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**Balance of Power :** The concept of explaining the International Order by looking at it primarily as a system where power is constantly ebbing and flowing, and where individual states, if not the entire International order, seeks to maintain peace through balancing power.

There was certainly a belief in this approach to what we now term International Relations in the nineteenth Century and into the early days of the twentieth, with the emphasis primarily on balancing military power [1]. Some academics argue that Balance of Power is a totally pervasive and indispensable concept in explaining the way the world functions that it provides the nearest thing there is to a political theory of how the world functions at the state level [2].

But Balance of Power politics is not in vogue among western political scientists or students of International Relations as a tool for examining the interaction of state actors in the international arena: It has been consigned to the history books and replaced with more exciting ideas such as post-modernism, neo-liberalism and constructivism. There are, of course, exceptions: Diplomats still more overtly think in terms of Balance of Power than those looking at International Relations, and while it may be out of vogue in the West, it can be contended that Russia still thinks very much in such terms, and her foreign policy can be best explained by it (as indeed it has done for two centuries).

In the instance of the Arctic, it may be too soon – and too simple – to dismiss this seemingly arcane method of seeing the world: Potential disputes in the Arctic display all the symptoms of Great Power politics that a Nineteenth Century statesman would have recognised, and it is perhaps helpful to think of the region as a Balance of Power issue. In particular, the future governorship and exploitation of the Arctic could well lead to stand-offs, negotiations and military expansions more akin to the Cold War – or the 1880s - than to the present day. There seems to me to be three primary reasons for this renewed, if presently specialised, interest in the Arctic region, driven almost exclusively by melting of the Arctic ice cap: fish, natural resources [3], and navigation.

First, though, a word about perceptions. Think about the world and, ignoring a globe, the image that will most readily come to mind is that formed by what is known as a Mercator Projection, invariably with North at the top and either the centre of the Atlantic ocean or the Greenwich Meridian (itself an entirely arbitrary line – see Dava Sobel's highly readable book *Longitude*) in the middle. If one instead thinks of the world viewed from a point above the North Pole and our perceptions alter radically; when thinking of the Arctic region, it is useful to get away from the conventional, north upwards vision.

Next, it is useful to examine the present regime that governs the Arctic. The Antarctic is subject to a treaty (written in language highly reminiscent of the United Nations Charter) which

effectively restricts activity south of the 60th parallel to scientific exploration, bans nuclear experiments and the dumping of nuclear waste, and limits (to the point of banning) territorial claims. Full copy of the text of the original 1959 treaty can be found on the British Antarctic website at: [http://www.antarctica.ac.uk/about\\_antarctica/geopolitical/treaty/update\\_1959.php](http://www.antarctica.ac.uk/about_antarctica/geopolitical/treaty/update_1959.php). Not so the Arctic: Here the region is sectorised according to the coastline length of those nations that abut the Arctic, hence the US (thanks to Alaska), Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Norway and Russia form the Arctic Five (or A5). Given that the Arctic was explored (and to a degree exploited) much earlier than the Antarctic, given that the shortest route for an ICBM from the prairies of the mid-West to Central Russia was over the pole, and given that the northern hemisphere has traditionally been more populated than the southern, and the difference between the two governance regimes is understandable.

But the present governance regime introduces tensions. First, the EU has, other than through Denmark, no voice in what many see as a zone of vast, and increasing, economic (and therefore political) potential and relevance. Likewise, China, not having any Arctic coastline, has no direct say in Arctic affairs: One wonders why they feel the need to have a scientific station on Svalbard in the (Norwegian) high Arctic? Tensions may surface if Greenland extends its semi-autonomous status and moves towards complete independence from Denmark. There are signs of tensions even between the US and Canada over the former's seeming lack of interest in the region and the latter's determination not to be subordinated to its richer and more powerful neighbour to the south and west. Above all, there is Russia: isolated since the other four nations are NATO members and long-standing western liberal democracies; seeking a place in the world; mourning the passing of its moment of power; and, perhaps, prey to the insecurities to which she seems frequently bound.

The A5 struggle to maintain civil relations - albeit that at an individual state-to-state level cooperation does seem to exist: Norway and Russia, long uneasy neighbours cooperating over fishing, Canada and Russia over the provision of ice-breakers. Meanwhile, the larger Arctic Council (the A5 plus Finland, Iceland and Sweden – see: <http://www.arctic-council.org/>) seems little more than a talking shop.

Meanwhile, Russia seems increasingly to be flexing her muscles in the region (see Patrick Nopens' article in the series on Russia on [www.ukdf.org.uk](http://www.ukdf.org.uk)) in a manner that resonates with Great Power politics and can be best understood by looking at the region in terms of Balance of Power. For example, her actions in planting a Russian flag on the seabed under the geographic North Pole have been variously categorised as a scientific undertaking, an overt military threat, a gesture of nationalism and a play to adjust the balance of power in the polar region. Moreover, Russia is exploring the region actively for natural resource, most overtly hydrocarbon, reserves (more on this shortly) and is disputing a number of boundaries, particularly in relation to the continental shelf [4]. Meanwhile, it should be remembered that not only does Russia have long experience of operating in Arctic waters, but has the world's largest fleet of nuclear-powered ice-breakers. Indeed, it is the size, specifically the beam, of these ice-breakers that may become a driving factor were the far North to open up to commercial ship passage. And allied to this point, Russia is asserting ever more strongly her territorial claims so that if the Northern Sea Route does become even more viable for commercial shipping, she has made it clear that she will retain an economic interest in the passageway – especially if she is providing a service of

keeping the route ice-free thanks to her ice-breaker fleet.

What, then, of the financial drivers? The first is fish: Across the world, fish stocks are plummeting and therefore a major source of protein for an ever-expanding population is in decline. Meanwhile, as sea temperatures continue to rise, the remainder of the once-great northern waters fish shoals (think of the numbers of cod once caught off the Grand Banks) are migrating ever further northward, into the Arctic region. In parallel, as sea ice retreats due to broader climate change, the hitherto isolated Arctic fish stocks are themselves coming into the reach of commercial exploitation. While not the most important commercial driver for change, fish nevertheless has the possibility of providing a flashpoint for disputes – after all, Britain and Iceland clashed in the mid-1970s over his very point, albeit in a different geographic area.

Second, and clearly the issue with the largest financial potential, are natural resources and the hydrocarbon sector - especially oil - in particular. While not universally accepted (there are issues with the reliability of the seismic data) it is generally agreed that there are very significant oil reserves off the northern coasts, and that as technology further improves and demand requires accessing hitherto inaccessible regions, we will seek to exploit these reserves. The issue of oil exploration and exploitation in the Far North is subject to significant criticism: not only are there significant technological and meteorological challenges to overcome, but the very fragility of the Arctic eco-system has led to several calls to ban oil exploration in the region. Fears abound that a major leak (think BP's Deepwater Horizon platform in the Gulf of Mexico) would have catastrophic consequences for the region's wildlife. Whether such concerns will ever outweigh the global thirst for oil remains a moot point, but access to oil fields and their agreed or disputed delineation has a long track-record of engendering disputes. Meanwhile, new technologies (certain aspects of the IT industry for example) are increasing demands for certain natural resources (sometimes referred to as rare earths) and the Arctic is rich in many of these, such as the manganese nodules already mentioned; mining for these minerals face many, if not all, of the same challenges and inherent environmental risks, as for oil drilling and extraction.

Finally, as has already been suggested, access to the North West Passage [5] may well become a significant issue. There are already small-scale uses of the route, with an increasing number of ice-strengthened heavy-lift vessels being ordered by commercial companies. The potential savings for these companies is clear: A journey from Rotterdam to Korea via the Northern Sea Route would be roughly half the distance that a sailing through the Suez Canal would require. Since 2008, small but increasing numbers of vessels have made the passage through these northern waters during the brief ice-free season (roughly June – September), albeit ice-free is something of a misnomer as they have all been assisted, to a greater or lesser extent, by Russian ice-breakers. For one company in particular the appeals are obvious: the A P Moller-Maersk Group (more popularly known simply as Maersk) is the world's largest container ship operator, and a significant proportion of their operations (such as from the West Coast of America to Europe, or from Europe to the Far East) would directly benefit from such a shortened route. Furthermore, with goods in containers, many of them above deck, the potential for an environmental disaster in the event of a hull breach are significantly less than for a bulk-carrier shipping, say, crude oil.

But where this plays out acutely in terms of Balance of Power politics is that Maersk is a Danish company with its headquarters in Copenhagen. Therefore it is in the interests of both the Danish government and the Danish people to avoid antagonising Russia in relation to the Arctic region, even if this risks upsetting America, the leading Western power and leader of NATO, of which Denmark remains a member. There are other clashes of interests between the A5, most notably between Canada and America: primarily this is a dispute over the status of the North west Passage, but both territorial claims (relating to the Alaskan continental shelf) and America's lack of ice-breaking capability have caused tensions between these two normally fully cooperative neighbours. While there are again echoes here of Balance of Power issues it is the relationship – starkly illustrated as a power game - between Russia and Denmark that most catches the eye.

In conclusion, three points. Climate change is allowing far greater access to the Arctic region which in turn opens new fishing grounds to a world hungry for protein to feed its ever-expanding population; offers enticing new sources of natural resources (most publicly oil); and holds the potential for considerable economic gains for the transportation sectors via the North east and North West Passages. Second, notwithstanding the clear and potentially catastrophic dangers to the fragile Arctic environment from such exploitation, there is a definite potential for international instability in the Arctic region. For not only has the region been largely ignored by security scholars (and to a large extent practitioners) since the end of the Cold War, but its weak governance and ill-defined international status leave too many questions unanswered and affords what may be dangerous degrees of latitude by the main contenders as the struggle for economic advantage of power continue. Third, for these reasons the region demands more – and better – consideration by the international community, and perhaps the best way is to dust-off the unfashionable branch of politics and geo-political analysis known as Balance of Power as a tool for explaining the implicit power struggle in the Arctic. Russia has the upper hand in the region and seems determined to maintain her grip in the far North; the question is how the world will accommodate the Russian bear and maintain a balance of power in the Arctic region.

#### Notes

1. The expansion of the Royal Navy from the late 1880s, under the rubric of the "two-power standard" (where the Royal Navy had to be equal or superior to the combined forces of the next two largest navies) is an excellent example of this thinking. See: Tarak Barkawi, *Globalization and War* (Rowman and Littlefield, Maryland, 2006), p. 100.

2. Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations* (Penguin Books, London, 1998), p. 41.

3 Most media attention has been on oil, but other natural resources, for example manganese nodules, offer potential huge economic rewards.

4 The current limitation is 200nm off the coast, but countries that have signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) have 10 years to lodge a case to have this extended (claims to be submitted by 2014). The specific Russian claim is in relation to the definition of the Siberian continental shelf.

5 More accurately, the Northern Sea Route that follows the Northern coastline of Russia. However, to avoid confusion, the terms North East Passage (following the Russian coastline) and North West Passage (following the Canadian Northern coastline) are used here.