

A CZECH ARCTIC STRATEGY? NO LONGER A CRAZY IDEA

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29. 10. 2018

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Being far from the Arctic is no longer an excuse for ignoring it. With self-described “near-Arctic” nations ranging from the Asian powers of China and India to European counties such as Switzerland, Italy, and Spain all announcing their Arctic policies, the Czech Republic also should consider formulating and articulating an Arctic strategy.

The Arctic is rapidly becoming a contested area. Wishing that the Arctic might remain aloof from great power competition will not make it so. Foundational principles for a Czech Arctic policy should be grounded in realism, and include platforms on economic and industrial development, multi-lateral cooperation, scientific research, the human and environmental dimension, and countering Russian – and to some extent Chinese – aggression.

Approaching the Arctic as a pristine wilderness to be protected at all costs is to ignore what is already underway. The Czech Republic should expand its involvement to a multi-dimensional approach including government, industry, and military.

Introduction

In January of 2017, Czech researchers Barbora Padrtová and Zuzana Trávníčková spoke at a closed expert seminar on “The Arctic: Emerging Importance of the Region for the Czech Republic,” under the auspices of the Czech Institute of International Relations. The two also authored a white paper on the political, security, economic, and scientific aspects of the Arctic, ushering in the notion of Czech national interests in the Arctic. The idea might once have seemed far-fetched for a non-maritime state located below the Arctic Circle. But an interesting alignment of recent events suggests that the Czech Republic, as a mid-level European power, must step up its engagement in this newly active region.

The recent NATO exercise Trident Juncture 18 (in which the Czechs took part) is a good indication of how the security situation in the Arctic is changing. The biggest NATO exercise since the Cold War, it included 65 ships, 250 aircraft, 10,000 vehicles and 50,000 personnel. For the first time since 1987, the U.S. sent a Navy aircraft carrier strike group with the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman. Such an enormous effort is not an accident, nor is the exercise’s location in Norway. According to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the exercise comes in response to the fact that the security environment in Europe has deteriorated.

Russia and the Contested Arctic

The difference, of course, is Russia, a nation which has embraced its Arctic heritage with an intensity unmatched by other countries. Since the 2014 invasion of Crimea and resulting sanctions, Russia has intensified its Arctic focus and occasionally found a capable and well-heeled partner in China. Russia, more than any other country, has militarized the Arctic.

In recent years, Russia unveiled a new Arctic command, four new Arctic brigade combat teams, 14 new operational airfields, and 6 ports. It is supplementing its fleet of roughly 40 icebreakers with five more in construction and six more planned. Russia has the good fortune to control the North Sea Route (NSR), which lies within its 200-mile Economic Exclusion Zone. While the route is still open for only part of the year, the warming Arctic waters mean ships that would normally transit through the Panama or Suez canals can shave many days off their voyages by taking the newly open Arctic shortcut. This unexpected dividend allows Russia to flex some economic muscle – Putin has required that all ships transiting the NSR must be escorted by Russian ships, for which they pay a hefty fee.

Hardly a good neighbor, Russia has made mischief through cyberattacks on Arctic and Baltic countries; invaded other countries’ airspace, bullied the Baltic states, and increased its submarine activity. Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are frequently harassed by Russian military activity near or within their territorial waters.

Enter China, a boon to the cash-strapped Russians, with its need for Russian gas and oil and the wherewithal to pay for them. China, which published its first Arctic strategy white paper earlier this year, sees the melting Arctic as an ope-

ning for a Polar Silk Road. It is investing throughout the region and has recently set its sights on Greenland as a base from which to extract minerals – but perhaps also as a place to build a permanent presence. Its newest icebreaker, Snow Dragon 2, is just the beginning. Next up is its first nuclear-powered icebreaker.

The Response Across Europe

The bellicose behavior of Russia in the Arctic and High North has not gone unnoticed. Longstanding neutral countries such as Sweden and Finland have become “Enhanced Opportunity Partners” in NATO, and both fully participated in Trident Juncture 18. Finland offered an air base 150 km from Russia’s Kola Peninsula and contributed significant air power along with 2,400 personnel. Sweden hosted U.S. Air Force F-16 fighters and contributed about 2,200 soldiers to the exercise.

Sweden seems to be inching ever-closer to full NATO membership. For the first time in 20 years, it hosted its own exercise, Aurora 17. It announced that it would increase its military forces from 50,000 to 120,000 and introduced conscription to help it reach those numbers. It plans to buy 60 next generation Saab Grippen fighter jets and additional submarines. It will significantly increase its military spending from its current level, a bit over one percent of GDP. Recent polls show 45 percent of Swedes favor full NATO membership, a proportion that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier. Former Prime Minister Carl Bildt wrote “with no time to waste, Scandinavia is finally breaking fully with the Cold War era doctrine of neutrality, and embracing a more prudent and proactive defense policy.” The catalyst for all this is Russia.

Other countries, too, are re-examining their military strength in the Arctic. Britain just issued a parliamentary report, “On Thin Ice,” warning that the U.K. must beef up its defensive forces in the region and end its current era of what the report called “benign neglect.” As an initial step, the U.K. will make permanent its current practice of sending 800 Royal Marines for cold weather training in Norway by making the training joint with Norway, keeping the Marines there on a long-term basis, and integrating them into Norway’s defense plans.

Norway clearly sees itself on the front lines of any Arctic conflict with Russia. In addition to the British contingent, it has also welcomed more than 700 U.S. Marines for ongoing cold-weather training. Worth noting, its hit fictional television series “Occupied,” is about a Russian invasion of Norway, a telling measure of what viewers consider plausible.

Iceland has reopened Keflavik airbase (shuttered back in 2006) to host U.S. Poseidon P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, and the U.S. is spending \$35 million in upgrades to Keflavik.

Poland is buying more gear, opening a 4th division, and offering to pay \$2 billion to have a permanent U.S. military presence on its territory.

The New Arctic Reality

Climate change and rapidly melting seawater are the catalysts that have suddenly brought the region to life. New trade routes, oil, gas, and mineral exploration,

and the voice of those who live in the High North and Arctic are all increasingly a part of international dialogues. The Czech Republic, as a European mid-level power, and by virtue of its membership in both NATO and the EU, has a stake in these discussions.

The Arctic Council, a consensual governing body of the eight nations with territory north of the Arctic Circle, finds itself in a situation in which its members are far outnumbered by some 39 observers – in the form of inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary bodies, non-governmental organizations, and 13 individual nations, including the European countries of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Poland, and Switzerland.

The Council has been surprisingly successful, racking up small but significant victories. And other efforts at Arctic diplomacy resulted in the passage of the Polar Code, promulgated by the International Maritime Organization, which sets standards on search and rescue obligations of signatories. A fishing moratorium on the central Arctic was recently signed by all Arctic Council members.

It is hard to overstate the human level of disruption posed by melting ice and newly opening seaways. The same routes that appeal to the world's biggest shipping companies also attract increasing numbers of tourist cruise ships and research craft. Thawing ice has made life harder for the wildlife who depend on it and for communities who rely on subsistence hunting. Rising seawaters and/or menacing icebergs have forced entire communities to relocate to higher ground. National borders are irrelevant for these issues, which lend themselves to multilateral solutions.

After 1989, the Czechs proved their multi-lateral spirit by rushing to join the EU, NATO, the OECD, and many other international bodies. It would be natural for the Czechs to pursue observer status in the Arctic Council, especially now that landlocked Switzerland has paved the way. And with other emphatically non-Arctic members such as Japan, Korea, and Singapore, the prerequisites have clearly changed. The Czechs could well find a natural role championing the cause of the Arctic people, having long championed the rights of those far from the heart of Europe. The Czech Republic's recent election to the UN's Human Rights Council is recognition of its interest in the welfare of all the world's people.

Thinking Beyond the Maritime Domain

Some would prefer to see the Arctic as a pristine, near-uninhabited area in which nature might be studied by a few hardy researchers, but the truth is that the Arctic is becoming ground zero for the same great power competition seen elsewhere. Should the waters continue to open, shipping and industrial development will increase, bringing with it challenges to the environment and people.

The Arctic is the world's smallest ocean, and is ringed by the coastlines of five nations. The only entrance at the Pacific side is the 55-mile Bering Strait. The Barents Sea, on the European side, is much wider, but can also be a choke point. Filling in the automatically granted 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zones significantly diminishes the size. Add to that the still-to-be adjudicated Conti-

mental Shelf claims, some of which are extravagant, and the unclaimed remainder is small indeed.

But the Arctic is far more than an ocean. It is home to 4 million humans, ranging from Russian urbanites in Murmansk to Laplanders in Finland, Greenlanders in Nuuk, Norwegians in Tromsø and Inuit villagers in Canada and the U.S. For many small and vulnerable communities, their subsistence way of life is fading along with the melting ice.

Although they are interlinked, it is the land, as well as the sea, that supports unique flora and fauna. The three shipping routes through the Arctic – the North Sea Route along Russia's coast, the Northwest Route along Alaska and Canada, and the hypothetical for now transpolar route, will bring increasing numbers of seacraft with a variety of purposes – military, industrial, scientific, and touristic. As the Arctic continues its erratic cycle of freezing and thawing, support for those ships will occur on land, and in the air.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Czech Republic's involvement in the Arctic has been admittedly recent. If one discounts Jára Cimrman's historic but undocumented 1908 expedition to the North Pole, that leaves to Miroslav Jakeš the undisputed title as the first Czechoslovak to reach the North Pole in 1993. An earlier and ill-fated expedition in 1928 aboard the airship "Italia" included Czechoslovak physicist Frantisek Behounek, but apart from that, one has to look long and hard to find much of a historic Czech Arctic presence.

Much has changed since then. The Arctic will always be a maritime domain, but the increasing accessibility of the land surrounding it may be even more important. The Czech Republic should adopt a whole-of-government approach to build an enduring Arctic presence as a means of extending its presence in Europe, capitalizing on its scientific skills, and fulfilling its destiny as a mid-level power. The Czech Republic should:

- ▶ seek observer status in the Arctic Council, begin developing a cadre of diplomats with experience in Arctic diplomacy, and consider naming an Arctic ambassador;
- ▶ join with other NATO High North and Arctic member states to counter Russian aggression, finding a non-maritime niche with land or air forces. To that end, it ought to invest more in defense;
- ▶ monitor the level of Russian and Chinese foreign direct investment to ensure it is in congruity with security and strategic aims;
- ▶ encourage a larger segment of its scientific community to expand the Svalbard presence begun in 2004 by the University of South Bohemia and invest in additional research in joint ventures including public/private ventures and;
- ▶ offer incentives to Czech industry, especially the mining sector, to explore and develop commercial opportunities in the region.

Skeptical Czechs should remember that coastal frontage is not the only determinant of Arctic interests. After all, in the U.S., it is only Alaska that has Arctic coastline, yet the U.S. interest in the Arctic is national.

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This project is supported by the U.S. Embassy in Prague through its Small Grants Program.

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