
'Challenging' Russia in the Arctic: Political posturing or a war in the making?

24/02/2019



As Russia bolsters its efforts to secure and tap the Arctic, both the UK and the US have been vowing to meet its “challenge” – a premise that could lead to war, experts say, if their naval powers could muster the capabilities.

“It’s nobody’s lake,” said US Admiral James Foggo in a recent [interview](#) with US media – the latest in a string of American warnings against Russia’s northward push. His concern is primarily for *“Arctic Council nations – of which we are a member,”* and which are not interested in the Northern Sea Route being exploited by adversary powers like Russia and China.

UK Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson recently joined the chorus of warnings, saying Britain would *“stay vigilant to new challenges”* by *“sharpening our skills in sub-zero conditions, learning from longstanding allies like Norway or monitoring submarine threats with our Poseidon aircraft”*.

But Russia is better positioned both legally and physically to oversee the Arctic and, while still dangerous, the bellicose statements carry little weight for the reality on the ice, experts have told RT.

Bravado for domestic consumption

Williamson’s promise to defend NATO’s northern flank from Russia must be viewed “in the context of current UK domestic politics,” believes security analyst and former UK army officer Charles Shoebridge. With Brexit just around the corner, Williamson is drumming up the Russia

and China threats so that other European nations aren't *"tempted to turn to the EU for its security, but must continue to rely on the US and UK through NATO."*

Ultimately, he could be aiming just for political gain.

With the UK in political turmoil it often appears that Williamson is even positioning himself as a future candidate to replace Theresa May as PM.

Likewise in the US: James Foggo's *"nobody's lake"* comment was tellingly lacking in detail as to how exactly the US is going to keep Russia out of the Arctic, says retired colonel Mikhail Khodarenok.

"James Foggo's statements at this point are of a purely political nature. It's telling that he never clarified how exactly the US Navy is going to accomplish that task. Are they going to create naval groups in the Arctic Ocean, seize important coastal areas, channels, naval bases and ports? But that means war with a nuclear power, one which would see unrestricted use of weapons of mass destruction."



US Navy submarines break through sea ice during ICEX 2018 exercises in the Beaufort Sea © Reuters / US Navy / Mass Communication 2nd Class Micheal H. Lee

Dangerous free-for-all

War can be averted, the experts believe, though the danger of escalation is very real. The situation, according to Khodarenok, is complicated by the vagueness of international law

regarding the Arctic.

"James Foggo's statement is a fresh indication that the Arctic is becoming an arena of global rivalry over transport lanes and natural resources," Khodarenok said.

World history knows no precedent of such a rivalry playing out without considering military factors.

Shoebridge, on the other hand, believes that when faced with the danger of an armed incident spiraling into "*uncontrolled escalation*," cooler heads will prevail.

"Despite the confrontational language they might use, most leaders of most states want to avoid this," he said.

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Questionable claims and capabilities

The US seeks to deny Russia and China the use of the Northern Sea Route – but the lane goes along the Russian coastline, which, under international law, gives Russia a degree of control over it, something Russia should lean on when defending its rights to use the waters, says Khodarenok.

Besides, while Foggo wants Russia and China out of the "*nobody's lake*," he admits American companies can't use it either, since their vessels are too big for local conditions. Besides, Russia is the only world power with a significant icebreaker fleet, which makes it the only one capable of rendering aid to ships that have an emergency while sailing there. On top of that, Russia has been reviving its military installations that guard the area, including radar arrays and permanent military bases. Abandoning those is not an option, since that would mean losing a vital strategic foothold.

For Russia the Northern Sea Route has defense significance as well, since it provides access to all of the world's oceans, as well as the ability to maneuver between theaters relying only on the capabilities of the Russian Navy.

At the end of the day the only ones undoubtedly standing to profit from the opening of the Arctic arena are military industrial contractors – with the US 2nd Fleet revived for the sole purpose of containing Russia's Arctic ambition, Navy contracts are bound to follow.

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