

Abstract

The increasing pace of climate change in the last two decades has brought the Arctic, a former geopolitical afterthought, into growing prominence on the global stage. Receding ice and melting tundra have made a cornucopia of rare earth metals and hydrocarbons ripe for extraction as well as opened new shipping lanes which have the potential to revolutionize how goods are moved around the planet. In this emerging environment is a budding balance of power which involves the most powerful actors in the world-system, two of which, the United States of America and the People's Republic of China, are the focus of this thesis. Their respective arctic policies shape the balance of power for not only themselves, but for all other actors in the theater. The United States' laissez faire attitude towards the Arctic has caused it to fall behind the progress of other powers in the region which could make it difficult to assert its influence in the theater in the future. China however has chosen to follow an ambitious arctic policy despite its geographical distance from the region, and has given the arctic a prominent position in its greater Belt and Road project, much to the suspicion of traditional arctic powers.

Analyzed through a realist lens, the balance of power in the Arctic appears to be stable for the time being as actors continue to fill in a vacuum of influence, allowing them to avoid maneuvers which might raise tensions to unacceptable levels. This stability though will not last forever. The Arctic is still revealing its bounty via the progression of climate change and as the vacuum fills the balance of power will begin to shift making conflict more likely.

The interconnected arctic dynamic and the emerging balance of power has yet to receive intensive study from academia, an oversight which this work aims to diminish, as well as prompt further research this increasingly important geopolitical region.