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Preventing an Arctic Cold War

By PAUL ARTHUR BERKMAN

JUST a quarter-century ago, and for millenniums before that, the Arctic Ocean was covered year-round by ice, creating an impregnable wilderness that humans rarely negotiated. Today, as the effects of global warming are amplified in the high north, most of the ocean is open water during the summer and covered by ice only in the winter.

This unexpected transformation has radically altered the stakes for the Arctic, especially for the eight nations and indigenous peoples that surround it. But while there has been cooperation on extracting the region's oil, gas and mineral deposits, and exploiting its fisheries, there has been little effort to develop legal mechanisms to prevent or adjudicate conflict. The potential for such conflict is high, even though tensions are now low.

Several countries, along with corporations like ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell, are preparing to exploit the region's enormous oil and natural gas reserves. New shipping routes will compete with the Panama and Suez Canals. Vast fisheries are being opened to commercial harvesting, without regulation. Coastal areas that are home to indigenous communities are eroding into the sea. China and the European Union are among non-Arctic governments rushing to assert their interests in the region. Some states have increased military personnel and equipment there.

The most fundamental challenge for the Arctic states is to promote cooperation and prevent conflict. Both are essential, but a forum for achieving those goals does not yet exist.

In 1996, eight countries — the United States, Russia, Canada, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Iceland and Denmark (which manages the foreign affairs and defense of Greenland) — and groups representing indigenous peoples established the Arctic Council to chart the region's future. So far, this high-level forum has identified sustainable development and environmental protection as "common Arctic issues." But another crucial concern — maintaining the peace — was shelved in the talks that led to the council's creation. The fear then, as now, was that peace implied demilitarization. It doesn't. But if these nations are still too timid to discuss peace in the region when tensions are low, how will they possibly cooperate to ease conflicts if they arise?

Since 2006, each of the Arctic nations has adopted its own security policy to safeguard its sovereign rights. What they must do now is compare their separate security policies,

identify the ways in which those policies reinforce or conflict with one another, and then balance national interests with common interests.

How, for instance, will each nation position its military and police its territory? How will the Arctic states deal with China and other nations that have no formal jurisdictional claims but have strong interests in exploiting Arctic resources? How will Arctic and non-Arctic states work together to manage those resources beyond national jurisdictions, on the high seas and in the deep sea? Without ratifying the Convention on the Law of the Sea, a 1982 treaty governing use of the world's oceans, how can the United States cooperate with other nations to resolve territorial disputes in the ocean?

NATO's top military commander, Adm. James G. Stavridis of the United States Navy, warned in 2010 of an "icy slope toward a zone of competition, or worse, a zone of conflict" if the world's leaders failed to ensure Arctic peace.

Whether it is through the Arctic Council or another entity, there needs to be a forum for discussing peace and stability, not just environmental and economic issues. We need "rules of the road" to take us safely into the Arctic's future.

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, whose economy is reliant on its rich deposits of oil and natural gas, clearly understands the benefits of a northern sea route and of the hydrocarbon deposits on his nation's continental shelf, and has emphasized the importance of peace and cooperation in the Arctic. So have leaders of other Arctic nations. But we have heard virtually nothing from President Obama, even as he has made the dangers of a warming earth a priority of his second term.

At an Arctic Council meeting in Tromso, Norway, last year, Hillary Rodham Clinton, then the secretary of state, said "the world increasingly looks to the North" but did not go much further. She called for "responsible management of resources" and efforts "to prevent and mitigate the effects of climate change."

As the head of an Arctic superpower and a Nobel laureate, Mr. Obama should convene an international meeting with President Putin and other leaders of Arctic nations to ensure that economic development at the top of the world is not only sustainable, but peaceful.

Paul Arthur Berkman, a biological oceanographer at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is the author of "Environmental Security in the Arctic Ocean: Promoting Co-operation and Preventing Conflict."