

The Arctic

Mirror, mirror on the wall

Oct 8th 2009 | OTTAWA

From The Economist print edition

An icy conflict is far from inevitable, despite some heated talk

AS ANY nine-year-old knows, the Mirror of Erised—featured in the Harry Potter books—is a magical looking-glass that shows not your own countenance, but what is close to your heart. To judge by recent statements from the interested parties, gazing at the Arctic in an age of global warming can have a similar effect.

In the open waters once covered by ice, resource companies see new access to oil and gas, traders see handy routes from Europe to Asia, governments see possible new borders and military leaders see the need for new equipment and troops.

The confusion only grows when representatives of these diverse forces—from Canadian admirals to German shipping firms—head in increasing numbers to the high north, as happened this summer and early autumn. As they all sense, today's national and international rules, put in place when thick ice made the region largely inaccessible, won't work in what is becoming a new political space. (The latest figures show ice cover rose slightly this year, but a long-term shrinkage is still expected.)

Small wonder, then, that military types mention the possibility—though not the likelihood—of a new sort of cold war. NATO's new supreme commander, Admiral James Stavridis, said in one of his first public statements that the alliance was already paying more attention to the high north. "I think it could either be a zone of conflict, I hope not, a zone of competition, probably. It could also be more co-operative...and as an alliance we should make this as co-operative as we possibly can."

NATO's secretary-general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, has also been talking about melting ice. The warming of the Arctic is not necessarily a threat, and in commercial terms it is an opportunity, he says. However, "we can't wish away the security implications of the fact" that "an entire side of North America will be more exposed."

In theory, protecting the Arctic—like fighting piracy—could be an area for co-operation between Russia and NATO. But Russia's envoy to the alliance, Dmitry Rogozin, has raised what he sees as a darker outcome: in some "very bad circumstance" America could use the melting waters to deploy a sea-based missile defence.

All the Arctic powers have boosted their northern presence. In August Norway moved its operational command north of the Arctic Circle. Russia is upgrading its northern fleet, which includes 18 icebreakers. Canada is building new patrol boats and opening a refuelling station on Baffin Island.

Still, impressive as it sounds, this build-up is nothing like the old American-Soviet stand-off. For one thing,

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How will things be when I grow up?

surveillance satellites have reduced the need for a lot of remote radar stations and airports. And despite the bellicose rhetoric, people whose job is to wrestle with Arctic issues say co-operation still looks more likely than confrontation. This summer American and Russian oceanographers studied the impact of global warming in the Bering Strait, while American and Canadian scientists conducted a joint survey of the extended continental shelf north of Alaska. The armed forces of Russia, Norway, Finland and Sweden did manoeuvres together in the Barents Sea, and Denmark sent observers to Canadian exercises.

Two German cargo ships that made their way along Russia's north coast, a route newly open to Western vessels, could not have cleared the straits of the East Siberian Sea without help from Russian icebreakers. Nor need conflict result from the rush for energy reserves north of the Arctic Circle. These are estimated by the United States Geological Service at about 30% of the world's undiscovered gas and 13% of its undiscovered oil. Most of those fossil treasures lie in waters where sovereignty is undisputed.

There is also time to get a legal regime in place, if countries decide what they want. In contrast with treaty-bound Antarctica, there is no supranational body in the Arctic. Land and territorial seas come under a series of national laws and rules from the six countries with an Arctic coast—America, Russia, Canada, Norway, Iceland and Denmark (still sovereign over increasingly independent Greenland).

They co-operate through various regional groups. The most important is the Arctic Council, which has a remit that is environmental and non-binding. The six nations agreed in May 2008 to use the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to settle disputes over ownership of the extended continental shelf, even though America has not ratified that law.

Some countries with no Arctic real estate, including China, Japan, South Korea and Germany, want a more inclusive regime for the far north. But, at the moment, members of the Arctic Council are resisting the expansion of their exclusive club.

And America, although ready to consider new multinational bodies if there is a clear need, wants to keep the Arctic Council to today's narrow function. That may change when Barack Obama, still bound by George Bush's Arctic policies, finds time to look north. But nobody knows what Mr Obama will see in the Mirror of Erised.

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