



View Point

Russia Exercises Soft and Hard Foreign Policy Options in the Arctic

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On September 15, 2010, Russia and Norway signed the "Treaty on Maritime Delimitation and Co-operation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean" thus settling the 40 years old dispute between the two sides over 175,000 square kilometers of sea territory. Russia's President Dmitry has noted that the 'historic treaty opened the way to joint energy projects between the two neighbors'. It is now expected that the respective national oil companies Gazprom and Statoil Hydro would engage in joint development in the 'block covered under the new agreement' that is estimated to contain energy resources equivalent of 39 billion barrels of oil or 6.6 trillion cubic meters of gas.

The above initiative is seen as an example of Russia's evolving foreign policy choices wherein Moscow has attempted to exercise a softer approach in dealing with neighbours and other countries with which it has difference over a variety of issues including boundary disputes, nuclear weapons, missile defences, gas supplies, etc.

In the Arctic region, Russia has put emphasis on bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other five Arctic countries on issues relating to impact of climate change, melting ice, ecosystem, and sustainable development of resources. It hosted an international forum on the Arctic called "Arctic: territory of dialogue" on September 22-23, 2010 in Moscow to discuss the social, economic and environmental problems of the region. Russia also announced that it looks to the UN decision on its claim to the Lomonosov Ridge under the Arctic which is claimed by

Canada too. Russia is also supportive of establishing a unified regional search and rescue system for international shipping. At another level, Russia has invited foreign companies to invest in energy and mining projects and developing mineral resources.

However, Russia has not shelved hard foreign policy options and has adopted an aggressive military strategy in the Arctic. In September 2008, Russia announced the “Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the period up to 2020 and beyond,” clearly suggesting that as the Arctic ice melts, Russia must prepare for several political, economic and security challenges. In that context, the Russian security policy envisages development of military infrastructure for securing national interests in the Arctic. The document notes that Russia needs to retain a “necessary combat potential” in the North.

In recent times, Russian officials including political leaders have attempted to dispel fears among the Arctic littorals about Moscow’s plans to develop military capabilities to protect its national interests in the Arctic. Further, Russia is keen to showcase to the international community that it is a responsible stakeholder and Vladimir Nazarov, the deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council has stated that Moscow is “against the militarization of the Arctic region and for ‘the civilized delimitation of this zone.’” Russia is critical of NATO’s involvement in the Arctic on the grounds that it is a military body and has no role in the Arctic which is a "zone of peaceful and economic cooperation".

Early this month, a Russian IL-38 anti submarine aircraft flew very close to the US Navy ship USS Taylor in the Barents Sea off Russia's northern coast. Close on its heels, a Ka-27 anti submarine helicopter from a Russian warship flew very close to the US warship. The Russian reaction is quite intriguing given the fact that USS Taylor was on its return passage from Russian port of Murmansk, where it had participated in the celebration of the two countries' cooperation during the Second World War. In March 2010, two Tu-160 Blackjack strategic bombers of the Russian Air force engaged in a routine patrol mission over the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans and were shadowed by NATO fighters (two F-16 of the Norwegian Air Force and two British Tornados). In August 2010, Canada scrambled fighter jets after two Russian TU-95 Bear bombers approached the Canadian airspace. These military activities are reminiscent of the Cold War when NATO and Soviet naval forces, submarines, strategic bombers engaged in shadowing each others activities.

The other Arctic claimants are concerned about the growing Russian military capabilities. In August 2010, Canada conducted Operation Nanook, the largest sovereignty exercises in the Arctic. Significantly, Denmark sent two offshore patrol vessels and the US dispatched a destroyer and a Coast Guard ship “for the purpose of exercising and increasing... interoperability with Arctic allies.” Canada plans to establish Arctic warfare training center and develop a deep-sea port for Arctic naval operations.

A 2009 US National Security Presidential Directive states that the US has ‘broad and fundamental national security interests in the Arctic region’ which include ‘missile defense and early warning; deployment of sea and air systems for strategic sealift, strategic deterrence, maritime presence, and maritime security operations; and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight.’

It is true that Russia is eager to showcase to the other Arctic littorals its soft foreign policy options, which is a sensible option for a benign profile. Perhaps the biggest challenge for Russia would be how to cut back on its military plans for the Arctic given that the other claimants are preparing to develop capabilities in anticipation of any future disputes in the Arctic.

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