

US war games signal intensifying tension over Arctic

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29 June 2009

In more ways than one, things are heating up in the Arctic. Several large military exercises undertaken by the United States and members of the US-led military alliance NATO are proof of growing tensions between the major powers.

The stakes involved in the Arctic are enormous. A report issued last year by the United States Geological Survey estimated that the Arctic Ocean could hold 90 billion barrels of oil, up to a third of the world's untapped natural gas deposits, and a possible 20 percent of natural gas liquids. In addition, the retreat of the Arctic ice sheet due to environmental warming could open up viable shipping routes between the northern Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

For many years the United States has played a relatively muted role in the Arctic, while Russia, Norway, Canada and Denmark have actively pursued territorial claims in the region. US Coast Guard Real Admiral Gene Brooks has warned, "If there's a five-nation race in the Arctic, we're fifth," while Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Thad Allen has urged Washington to renew its fleet of icebreakers so as not to fall behind its rivals.

Writing June 11 in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Christoph Seidler claimed that Russia was "leading the pack" in the race for dominance in the Arctic, with the US "likely to remain on the sidelines."

It is inconceivable, however, that Washington will permit its rivals—especially in Moscow—a free hand in the Arctic. This is the significance of a series of US military operations in the high northern latitudes over the past two months.

In May, NATO held its regular Joint Warrior exercise in the North Sea. Involving more than 30 warships and dozens of aircraft, the war games were extended from

the usual two to three weeks this year, with forces operating in a fictitious "Northern Dispute Zone" involving an enemy who had been harassing neighboring states.

The following month, another major NATO operation took place in the region. Based in the Swedish Arctic and the northern section of the Baltic Sea, NATO exercises took place June 8-11 involving armed forces from alliance members Norway, Britain, Germany, Poland, and the United States. Also present were forces from Sweden and Finland—not NATO members but linked to the alliance through its "Partners for Peace" scheme.

This was the first major NATO exercise in Sweden, which has traditionally maintained a policy of neutrality. A number of Swedish politicians and peace groups have complained that the maneuvers threaten this neutral status and are indicative of the country's gradual move towards NATO accession. A Nordic battle group, involving forces from Norway, Sweden and Finland has participated in the US occupation of Afghanistan.

The exercises were reputed to involve the largest use of airpower in Scandinavia since the Second World War.

Concurrent with the Scandinavian maneuvers, the US Navy led its annual Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) exercise, involving 12 navies from NATO and allied countries. At the center of the operation was USS Mount Whitney, flagship of the US Navy's Sixth Fleet.

"The purpose of BALTOPS is to bring all of the nations together in one exercise," said Commander J.G. Olaf Albrecht, the head of the German Navy Fleet Headquarters' delegation. "We learn how other navies work and how to live together in the Baltic Sea, especially the nations which are former Soviet nations

such as Lithuania and Latvia. It's a very educational experience.”

This is the latest intensification of NATO activity in the Baltic, with the alliance maintaining regular live military exercises involving air and ground forces from its three new ex-Soviet members, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

For 11 days this month, concluding June 26, the US Navy and Air Force also carried out a major training operation in the Alaskan Arctic, centered at Elmendorf Air Force Base and involving the USS John C. Stennis carrier strike group. The area of operations bordered Russian territorial waters in the Chukchi Sea, which is estimated to hold 15 billion barrels of recoverable oil and 76 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

The obvious target of US and NATO military preparations in the high northern regions is Russia. This month the Swedish defense minister, Sten Tolgfors, commented on tensions in the region, saying, “Russia has certainly raised its tone of voice over the last couple of years” regarding territorial disputes in the Arctic.

Russia is actively pursuing a campaign under the International Law of the Sea to lay claim to vast swathes of the Arctic Ocean, including the North Pole. Russia and NATO member Norway have a longstanding dispute over the sovereignty of the Barents Sea, a region rich in oil and gas deposits, and a potential major sea route for energy exports from the Russian port of Murmansk.

To reinforce its claims in the region, and in response to increased NATO activity, Moscow has increased the number of air force flights over the Arctic and plans to develop a new fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers capable of patrolling the Arctic Ocean. Russia’s Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has said the Arctic is vital to the country’s “strategic, economic, scientific and defense interests.”

In June, Norway announced that it would move its top military structure, the Operational Command Headquarters, north from Stavanger to Reitan in the Arctic Circle. The Norwegian government has also been in talks with senior NATO officials, including Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, about expanding the alliance’s role in the region.

Rival claims to sovereignty over the Arctic are also being asserted among members of the NATO alliance.

Denmark and Canada have a long dispute over the channel between Greenland (an autonomous Danish territory) and Ellesmere Island, a potential sea lane should the Arctic ice melt further. Canada and the United States have also pursued rival territorial claims in the region.

Amidst a historic crisis of world capitalism, American imperialism is seeking to expand its influence at the direct expense of its rivals, none more so than Russia. This was expressed most explosively to date with the US-backed Georgian assault on South Ossetia in August 2008, which almost led to direct conflict with Moscow. Today there is no region on earth, especially where rich oilfields are located, in which great power conflict is not brewing. The Arctic is no exception.



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