

The race to securitize the Arctic in a post-Cold War scenario

La carrera para asegurar el Ártico en un escenario posterior a la Guerra Fría

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ABSTRACT. The Arctic implies a planetary struggle to stop the rapid change of its ecosystem caused by global climate change, with the global impact it could generate in the future. As a consequence of this first ecological challenge, the Arctic scenario is becoming more interesting for key transnational actors to develop new business opportunities related to mining exploitation, energy reserves and logistics services, where the result will tend to prioritize business and safety on the ecology, reaffirming the meta-tragedy in the Arctic region. Due to the complexity of the Arctic scenario, the preference for intergovernmental forums and the ambiguous interests and roles of its actors, the inadequate trinomial between a global ecological tragedy, an individual economic business and a collective security career will tend to subsist and increase its tragic effects about the environment.

RESUMEN. El Ártico implica una lucha planetaria para detener el rápido cambio de su ecosistema causado por el cambio climático global, con el impacto global que podría generar en el futuro. Como consecuencia de este primer desafío ecológico, el escenario del Ártico se está volviendo más interesante para los actores transnacionales clave para desarrollar nuevas oportunidades de negocios relacionadas con la explotación minera, las reservas de energía y los servicios logísticos, donde el resultado tenderá a priorizar los negocios y la seguridad sobre la ecología, reaffirmando la meta-tragedia en la región del Ártico. Debido a la complejidad del escenario ártico, la preferencia por foros intergubernamentales y los intereses y roles ambiguos de sus actores, el trinomio inadecuado entre una tragedia ecológica global, un negocio económico individual y una carrera de seguridad colectiva tenderán a subsistir e incrementar sus efectos trágicos sobre el medio ambiente.

KEYWORDS: Arctic, Securitization, Environment risk, Meta-Tragedy, Polar geopolitics, Climate change.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ártico, Puesta en seguridad, Riesgo medioambiental, Meta-tragedia, Geopolítica polar, Cambio climático.

1. Introduction

Unlike Antarctica, which is an inhabited continent, the Arctic is an area surrounding the Arctic Ocean located in the North Polar Region, with indigenous population, and it is governed by a multi-layered legal and institutional framework regarding several key issues, such as the protection of the local environment, the resource extraction, the resolution of international disputes on sovereign boundaries, the international protection of ships navigating in that area, the respect for indigenous populations and the promotion of their traditions and social context, and the scientific research.

One of its most important legal basis is the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which control activities on, over, and beneath the Arctic Ocean, promoting an spirit of cooperation in the resolution of the disputes. There are still many overlapping claims in the oceans. Beyond the 200 mile EEZ limit, there are still several dispute settlements to solve. Five Arctic countries (Russia, Norway, Canada, Denmark and the USA) lay a claim to the seabed resources by attempting to prove that the seabed is an extension of their continental shelf. (Sakhuja & Narula, 2016:6).

In 1996, the eight Arctic States have created the Arctic Council, in which they are permanent members¹. Although security issues were intentionally excluded from the mandate of this institution, it is internationally considered as the only pan-Arctic regional forum, and a high-ranking intergovernmental agenda-setting and decision-making body.

While the Arctic countries, in particular Canada and Russia, might keep on militarizing its Arctic coasts, the non-Arctic countries will focus all their energies on maintaining the most Northern region of the world as a common heritage of the humanity and, thus, imposing its shared use. (Di Liddo & Manenti, 2017:19-20). In the last decade, there was a change in international actors' perception about the new opportunities emerging in the Arctic region. Twelve "outsiders," non-Arctic States, all of them key players in current international arena, were accepted as observers. France, Germany, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom, Italy, China, Singapore, Korea, Japan and India. For European states, their participation was deserved after their strong, centennial polar research tradition. And in the case of the Asian partners, their acceptance represents a process of international recognition for their key position as new emergent global powers. In the case of China, it has been seen as the last acknowledgment of its international participation as an equal power by those actors, in particular Russia and the USA, who have historically stressed their superiority during the "Hundred Years of Humiliation" and the Cold War. (Danner, 2018:64-65)

There is also a symbolic narrative related to the acceptance of these nations as members of the Arctic Council, consisting on declaiming their belonging to the Arctic region. In fact, in recent years, many Arctic Council's observers started to consider themselves as part of the Arctic ecosphere. China declared itself as a "near-Arctic country" or an "Arctic stakeholder," while others as Germany and Italy, consider themselves as "Arctic players in scientific research". The case of France is peculiar. It proclaims itself as a "Polar nation" French National Government (2017)², on the basis of its strong tradition on expeditions, explorations and permanent research bases at the poles. From a constructivist point of view, such statements are crucial to understand the deep reasons about why and how these players are both configuring their own role and taking responsibility and further prerogatives on the basis of that new status in the Arctic international scenario.

2. The race to securitize the Arctic in a post-Cold War scenario

As a consequence of the global effects of climate change and the increasing human activity in the Arctic, in the past years several global superpowers were recalibrating their geostrategic calculations throughout this area. Both the Russian Federation and the USA have military structures in the Arctic region, based on their

¹ Canada, Denmark (with sovereignty over Fær Øer Islands and Greenland, which keep the status of autonomous territory), Norway, the Russian Federation, the USA, Iceland, Finland and Sweden.

² As expressed by Jean-Marc Ayrault, French Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development at the Introduction of the French official policy document on the issue. French National Government (2017).



nuclear weapon systems. But, notwithstanding the fact that the Arctic Council serve constantly as an echo-chamber of the tensions between Russia and its Arctic neighbors caused by other planetary conflicts, there's still a consensus to avoid military maneuvers and conflicts in the Arctic region, reinforcing a resilient high stability based on both intergovernmental and interregional multilateral cooperation. (Heininen, 2016:6.).

In 2007, Russians have drawn the attention of the whole world by planting a Russian flag on the North Pole seabed at 4261 meters below the ice, in an attempt to support Russian territorial claims on the Arctic. It generated an escalation of diplomatic criticism and geopolitical tensions See: (Jacobsen, 2013:28-29). Russia has always posed the question of the Arctic in terms of national security, "(...) all kinds of activity in the Northern regions are in the highest degree connected to providing of national security. Zysk, cit. in M. Jacobsen (2013:27).

In response to the Russian proactive and typical realpolitik approach towards Arctic exploration, sovereign claiming and the exploitation of its resources, in 2010, the US Department of Defense declared that the changes in the Arctic region represent "a unique opportunity to work collaboratively in multilateral forums to promote a balanced approach to improving human and environmental security." (Pincus & Ali, 2015:165).

In May 2013, President Obama released his National Strategy for the Arctic Region, highlighting that "The Arctic region is peaceful, stable and free of conflict," warning the Russians and any other country that "an undisciplined approach to exploring new opportunities in this frontier could result in significant harm to the region, to our national security interests, and to the global good." (Pincus & Ali, 2015). Obama's policy on the Arctic regions was then structured on the basis of four main goals:

- 1) to evolve Arctic infrastructure and strategic capabilities;
- 2) to enhance Arctic domain awareness;
- 3) to preserve Arctic region freedom of the seas; and
- 4) to provide for future United States energy security.

It is crucial to understand that a race for the conquest of the Arctic resources means also high costs of investments in very specific ice-capable assets, to use during a still limited part of the year and in a still harsh and dangerous environment³. So the Arctic is experiencing a new but slow process of securitization, mainly reflecting the Post-Cold War global tensions between Russia and the USA and the Western world. Besides the deployment of missile sea and air defense systems for strategic sealift and deterrence, the two superpowers have to deal with the other Arctic nations, which are trying to secure their own national interests, related to both the protection of their own society and environment and the need to secure freedom of navigation and over-flight as a prerequisite for a more influential presence in such a distant and harsh region. While the Arctic nations are trying to settle their territorial disputes in the traditional Westphalian international legal way, raising up their own nationalist discourses, the erosion of the Arctic ice and the discover of new potential benefits from it, increased the interest for a multi-party intergovernmental model of governance.

3. The dichotomic role of the European observer countries

Spain, Germany, Italy, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Poland were accepted as observer parties, mainly because of their strong and centennial polar scientific research tradition. All of them had exposed their vision and interests in public "White Papers," in which they indistinctly mention the main dichotomy related to the Arctic: while emphatically assessing the risk of the global warming and asking the whole community to be responsible and to collectively fight against all environmental threats, all European observer countries highlight the other face of the medal, expressing their interest on participating in the different businesses that the global climate change will bring to that region in the near future. This dichotomy is explicitly declared in the title of the German guidelines official document, "assume responsibility, seize opportunities," swinging from environmental protection to geo-economic opportunities. Moreover, that report

¹ I.e., a polar-class icebreaker costs roughly U\$S 1 billion, just to use it during winter months.

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provide us a clear example to illustrates how deep this tension is enclosed in the official discourse from the top economy in the EU. It declares,

"The exploitation of Arctic raw material sources, which is already in progress, can contribute to a more secure supply of energy and raw materials both in Germany and the EU. This in turn creates new opportunities for German companies. Against this background, the Federal Government attaches great importance to the peaceful, environmentally sound and economically sustainable use of raw materials in the Arctic region. This includes establishing high environmental standard and liability for environmental damage." German Federal Government (2013, 3rd paragraph)

It is possible to highlight, in the first sentence, that Berlin is underlining how this process of exploitation has been already "in process", with the intention to skip the discussion on who is responsible for starting such tragic degradation. Then the text emphasizes two more key ideas: that the benefits are shared with others ("and the EU") and linking to national security, because Arctic exploitation provides a better alternative to current energy suppliers for Germany. In other words, Germany prefers to obtain energy from the Arctic instead of doing it from Russia. The quote also introduces a counterbalanced opinion while underlining "against this background", which confirms Germany's commitment to protect a peaceful, environmentally sound and economically sustainable use of raw materials, mostly by establishing high standards and norms to circumscribe exploitation to respect of environmental principles, in particular the precautionary principle⁴.

Also France keeps the same logical structure in its "white paper." After describing the "great challenge of the Arctic" and stressing the key role of French "scientific research and cooperation", the text highlights the "economic opportunities" and their importance also in terms of "defense and security". French National Government (2017, chapters 1 to 3)

Spanish strategic vision is more focused on scientific research and fisheries, while supporting the development of a communitarian "Northern dimension" of the EU, in concomitance with the promotion of a "Mediterranean" EU Spanish Government (2017:31).

Poland is also promoting a more active role and distinctiveness in Arctic affairs, through public diplomacy and supporting research and cooperation, alongside the Arctic policies of the EU. Zaborowski (2015:5-6).

Italy also shares the same ideological position of its communitarian partners, focusing its interests on scientific research, diplomatic relations within the AC institutional network, awareness-raising projects and international cooperation with the Arctic countries to promote environmental protection, and its intention to share "with all the stakeholders" a "sustainable" offshore exploitation of energy and mining resources. Italian Government (2015:16.). Italy is also concerned about the opening of the Arctic sea routes and the risk that event could bring to the current Mediterranean maritime traffic arriving from Asia through Suez. (Battistone, 2017).

The Dutch government and its society are worried about the sea level rising as a consequence of the climate change. This is the reason why they are investing in scientific research to tackle down this struggle in the Arctic region, and also promoting environmentally-sound global standards to ensure a sustainable development of economic activities in that area. Schulze (2017:10).

A slightly different vision is presented by the recent British white paper, titled "Beyond the Ice", which is inspired in the new governmental vision after the Brexit. The UK strategy is based on three pillars. First, the

⁴ "The government recognizes the importance of managing the Arctic region carefully to ensure global environmental protection using the precautionary principle." German Federal Government (2013). And this concept is repeated at the 2017 Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines document, while it is stressed that the protection of the Arctic environment has to be done "through circumspect and precautionary action". German Federal Government (2017).



opportunity to project a global influence through the Arctic region. Second, the protection of the local people and the environment, with a specific reference to defence and safety. And third, the promotion of prosperity, thanks to the new trade routes, exploitation of natural resources, connectivity and financial services. (UK Government 2018).

4. Conclusive notes

The debate on the fate of the Arctic is now between two poles which could be illustrated as two key questions. On the one hand, is this a "cautious evolution" (Pincus & Ali, 2015:164), a "limited modernization" from a once-closed security bastion to an open, still peaceful and integrated part of global economy? Or, in the opposite way, are we dealing with a renaissance of traditional security tensions in a military-strategic sense?

From an economist's point of view, the Tragedy of the Commons narrative represents a typical case of market failure. And, with the help provided by the Theory of Games⁵, (Binmore, 2007), international society could implement efficient solutions to this struggle by engaging individuals in collective, cooperative and long-term agreements and by sanctioning free riders' attempts to increase individual benefits at the expense of collective welfare and local essential values. (Heininen, 2016:5).

However, this kind of communitarian ethos and measures required to avoid the tragedy cannot be enforced in the Arctic scenario without a broad political commitment to move from the traditional international logic, based on disputes among States and the settlement of intergovernmental agreements, to the implementation of much complex and innovative models of governance, with the use of open, multistakeholder and inclusive methods of agenda-setting and decision-making procedures, which ensures de-centered and multi-level fulfillment of their policies and measures in order to achieve more efficient, robust and resilient solutions. However, because of such inhospitable environment, and the consequent absence of a strong Arctic social pressure over the States, combined with the geostrategic and economic importance of the benefits of future exploitation and the increasingly amounts of investment used to obtain them, the Arctic governance might remain strongly locked into the intergovernmental logic.

And this realistic and intergovernmental logic expands its *raison d'être* far beyond the mere economic and political dimensions. It is indeed deeply rooted in a moral struggle regarding our collective behavior as a humankind. The meta-tragedy could represent, in fact, a specific case of banality of the evil. While in the famous A. Arendt's description of Eichmann's behavior she determined how an evil macro machinery could fulfill its horrendous aims by using isolated and detached micro-systemic relationships between banal means and ends, in the case of our meta-tragedy, the same logic is applied through a paradox: the fate of the Arctic could be already doomed by just letting the international community to cooperate on how to share the profits available from that tragedy.

Cómo citar este artículo / How to cite this paper

Delgado-Moran, J. J.; Mazurier, P. A.; Paya Santos, C. A. (2019). The race to securitize the Arctic in a post-Cold War scenario. *Revista de Pensamiento Estratégico y Seguridad CISDE*, 4(1), 59-64. (www.cisdejournal.com)

⁵ In particular, an outcome from the prisoner's dilemma and the chicken's game: the collective need to cut incentives for free-riding by regulation and measures to enhance transparency and responsibility and promote cooperative interaction.

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