Security, Communication and the Role of the Police in Germany

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The Arctic

A Reloaded Geopolitical Arena for Canada and the United States

According to experts of the NASA Earth Observatory, the Arctic ice sheet diminishes at a staggering rate of 13% per decade. As National Geographic states, there is a possibility of an ice-free Arctic summer as early as 2035. The melting of ice sheets and the warming of winters by 3-4°C in the region

has rewritten the geopolitical stakes for both Canada and the United States. In this fast changing environment, the opening of maritime routes, growing access to natural resources such as oil and to key strategic points has created a race for control between rivalling actors. From the multitude of actors, diverging and wide ranging interests from trade to securing natural resources, arises the question which nations are capable of reacting quicker and taking the initiative.

The geopolitical importance of Russia in the region from a Canadian and US perspective

As Robin Ashby, the Secretary-General of Eurodefense-UK notes in his article about the growth of Russian influence in the Arctic in terms of military and trade capabilities, Russia is keen to capitalise on trade and military opportunities offered by emerging maritime route shortcuts in the Arctic Ocean towards the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea. Because of the melting ice, a journey via the Arctic Ocean towards European ports such as Antwerp or Rotterdam could soon become a reality, thus reducing travelling costs. Moreover, Russia would have more leverage when controlling the area with increased military capacities.

Russia has become increasingly versatile in its activities in securing control over trade routes and has also ramped up the development of its fleet of nuclear powered-icebreakers. This permits Russia to be less reliant on the limited refuelling capacities of the region and thus enable it to increase its surveillance in the region and facilitate trade and military circulation. Besides, Russia has currently more than 40 icebreaker ships while Canada has 19 and the US only two. As Mr.Ashby mentions, Russia has further developed airbases, radar installations and missile defences in order to respond to the challenges of its rivals.

However, both Canada and the US have reacted to this challenge by cooperating together. In 2022, the US and Canada have joined forces in reinvigorating the NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) by a joint upgrade of nuclear missile detection systems, radar coverage in the Arctic Circle and also a modernization of Canadian air capabilities in the Arctic. This year, Canada and the US alongside Finland have signed the ICE Pact in order to increase shipbuilding capacities of the Western Allies in the wake of friction with Russia.

Nonetheless, the current tide of events has proved to be a slap in the face for both countries as they had regarded the Arctic region as a marginal hinterland or merely as a region of resources but with limited geopolitical importance since the end of the Cold War. Both Canada and the US have to adapt quickly in terms of capabilities and must engage with NATO allies in order to maintain control of resources and diplomatic bargaining positions.

Canada and the US, frenemies in the future?

We have seen that Canada and the US are cooperating on numerous platforms but the thawing of the Arctic has also caused diplomatic friction between the two countries. The stakes have been high as the legal dispute over the Northwest Passage has been unresolved since 1969. Canada claims that the passage belongs to its internal waters while the US believes that it lies in international waters. For the US, the perspective of Canada's claim being upheld would not be very beneficial as Canada would retain its right to block access to the passage and could potentially charge fees for passing ships. With a largely ice-free Arctic summer in the near future, the dispute risks escalation between the two countries.

All in all, in order for Canada and the US to remain important players in the region both in economic and military terms, both countries must find a way to find agreements and compromise in these fields in the wake of increased presence of rivals such as Russia and potentially even China in the future.

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