



DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

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May 29, 2014

Putin and the Institutional Deficit in Arctic Security

Just trying to understand, never mind defend, Vladimir Putin is once again a serious political offense. Some German commentators even have a name for the offender – a Putinversteher, a Putin “understander.” And they don’t mean that in a good way.¹ But in Tromsø, Norway – some 350 kms above the Arctic Circle, a long way from Kiev and Donetsk but very near to Murmansk – participants in an Arctic marine security workshop assumed the effort to understand and, notably, get along with the Russians to be more a matter of self-interested necessity than the occasion for derision.

That didn’t prevent the Ukraine crisis from insinuating itself into the “Cooperation 66° North” workshop on maritime security, co-sponsored by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat and the US Embassy in Oslo, and held at Tromsø’s University of the Arctic. Some last minute tit-for-tat cancellations reduced Russian participation, and the discussions couldn’t ignore the political chill in pan Arctic relations spawned by the geo-political machinations of southern Europe.

Participants were aware of the Canadian government’s appeal to principle in boycotting an Arctic Council meeting in Moscow.² The cancellation of a US-Russia hazards-reduction workshop, planned for early June, was reported as “a casualty of the conflict over Ukraine,”³ and a string of joint Arctic military exercises has also been cancelled – including “Pomor 2014” with Russia and Norway and “Northern Eagle” with Russia, the US, and Norway, among others.

Side conversations with diplomats, experts, and stakeholders from Russia, the Nordic countries, Eastern and Central Europe, and North America, made it clear that most saw lost opportunity rather than principle in the contrived linkages between the Ukraine and the Arctic. Indeed, the apparent susceptibility of the Arctic to political impositions from unrelated conflicts was raised as evidence of the lack of a durable institutional framework for Arctic security, one that can keep Arctic authorities focused on regional security challenges and made-in-the-region solutions.

One irrefutable reality in the Arctic is that it doesn’t afford the luxury of picking and choosing partners. There are eight of them, eight states with territory above the Arctic Circle, all are members of the Arctic Council, and none is leaving. Russia’s 7,000 kilometers of Arctic coastline and its expansive continental shelf make it a particularly imposing fixture, now and in the future. An American scientist organizing the cancelled Alaska workshop had it right when he offered this bottom line: “Perhaps we can function with a G-7 instead of a G-8, but an Arctic-7 instead of an Arctic-8 would be pointless.”⁴

The importance of a durable, inclusive, and cooperative security posture in the Arctic is rooted in another unavoidable northern reality, namely, that the security challenges facing the Arctic are prominently a function of geography and the unique conditions within the region itself. Security for Arctic mariners – a broad category that includes operators of tourist cruise ships, fishing dinghies, industrial supply ships, tankers, general cargo ships, and many more – has little to do with state-to-state rivalry or hostile military forces and everything to do with things like badly needed improvements in docking and resupply facilities, access to up-to-date navigational charts, and timely emergency services that can master the harsh weather and environment.

Linking pan-Arctic security relationships to geostrategic strife in southern Europe – apart from there being no evidence that curtailing cooperative engagement in the Arctic could make any kind of contribution to the resolution of the Ukraine or any other southern crisis – obviously runs the danger of transforming Arctic security priorities into policies and practices that address non-Arctic geopolitical considerations but fail to meaningfully address Arctic-specific security needs (a pretty good characterization of the Arctic security model of the Cold War).

US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel had illustrated that danger just a few days before the May Tromsø workshop with his comments on “the dangerous potential for conflict in the Arctic” and the need, therefore, to “bolster” the Pentagon’s presence there⁵ – although one Pentagon watcher insisted with some confidence that current and foreseen fiscal restraint in the US could be relied on to ensure that the Secretary’s warnings would remain rhetorical with little impact on actual deployments.

That hasn’t stopped elements of the US military from trying to make the Defense Secretary’s promise, or threat, real. A new report by a group of former military officers⁶ looks at climate change and its impact on US security requirements and echoes the warning of potential conflict. The report highlights the energy resource potential of the Arctic and is sponsored by the US-based Energy Foundation, which describes itself as “a partnership of philanthropic investors promoting clean energy technology” and includes Prime Minister Stephen Harper on its board.

The Generals don’t link the Ukraine to the Arctic and they repeat what has become the widely accepted understanding, namely that “the likelihood of conflict in the Arctic is low,” but they insist that “the long-term geopolitical situation is complex, nuanced, and uncertain,” and thus they “cannot rule out new disputes arising over natural resource exploration and recovery, fishing, and future shipping lanes.” They lament the US Navy’s lack of ice-hardened vessels to apply to the task” (the “task” left undefined), and then in a great piece of understatement, they point out that while nuclear submarines are ice-hardened, they are however “poorly suited for most Arctic missions.” They could well have added that such subs are a uniquely telling symbol of the gaping mismatch between traditional military combat capabilities and those needed to meet the current security challenges of the Arctic.

The Russian Arctic is of course already heavily militarized, not only with submarines that are “poorly suited for most Arctic missions,” but also with the Northern Fleet based at the Kola Peninsula, but ironically it is also Russia that is putting forward some of the more serious efforts toward Arctic relevant security facilities. Besides its unmatched fleet of icebreakers of all sizes, the Tromsø workshop was reminded, for example, of the 10 naval/border stations in the process of being developed by Russia along the Northern Sea Route. While taken by some as evidence of Russian re-militarization of the region, a Murmansk-based Russian adviser to the Russian Parliament noted that these new facilities are still in the earliest stages of development, and that they will focus on bolstering border controls along Russia’s extensive and largely unmonitored Arctic coastline and on enhancing emergency response capabilities. First announced in 2012, these “dual use” port and land facilities will serve commercial vessels as well as those of the border service and the Russian Northern Fleet.⁷ These are intended to be small scale operations, not all of which will be port facilities, but all of which will be collocated with “emergency-rescue centres” announced earlier.

Experts in the workshop’s security working group insisted that there is enough contention and diversity in approaches to Arctic security for it to warrant a more reliable mediating mechanism than is available in the vagaries of Pentagon, or Kremlin, finances or on the whims of Mr. Putin. To consistently reject southern geopolitics in favor of practical region-based responses to local challenges requires a forum dedicated to regional security.

The current institutional deficit can be measured by the disturbing ease with which European discord has migrated to the Arctic and can be explained at least in part by the agreement among the Arctic-8, the Arctic Council, that traditional security matters should stay off of its collective agenda and by the unsuitability of the obvious alternatives.

Five of the Arctic-8 are in NATO, but when it comes to relations with Russia, NATO clearly generates more contention than security, and Canada has rightly led the effort to keep NATO operationally out of the Arctic.⁸ All Arctic states are members of the OSCE (the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe), but no Arctic state is keen to bring, even marginally, the many non-Arctic states of the OSCE to an Arctic Security table.

There are nevertheless some useful pointers towards a made-in-the Arctic institutional framework available. The annual meeting of the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff is a step in the right direction, but it is far from the kind of politically-led cooperative security forum the region needs. The Illulissat declaration,⁹ the 2008 commitment by Arctic states to settle disputes by peaceful means in accordance with international law in general and the Law of the Sea in particular, is a potent symbol cooperative Arctic security, but it offers no continuing forum to ensure that actual deployments and practices conform to that intention and that could help to shield the Arctic from the vagaries of broader geo-political dynamics.

Notwithstanding some clever punditry, the role of the *Putinversteh*er is actually essential in the Arctic. Addressing the Arctic’s institutional deficit – the development of a forum through which to enhance understanding, not only of Putin, but of the imperatives of mutual security – ought therefore to be higher than ever on the collective Arctic agenda.

Notes

¹ Diana Johnstone, "To Understand Or Not to Understand Putin," *Aletho News*, 08 May 2014. <http://alethonews.wordpress.com/2014/05/08/to-understand-or-not-to-understand-putin/>

² Trude Pettersen, "Canada skips Arctic Council meeting over Ukraine," *Barents Observer*, 16 April 2014. <http://barentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2014/04/canada-skips-arctic-council-meeting-over-ukraine-16-04>

³ Yereth Rosen, "US-Russian tensions create worries for Arctic Scientists," *Anchorage Daily News*, 09 May 2014. <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20140509/us-russia-tensions-create-worries-arctic-scientists>

⁴ Yereth Rosen, "US-Russian tensions create worries for Arctic Scientists," *Anchorage Daily News*, 09 May 2014. <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20140509/us-russia-tensions-create-worries-arctic-scientists>

⁵ US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Speech to Chicago Council on Global Affairs May 6, 2014. <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1845>

⁶ CNA Military Advisory Board, *National Security and the Accelerating Risks of Climate Change* (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2014). http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/MAB_2014.pdf

⁷ Mark Adomanis, "Russia Plans Massive Arctic Expansion," *USNI News*, 29 May 2013, US Naval Intelligence. <http://news.usni.org/2012/08/09/russia-plans-massive-arctic-expansion>

⁸ NATO is obviously in the Arctic in the sense that NATO membership and Article V apply through a member's territory, but NATO is not present in the sense that NATO forces are not operationally present.

⁹ The Ilulissat Declaration, Arctic Ocean Conference Ilulissat, Greenland, 27 – 29 May 2008. http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat_Declaration.pdf