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China Eyes Arctic Access & Resources

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Abstract

Within the next two decades, we could witness a strategic shift in the centre of gravity on oil and geopolitics from the Middle East to the Arctic prompted by global competition for new crude oil reserves and shortened sea lanes across the Arctic. As a result, the Arctic could become another flashpoint in global power politics. Arctic states should expect future geopolitical challenges from non-Arctic states particularly China. Moreover, changes in the Arctic will further increase territorial claims and border disputes between Arctic and non-Arctic states. These issues are primarily related to free passage and resource extraction rights. Though China is not an Arctic littoral state, it argues that the Arctic belongs to all people around the world as no nation has sovereignty over it and that the region is part of the common heritage of mankind. And with one fifth of the world's population, China must have access to Arctic natural resources and its shortened sea routes. China's position clearly contrasts with that of the five Arctic littoral countries, namely, the United States, Norway, Denmark, Canada and Russia. This paper will argue that China and other nations of the world have entitlement to the riches of the Arctic given the fast-depleting global oil reserves and the fact that, under international law, no country currently owns the North Pole or the region of the Arctic Ocean surrounding it. This paper will also argue that Arctic issues are becoming inter-regional and that a balanced approach towards common interests should be adopted so as to pre-empt future conflict.

Keywords: Arctic, icecap, resources, sovereignty, flashpoint, littoral

Introduction

Deng Xiaoping was the inspirational architect of contemporary China, and is thus among the pole figures of the twentieth century.

Deng's advice after Tiananmen was that China should "observe developments soberly, maintain our position, meet challenges calmly, hide our capabilities and bide our time, remain free of ambition, never claim leadership. China should not attempt to be a hegemon, it should never practice power politics and it should never pose a threat to its neighbours or to world peace". These are mantras that Chinese officials continue to repeat. China's foreign policy is designed first and foremost to serve economic development following Deng's injunction. Moreover,

its rise is to be peaceful. **1** But China's peaceful rise could be marred by its huge thirst for oil and energy and having to compete with other major consumers around the world for the fast-depleting resources.

China's economy at \$7.3 trillion in 2011 is nearly twenty two times larger than it was in 1979 at the time Deng Xiaoping was China's supreme leader of China, and is the second largest in the world after the United States. This compares with \$15.09 trillion for the United States and \$5.87 trillion for Japan. **2** However based on a purchasing power parity (PPP) used by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a measuring stick, China's GDP is \$11.30 trillion compared with the US's \$15.09 trillion, Japan's \$4.44 trillion and India's \$4.46 trillion. **3** Based on the projected economic growth for China and the US, China could overtake the United States within 5-6 years to become the largest economy in the world. By 2017, China's GDP would have risen to \$20.53 trillion compared with the United States' \$18.95 trillion and India's \$7.57 trillion. **4**

However, China's robust economic growth and its status as an economic superpower would falter without oil, hence its forays into all corners of the globe in search for oil.

China's Oil Fundamentals

China's spectacular economic growth has significantly altered its position in the global oil market. In 2011, China accounted for 11% of global oil consumption compared to 6% in 2001, whilst its share of global oil production amounted to only 4.9%. **5**

China's domestic consumption has been rising at an annual rate of 6% between 2007 and 2011, while production has been virtually stagnant during the same period (see Table 1).

Table 1
China's Oil Production, Consumption & Net Imports, 2007-2030
(mbd)

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2020	2030	% change 2007- 2030
Production	3.74	3.81	3.80	3.94	3.76	2.88	2.44	- 35%
Consumption	7.82	7.94	8.21	9.25	9.76	14.24	21.36	+ 173%
Net imports	4.08	4.13	4.41	5.31	6.00	11.36	18.92	+ 364%
Imports as % Of demand	52	52	54	57	61	80	89	

Sources: BP Statistical Review of World Energy, June 2012 / International Energy Agency (IEA) / Author's projections.

Since it became a net oil importer in 2003, China has greatly increased its oil imports. In 2011, China imported 6.00 million barrels a day (mbd) of crude and oil products accounting for 61% of its consumption compared to 52% in 2007.

Forecasts for the coming decades all point to a strong growth in demand and, above all, a great increase in oil imports. Consumption is projected to reach 10.35 mbd in 2012 rising to 14.24 mbd in 2020 and 21.36 mbd in 2030 while imports could reach 6.65 mbd in 2012 rising to 11.36 mbd in 2020 and 18.92 mbd in 2030. In short, China could double its imports of crude oil between 2011 and 2020 and more than treble them by 2030.

This rise in consumption and in oil imports is the result of several factors, including rapid GDP growth of about 9%-10% a year over the past two decades, urbanization, improving standard of living and a sharp increase in the number of vehicles on the country's roads projected to rise from 40 million in 2010 to 130 million in 2020. **6** Another factor is the building of strategic oil reserves with the intention of stockpiling 50 days' imports or 414 million barrels (mb) by 2015 rising to 90 days' imports or 1022 mb by 2020. **7**

China's Global Quest for Oil

For decades the doctrine of peaceful rise has meant that China has tried to secure energy and raw materials without confronting the United States and its western allies. China's long-standing willingness to deal with states that the West regards pariahs is in part a practical and ideological refusal to make judgements about other countries' domestic policy. It is also in part a recognition that dealing with Sudan, Angola, Iran or Uzbekistan allows China to avoid direct confrontation with Western interests. However, the larger China has become, the sheer scale of its energy needs has forced it more and more to intrude into areas that the United States regards as its own sphere of influence. China has also moved from non-committal engagement with pariah states to openly supporting them. The relationship with the United States and the West in general is, therefore, becoming steadily tenser.

To sustain its spectacular economic growth, China may seek to secure more energy deals in the Middle East, putting it on a possible collision course with US interests in the world's most volatile region. China is now the biggest importer of Saudi oil and the second-biggest importer of Iranian oil. In Iraq, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) shares a contract with BP to develop Iraq's Rumaila oilfield with estimated proven reserves of 17.8 bb – the biggest contract signed by the Iraqi government so far. **8**

Other examples abound. Consider China's courtship of Canada. In April 2005 Petro-Canada and Enbridge signed a memorandum of understanding to build a \$2-billion 'gateway' pipeline to move oil from Alberta to the Pacific Coast. Petro-China is to get 200,000 barrels a day (b/d) through this pipeline. Yet only four

years earlier Dick Cheney, the former US vice-president, had declared that Canada's tar sands were part of the United States' energy security. Moreover, the Chinese oil company, Sinopec, has acquired a 40% stake in Synenco Energy's \$4.5 bn Northern Lights Oil Sands project, which currently produces 100,000 b/d, while CNOOC has acquired 16.9% stake in MEG Energy Corporation, which operates the Christina Lake project, near McMurray. **9**

In Latin America, One of the fastest growing destinations of Venezuelan crude oil exports has been China. **10** China has funnelled money and expertise into Venezuela's oil industry. A series of recent investments and loans totalling \$44 bn will expand China's Venezuelan oil imports from 120,000 b/d in 2008 to 1 mbd this year. **11** In 2010 China lent \$20 bn to Venezuela in exchange for oil deliveries over the next ten years. Venezuela is servicing this debt by shipping 200,000 b/d to China. **12**

With the recent discovery of huge pre-salt oil reserves in Brazil, the Brazilian government has been looking for investment capital from foreign oil majors. Chinese nationalized oil companies already have major stakes in the country's oil and gas markets and are expected to continue and consolidate their investments and in turn their interests in the future. Chinese government-backed oil companies have a major advantage at present. The Chinese government offers loans for E&P (Exploration & Production) activities and in return is guaranteed shipments of oil on continual basis. Such loans give China an edge over competitors and have proved to be a decisive winning factor in many major oil contracts. A case in point is the \$10 bn loan given by China to Brazil's national oil company, Petrobras, in return for 200,000 b/d of oil for the next decade. The three Chinese oil majors CNPC (China National Petroleum Corporation), Sinopec and CNOOC (China national Offshore Oil Corporation) are going all out to secure supplies. **13**

Chinese expansion into Africa, in particular, has long been attracting more and more attention from policy-makers in the West. A senior economist at the Chinese Ministry of Commerce estimated that trade volume between China and Africa might have already topped the \$100 bn mark. **14**

Of particular interest to the West is China's growing expansion into Africa's oil markets. It should be pointed out that although oil is a major and obvious source of Chinese interest in Africa, it is far from being the only one. China is actively seeking resources of every kind: copper, bauxite, uranium, aluminium, iron ore and manganese, among others. **15**

In central Asia, China is looking to secure more Kazakh oil supplies following its acquisition of PetroKazakhstan in 2007 and the commissioning of its first oil import pipeline (nicknamed the 'new silk road'), which runs 600 miles from Atasu, in central Kazakhstan and on to Xinjiang province in China. **16**

In all these overseas investment ventures, the strategy chosen is basically the same, namely to acquire foreign energy resources via long-term contracts as well as purchasing overseas assets in the energy industry. This policy is based on the desire to circumvent an over-reliance on the global oil market through either acquiring major stakes in oilfields around the world or safeguarding access to them. Because China's oil companies are state-owned, China is able to pursue this course even if it meant outbidding competitors in major contracts and paying over the odds.

And while China's foreign policy was previously ideologically-driven, now it is driven by its quest for oil. Oil is viewed as a strategic asset upon which China's domestic stability and national security depends.

China's Commercial and Strategic Interests in the Arctic

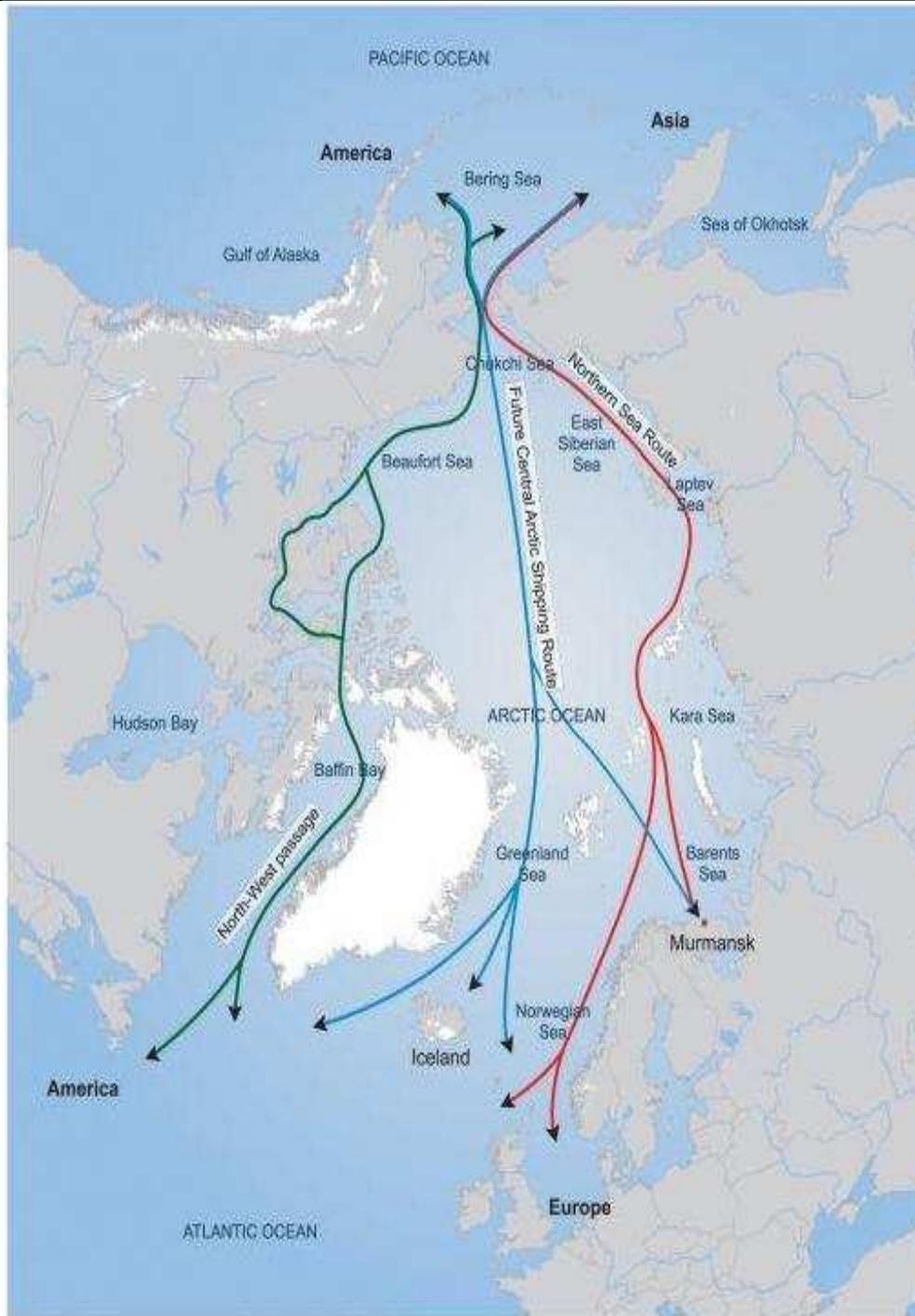
While China's thirst for oil has taken it to virtually all corners of the world, it has also become increasingly interested in the Arctic in recent years due to the melting of the polar ice-cap and its own desperate need for energy resources and raw materials for its growing economy. Access to natural resources and shortened shipping routes has prompted China to look at what the Arctic might provide. China is not an Arctic littoral state, has no Arctic coast, and as such neither sovereign rights over the region's continental shelves nor the resources that lay beneath them. Regardless, as an economic superpower and a permanent member of United Nations Security Council, it is expected to seek a role in determining the framework and legal foundations for the region's future development and management. **17**

China has primarily been focusing on the changing Arctic and its potential impact on its continental and oceanic environment and how such transformation could affect its domestic agriculture and economic development.

However, various think-tank groups in China have been urging the government to get actively involved in the region and map the strategic opportunities the melting Arctic offers. China has not yet published any official strategy towards the Arctic. However, it has so far adopted a careful approach towards showing greater involvement in the region in order to avoid alarming polar states. In relation to the sovereignty debate, China asserts that the Arctic belongs to all people and the region is part of the 'common heritage of mankind'. Vocalized or not, China's strategic interest in the region is clear and the country is taking concrete diplomatic steps to ensure that it should be recognized as a key player in the region.

There are three potential international routes through the Arctic: (1) the North East Sea Route or Northern Sea Route along the Russian coast (NSR), (2) Transpolar Route and (3) the North West Passage (NWP) through the Canadian Arctic archipelago (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Map of Possible Future Shipping Routes in the Arctic



Source: NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Courtesy of the Journal of Energy Security, April 2012 Issue.

There is disagreement concerning the status of NWP which could considerably shorten the distance between Europe and Asia. The NWP is claimed as an internal waterway by Canada. In contrast, the European Union and the US identify the NWP as international waters which they contend they have every right to sail across. In general, the NSR and NWP routes would substantially reduce the distance between Asia, Europe and North America.

China's interest in the region is magnified by the fact that 46% of its GDP is shipping-related and 85% of its energy imports come from abroad. **18** China has no Arctic territories but does have appetite for its natural resources and is eager to utilize shortened sea routes. Different routes will be utilized depending on the origin of goods shipped and their destination. For example, LNG could be transported to Shanghai from the Barents Sea through Russia's NSR, German products could sail through the transpolar route, and Chinese exports to the Eastern US will make way through the NWP. The distance between Shanghai and Hamburg through the NSR is 345 nautical miles shorter compared to the route via the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal.

China is of course completely aware of the potential hydrocarbon resources and economically critical minerals in the Arctic region. According to the US geological survey, 22% of the world's remaining oil and natural gas resources could be located beneath the Arctic. This is estimated at 550-660 billion barrels (bb) of oil, almost equivalent to the Middle East's proven reserves. **19** Also, China recognizes the significance of new Arctic shortened sea routes and the strategic military significance of the region

China's Position on the Arctic

China's position on the Arctic has been succinctly articulated by Chinese Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo who expressed a sense of moral entitlement to Arctic resources and its sea routes and also his concern that Arctic states might endeavour to restrict Chinese access (see Figure 2).

In a statement in March 2010, Admiral Zhuo said the "Arctic belongs to all people around the world as no nation has sovereignty over it. China must play an indispensable role in the Arctic exploration as we have one fifth of the world's population". **20**

China is exerting pressure to review and re-develop Arctic regulations due to changing circumstances. They insist that Arctic issues are becoming inter-regional and that a balanced approach towards common interests should be adopted.

Due to the transformation of the Arctic region, pressure from non-Arctic states like China and others is bound to increase and as suggested could escalate the friction between littoral and non-Arctic states. It is no wonder then that China is

expected to expand its role as decisive power in the region's management. China has had a permanent presence in the Arctic since 2004, when it established a research station in Svalbard, Norway, which is well inside the Arctic Ocean in the Barents Sea. Also, China is reportedly planning three Arctic research expeditions over the next three to four years. The country has announced its intention to build a new 8000-ton ice breaker by 2013 in addition to the one it already has, in order to cruise the Arctic region to conduct various expeditions.

Figure 2
A Chinese View of Arctic Sea Routes



Source: Chinese Arctic & Antarctic Administration: Courtesy of the Journal of Energy Security, April 2012 issue.

Note: 'North East Sea route' is red and the 'North West Sea route' is blue.

China has also expressed interest in obtaining permanent observer status in the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council has eight member states - Canada, US, Russia, Denmark (Faroe Islands and Greenland), Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland. In addition, the Council includes five permanent observers, which are all European (France, Germany, Poland, Britain, and Spain) and ad hoc observer members, including Japan, South Korea, and China.

Arctic nations are alarmed by China's position on the Arctic. China's economic growth and increasing military capability are further making Arctic nations suspicious about its interest in the region. A crucial question will be how to

ensure a balanced approach and effective policies to confront the pressure from non-Arctic states that will arise when the Arctic is opened for oil, gas and mineral extraction and international shipping. There is no doubt that a melting Arctic provides a unique opportunity for China to benefit from the shortened sea routes and access to natural resources. However challenges to these opportunities should not be underestimated. It would not be easy for China to sail through the NWP and NSR without clarification of the legal status of these passages. There is, therefore, a pronounced need to comprehensively understand all of the issues as interpreted by Arctic littoral states and non-Arctic nations alike.

Territorial Claims in the Arctic

The next two decades could witness a strategic shift in the centre of gravity on oil and geopolitics from the Middle East to the Arctic. As a result, the Arctic could become another flashpoint in global power politics.

The Arctic region is constantly changing and Arctic states should expect future geopolitical challenges from non-Arctic states possibly leading to conflict.

Changes in the Arctic will further increase territorial claims and border disputes between Arctic and non-Arctic states. These issues are primarily related to free passage and resource extraction rights.

At present, border disputes do exist between Canada and Denmark regarding the rights over Hans Island in Nares Strait; Canada and the US, regarding a sea area in the Beaufort Sea; between Norway and Denmark, regarding the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Spitsbergen; and between Norway and Russia which in the past concerned an EEZ in the Barents Sea and which, in fact, has been resolved. **21**

Under international law, no country currently owns the North Pole or the region of the Arctic Ocean surrounding it. The five Arctic countries, Russia, the United States (via Alaska), Canada, Norway, and Denmark (via Greenland), are limited to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 200 nautical miles adjacent to their coasts.

Upon ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a country has a ten year period to make claims to an extended continental shelf which, if validated, gives it exclusive rights to resources on or below the seabed of that extended shelf area. **22** Norway (ratified the convention in 1996), Russia (1997), Canada (2003) and Denmark (2004), all launched projects to provide basis for seabed claims on extended continental shelves beyond their exclusive economic zones. The United States has signed, but not yet ratified the UNCLOS. **23 & 24.**

As defined by the UNCLOS, states have ten years from the date of ratification to make claims to an extended continental shelf. On this basis the five states fronting the Arctic Ocean - Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the US – must make their claims by 2013, 2014, 2006 & 2007 respectively. Since the US has yet to ratify the treaty, the date for its submission is undetermined as yet.

The status of certain portions of the Arctic sea region is in dispute for various reasons. Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States all regard parts of the Arctic seas as “territorial waters”. There are also disputes regarding what passages constitute “international seaways” and rights to passage along them.

In 1925, based upon the Sector Principle, Canada became the first country to extend its maritime boundaries northward to the North Pole, at least on paper, a claim that is not universally recognized (there are in fact 415 nautical miles of ocean between the Pole and Canada’s northernmost land point). **25** In 1926, the USSR declared the territory between two lines drawn from west of Murmansk to the North Pole and from eastern Chukchi Peninsula to the North Pole to be Soviet territory. **26** Norway made similar sector claims – as did the United States, but that sector contained only a few islands so the claims were not pressed. Denmark’s sovereignty over all of Greenland was recognized by the League of Nations in 1916 and also by an international court in 1933. Denmark could also conceivably claim an Arctic sector.

In addition, Canada claims the water within the Canadian Arctic Archipelago as its own territorial waters through which the Northwest Passage runs. However, the legal status of the Northwest Passage is disputed: Canada considers it to be part of its territorial waters. The United States and most maritime nations consider it to be an international strait, which means that foreign vessels have right of “transit passage”. In such a regime, Canada would have the right to enact fishing and environmental regulation and also fiscal and smuggling laws as well laws intended for the safety of shipping but not the right to close the passage.

Until 1999, the North Pole and the major part of the Arctic Ocean had been generally considered to comprise international space, including both the waters and seabed. However, both the adoption of the UNCLOS as well as global climate change causing the polar ice to recede at a rate higher than expected, has prompted several countries to claim or to reinforce pre-existing claims to the waters or seabed of the polar region.

However, one would cogently argue that under international law, no country currently owns the Arctic or the region of the Arctic Ocean surrounding it. And while the five Arctic littorals countries are limited to an EEZ of 200 nautical miles adjacent to their coasts, China and other countries of the world should have an entitlement to part of the rest. To further validate this position, one would also argue that while Pacific coastal nations could be entitled to an EEZ of 200 miles,

they don't own the rest of the Pacific or the resources under its seabed.

Conclusions

Climatic and environmental Changes in the Arctic are enhancing the growing importance of the region.

Within the next two decades, we could witness a strategic shift in the centre of gravity on oil and geopolitics from the Middle East to the Arctic prompted by global competition for new crude oil reserves and shortened sea lanes across the Arctic. As a result, the Arctic could become another flashpoint in global power politics.

And while China's thirst for oil has taken it to virtually all corners of the world, it has also become increasingly interested in the Arctic in recent years. Access to natural resources and shortened shipping routes has prompted China to look at what the Arctic might provide.

Though China is not an Arctic littoral state, it argues that the Arctic belongs to all people around the world as no nation has sovereignty over it and that the region is part of the common heritage of mankind. And with one fifth of the world's population, China must have access to Arctic natural resources and its shortened sea routes. China's position clearly contrasts with that of the five Arctic littoral countries, namely, the United States, Canada, Norway, Denmark and Russia.

Under international law, no country currently owns the North Pole or the region of the Arctic Ocean surrounding it. And while the five Arctic littoral countries could be entitled to an EEZ of 200 nautical miles adjacent to their coasts, China and other countries of the world should have an entitlement to part of the rest.

As the Arctic issues are becoming inter-regional, a balanced approach towards common interests should be adopted thus allowing all nations of the world to benefit from its riches and enabling the Arctic to live up to its reputation as the common heritage of mankind. These principles should be enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to pre-empt escalation of tensions in the future and possibly conflict between Arctic and non-Arctic nations.

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Footnotes

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