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Power Games in the Arctic Ocean

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Power games have begun in the Arctic Ocean. Global climate change is expected to cause turmoil and upheaval on the security environment. Melting ice in the Arctic will trigger the commotion.

1. The Arctic Sea Routes and Global Security

a. Changes Caused by the Opening of the Arctic Sea Routes

It is a popular prediction that if global warming progresses at current pace, an ice-free Arctic Ocean will emerge in the summer season of 2037.¹ A latest prediction based on an assessment of the shrinking surface of Arctic ice has gone so far as to say that the Arctic Ocean will be free from ice as early as the summer of 2013.² Melting of ice in the Arctic Ocean is paradoxical: a serious threat to natural environment and ecology is accompanied by expectation for the appearance of new shipping routes.

The opening of the Arctic sea routes will cultivate four new aspects of sea traffic:

The Arctic sea routes will serve as short cut routes.

Sea lanes in the world will become connected throughout in unbroken networks of open-ended routes

The Arctic sea routes will serve as alternative sea routes.

The Arctic sea routes will step up human activities in the Arctic Ocean.

¹ *Arctic Ocean Quarterly Bulletin*, First Number (Ocean Policy Research Foundation, Aug., 2009) p.1.

² *BBC News*, December 12, 2007.

At present, there are two routes in the Arctic Ocean: the Northeast Passage (alias “Northern Sea Route”) extending along the northern parts of Russia and the Northwest Passage traveling along the coastal areas of Canada. If these routes became available throughout the year or summer season at the least, without forced reduction of ship speed, those routes would gain advantage over the conventional sea routes connecting the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Indian Ocean, in terms of navigation distance. For example, the navigation distance between Tokyo and Rotterdam via the Arctic Ocean is estimated to be 40% shorter than that via the Suez Canal. Since sea transportation accounts for more than 90% of cargo transportation around the world, short cut routes via the Arctic Ocean would be likely to bring larger benefits to the world economy. Furthermore, once international sea routes became available through the Arctic Ocean, sea lanes around the world would be linked throughout to form a circle, which will improve the efficiency and flexibility of global maritime distribution system. For instance, a new regular service will become viable --- starting from Western Europe via the Suez Canal, calling in ports along the Indian Ocean to reach East Asia, and then traveling through the Arctic Ocean and finally reaching Northern Europe. The Arctic sea routes would provide a greater variety of shipping route options. For example, in case the Malacca Straits becomes impassable due to piracy, natural disasters or accidents, the Arctic Ocean will be used as an alternative route. On the other hand, the Arctic sea routes will broaden the range of human activities in the Arctic Ocean, such as operations in the fisheries whose virginity had been protected by frozen ice, and the exploitation of seabed resources.

b. Military Significance of the Arctic Sea Routes

The changes in the Arctic mentioned above will be significant alike from a military viewpoint. The opening of the Arctic sea routes would increase the operational readiness and flexibility of naval deployment, and enable power projection from the Arctic Ocean, thus making military operations more versatile. For instance, in case military force should be dispatched urgently, or sea routes for ordinary use are blocked militarily, or military force should be deployed in two different directions --- the use of the

Arctic sea routes will address such situations. In the Russo-Japanese War, the main force of Russia's Baltic Fleet circumnavigated the southern tip of Africa and traversed the Indian Ocean to reach the East China Sea. Exhausted by the ultra long-distance navigation, the Baltic Fleet fell an easy prey to the combined fleet of the Japanese Navy that had awaited the arrival of the enemy fleet near Japan's home water. If even part of the Baltic Fleet had passed the Arctic Ocean, the result of the battle would have been different.

The military use of the Arctic Ocean will bring forth the presence of naval power there, which signifies that the Arctic Ocean will serve as waters for power projection to land areas. During the Cold War era, it was quite difficult for both the United States and the Soviet Union to deploy surface vessels in the Arctic Ocean due to the frozen ice regardless of the fact the Arctic Ocean was the very operational front. The Arctic Ocean was in those days no more than launching and flight routes of nuclear missiles. If the parties concerned could have deployed the surface force like an aircraft carrier, the Arctic Ocean would have been an area of the highest military tension for fierce contest between the powers of East and West.

The melting of ice in the Arctic Ocean will make possible the following in terms of naval operations:

- A quicker military deployment and more flexible operation plans thanks to Arctic navigation.
- Naval presence in the Arctic Ocean.
- Power projection from the Arctic Ocean.

So far no national security plans have been formulated on the assumption of the use of the Arctic Ocean as an international sea route. The Arctic ice further melts; shortcut routes become viable; the world's sea routes are unified into a "circle;" alternative routes are secured for military deployment, and naval presence and power projection become possible in a military contingency --- the occurrence of these possibilities represents that every nation's military strategy should be reformulated, and that the world's security

environment will undergo a major upheaval.

Coastal nations around the Arctic Ocean are Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States. Viewed militarily, the United States and Russia overwhelm the other nations. Next, we will observe the military movements of the United States and Russia in the Arctic Ocean.

2. Increasing Military Access to the Arctic Ocean

a. The U.S. Navy's Movements Responding to Surface Ice Shrinkage in the Arctic Ocean

In 2007, the U.S. Center of Naval Analysis publicized a report titled "*National Security and the Threat of Climate Change*." As threats resulting from climate change, the report enumerates military operation changes affected by melting ice, and military conflicts over exploitable seabed resources in the Arctic Ocean, along with the increase of bankrupt nations on account of the shortage of fresh water and food supply, and relocation of population.³

In April 2001, the U.S. Navy held a symposium on "Naval Operations in an Ice-Free Arctic." Under the assumption that the Northeast Passage will become navigable by non-ice vessels for two months per year within a five-year period, while the Northwest Passage for a month per year within a 5-to-10-year period, the symposium examined naval operations in the Arctic Ocean in the period 2015-2020. The discussion pointed out the possibility of a confrontation between Russia and China over sea routes and seabed resources, and its escalation into an interstate conflict, as well as the possible terrorism targeting vessels and seabed resources. Furthermore, the symposium suggested the necessity of researches into the operations of missiles and submarines, and search and rescue preparedness in cold climates, as well as the necessity of integrated operations of the Navy and Coast Guard.⁴

³ [http:// www.securityandclimatechange.cna.org](http://www.securityandclimatechange.cna.org)

⁴ Office of Naval Research, Naval Ice Center, Oceanographer of the Navy and the Arctic Research Commission, *Naval Operations in an Ice-Free Arctic Symposium*, (Whitney Bradley & Brown Inc., April, 2001.).

In July 2007, National Ice Center and the United States Arctic Commission co-sponsored in Washington a symposium titled “Impact of an Ice-Diminishing Arctic on Naval and Maritime Operation.” This event was regarded as a follow-up to the 2001 symposium. The 2007 symposium recognized that the possibility of the use of the Arctic Ocean had risen since 2001. A proposal was made to the effect that from a security viewpoint, naval presence is essential in the Arctic Ocean, and more ice breakers should become available for winter operations. Based on the proposal, the symposium pointed out that the U. S. Navy would undertake additional missions such as home defense in the Arctic Ocean; operations related to global scale deployment; safeguard of territorial sea and jurisdictional waters; conservation of natural resources, and scientific research support.⁵ In prospect of naval force deployment via the Arctic Ocean, some opinions argued that navigational restrictions imposed by Russia would interfere with freedom of navigation.

Under these circumstances, the U.S. government issued in January 2009 “*National Security Presidential Directive and Homeland Security Presidential Directive*” regarding the U.S. policies in the Arctic.⁶ The Directives recount that the United States is concerned with the Arctic from the viewpoint of national security --- a) missile defense and early warning; b) development of surface and aviation systems for strategic surface transport; c) strategic deterrence; d) maritime presence; e) constabulary activity at sea, and f) freedom of navigation and over-flight. The documents indicate that also in the light of homeland security, the U. S. government is concerned with the prevention of terrorism in the Arctic Sea. Based on these, the Directives declare that in the Arctic Ocean, the U.S. government will a) build the capabilities of defending national air, land, and sea borders; b) improve Maritime Domain Awareness to safeguard shipping, critical infrastructures, and resources; c) secure navigation of naval vessels and aircraft; d) promote the U.S. presence, and e) aim at peaceful settlement of disputes.

⁵ National Ice Center and UN Arctic Research Commission, *Summary Report, Impact of an Ice Diminishing Arctic on Naval and Maritime Operations July 10-12, 2007*.

⁶ NATIONAL SECURITY PRESIDENTIAL DIRECTIVE/NSPD-66. HOMELAND SECURITY PRESIDENTIAL DIRECTIVE/HSPD-25.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/release/2009/01/print/20090112-3.html>.

The U.S. Navy-sponsored symposia and the Presidential Directives seem to have suggested that U.S. security concern will be focused more on the possibility that the Arctic Ocean will emerge as a new route for military deployment and a theater of military operations, than on the protection of jurisdictional waters and resources. This can be inferred from the study of scenarios made at the symposium “Naval Operations in an Ice-Free Arctic” (2001). Among the scenarios examined then are the U.S.-Russia military conflict over passage in the Northeast Passage; the deployment of the U.S. naval force using the Northwest Passage to check China’s venturesome activity in the South China Sea, etc. Incidentally, when a U.S. fleet is deployed from the east coast of the U.S. mainland to the western Pacific, the distance the fleet should cover will widely vary according to a route it selects: 17,500 nautical miles by circumnavigating the southernmost tip of the South America and 11,600 nautical miles via the Panama Canal, whereas 8,700 nautical miles by adopting the Northwest Passage.

b. Russia’s Military Movements for Control of Seabed Resources and the Sea Routes in the Arctic Ocean

The Arctic is estimated to hold some 22% of resources in the world that have been unexploited to date, yet technically exploitable⁷. The seabed of the Arctic Ocean has been ascertained to hold mineral resources such as gold, silver, copper, and iron, and abundant reserves of energy resources of oil and natural gases. Diminishing sea ice is bound to raise the possibility of exploiting seabed resources. Against the background of surging demand for resources and energy in the world, many nations are expected to break into the exploitation of the Arctic Ocean. Sovereign right over seabed resources belongs, as stipulated by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to coastal states possessing an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and a continental shelf. However, among the five Arctic coastal states (Canada, the United States, Denmark, Norway, and Russia), EEZ and continental shelf boundaries have yet to be established.

Russia asserts that its continental shelf extends up to the North Pole, and attempts to

⁷ *Arctic Ocean Quarterly Bulletin*, First Number (Ocean Policy Research Foundation, Aug., 2009), p.2.

establish its vested interests over seabed resources by actual actions. On August 2, 2007, Russian deep-sea submersibles Mir-1 and Mir-2 reached down to the North Pole seabed 4,300 m deep, and posted a titanium-made Russian flag.⁸ Against Russia's overt behavior of trying to establish its sovereign right over the Arctic resources as an accomplished fact, the Canadian foreign minister showed displeasure by saying, "We don't live in the 15th century." The other coastal states likewise strongly criticized the behavior of Russia.

Knowingly or unknowingly, Russia is activating the operations of its naval and air forces in the Arctic Ocean. In May 2008, Tu-95 Bear-H bombers launched a regular patrol over the Arctic along the U.S. and Canadian territories,⁹ and in June 2008, the Russian Defense Ministry declared that they would, for safeguard of national interests in the Arctic, be ready to go into a fighting trim and increase submarine operations.¹⁰ In September 2008, the said ministry also announced that a Delta-III class nuclear submarine traveled the Arctic Ocean underwater and reached the Kamchatka.¹¹ Moreover, the Russian Navy's North Sea Fleet is reportedly operating a spy submersible B-90 Sarov in the Arctic Ocean with its base in the Kara Peninsular.¹² In the background of the increasingly active operations of the Russian Navy and Air Force in the Arctic, there seem to lie Russia's ambition to secure seabed resources and control the Northeast Passage to prevent intervention from other nations. Russia's military concerns obviously differ from those of the United States.

As if rivaling with Russia, the other Arctic coastal states are also intensifying their military activity. In August 2008, Canada implemented a ground-sea-air joint exercise "Operation Nanook 08" in the Arctic; and in October 2008, the Norwegian Navy decided to dispatch a frigate to the waters near Svalbard Islands to strengthen its naval presence. Similar actions continued into the year 2009. In June, Denmark decided, as part of its

⁸ *Arctic Ocean Quarterly Bulletin*, First Number (Ocean Policy Research Foundation, Aug., 2009), pp.14-15.

⁹ Globeandmail.com, May 8, 2008.

¹⁰ RIA Novosti (June 10,2008) RIA Novosti (June 24,2008)

¹¹ RIA Novosti (September 30,2008)

¹² BarentsObserver.com(2009.6.10).

2010-2014 National Defense Program, to newly create in Greenland a military command and a task force responsible for the Arctic operations. In August, Canada carried out “Operation Nanook 09.” Canadian Premier Harper participated in the exercise. He arrived on a frigate in action by helicopter, and gave a pep talk to Canadian forces personnel and media reporters, saying: “The first principle of Arctic sovereignty is ‘use it or lose it.’” Not only that but Premier Harper ostentatiously boarded a submarine navigating on the surface.¹³

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that researches have lately appeared in Norway and other countries that discuss the Arctic Ocean security from the viewpoint of geopolitics.

C. The Start of a New Cold War?

The monthly magazine of Navy League of the United States, *SEAPOWER*, carried a feature “The Cold War?: US, Canada, Russia, Denmark, rush to stake Arctic Claims” in its issue of October 2007. The publication reports that claims of the coastal states heat up over the exploitation of seabed resources and the use of Arctic sea routes, both of which diminishing ice helps look more realistic but at the same time turn into the seed of further tension.¹⁴ The magazine introduced the U.S. argument that Russia’s assertion of its continental shelf being extended to Lomonosov Ridge is not acceptable; and since, in the meantime, the Northwest Passage is an international strait for military, commercial and tourism uses, Canada’s assertion of the route being internal waters is unacceptable, either.

In August 2008, the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* carried an article “Cold War Goes North,” and commented that the reaction of the United States and other countries against the posting of a Russian flag in August 2007 may help the prospect of a new Cold War.¹⁵

¹³ Times Colonist (2009.8.19)

¹⁴ Navy League of the United States, ““The Cold War ? : US, Canada, Russia, Denmark, rush to stake Arctic Claims” *SEAPOWER*, October 2007.

¹⁵ *Arctic Ocean Quarterly Bulletin*, First Number (Ocean Policy Research Foundation, Aug., 2009).p.14.

A look at a desk globe from above will clarify the reason why the Arctic Ocean is likened to the Mediterranean of the Arctic --- the Ocean is surrounded by coastal countries as is the real Mediterranean Sea. The ice that had for long covered the Arctic Ocean begins to retreat due to global warming, and now humans will be likely to use the space with impunity. But in the area, territorial seas, contiguous zones, and jurisdictional waters of the coastal states are overlapped with each other, accompanied by various jurisdictional claims. Military access to the Arctic Ocean increases, whereas disputes among the coastal states over their interests are not abated --- such a situation seemingly sparks fear of a new Cold War.

3. Geopolitics over the Arctic Ocean

a. Impact of the Melting of Arctic Ice upon Geopolitics

As referred to earlier, there have recently appeared such researches as discussing power games over the Arctic Ocean from the viewpoint of geopolitics.

Sir Halford J. Mackinder, who first advocated the notion of geopolitics, called the area lying at the center of the Eurasian Continent --- militarily inaccessible from the sea --- as the Heartland. He gave a warning to the government of the United Kingdom, a maritime nation and his home country, saying "Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island. Who rules the World-Island commands the World." He argued that efforts should be made to prevent a single Eurasian nation from ruling over the Heartland, and to prevent a land state that has established sway over the Heartland from advancing to the sea. Incidentally, the Heartland conceived by Mackinder largely corresponds to the inner regions of today's Russian Federation. Its northern borders are coastal areas of the Arctic Ocean. In other words, he considered the Arctic Ocean located beyond the Heartland borders to be strategically valueless.

According to Nicholas J. Spykman who employed a geopolitical approach to examine the U.S. strategy in world politics, maritime states established ascendancy by using the oceans encircling the Eurasian Continent as a traffic belt; but Eurasian land states, on the other hand, have so far failed to use the Eurasian Continent and the frozen Arctic

Ocean as global traffic routes. Based on this exposition, he called the maritime fringe of the Eurasian Continent as the rimland, and gave a warning against the possible expansion of land states toward the rimland. Spykman recapitulated his theory as “Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; Who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.”

What has been described above may be recapitulated geopolitically as: the advance of a mighty power to a strategically important region will cause a power shift on a world scale. Validity of this summary testifies to the validity of geopolitics. However, if easier access to the Arctic Sea were realized, one of the hypotheses of classical geopolitics would become obsolete. Yet, this is not concerned exclusively with geopolitics. As mentioned earlier, conventional security policy adopted by many countries also hypothesizes the uselessness of the Arctic Ocean as an international sea route.

b. The Concept of Sea Control and Geopolitical and Strategic Significance of the Arctic Ocean

Although it is questionable whether or not the Heartland is the optimal term to discuss today's security issues, yet, the present author chooses to use the word in this paper when discussing geopolitics. As mentioned above, Mackinder argued that the United Kingdom as a maritime state should be vigilant against a land state's rule of the Heartland. This is because no maritime state could make military access to the Heartland from the sea. But the deployment of naval vessels in the Arctic would make it easy to attack the Heartland. Mackinder also insisted that a maritime state should prevent a land state controlling the Heartland from advancing to the sea. At this moment, the unfrozen sea is emerging to the north of the Heartland, but no nation stations military forces there in defiance of Mackinder's warning.

In the days when Spykman discussed U.S. strategy from geopolitical viewpoint, it was possible to aviate over the Arctic Ocean. He stressed the possibility of U.S. dominance in the Arctic because of its superior airpower. In the Cold War era, the airspace over the Arctic Ocean was a flight route for strategic missiles set by the United States and the

Soviet Union, while strategic missile nuclear submarines allegedly hid under the frozen surface of the sea. But these do not necessarily predicate that the Arctic Sea was in those days a military theater from security and geopolitical viewpoint. The Arctic Ocean was then just a buffer zone. If, generally speaking, means of attack are confined to bombers and strategic missiles launched from land, warfare will be the exchange of attacks to each other's homeland territory. And the use of strategic missiles will bring about mutual assured destruction. The deployment of naval troops, however, will create a different situation. There will take place warfare of "homeland" versus "maritime domain," or "enemy territory" versus "outside the homeland territory," and in the case of an Arctic warfare, the party getting control over the maritime domain or the Arctic Ocean will be able to reduce its damage on its own territory, and on top of that, will broaden military options, thus gaining control of the entire warfare. In case there exists sea between the states in a military confrontation, each of them will first aim at the exclusive control of the waters as demanded by a geopolitical strategy --- this is a cardinal rule of warfare.

In the field of naval strategy, the concept of sea control is of primary importance. Control over strategically important specific waters, or exclusive control of the said waters will make it possible to execute warfare with advantage, and to check enemy's attacks. The acquisition of naval supremacy will enable a state to conduct advantageous negotiations upon, among others, resources development in the waters where the state has established control. Naval supremacy in the Arctic Ocean will make it possible to not only use the area advantageously in a military contingency, but affect control of sea routes and resources in times of peace as well. In UNCLOS, the ocean falls into territorial sea and national jurisdictional area and high seas. Militarily, there are concepts of "sea under own country's control" or "sea under other country's control". Power games presently evolving in the Arctic Ocean is a contest for naval supremacy. As long as the main actors in the games are the United States and Russia, the games will essentially become a new geopolitical contest over the now navigable Arctic Ocean.

How to achieve sea control? The first step to take is to build up naval presence. It is

Russia alone that now maintains naval presence in the Arctic Ocean, worthy of the term.

4. Impact upon Japan of the Opening of Sea Routes and Power Games in the Arctic Ocean

The increasing melting of the Arctic ice and increasingly serious power games will exert various influences on global diplomacy and security. Why is Japan exempt?

As for the legal status of the Arctic sea routes and the rights of innocent passage and transit passage in the Arctic Sea, coastal states along the sea routes and the user states will boldly confront with each other.¹⁶ As a user state and member of the international maritime community abiding by freedom of navigation, Japan will be required to participate in diplomatic talks on these issues.

If contests for naval presence heat up over sea control of the Arctic Ocean, and consequently part of the U.S. Pacific Fleet is allocated to the Arctic Ocean, the current collaboration system based on the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) deployment will be affected to a large extent. JMSDF will have to implement redeployment to bolster the northern defense. The deployment of Russian naval vessels in the Arctic Ocean will be conducted from Murmansk where is based the North Sea Fleet, and Vladivostok where is based the Far East Fleet. The deployment of the U.S. and Russian navies in the Arctic Ocean will shift naval power balance in the western Pacific, which will in turn affect JMSDF operations. The missions of JMSDF in the Japan Sea and the North West Pacific will become more important than ever.

If, the Arctic sea routes opened and turned a profit to pay the operational costs, a new sea lane would be created in the western Pacific connecting the Bering Strait and East Asia, defense of which would then be another mission of JMSDF. The Chinese Navy would

¹⁶ As for the legal status of the Arctic sea routes, Canada asserts that the Northwest Passage is its internal waters, whereas Russia has instituted a domestic law based mechanism to control ship navigation through the Northeast Passage. These are opposed to the U.S. claims for the freedom of innocent passage in territorial waters and that of transit passage in international straits.

also heighten naval presence to defend the new sea lane. Should such a situation occur, Japan and China may face a difficult decision over the sea lane defense.