situation in the arctic differs from that of Antarctica.*

***Keywords:*** *USA, China, Russia, Canada, Artic Circle, Sea Laws, Natural resources, Arctic Council.*

# Introduction:

As global warming continues to ravage our world and climate cycles, it also plays a role in fuelling conflict among major powers such as the United States of America, Russia and China. The melting of polar caps in the Arctic Ocean has unleashed a number of strategic military positions, potential trade routes and previously undiscovered resources. These discoveries have led not only the neighbouring countries but also major powers to be pulled into a race for resources that seems to be transforming into a conflict. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this conflict might be that it showcases a situation identical to that of the infamous South China Sea Dispute. The Arctic Region, also sometimes referred to as the North Pole, borders eight countries; these countries include; the United States, Russia, Norway, Greenland, Iceland, Sweden and Finland. The Arctic Circle itself is defined by the circle of latitude that sits at an estimated 66°33′45.6″ north of the equator. The arctic region encompasses an area of 14.5 million square kilometres. As mentioned before, the melting of polar caps has opened up a vast area of previously unclaimed land and ocean territory which is now becoming a source of tension between not only the neighbouring countries but between major world powers such as the United States and Russia due to the Arctic’s strategic military position as it connects to Eurasia through Russia, Europe through Scandinavia and the Americas through Canada and USA itself. A report by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in 2018 states that 21,000 square miles of sea ice has melted away thus clearing more land mass that can be controlled for civilization and cultivation.

# Region of Conflict:

Arguably, the most important area in the Arctic Region could be the Lomonosov Ridge discovered in 1948. Claims of ownership on Lomonosov Ridge have been made by the Russians. However, it is not only the Russians who are especially interested in this ridge but also the Canadians and all the other parties involved. Studies say that approximately ten billion tonnes of oil and natural gas are present under this ridge, however, not only are natural gas and oil present in this ridge but also diamond, zinc, copper which are of clear and great importance. It is believed that undiscovered resources in the Arctic make up about 20-25 percent of total unexploited resources left in the world. Apart from the Lomonosov Ridge, the region is believed to have 90 billion barrels of oil, 1670 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids according to the United States Geological Survey. The presence of such valuable materials is now causing tensions between states not only Russia and USA but also between USA and Canada over territorial disputes.

# Sea Laws and the Arctic Council:

In 1996 through the Ottawa Declaration, the Arctic Council was established. The council deals with issues regarding the arctic region among the arctic states. The Declaration’s main purpose was to create and promote peace in the Arctic Region based on the interactions with the natives of the polar zone along with

All the states that are bordered by the Arctic Region are the members of this council however this council also entertains 13 observer members that include Germany, India, Japan, France, Italy and China. Apart from China, the Italians, Japanese and French are also important actors in this region, as France has established its science stations in the Arctic and Japan is the closest Asian state to the Arctic Region itself. However, to discuss these countries’ involvement in the Arctic is beyond the scope of this research, the focus remains on most prominent international actors in the Arctic Region which include USA, China, Russia and Canada.

Although the purpose of this Council is to resolve disputes in the Arctic, it has largely been ineffective in doing so owing to its lack of enforcement powers in addition to this any decisions taken by the Arctic Council also remain unbinding. The most recent instance of disputes between the Arctic Nations was witnessed at the Rovaniemi Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council. This was the first meeting that concluded without a joint declaration, it was also the first time in 23 years that all member states’ ministers had attended the convention. The meeting failed due to factors such as no joint agreement was drawn up at convention combat climate change, the US Sectary of State, Pompeo based his speech mainly focusing on rivalling against China, Russia and surprisingly also Canda.

In the Arctic Region, the international Sea Laws are followed. According to the Law of the Seas, Section 2, Article 3 states that *every State has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles, measured from baselines determined in accordance with this Convention.* However, even though the International Law has specified the area to which a state can extend their territories, it might not prove effective as many of the natural resources lie beyond these territories.

However, even with the Laws of Sea in place, the conflict is seemingly enhancing as the tensions rise among Washington and Moscow.

# Antarctic and Arctic; the difference:

In contrast to the situation in the Arctic Region, the situation in Antarctica has been a rather peaceful one. The conflict in the Antarctic has been curbed largely thanks to the Antarctic Treaty, which unlike the Arctic Council has been considered binding. Owing to the Antarctic Treaty, the expeditions led into the Antarctic Region are solely for research and scientific purposes. The regions also differ in geographical and geological terms as well. In comparison to the Arctic, the Antarctic is colder and experiences harsher weather conditions. The Antarctic also experiences lesser surface melt when compared to the Arctic. To summarise, the Antarctic is considered to be the geological opposite of the Arctic Circle Region.

# US, Canada and the Arctic:

Similar to the interests of most states involved in the arctic region, USA’s goals also lie in gaining strategic military positions and precious oil and natural gas resources. The USA borders the arctic through the state of Alaska. Although numbers differ due to the harsh climate of the Arctic, studies show that the United States has somewhere around two to five icebreakers. None of these icebreakers are powered through nuclear energy.

The US icebreakers called the Polar Star and the Polar Sea were commissioned 46 years ago in 1976, and its newest icebreaker Healy was commissioned in 1998.

The Arctic Region has been a source of tension between Washington and Ottawa due to the Northwest Passage. The Northwest Passage is of great importance as it connects the Americas to the Far Eastern States of China, Japan and other emerging Asian economies. The dispute between USA and Canada began in 1969, as an American oil tanker passed the passage without the Canadian permission which led to a legislation being passed in Canada claiming the Passage as their own.

Although the countries have since decided to “agree to disagree” on the matter, with the rapid melting of the polar caps this dispute could soon transform into a hostile conflict. However, the USA Arctic coast guard fleet pales in comparison to the Canadian fleet that comprises 18 icebreakers.

# China and the Arctic:

China is perhaps one of the most important actors in the Arctic even though it does not border the Arctic region. It is estimated that even at its nearest to the arctic point, it is 900 miles away from the region it has set its eyes upon. The Chinese goals are identical to those of the United States; to acquire the natural resources and strategic military points. China aims to pursue these goals in order to complete its “polar silk road” project that was announced in 2018 along with the Chinese self-proclamation of being a near-arctic state. To pursue these goals, Beijing has been successful in designing and producing its own icebreaker known as the Xuelong 2 or the Ice Dragon 2, it set sail for the Arctic Region in 2019. Before which the Xuelong was the only operating Chinese vessel in the Arctic Region which was produced in 90s in Ukraine. Elizabeth Buchanan of Deakin University Australia describes the domestic manufacture of an icebreaker as a “win for Beijing”. China has dubbed its interests in the Arctic Region as “global common good”.

# Russia and the Arctic:

In the Arctic Region, the powerful navy belongs to Russia. Not only does it have 51 icebreakers in its navy but six of these icebreakers are nuclear-powered. Russia is the only country in the world to have achieved this feat. Russia has laid claims to the Lomonosov ridge, claiming that under International Law, the ridge lies in Russian territory. This claim was submitted in 2000 which was then rejected by a panel of International Scientists.

Joint-expeditions by the Russians and Canadian have led into this region due the countries’ interest in resources present here. In 2008, a Russian Icebreaker planted a Russian Flag at the north pole, this action was supposedly carried out to assert Russian dominance in the region. In addition to these actions and claims, Russia is setting up legal procedures in an attempt to expand territories by an area of 460,000 square miles. This area makes up land mass equal to that of Italy, France and Germany combined.

**Research Methodology:**

The research conducted was mainly qualitative however some quantitative aspects were present in order to acquire correct resource estimation numbers. The primary source of research were academic journals, news articles and books. the two main literature resources were The Anarchic Sea and the Law of the Sea Convention. The Arctic Council’s own website proved to be useful as not only did it have most recent updates, it also provided links to all the declarations and conventions that were held by the Arctic Council, however, there was not much information available on the observer nations and their objectives within the Council. Academic Journals were also a great asset while conducting research as it was not possible to conduct on-ground interviews or surveys.

**Research Gap:**

The research gaps that were encountered during the research were primarily in the estimation of the number of resources present, each organization has its own facts that differ from others. So, for the ease of understanding, we have only taken figures from US geological survey. Another aspect we were unable to progress research on was how international relations will be manipulated in the near future based on the arctic conflict which states will emerge victorious should the conflict manifests into a violent one.

**Analysis:**

The situation in the Arctic Region is continuing to escalate day by day, it is evident that in near future that the sates involved in the latent phase of this conflict will be involved in an active conflict as time progresses. It is clear that each state is involved in attempts to gain their national interests. In the near future, a more serious conflict can break out between the USA and Canada not only over the Northwest Passage but also over the Natural Resources. This conflict between two close allies will cause ripples maybe even waves through the current international order. Tensions are also likely to increase between the Russians and the Chinese as Russia remains adamant on not sharing the Arctic Resources or land. As this conflict develops, it is possible that more countries will enter the stage for the sake of resources and military strategic points. It can be argued that the results of this conflict might be able to alter the current international order.

# Conclusion:

Although the dispute in the Arctic Region has not yet developed fully into a conflict, it has the potential to create a new era of Cold War. As Earth continues to warm up due to climate change, the polar caps continue to melt at a rapid rate which in turn will unleash vast areas of unclaimed land and sea. This will grow into a more hostile conflict as more nations will start to compete for the natural resources as the previous resources will continue to become exhausted. It is crucial for the Arctic Nations to agree to peaceful cooperation and limit their territories as per the Law of the Seas, similar to the situation in the South Pole.

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