**Defence in the Arctic Inquiry**

**Written Evidence Supplied by Dr Peter Hough**

**Geopolitical Developments and Existing Fora for De-escalating Conflict**

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I am the author of: *International Politics of the Arctic: Coming in From the Cold* (Routledge 2013); *Understanding Global Security (Routledge 2004, 2008, 2013 & 2017) Environmental Security (Routledge 2014)* and other works on International Relations. I am submitting this evidence as an individual with an interest and demonstrable expertise on Arctic politics in the hope that my observations and analysis might be useful to the sub-committee.

**KEY POINTS**

* Geopolitical developments in the Arctic show no prospect of spilling into conflict in spite of concerns regarding Russian military adventurism elsewhere and increased energy security interests in the region.
* The evolution of Arctic governance in the post-Cold War era- centred on the Arctic Council- has proven to be impressively cooperative, inclusive and legalistic and a force for good in terms of the de-escalation of potential conflict.
* Whilst, in my view, the UK need not be too fearful of defence threats in the Arctic, furthering diplomatic engagement with the region would aid the continuation of good governance and reap economic and security rewards.

**MAIN BODY**

*Geopolitical Developments in the Arctic*

1.Climate change is literally and metaphorically bringing the Arctic in from the cold in international affairs with new economic opportunities emerging with the retreat of the ice sheets. Prominent amongst these is the prospect of previously inaccessible oil and gas sources in the High North becoming available for extraction. A spate of extended maritime claims by the states of the region and some high profile diplomatic posturing has prompted much anticipation of a new scramble of resources and even a new, more literal Cold War. The reality, however, appears to be more mundane with the Arctic oil rush proving to be more of a slow and cooperative saunter thus far, as the Arctic powers, and others, seek the new riches with a degree of caution, employing – and even sharing – lawyers and geologists rather than deploying troops.

2. The recent upsurge of ‘supermajor’ oil companies’ interest in the region is not necessarily indicative of a new black gold rush. Increasingly, they have been compelled to look further afield as a result of the rise in “resource nationalism,” as shown by increased state control of hydrocarbon reserves. The Russian government in particular has acquired more direct influence over domestic energy companies and foreign investment ventures as part of the centralization that has occurred since Putin succeeded Yeltsin as President in 1999. The expertise of the Western supermajors is needed by the Russian government, inevitably leading to a series of cooperative international ventures at odds with the nationalistic scramble popularly portrayed and predicted.

3. As well as working with Western MNCs, the Kremlin has also engaged cordially with Western governments over the Arctic in diplomatic circles. In April 2010, whilst President Medvedev was visiting Oslo, the Russians and Norwegians concluded an agreement ending a low level 40 year diplomatic dispute over how to partition the Barents Sea by amicably splitting it in two. In a joint communiqué that followed, the two foreign ministers announced the following: ‘We firmly believe that the Arctic can be used to demonstrate just how much peace and collective interests can be served by the implementation of the international rule of law.’[[1]](#endnote-1) This initiative took much of the world by surprise but should not have done given that it was a win-win result. Doggedly sticking to their divergent claims had created a “grey zone” amounting to some 12% of the Sea in which neither side could prospect for oil. Rhetoric and reality are not the same thing when it comes to examining diplomacy. Russian policy in the Arctic has actually consistently been far less belligerent and more cooperative than portrayed in the West. The thaw has been evident since Gorbachev’s 1987 Murmansk speech in which he declared: ‘What everybody can be absolutely certain of is the Soviet Union's profound and certain interest in preventing the North of the planet, its Polar and sub-Polar regions and all Northern countries from ever again becoming an arena of war, and in forming there a genuine zone of peace and fruitful cooperation.’ Russian overtures to the West on the Arctic have been consistently conciliatory, whilst maintaining their claims to the Seas to their north. Gorbachev’s words were re-echoed in 2010 by Prime Minister Putin at a meeting of the International Arctic Forum in Moscow where he stated: ‘We think it is imperative to keep the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation,’ since; ‘We all know that it is hard to live alone in the Arctic.’

4. There is only one territorial question to be resolved in the Arctic; a somewhat surreal and ridiculous, although generally good natured ‘dispute’ between Canada and Denmark over the tiny uninhabited Hans Island in Baffin Bay (which was overlooked in their 1973 boundary treaty). This looks increasingly as though it will be resolved by either dividing or co-ruling the icy slab. Some maritime disputes still exist in the Arctic but this is far from unusual in international relations and there is little precedent anywhere for fighting over fish and water. Areas of contention remain in the Bering Sea between the US and Russia, and between the US and Canada over the North West Passage and Beaufort Sea, though these are lower level disputes than the Barents Sea which was amicably resolved.

5. The Arctic continental shelf claims are being pursued in a distinctly legalistic manner with the Russians, Canadians, Danes and Norwegians patiently presenting claims to the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and showing every indication that they will abide by their arbitration. Canadian and Danish geological teams have even shared information in compiling their overlapping claims in the Lomonosov ridge area. This legalistic approach was made public with the *Ilullisat Declaration* which followed a meeting of the 5 Arctic Ocean states in Greenland in 2008 which concluded that: ‘We remain committed to this legal framework [UNCLOS] and to the orderly settlement of any overlapping claims.’

6. There was a notable reassertion of energy security interests in a series of foreign policy statements and initiatives by the Arctic states in the late 2000s. All of the ‘Arctic 8’ produced foreign policy plans asserting their national interests in the region and the Russians, Canadians and Norwegians have all increased military patrols and operations in their northern flanks, most notably in Ottawa’s popular ‘Use it or Lose it’ strategy. Foreign policy statements, though, tend to assert national interests and zero-sum characterizations of energy security because that is what foreign policy statements are supposed to do and what most expect to read. Formal Realism though, often masks a truer discourse of cordial cooperative relations and that is the case with the Arctic 8. The toughest posturing has come not from the Russians or the Americans, but from Canada, and even this is still more rhetoric than reality. Rhetoric and reality are often not the same in international relations and particularly not in the politics of the Arctic where declarations are often the howls of sheep in wolves’ clothing. Arctic exploration, whether for adventure or profit, has always seemed to be accompanied by much symbolism, jingoism and bombast as man seeks to conquer nature at its most brutal. This, though, flies in the face of the reality that making money in remote, difficult conditions necessitates cooperation rather than nationalist rivalry. Instead of the old maxim that a successful foreign policy requires one to “speak softly but carry a big stick” what we are witnessing in the Arctic is more a case of, “talk tough but carry a big bag of carrots.” Exercising sovereign control over vast, thinly inhabited tracts of land is a difficult task; hence the tradition of cooperation and sharing in the use of common land and resources between Inuit, Sami and other regional indigenous groups. Arctic “incomers” generally come to recognize the reality of this to some degree but domestic public opinion often sees only the flags and oilfields displayed on maps. The cordial politics of the Arctic 8 and the energy-seeking ventures bringing together Western MNCs and the Kremlin represent more a case of transnational symbiosis than a new Cold War nationalism. Far from the lucrative scrambles produced by the discoveries of Yukon gold in the 1920s or Alaskan oil in the 1960s, future energy exploration in the High Arctic is set to be much more long-term and speculative. Whilst global warming is rightly bringing much needed attention to the needs of its indigenous populations whose lives are being transformed by a transforming physical and economic climate, an awful lot of hot air has been spoken about an Arctic oil rush and a new Cold War.

*Arctic Governance*

7. The Arctic Council evolved from the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) but the idea of a permanent institution for the Arctic was around at the same time that this regime was being developed at the end of the 1980s, kick-started by the landmark 1987 Gorbachev Murmansk speech. The AC Chair rotates between the Arctic 8 every two years accompanied by a biennial ministerial at which decisions are taken by the consensus of the 8 (i.e. unanimity). In addition, ‘Senior Arctic Officials’ (SAOs) meet every 6 months in the country holding the presidency to flesh out ministerial strategy. SAOs take reports from the A8 or permanent participants to work on and prepare recommendations for the Ministerials as well as acting on issues delegated to them by the biennial summits. SAOs also coordinate the work of the Working Groups and any other *ad hoc* groups or task forces. In addition to the 8 member states the AC is notable for opening its doors to a large number of other participants and observers. Representatives of six transnational indigenous peoples are recognized with the right to attend all meetings and submit reports, though not be included in the decision-making process. These ‘Permanent Participants’ are; the Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich’in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Saami Council, and the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East (RAIPON). Six non-Arctic states have been recognized from the start as permanent observers; UK, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland and Spain. Government representatives of these states have no voting rights but are able to submit statements at ministerial meetings and propose agenda items. China, Japan, North Korea, Italy, Singapore and India have subsequently joined this roster of observers as commercial interest in the region has grown. The EU have been included as observers on an *ad hoc* basis since 2008-9 but have been unable to secure agreement on making this permanent at successive Ministerials because of concerns in Canada and among the indigenous representatives at European opposition to seal hunting.

8. The 2011 AC Ministerial at Nuuk marked a watershed with agreements reached to establish a permanent secretariat and ratify the organization’s first legally binding agreement; the 2011 ‘Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic’. This enhanced status for the AC was clearly illustrated by the attendance of Hilary Clinton at the summit, becoming the first US Secretary of State to attend. The AC, hence, has been transformed from a ‘high level forum’, as described at the Ottawa Declaration, to a fully-fledged intergovernmental organization with a permanent base and binding rules emanating from a decision-making process. Whilst military security matters remain outside the remit of the AC a seed of intergovernmental cooperation has been sewn. Military chiefs of staff of the A8 met for the first time in Newfoundland in 2012 where it was announced that these meetings would become annual events cooperating in the provision of military support for civil emergencies, building on the AC Search and Rescue agreement public support. This is somewhat reminiscent of the EU where informal defence cooperation has grown as a spin-off of more formal integration in less sensitive political areas.

9. Before the launch of its first hard law policy, though, it is clear that the AC had been responsible for a steady growth of soft law agreements, lacking official legal rigour but nonetheless having a political impact. The US and Russia, fearful of extra burdens on their oil and gas industries, were initially lukewarm on involving themselves in AC Oil and Gas Assessments but were gradually brought on board and came to contribute greatly to them. The ‘softness’ of environmental and maritime safety issues is, in fact, the key to their significance in Arctic intergovernmental politics. The US and Russia are prepared to work collaboratively on these less sensitive issues in the AC in ways they have often been reluctant to do on the global stage. At the same time as Presidents of the US and Russia have been in denial about climate change their administrations have put their names to the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) and numerous ministerial statements which have done much to advance global policy on this issue.

10. There is no doubt that indigenous peoples have been empowered by their visible presence in the AC. It has enhanced the profile of the Inuit Circumpolar Council and Sami Council, whilst the Arctic Athabaskan Council and Gwich’in Council were formed specifically in response to opportunities offered by AC representation. The trend has been set for not excluding indigenous group applicants so long as they meet the criteria of representing indigenous peoples of more than one country. This dimension of the AC adds to its external credibility as representing the people of the world amongst the most affected by climate change rather than just representing a cabal of states actually largely responsible for the problem and likely to exacerbate it by mutually despoiling the Arctic. The existence of the AC has also assisted in making the region more visible on the global political stage and influencing international policy in a wider sense. Climate change and Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) assessments from AC Working Groups have fed into the global regimes in those areas as is particularly evidenced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s 2007 Assessment Report featuring a chapter specific to the Arctic. The AC has become the chief source both of regional governance and regional representation on the global stage.

*The UK and the Arctic*

11. The UK has a natural interest in the Arctic as the northernmost non-Arctic state whose EEZ extends to within 120 miles of the Arctic circle and the same latitude as all of the ‘Arctic 8’. It is also natural that this interest should grow. Whilst the new riches on offer in the Arctic are subject to exaggeration there is no doubt that greater commercial opportunities are opening up in the region with great significance for British energy and shipping interests. The Arctic 8 are all major trading partners and in the wake of ‘Brexit’ looking northwards makes economic and diplomatic sense. The EU’s strained relationship with the Arctic Council and the regions indigenous peoples means that this is one arena where the UK will not be hamstrung by gravitating away from Brussels. The UK has tended to be close to Norway in Arctic diplomacy (such as in supporting their claim to an EEZ around Svalbard unlike most other states) and it makes sense for this relationship to be maintained and deepened given the likelihood of applying to join EFTA and the value of having the ear of a full member of the AC.

12. Whilst it is the contention of this author that military adventurism in the Arctic is unlikely it must also be the case that there is an ‘indirect peacekeeping’ dividend to strengthening ties with the Arctic states and Arctic fora of governance. The cordial, cooperative politics of the Arctic Council and other Arctic intergovernmental settings provide useful means for strengthening relations with Russia and also with fellow Observer China, who share a similar vision about opening up shipping routes and working productively with the Arctic 8.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

* Concerns over military adventurism in the Arctic are overstated but it is in the UK’s economic and security interests to deepen diplomatic engagement with the Arctic. This can help ensure the continuation of good maritime governance in the region and help build relations with Russia and China.
* Making the most of our observer status allied to the maintenance of strong relations with Norway is a logical path towards enhancing British influence in the Arctic Council.
* Greater diplomatic engagement in the Arctic represents a sensible dimension of post-Brexit foreign-policy re-orientation, particularly since the EU’s leverage over the Arctic Council is weak.
1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)