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Arctic Circle 2019: The Arctic Security Environment and ‘Outside’ Actors

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Two noticeable themes emerged at a number of Arctic Circle Assembly plenary and break-out sessions: (1) the significant attention paid to “outside actors” and “near-Arctic states” and (2) the acceptance of the widened security agenda by actors in the Arctic.

Outside Actors and Near-Arctic States

Tension exists among Arctic states to either accept the growing influence of ‘outside’ Arctic states or temper outside influence in the region by having Arctic states with stronger economies step up to fill the void that China is more than willing to fulfill. China’s influence is seen to be growing in the Arctic as its relevance as an economic actor through its Polar Silk Road/Belt and Road Initiative expands into the region. Discussions regarding current and future Chinese investment in Greenland, Iceland, and Russia reflected a mix of anxiety and concern by some and of hopefulness by others that recognize the need for a source of foreign investment to develop their regions. These types of investments raise the stock of Chinese influence in the region and further legitimizes their claim as a ‘near-Arctic state’.

Other sessions involved ‘non-Arctic states’, such as Scotland, promoting their own newly released Arctic policies with Scotland heavily promoting itself as the Arctic’s nearest neighbour. The European Union was also promoting its relevance in the Arctic through its Arctic state members and the role it sees itself playing in the region in addressing economic, social and traditional security issues. The European Union and Scotland’s promotion of their Arctic policies, their perceived future roles in the Arctic, and China’s expanding role in the region reinforce the fact that the list of outside actors is growing. Arctic states and security arrangements such as NATO must not only include them in security calculations in every respect, but also determine how their growing involvement could change the way in which future security decisions are made.

Widened Security Agendas

Security in the broadest sense could be heard in many of the sessions. Human, environmental, economic, energy, climate, and political security were terms used in a variety of different panels and presentations. The ease in which many of these terms were used to describe the issues in the Arctic

show the acceptance of a broader sense of the term 'security', but also the means in which the challenges they were discussing could be addressed. For example, the use of the military in a variety of ways was mentioned, including obvious ways such as search and rescue, but also in ways that address broadened security concerns including infrastructure investment and monitoring programs, such as the Canadian Rangers, that provide benefits to local communities beyond fundamental military priorities. Beyond the military, spinoff effects from investment in research programs from outside states, including China, has not only affirmed their inclusion in Arctic affairs, but also helps to assist in addressing environmental and climatic security concerns.

Conclusion

Many non-Arctic states are looking to the Arctic to expand their research, investment, and security initiatives. The inclusion of these 'outside' states demands that Arctic states reflect on themselves, their desires in the region, and how they can manage this outside growing interest in the region. It further questions the "Arctic club" mentality that has existed in the past and reinforces the idea that states must acknowledge their Arctic regions as more globally interconnected than they have had to historically. This affects the security environment in the region because Arctic states are having to recognize the expanding role that outsiders may play in the region in the future, and that the 'Arctic Eight's' influence over the region may not be as absolute as it has been in the past. Arctic states should thus consider ways in which they can partner or work with outside states to achieve their own goals in the region.

Ultimately, two noteworthy themes were very much present at Arctic Circle:

- (1) broadened concepts of security are accepted by many researchers, diplomats, politicians, and investors working in the region and a variety of actors that participate, including the military. These actors play a role in addressing these broadened security concerns; and
- (2) 'outside' states and 'near-Arctic states' are successfully cultivating their roles in the Arctic and legitimizing their inclusion in spheres of Arctic influence that were once controlled primarily by Arctic states.

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