



FLETCHER ARCTIC CONFERENCE FORWARD

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06 March 2016

What exactly is it about the Arctic today that is of such strong interest to policymakers and the greater global community? Why are we so engrossed with a part of the world that is often considered barren and remote?

The Arctic is home to eight million people and a wealth of plant and animal life, and it is also an emerging economic and geopolitical frontier. As the ice continues to recede and resources are exposed, the region presents a myriad of opportunities and challenges to both Arctic and non-Arctic nations. Opportunities are emerging in the form of new shipping routes, changing fisheries, increased access to mineral and hydrocarbon wealth, and the pressing need for supporting infrastructure. But we must ask: How can Arctic nations best regulate economic opportunity and reconcile Arctic territorial rights with competing national interests and external political tensions? How can these nations ensure that Arctic development is conducted sustainably? Why is Arctic development important to non-Arctic nations? What are the economic and political implications for the greater global community? These are all challenges confronting policymakers, business people, and security officials as they negotiate an increasingly accessible part of the world.

Many Western leaders point to the Arctic as a zone of cooperation—and we have observed such cooperation with the formulation of the Arctic Council, joint scientific endeavors, Search and Rescue agreements, and the very recent Arctic Coast Guard Forum—but disputes between Russia and other Arctic nations in regions to the south have raised concerns in certain quarters. While an ongoing struggle for dominance over the Northern Sea Route and North-west Passage and competing continental shelf claims may reflect these tensions, tit-for-tat military exercises and plans for expanded military infrastructure in the Arctic certainly do. The Russian government recently announced completion of a new military base in Franz Josef Land capable of supporting 150 soldiers, as well as its intention to rebuild six existing airfields. While such a nominal increase in military personnel posted to the Arctic may merely be seen as a posturing act, taken in context with Russia's recent actions in Europe and the Middle East, it might also be seen as a bold move to project power from a previously overlooked region.

Asian nations are also proactively contributing to Arctic scientific research, brokering partnerships with Arctic nations, and shrewdly investing in Arctic mineral and shipping opportunities. The scope and pace of China's Arctic strategy alone is formidable. The number of non-Arctic players in the field is steadily growing and shifting the political dynamics of the region, and no Arctic nation can afford to simply sit back and watch.

Careful monitoring, open communication, and active policymaking can ensure that the Arctic does not become an area of proxy conflict. As the current Chair of the Arctic Council, the United States must exert strong leadership in the region to safeguard against this possibility and ensure that the Arctic continues to represent a zone of cooperation. The United States must also work with its fellow Arctic nations and interested non-Arctic nations asserting themselves in the region to facilitate a conversation on security that encompasses more than just immediate geopolitical tensions.

"Security" takes on many meanings. As it seems that the pace of Arctic economic development will only continue to accelerate, we must pursue a sustainable approach to security that prioritizes the Arctic's people and its environment. The needs and desires of those who inhabit the Arctic must be understood—not as a recommendation, but rather as a necessity for success. Interested parties must support local knowledge and listen to those who understand the Arctic best before making decisions that could change the region forever.

The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy is joining in the movement to raise domestic awareness of Arctic challenges and opportunities and the United States' identity as an Arctic

nation. We recently launched an Arctic Lecture Series showcasing the reflections of a diverse array of experts on an interdisciplinary sampling of issues. We also convene an annual Arctic conference. In this, our fifth year, we are focusing on sustainable infrastructure development, entrepreneurship and innovation, and geopolitics and security. As we assemble representatives from around the world to engage in inclusive ideas and information sharing, we sincerely hope you will join us to share and learn, too. The Opening Arctic Conference will be held on March 12th at our Medford, Massachusetts, campus.