

**Issue:** Defending the Arctic region against overexploitation

**Forum:** United Nations Environmental Assembly

**Position:** Deputy chair

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## Introduction

As climate change has caused large parts of the sea ice in the Arctic region to melt, valuable resources have surfaced. Global entities are competing for the Arctic's newly available natural resources. This report will provide an overview of the current conflicts in the Arctic, will explain the significance of the natural resources found in the region, and will provide possible solutions for exploiting the region whilst keeping into account the stakes of the indigenous people and the effects on further global warming.

## Definition of Key Terms

### **The Arctic region**

Northern polar region, consists of the Arctic Ocean, adjacent seas, parts of Greenland, Alaska, Finland, Iceland, Canada, Norway, the Russian Federation and Sweden.

### **Indigenous people**

Native people (in this report: Native people of the Arctic regions)

### **Sea ice**

When seawater freezes and floats on the ocean surface. It is found in both polar regions. It partially melts in summer and re-freezes in the winter.

### **Permafrost**

A layer of soil that remains frozen throughout the entire year

### **Transpolar Sea Route (TSR)/ Trans-Arctic Route**

Future Arctic shipping route which will run from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, crossing the centre of the Arctic Ocean.

## General Overview

### **The melting of the ice**

The Arctic is an icy sea which is surrounded by land. It is home to approximately four million people and to a large amount of wildlife. Besides that, the Arctic has for many years functioned as a physical border between Russia and the West, between which there has long been a strong political tension. The temperatures in the Arctic vary from  $-60$  to  $+30$  degrees Celsius and consists for a large part of sea ice. A part of the sea ice melts in the summer and re-freezes in winter, but for the last decades the ice melts faster than it freezes, causing a huge decline in the amount of Arctic sea ice. Arctic sea ice plays a large role in moderating the global climate. Because of the bright surface of the sea ice, 80 percent of the sunlight that hits the surface is reflected right back into the atmosphere. When the sea ice melts every summer, the dark ocean surface no longer reflects the sunlight, but absorbs approximately 90 percent of it. This causes the arctic temperatures to rise further as the oceans heat up. The ice is estimated to vanish at a rate of 3% per decade, possibly making the sea ice disappear within generations.

Not only the sea ice is melting. The Greenland ice sheet, consisting mainly of permafrost, is disappearing as well. The thawing of the arctic permafrost causes carbon dioxide and methane that has been buried beneath the ice for ages to be released into the atmosphere, once again accelerating global warming and also causing a rise of the sea-level of about five centimetres.

### **Effects on inhabitants**

For the 400,000 indigenous people who rely on the sea ice for hunting, the changes in the environment have caused many complications. Hunters have to deal with more dangerous circumstances such as the thinning of the ice, which causes it to crack unexpectedly at times. They also have to travel much longer distances, sometimes more than 300 kilometres to hunt for wildlife. Another side effect of the melting is that much more water evaporates into the air, causing more severe storms. As the quality of the ice and snow changes, it becomes nearly impossible for Inuit to build igloos. For the indigenous people, who have adapted to survive the already extreme weather conditions of the Arctic, the situation is critical. As for the other inhabitants of the Arctic, the warming has had negative impacts on transportation. The melting ice disrupts pipelines and routes on land, while frozen roadways are a necessity for transport and travel from area to area.

### **The Arctic resources race**

The oil and gas industry that is for a large part responsible for the heating of the earth, is now profiting the most from the melting ice. As the sea ice is melting, new natural resources appear. It is estimated that 25% of the world's oil, 30% of the world's natural gas and many other precious minerals lie beneath the Arctic. Several nations are now making territorial claims in hopes of establishing new shipping lanes, resource development and protecting sovereign rights. The Transpolar Sea Route (TSR) is currently only navigable with the usage of heavy icebreakers but is expected to become the predominant Arctic shipping route by 2030. As the route lies outside of the Exclusive Economic Zones of Arctic coastal states, the route has great geological importance for countries that wish to trade through the arctic region in the future. China has been trying to gain influence in the Arctic Region for years and has been given rights to investigate the Arctic environment. A couple of Chinese companies have already been given rights to extract minerals and China will be cooperating with Finland, Norway and

Northern Canada to upgrade internet infrastructure and transportation links. For the Northern regions of Finland and Norway, among others, the recent developments promise great job prospects and prosperity.

Russia has made clear they want to increase North-West trade twenty times, while claiming territory that is worth over 30 trillion dollars in oil and gas. Russia has also placed several strategic military points, claiming this is necessary to better monitor emerging sea traffic in the Northern Sea Route. We can conclude that Russia and China dominate regional politics and governance.

The United States are mainly trying to keep China and Russia out of the picture and have not yet shown great interests in solving the challenges the Arctic is facing regarding climate change.

### **Downside to economic growth**

Although the newly discovered resources can supply many people in the Arctic coastal regions with jobs, the parties need to be very careful with the environment. While there are large oil reserves, countries need to think about more sustainable resources. Beside the expected increase in emission of carbon dioxide, an oil leak would be disastrous in the cold water of the Arctic Ocean. If there were to be a leak while the sea ice is frozen, months would go by before it would be possible to clean up the ocean again. In addition to this, the TSR will cause a vast increase in shipping through the Arctic. The black carbon that the ships emit settles on the sea ice and accelerates its disappearance. Another point that concerns activists is overfishing. Anyone can fish the newly opening high seas limitlessly according to international law. There needs to be a regulation system to prevent an entire ecosystem from collapsing within two decades.

## **Major Parties Involved**

**Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden**

### **The Arctic Council**

The Arctic council is an intergovernmental organization which promotes coordination, cooperation and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic indigenous communities and other inhabitants of the Arctic

### **United States**

The United States still have not ratified the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea and lose credibility in the region by denying the existence of climate change.

### **China**

China is new to the scene in the arctic region and has said not to want to challenge the political institutions already in place.

## Russian Federation

Russia is making huge territorial claims and is focussing on exploiting natural gasses.

## Timeline of Key Events

1925	Canada is the first country to extend its boundaries northward towards the North pole
December 1982	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
1996	Declaration of Ottawa; the Arctic Council is formed
September 2007	ESA report ice loss for the first time since records began
May 2008	Arctic Ocean Conference (Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Indigenous people excluded)

## Previous attempts to resolve the issue

In May 2008, the Arctic Ocean conference was held where the Ilulissat Declaration was signed by the five coastal states of the Arctic Ocean. This Declaration concerns the legal regime that governs the Arctic Ocean. It caused a lot of controversy because Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Arctic Indigenous peoples were excluded.

In 1996, the Arctic council was formed. Indigenous people were included in the board of the Council, and the Council put in place several agreements, such as the agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic. The problem is, however, that the Arctic Council is a forum. It can only do assessments and make recommendations but it has no budget nor can it implement or enforce its guidelines.

## Possible Solutions

Try focussing on:

- Reduction of greenhouse gasses and black carbon emissions
- Inviting indigenous people to conferences and listening to their daily needs and challenges. This can help sketch a better understanding of the environment
- Getting world players such as China to agree on treaties that regulate fishing in high sea waters
- Reducing the amount of ships passing through the Arctic Ocean

## Appendix/Appendices

- <http://nsidc.org/arcticseaicenews/>
- <https://www.wwf.org.uk/where-we-work/arctic#about-the-arctic>
- [https://nsidc.org/cryosphere/seaice/environment/human\\_operations.html](https://nsidc.org/cryosphere/seaice/environment/human_operations.html)
- <https://arcticportal.org/arctic-governance/international-agreements>
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