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Soon ships will be able to sail across an open Arctic Ocean during the summer months. The low humming of freight vessels will be a regular sound. The reduced presence of massive multi-year sea-ice is rapidly becoming a reality as the thicker and older ice is being exported from the region.

The thinner and more fragile seasonal sea-ice layer, partly replacing the old and thicker ice, is no match for modern icebreakers or even strengthened freight containers. A Norwegian cargo-ship has already traversed the Northeast Passage: faster than expected and without encountering any major challenges.

The increased shipping in the Arctic, tourism included, is just beginning. The escalation of the trend is certain. It is understandable: the distance saved by choosing the Northern Sea Route rather than the Panama strait shortens the journey between the Pacific and Atlantic Ocean by about one third (roughly 4,000 nautical miles) of the total.

The implications will be profound. The opening of new shipping-routes has throughout modern history been followed by major cultural and political change. So will it be with the Arctic. A harbinger of this change is that as the summer sea-ice margin withdraws northward and opens up more space for shipping, the interests of the oil companies are also drifting northwards. The factors driving this shift are twofold: oil wells further south are drying up, and the Barents Sea is becoming more accessible.

The levels of political (and geopolitical) conflict over the Arctic are still low. But much is at stake, and the environmental question is but one of many. A European Union report says that there is "a range of disagreements on issues within the international law of the sea..." concerning the Arctic marine area. The reality of an Arctic pushed into disequilibrium is that the climatic and the political feedback of instability seem likely to be far-reaching, perhaps even global (see "The effects of sea ice loss on biodiversity", Arctic Council, 5 April 2011).

The blue north

The resources of the Arctic are many and rich. The seabed contains considerable amounts of oil and natural gas. The prospect of minerals is frequently mentioned, especially rare-earth minerals that are in increasing demand now that China has announced that it will be reducing its exports.

A United States Geological Survey (USGS) report released in 2008 says that the Arctic seabed contains nearly 20% of the world's oil reserves and 30% of its gas reserves. Most of this is likely to be on the Russian side. But the uncertainties associated with these figures are large, because many of the areas have not yet been properly mapped. A detailed mapping of the seabed in the Barents Sea will reveal, if not the true potential, a more realistic picture.

An important development here is the Norwegian Oil Directorate's announcement on 1 April 2011 that Statoil has made its biggest gas and oil discovery for twenty years. The field is located in the Barents Sea; preliminary analysis suggests that it contains 25-40 standard million cubic metres of high quality oil and 2-7 standard billion cubic metres.

The European mainland relies on steady gas exported from Russia and Norway, making the question of future energy delivery per se a security question. The question of how safe that delivery will be in the future is fundamental. This is but one of the emerging Arctic-related issues whose geopolitical ripples are being felt in Europe's political core.

The fact that the European Union desires a stronger presence in the "high north" is no secret. The president of the European council, Herman von Rompey, delivered a speech in October 2010 - hosted by the International Polar Foundation (IPF) - in which he stated that the EU seeks observer status at the Arctic Council. This body - which currently consists of Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland Canada, the United States and Russia - is in demand; China is also eager to participate.

At the IPF meeting, von Rompey emphasised the strong research presence that the EU already has in the Arctic and wants to develop further. The union's aim for an increased role in the region is expressed in the European parliament's report A sustainable EU policy for the High North (formally approved on 20 January 2011).

The rising political interest in the Arctic is evident elsewhere. Norway's foreign-affairs minister Jonas Gahr Støre has repeatedly stated that the question of the High North represents the most important area of interest for the Norwegian government, and that it will become a new geopolitical focus in the near future. Sweden will assume the chair of the Arctic Council in June 2011, and is expected to launch an Arctic strategy some time during the year. This might speed up the process of getting the EU an observer status within the council.

But nature too will play a role in these calculations. It can interfere with, and even dictate, the course of politics, albeit in ways difficult or impossible to anticipate. The tsunami in Japan on 11 March 2011, with its huge impact on the domestic outlook as well as international trade, is a case in point.

Yet nature's frequent and powerful intervention in societies and the daily life of people is rarely factored in when accounting for major political and societal shifts. The case of the Arctic - a large area suddenly and unexpectedly made available for exploitation - has few if any historical parallels. It may be compared to the Klondike gold-rush in California or the scramble for Africa, and in contemporary terms to the prospective contest over Antarctica. In the latter respect, how the Arctic experience is managed will create some kind of precedent for the southern vastness.

The rich arena

The rich resources and security concerns embedded in the Arctic (related as these are) underpin the European Union's interest in expanding its political presence in the region. The overlapping interests are significant here: Denmark, Finland and Sweden are members both of the Arctic Council and the EU, and Iceland may soon join the union).

The EU's own position on Icelandic membership states that it "underlines the need for a coordinated Arctic policy at EU level and represents a strategic opportunity for the EU to assume a more active role and contribute to multilateral governance in the Arctic region". The EU's wider objective is to become more of an "insider" to the Arctic.

There are two plausible avenues here. The first is for the EU to fund the giant polar-research vessel *Aurora Borealis*. This ship can be present in the Arctic year-around and conduct research in areas hitherto impossible. Such a major investment would both provide the EU with a unique research platform and heighten its political presence. A final decision awaits.

The second and broader avenue is to launch a major, long-term cross-disciplinary Arctic research programme that encompasses natural and social science alike, including all aspects of the presence of indigenous peoples.

It should be kept in mind that much of the Arctic is, in scientific terms, still uncharted territory. Many of the biological and physical processes operating in the Arctic are poorly understood, a point highlighted in a report of the International Oceanographic Commission (IOC), entitled *Why monitor the Arctic Ocean?* These sciences will play a major role in transforming knowledge and understanding of the Arctic, and thus enabling new ways of managing it.

An equally large impact is likely to come from increased trade, especially between neighbouring states. Shtokman Development AG, a consortium of three major companies - Total S.A. (France), Statoil (Norway) and Gazprom (Russia) - is a prime example. The company aims to produce 23.7 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year in the first phase, planned to last twenty-five years. A border settlement between Russia and Norway in September 2010, after forty years of we-agree-to-disagree, was clearly related to the Shtokman field. This has set in chain a series of bilateral trade and political deals between Arctic countries. This is another underlying reason for the EU and China to take a keener interest in the Arctic.

The race for the Arctic is one where science and trade are the forerunners, but where politics follow close behind. It represents a new ground for interactions that primarily, though but not exclusively, involve the eight countries claiming ownership. The scale of its oil-and-gas resources alone make it certain that it will develop into a centre of geopolitical gravity, where the environmental stakes will be huge.

The appearance of the Arctic, the desolate windswept icy landscape that resonates so profoundly with the idea of vulnerability and environmental sensitivity, is deeply ingrained in humanity's self-awareness. The day that pristine look is gone will open the Arctic in another sense: to be treated just like any other ocean on Earth.

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Source: [Open Democracy](#)