



THE ARCTIC, A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

"If someone tried to invade the Canadian Arctic, my first instinct would be to come to his rescue". This statement from Canadian General Walter Natynczyk in November 2009 illustrates the complexities of the Far North. While interest in the region and its natural resources grows continuously (hydrocarbons, tourism, minerals, shipping routes...), we are still far from mastering this universe. Everything remains to be done.

WHITE GOLD?

During the Cold War, interest in the Arctic Ocean was primarily strategic. The two superpowers were facing each other, separated by the Bering Strait, only 92 km apart. As early as 1959, an American submarine broke through the ice at the pole, making the threat of a nuclear winter credible. The end of the Cold War marked a disinterest in the area and, it would not be till 2007 that the world would be reminded of the Far North when an expedition planted a Russian flag at the bottom of the ocean.

All interests and desires were suddenly awakened in 2008 when the United States Geological Survey published its report about the estimated resources in the region: a fifth of world oil reserves yet to be discovered would be hidden there. While these figures are now scaled down, the race was launched: we want to conquer the frozen ocean.

Indeed, melting ice opens up new possibilities in the use of the seas, soil and subsoil. Many resources (minerals, oil and gas) become accessible and fish stocks grow as numerous species migrate to cooler waters in the Arctic due to climate warming.

The gradual disappearance of sea ice provides the ability to navigate the region (using the Northeast Passage along the West Canada and the Northern Sea Route along Russia) foreshadowing a significant reduction in navigation time between Asia and Europe, while also becoming a popular tourist destination.

HOSTILE AND FRAGILE WORLD

However, this operation can encounter a number of difficulties and successful achievement is far from being guaranteed. The Arctic Ocean is a harsh environment for men and material: navigating in polar waters requires purpose built ships, equipment and knowledge and can only be considered for a short period of time. Moreover, its real economic interest must be put in perspective, the gain in time is not necessarily the key decision factor in choosing a sea route: it is often more important for owners to have many ports on a single road to make transit profitable.

Finally, installing oil platforms that can withstand the movement of the ice remains a real challenge.

In an environment both fragile and dangerous, the human presence and the exploitation of the region can destabilize the established equilibrium. Growing human presence increases the risk that an incident can turn into disaster in an area where fast rescue cannot be expected.

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE ARCTIC?

There are many conflicts around boundaries and other legal issues that remain to be solved in the region: overlapping exclusive economic zones, agreement over the extension of the continental shelf, legal status of the Northwest Passage and the North Road (Canada considers it an inner sea while other countries, U.S. in mind, see it as an international strait). All these problems that seemed buried with the Cold War returned to the front of the stage. Russia and Canada have already submitted their applications before the commission of the continental shelf.

The future of the Arctic remains to be built. The unpredictability of climate change, the multiplicity of actors and political positions, and the potential disregard for the environment make this ocean a promise that cannot be taken for granted.



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