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The Arctic: A Region of Peaceful Development or Conflicts?

V. Kotlyar

IN RECENT YEARS, the Arctic has been attracting heightened attention in the world due to the intensive study and use of its natural resources by various countries: the oil and gas resources on the mainland and on the continental shelf, the region's biological reserves and the transport capacities of the Russian Northern Sea Route.

It needs to be said that until recently, in covering events in the Arctic region, Western media, including the media of the Arctic countries, have focused on the stable development of peaceful, constructive cooperation between the Arctic states (Russia, the United States, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland) within the framework of the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the main bodies of regional cooperation in the Arctic. However, in the past two or three years, the media of a number of Western countries, especially the United States, and sometimes even certain media outlets in Russia, have been increasingly vocal regarding the purportedly inevitable escalation of tension and the "danger of conflicts" between the Arctic states – what's more, not only political but also military conflicts, as well as recommendations for U.S. allies to lean more on NATO's "reliable shoulder."

One pretext for this change in the tone of the Western media was the 2007 report from Russia regarding the planting of a titanium alloy copy of the Russian national emblem on the ocean bed by a Russian scientific expedition in the course of underwater studies near the North Pole. However, the news about this scientific event was immediately misinterpreted and triggered a media campaign in a number of Western countries, accusing Russia of illegally taking control of a section of the Arctic shelf

Vladimir Kotlyar, Minister Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Member of the International Law Council at the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, UN International Arbitrator on the Law of the Sea, Doctor of Science (Law); vskotlyar@yandex.ru

beyond the 200-mile zone – furthermore, doing that unilaterally and in defiance of international law, i.e., without waiting for the decision of the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). As a matter of fact, Russia submitted a bid for the Arctic shelf to the CLCS back in 2001, but at the time the commission postponed the decision, asking Russia to provide additional geological data and it took Russia several years to carry out research to gather the requested data.

A little later, in 2008, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) estimated that the Arctic accounts for 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30% of natural gas reserves, 84% of which are located in offshore areas.

However, as the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, citing the U.S. Department of Energy, said in its report, of the nearly 60 large oil and natural gas deposits discovered in the Arctic, 43 are in Russia, 11 in Canada, six in Alaska, and one in Norway. According to official Russian quantitative estimates based on exploration and research carried out in 1993-2002, total initial recoverable resources of the Russian continental shelf (including the territorial sea and internal waters) exceed 100 billion tons of oil equivalent, including more than 13.5 billion tons of oil. About 70% of these resources are concentrated in the continental shelf of the western Arctic: the Kara, Barents and Pechora seas, as well as in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Caspian Sea.

Twenty fields among the proven offshore hydrocarbons reserves are categorized as large and six as unique. The total reserves of these fields are estimated at 12.066.5 billion tons of oil equivalent, or 95.3% of known accumulations of offshore hydrocarbons, while the Russian shelf is the largest in the world, its total area amounting to 6.5 million sq km (or 20% of the total offshore area in the world), at least 4.0-4.4 million sq km of which are promising oil and gas fields. Depending on how the issue of the outer limits of the Russian continental shelf beyond 200 miles in the Arctic is resolved, the total area of our shelf can increase by approximately 1.2 million sq km.

It seems that it was extremely difficult for Russia's rivals to stomach this kind of advantage it has with regard to mineral shelf reserves. So

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when, in 2009-2015, in keeping with the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, Norway, Canada, Denmark, and Russia (again) submitted their bids to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) to expand their Arctic shelf from 200 nautical miles to 350 nautical miles from the baselines, from which the seaward limits of a state's territorial sea are measured, it turned out that the bids submitted by Denmark and Canada significantly overlap with the limits of the area claimed by Russia.

However, the fact that Russia openly prepared and subsequently, in 2015, submitted its revised bid for the extension of the Arctic continental shelf in accordance with international law – i.e., the 1982 Convention – pulled the rug from under the feet of the campaign initiators who tried to ascribe to Russia the intention to unilaterally seize Arctic shelf areas, and by now the anti-Russian campaign on the issue has run out of steam, even though it has not died down completely. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that because the campaign was evidently designed, among other things, to complicate the situation at the UN commission during the consideration of the Russian bid, which can take up to 10-15 years (after all, Russia will need to negotiate on the delimitation of the declared areas, at least, with Denmark and, most likely, with Canada, judging by its provisional submission, and in the more distant future, possibly also with the United States), as the time for the consideration of the Russian bid by the commission draws near, the campaign may restart.

Meanwhile, the leaders of NATO and EU countries, as well as the organizations' chiefs of headquarters, make an even more active use of another pretext for the alarmist campaign that they have initiated with respect to future conflicts in northern Europe and in the Arctic, based on their own interpretation of the internal political crisis in Ukraine solely as Russia's "interference" in the affairs of sovereign Ukraine, the "annexation" of Crimea and the occupation of the Donets Basin with the aim of establishing Russia's "zones of influence" in Ukraine.

Starting in 2012, government agencies in Poland, Lithuania and western Ukraine used CIA funds to train groups of Right Sector instructors in the tactics of use of force and the seizure of urban facilities, which was applied by Right Sector detachments to execute special forces officers and demonstrators during the Maidan protests in Kiev on February 18-20, 2014, to seize the parliament building on February 20, stage an anti-constitutional coup d'état, and remove President Viktor Yanukovich from power on February 22, even though three days prior to that, three foreign

ministers of EU countries had signed an agreement on the settlement of the political crisis in Ukraine with a Maidan representative and Viktor Yanukovich; following the first Russophobic statements by Kiev's new authorities, the Russian-speaking population of Crimea and the Donets Basin protested against the anti-constitutional coup in Kiev and began to form self-defense detachments, and only after that did Russia come out in support of these territories, after receiving a corresponding appeal from their population and their authorities – all of this has been ignored, and the history of the Ukraine crisis has been blatantly distorted.

The remarks by NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, on October 28, 2015, in Madrid are telling in this context. "Moscow seems to think," he said, "that Russia can only be secure if its neighbors are unstable, or even dismembered." And this was said by the "commissar" assigned to the NATO headquarters after Washington, which in fact controls the Kiev government, had to all intents and purposes dismembered Ukraine!

The U.S. and NATO political and military leadership panders to the hysterical statements of certain politicians from the neutral countries of northern Europe, specifically Finland and Sweden, who follow in the footsteps of the leaders of Poland and the Baltic countries, spreading the myth that after Ukraine, Russia should be expected to exert the same political pressure and interference with regard to them. Under this pretext, the campaign to intimidate Finland and Sweden with "a threat from Russia" has intensified, as has the work with political circles and media in these countries with the aim to ensure their accession to NATO with which they both have long been cooperating informally, in particular, by supplying arms to Kiev.

In November 2015, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated in no uncertain terms that "Russia's increasing military activity from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean... not only affects Allies [i.e., NATO member countries] but also Nordic partners like Sweden and Finland," adding that "NATO had strengthened ties with Sweden and Finland to boost situational awareness, increase defense against hybrid warfare, and do more joint training and exercises to strengthen security in the region."

The U.S. media and the rightist press of Nordic countries, especially Sweden, are the most active participants in this NATO and EU information war against Russia in the Arctic. In September 2015, *The Wall Street Journal*, an influential U.S. newspaper, published an article by Russophobic Senator John McCain, asserting, in part, that Russia's

“ambitions increasingly extend to the Arctic and Europe’s northern flank” and that “Russia is rushing to nationalize and control new waterways across the Arctic Ocean that could open not simply to commercial shipping, but also military and intelligence activities.... Any action by Russia that impedes movement in the Arctic may ultimately threaten the peace of the Atlantic and the intercontinental ties between the U.S. and our closest allies and trading partners in Europe.” And in the spirit of this illiterate nonsense, even ignoring the fact that he actually exposes the ambitions of the United States to establish total control over the Arctic, he tried to influence a number of political leaders and representatives of security and law enforcement agencies in Norway, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia during his visit to Scandinavia in the summer of 2015!

From all indications, Washington believes that Finland somewhat lags behind in this respect from Sweden, so, according to media reports from that country, citing the government chief of press service, with the aim of improving the effectiveness of the effort to counter information coming from Russia, in 2016, a group of counterpropaganda specialists will be sent to Finland, while training courses will be organized for Finnish specialists at Harvard University in the United States. The goal is to influence public opinion in Finland, where at present 80% of the public is opposed to NATO membership; what’s more, they want to do this before the referendum on the country’s NATO membership that the government has set for 2017.

There have been reports in the country’s media that Finnish journalists and experts who support Russia’s position on Ukraine and Syria are coming under pressure and even attacks by hooligans, while their employers are urged to dismiss the "dissenters." Similar developments are also unfolding in Norway.

On October 1, 2015, the owners of the *Barents Observer*, a small but well-known North European newspaper, dismissed its editor-in-chief who refused to follow their guidelines regarding the spirit in which the paper’s international news stories should be edited, which triggered a critical reaction from a number of the country’s influential scientific research institutions. Certain Norwegian media outlets reported that the influx of refugees from the Middle East via the so-called Arctic route through the Russian port of Murmansk to Kirkenes, Norway, is "a Russian provocation" designed to punish Norway for joining Western sanctions against Russia; that there are criminal groups in Russia ferrying refugees along this route; that they will be brought to the Norwegian border from

Murmansk and the city of Nickel by free buses, and so on and so forth.

The deteriorating atmosphere in international relations in connection with the U.S., NATO and EU reaction to the political crisis in Ukraine has not yet had a significant impact on cooperation between the Arctic countries, although in 2014-2015 the United States and Canada reduced their participation in activities within the framework of this cooperation, especially cooperation between defense departments and NGOs. The Russian foreign minister's visit to Norway in October of 2014 showed that Arctic countries are still interested in developing relations in the economic sphere, environmental cooperation, ensuring nuclear and radiation safety, and cross-border interaction, as well as in the stable operation of the established formats: the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and the Northern Dimension, an EU project.

Unfortunately, certain political figures, primarily in the U.S., have tried to mar the atmosphere of peaceful cooperation in the Arctic. Thus, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who is a top-tier contender for the U.S. presidency in the 2016 election, apparently due to the lack of other ideas ahead of the election, in April 2014, at a rally in Montreal, urged the United States and Canada to forge a unified front to counter aggressive actions by Russia in the Arctic, suggesting that Russian expansionist approaches could affect the Arctic and that East-West relations in the vast northern region will not stay unaffected by Russia's annexation of Crimea. "There's a lot at stake here", she stressed, recalling "Russia's recent major build-up of forces and military bases in remote Arctic sites."

U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter also believes that Russia has issued a challenge to the United States by rebuilding 10 military bases in the Arctic, which were abandoned in the 1990s, and sending more air patrols to the U.S. shores. In this context, the aforementioned Senator McCain recalls that in 2015 "the US assumed the chairmanship of the Arctic Council for two years" and "during that time we should make recognition of Mr. Putin's hegemonic ambitions a top priority and increase cooperation with our Arctic partners to deter Russia from instigating a new 'great game' in the Arctic." It is not difficult to see what kind of damage McCain's "recommendation" can cause to Arctic cooperation.

However, for some reason, neither Stoltenberg nor Clinton nor Carter mentioned the fact that, during the difficult period of 1991-1995, Russia completely withdrew its armed forces from the Arctic, but that did not

prevent NATO countries from continuing to fly in the Arctic region or conducting operations with the participation of their submarines in the Arctic Ocean, sometimes in direct proximity to Russian naval bases or in the Spitsbergen area, which, under the 1920 Spitsbergen treaty, should have been demilitarized, and Norway is responsible for that. What's more, as Alexander Vershbow asserted recently, in 2015, NATO countries intensified their military maneuvers, some of which, as is known, were carried out in the Arctic and some in close proximity to the Russian borders.

As for the rebuilding of Russian military bases, the CIA shadow bulletin Stratfor has tried to sober up the Western authors of the allegations regarding Russia's militarization of the Arctic and stressed, referring to satellite imagery, that these bases "were not built with combat in mind," not to deploy "real combat capabilities to the Arctic region," reminding that "Moscow has described its Arctic bases in many ways – monitoring stations, border control complexes and search and rescue centers, to name a few – all of which underscore their more important role of enabling Russia to monitor movement in the region and mark its territorial claims."

Nevertheless, despite the information war waged by leading NATO and EU countries against Russia, public opinion polls in Arctic countries show that the greater part of their population favors cooperation with Russia in the Arctic. In particular, the Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program's poll of 10,000 people from all member countries of the Arctic Council, conducted in the spring of 2015, showed that the majority of respondents, especially in Norway, believe that this cooperation should continue.

During an Arctic cooperation conference in Kirkenes (Norway) in 2015, the local authorities and business circles entered into open confrontation with the Oslo government's policy regarding relations with Russia. Sør-Varanger Governor Cecilia Hansen said that the national and regional media did not approve of the sanctions against Russia, because they would not help improve relations between Russia and Europe; she added that cross-border cooperation could become a key to resolving this problem. She was completely supported by representatives of local business circles.

The local press also condemned the conduct of large-scale NATO military exercises in northern Norway, believing that Russia could regard the appearance of 5,000 NATO military servicemen near its border as an act of provocation, and criticized the "pessimistic" remarks made by

Sweden's former foreign minister Carl Bildt, who said at the Kirkenes conference: For relations with Russia to become better, they must first become worse.

The desire for broader cooperation with Russia is also supported by representatives of the indigenous people of Alaska. As a result of vigorous efforts, their leaders have ensured that the U.S. State Department has signed an agreement with the Russian authorities on visa-free entry for visiting relatives of residents of Alaska and Chukotka areas bordering the Bering Strait.

However, despite the support for regional cooperation by the majority of people in Arctic countries, in the past two or three years, Western media reports have predicted forthcoming crises in the Arctic. Canada's TV and radio broadcasting company CBC, for example, talks about the long-standing controversy over who controls what in the Arctic. The Arctic territorial issue, which originated in colonial days, has not yet been settled, a CBC reporter said, and so we should expect conflicts over the seizure of territories and subsequent threats, similar to what is now happening in the South China Sea. U.S. media outlets periodically comment on unresolved problems in the Arctic and, in particular, America's reluctance to recognize the validity of Russian claims to sections of the Northern Sea Route over Siberia.

Japanese officials and media speak about the future of the Arctic in the same spirit, stressing the existence of many uncertainties on issues related to laying new routes and developing Arctic mineral resources. The Japanese maritime policy administration, for example, has said that "since the ice has melted the Arctic Ocean has turned into a common sea." Proceeding from the situation that has evolved, the Japanese daily *Yomiuri* wrote in November 2015, "Japan, the United States and other military allies are beginning to treat the Arctic as a new common area on par with outer space and cyberspace. The goal is that any country should be able to use this region on a free and stable basis."

So, in keeping with the Maritime Policy approved in 2013, Japan will have the following priorities in the Arctic: 1) putting a special focus on science and technology; 2) taking a cautious approach toward ensuring security; 3) studying the economic component of the northern route and the development of mineral resources; 4) implementing research programs facilitating the resolution of political issues; 5) contributing to the formulation of international rules; and 6) providing conditions for using the Northern Sea Route. In other words, Japan, as well as certain non-

Arctic countries, seeks to internationalize the Arctic. However, realizing that the Arctic states do not want other players to interfere in their internal affairs, Yomiuri calls for circumspection so as not to arouse concern in the coastal countries.

However, as a matter of fact, at present there are very few legal “uncertainties” in the Arctic and therefore there is no reason for conflicts, especially armed conflicts: They can only be imposed artificially. Indeed, at present, there are no “no man’s” lands or undiscovered lands in the Arctic. All lands there – on three continents and islands – are part of the territory of any one of the Arctic states: Russia, the United States, Norway, Iceland, Sweden or Finland. However, if the delimitation of territory between the Arctic countries in Europe, Asia and the Americas took place back in previous centuries, the status of island territories in the Arctic Ocean was established relatively recently.

All Arctic states have established the boundaries of their internal waters and territorial sea, as well as their exclusive economic zones and continental shelf, based on the provisions of 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and delimited these maritime areas in situations where they overlapped. Regarding Russia, the USSR/Russia had two disputed maritime areas – one with the United States and the other with Norway. The delimitation of maritime areas with these countries was achieved by signing, respectively, the 1990 Maritime Boundary Agreement, establishing a maritime boundary in the Chukchi Sea and the Bering Strait, and the 2010 Russia-Norway treaty on maritime delimitation and cooperation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean, which was ratified by Russia in 2011.

As for the U.S.’s reluctance to recognize Russia’s jurisdiction over the Northern Sea Route, presumably due to its “exceptionalism,” Article 234 of the 1982 Convention gives Russia “the right to adopt and enforce non-discriminatory laws and regulations for the prevention, reduction and control of marine pollution from vessels in ice-covered areas within the limits of the exclusive economic zone, where particularly severe climatic conditions and the presence of ice covering such areas for most of the year create obstructions or exceptional hazards to navigation, and pollution of the marine environment could cause major harm to or irreversible disturbance of the ecological balance.”

However, those who believe that Arctic warming, which began some time ago, might forever eliminate its ice covering and turn the Arctic Ocean into a “common sea,” thus making Article 234 of the 1982 Convention effectively invalid, should bear in mind that, as scientists

have established, the Arctic climate has for centuries been changing from cooling to warming and back to cooling every 30-40 years, so there should be no rushing to conclusions with regard to “continuous warming.”

At present, the only unresolved issue is related to the claims of a number of Arctic countries to expand the zone of their continental shelf beyond its external boundaries. However, all of them agree that this can only happen in strict compliance with the criteria formulated in the 1982 Convention and with the approval of the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, which was established in keeping with this convention and which considers such claims. The sea area outside the exclusive economic zone is part of the high seas, while the seabed beyond the limits of the continental shelf has the status of an international seabed area. At the same time, the status of the exclusive economic zone, high seas and international seabed areas is also regulated by the 1982 convention.

Recently, U.S. representatives, at various conferences, have been raising a new issue, to the effect that if the current period of climate warming in the Arctic continues for some time then a large ice-free area can emerge in the central part of the Arctic Ocean with substantial biological resources the development of which is not regulated by any agreements. In this case, the U.S. suggests, it would be advisable for the Arctic states to develop an agreement on the conservation of biological resources in this zone to prevent the predatory exploitation of these resources, with a number of non-Arctic state already showing interest in them. This idea is supported by Russian fishermen and evidently deserves attention.

Thus, at present, there is no reason to expect “inevitable conflicts” in connection with the race for Arctic resources, especially oil and gas, as reported in the media. In reality, at present, there are no grounds for this kind of race if only because 93% of these resources are located within the limits of the exclusive economic zones of the Arctic states that already have sovereign rights over these resources. This is why Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov had every reason to state in late 2014: “There is no and there can be no ‘race for the Arctic’ as a matter of principle. The international law regime of the Arctic sea areas clearly defines the rights both of the coastal Arctic states and other states. This relates, among other things, to the development of mineral resources, oil and gas deposits, and the management of sea biological reserves. International law also regulates the possibilities of expanding the external limits of the continental shelf of coastal countries. The present international situation, which is far

from simple, does not make any cardinal changes in the status quo.”

In conclusion, it can only be said that Russia is geared toward the further development of Arctic cooperation within the framework of the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and Russia-EU cross-border cooperation programs. Russia is firmly committed to this course. “Our country,” President V.V. Putin said at a Russian Security Council meeting in April 2014, “is interested in the stable development of the Arctic region, based on cooperation and full respect for international law. To this end, we are in constant dialogue with our partners on Arctic issues and we fully comply with international requirements with regard to enhancing regional security. Within the framework of the Arctic Council, we address issues related to cooperation in the border area, sea transit, and interaction in emergency response to accidents in the hydrocarbon development process on the shelf.”

This cooperation in the Arctic, as Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov noted back in February 2013, is, essentially, “a measure of trust that brings an additional element of stability and provides a concrete response to the frequent alarmist prophesies regarding the inevitability of conflicts in the Far North.” “We have managed to create a zone of trust and stability in northern Europe,” he said, reiterating this point in his remarks at a ministerial meeting of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council on October 14, 2015 in Oulu, Finland. “We see no alternative to wide-ranging international cooperation in high latitudes.”

Key words: Arctic, Northern Sea Route, Barents Euro-Arctic Council.