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The Pompeo Doctrine: How to Seize the Arctic's Resources, Now Accessible Due to Climate Change (Just Don't Mention Those Words!)

Donald Trump got the headlines as usual — but don't be fooled. It wasn't Trumpism in action this August, but what we should all now start referring to as the Pompeo Doctrine. Yes, I'm referring to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and, when it comes to the Arctic region, he has a lot more than buying Greenland on his mind.

In mid-August, as no one is likely to forget, President Trump surprised international observers by expressing an interest in purchasing Greenland, a semi-autonomous region of Denmark. Most commentators viewed the move as just another example of the president's increasingly erratic behavior. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen termed the very notion of such a deal “absurd,” leading Trump, in an outburst of pique, to call her comments “nasty” and cancel a long-scheduled state visit to Copenhagen.

A deeper look at that incident and related administration moves, however, suggests quite a different interpretation of what's going on, with immense significance for the planet and even human civilization. Under the prodding of Mike Pompeo, the White House increasingly views the Arctic as a key arena for future great-power competition, with the ultimate prize being an extraordinary trove of valuable resources, including oil, natural gas, uranium, zinc, iron ore, gold, diamonds, and rare earth minerals. Add in one more factor: though no one in the administration is likely to mention the forbidden term “climate change” or “climate crisis,” they all understand perfectly well that global warming is what's making such a resource scramble possible.

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This isn't the first time that great powers have paid attention to the Arctic. That region enjoyed some strategic significance during the Cold War period, when both the United States and the Soviet Union planned to use its skies as passageways for nuclear-armed missiles and bombers dispatched to hit targets on the other side of the globe. Since the end of that era, however, it has largely been neglected. Frigid temperatures, frequent storms, and waters packed with ice prevented most normal air and maritime travel, so — aside from the few Indigenous peoples who had long adapted to such conditions — who would want to venture there?

Climate change is, however, already altering the situation in drastic ways: temperatures are rising faster in the Arctic than anywhere else on the planet, melting parts of the polar ice cap and exposing once-inaccessible waters and islands to commercial development. Oil and natural gas reserves have been discovered in offshore areas previously (but no longer) covered by sea ice most of the year. Meanwhile, new mining opportunities are emerging in, yes, Greenland! Worried that other countries, including China and Russia, might reap the benefits of such a climate-altered landscape, the Trump administration has already launched an all-out drive to ensure American dominance there, even at the risk of future confrontation and conflict.

The scramble for the Arctic's resources was launched early in this century when the world's major energy firms, led by BP, ExxonMobil, Shell, and Russian gas giant Gazprom, began exploring for oil and gas reserves in areas only recently made accessible by retreating sea ice. Those efforts gained momentum in 2008, after the U.S. Geological Survey published a report, Circum-Arctic Resources Appraisal, indicating that as much as one-third of the world's undiscovered oil and gas lay in areas north of the Arctic Circle. Much of this untapped fossil fuel largess was said to lie beneath the Arctic waters adjoining Alaska (that is, the United States), Canada, Greenland (controlled by Denmark), Norway, and Russia — the so-called "Arctic Five."

Under existing international law, codified in the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), coastal nations possess the right to exploit undersea resources up to 200 nautical miles from their shoreline (and beyond if their continental shelf extends farther than that). The Arctic Five have all laid claim to "exclusive economic zones" (EEZs) in those waters or, in the case of the United States (which has not ratified UNCLOS), announced its intention to do so. Most known oil and gas reserves are found within those EEZs, although some are thought to be in overlapping or even contested areas beyond

that 200-mile limit, including the polar region itself. Whoever owns Greenland, of course, possesses the right to develop its EEZ.

For the most part, the Arctic Five have asserted their intent to settle any disputes arising from contested claims through peaceful means, the operating principle behind the formation in 1996 of the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental organization for states with territory above the Arctic Circle (including the Arctic Five, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden). Meeting every two years, it provides a forum in which, at least theoretically, leaders of those countries and the Indigenous peoples living there can address common concerns and work towards cooperative solutions — and it had indeed helped dampen tensions in the region. In recent years, however, isolating the Arctic from mounting U.S. (and NATO) hostilities toward Russia and China or from the global struggle over vital resources has proven increasingly difficult. By May 2019, when Pompeo led an American delegation to the council's most recent meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, hostility and the urge to grab future resources had already spilled into the open.

Reaping the Arctic's Riches

Usually a forum for anodyne statements about international cooperation and proper environmental stewardship, the lid was blown off the latest Arctic Council meeting in May when Pompeo delivered an unabashedly martial and provocative speech that deserves far more attention than it got at the time. So let's take a little tour of what may prove a historic proclamation (in the grimmest sense possible) of a new Washington doctrine for the Far North.

“In its first two decades, the Arctic Council has had the luxury of focusing almost exclusively on scientific collaboration, on cultural matters, on environmental research,” the secretary of state began mildly. These were, he said, “all important themes, very important, and we should continue to do those. But no longer do we have that luxury. We're entering a new age of strategic engagement in the Arctic, complete with new threats to the Arctic and its real estate, and to all of our interests in that region.”

In what turned out to be an ultra-hardline address, Pompeo claimed that we were now in a new era in the Arctic. Because climate change — a phrase Pompeo, of course, never actually uttered — is now making it ever more possible to exploit the region's vast resource riches, a scramble to gain control of them is now officially underway. That competition for resources has instantly become enmeshed in a growing geopolitical confrontation between the U.S., Russia, and China, generating new risks of conflict.

On the matter of resource exploitation, Pompeo could hardly contain his enthusiasm. Referring to the derision that greeted William Seward's purchase of Alaska in 1857, he declared:

“Far from the barren backcountry that many thought it to be in Seward's time, the Arctic is at the forefront of opportunity and abundance. It houses 13% of the world's undiscovered oil, 30% of its undiscovered gas, and an abundance of uranium, rare earth minerals, gold, diamonds, and millions of square miles of untapped resources.”

Of equal attraction, he noted, was the possibility of vastly increasing maritime commerce through newly de-iced trans-Arctic trade routes that will link the Euro-Atlantic region with Asia. “Steady reductions in sea ice are opening new passageways and new opportunities for trade,” he enthused. “This could potentially slash the time it takes to travel between Asia and the West by as much as 20 days... Arctic sea lanes could come [to be] the 21st century's Suez and Panama Canals.” That such “steady reductions in sea ice” are the sole consequence of climate change went unmentioned, but so did another reality of our warming world. If the Arctic one day truly becomes the northern equivalent of a tropical passageway like the Suez or Panama canals, that will likely mean that parts of those southerly areas will have become the equivalents of uninhabitable deserts.

As such new trade and drilling opportunities arise, Pompeo affirmed, the United States intends to be out front in capitalizing on them. He then began bragging about what the Trump administration had already accomplished, including promoting expanded oil and gas drilling in offshore waters and also freeing up “energy exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge,” a pristine stretch of northern Alaska prized by environmentalists as a sanctuary for migrating caribou and other at-risk species. Additional efforts to exploit the region's vital resources, he promised, are scheduled for the years ahead.

A New Arena for Competition (and Worse)

Ideally, Pompeo noted placidly, competition for the Arctic's resources will be conducted in an orderly, peaceful manner. The United States, he assured his listeners, believes in “free and fair competition, open, by the rule of law.” But other countries, he added ominously, especially China and Russia, won't play by that rulebook much of the time and so must be subject to careful oversight and, if need be, punitive action.

China, he pointed out, is already developing trade routes in the Arctic, and establishing economic ties with key nations there. Unlike the United States (which already has multiple military bases in the Arctic, including one at Thule in Greenland, and so has a well-established presence there), Pompeo claimed that Beijing is surreptitiously using such supposedly economic activities for military purposes, including, heinously enough, spying on U.S. ballistic missile submarines operating in the region, while intimidating its local partners into acquiescence.

He then cited events in the distant South China Sea, where the Chinese have indeed militarized a number of tiny uninhabited islands (outfitting them with airstrips, missile batteries, and the like) and the U.S. has responded by sending its warships into adjacent waters. He did so to warn of similar future military stand-offs and potential clashes in the Arctic. “Let’s just ask ourselves, do we want the Arctic Ocean to transform into a new South China Sea, fraught with militarization and competing territorial claims?” The answer, he assured his listeners, is “pretty clear.” (And I’m sure you can guess what it is.) The secretary of state then wielded even stronger language in describing “aggressive Russian behavior in the Arctic.” In recent years, he claimed, the Russians have built hundreds of new bases in the region, along with new ports and air-defense capabilities. “Russia is already leaving snow prints in the form of army boots” there, a threat that cannot be ignored. “Just because the Arctic is a place of wilderness does not mean it should become a place of lawlessness. It need not be the case. And we stand ready to ensure that it does not become so.”

And here we get to the heart of Pompeo’s message: the United States will, of course, “respond” by enhancing its own military presence in the Arctic to better protect U.S. interests, while countering Chinese and Russian inroads in the region:

“Under President Trump, we are fortifying America’s security and diplomatic presence in the area. On the security side, partly in response to Russia’s destabilizing activities, we are hosting military exercises, strengthening our force presence, rebuilding our icebreaker fleet, expanding Coast Guard funding, and creating a new senior military post for Arctic Affairs inside of our own military.”

To emphasize the administration’s sincerity, Pompeo touted the largest NATO and U.S. Arctic military maneuvers since the Cold War era, the recently completed “Trident Juncture” exercise (which he incorrectly referred to as “Trident Structure”), involving some 50,000 troops. Although the official scenario for Trident Juncture spoke of an

unidentified “aggressor” force, few observers had any doubt that the allied team was assembled to repel a hypothetical Russian invasion of Norway, where the simulated combat took place.

Implementing the Doctrine

And so you have the broad outlines of the new Pompeo Doctrine, centered on the Trump administration’s truly forbidden topic: the climate crisis. In the most pugnacious manner imaginable, that doctrine posits a future of endless competition and conflict in the Arctic, growing ever more intense as the planet warms and the ice cap melts. The notion of the U.S. going nose-to-nose with the Russians and Chinese in the Far North, while exploiting the region’s natural resources, has clearly been circulating in Washington. By August, it had obviously already become enough of a commonplace in the White House (not to speak of the National Security Council and the Pentagon), for the president to offer to buy Greenland.

And when it comes to resources and future military conflicts, it wasn’t such a zany idea. After all, Greenland does have abundant natural resources and also houses that U.S. base in Thule. A relic of the Cold War, the Thule facility, mainly a radar base, is already being modernized, at a cost of some \$300 million, to better track Russian missile launches. Clearly, key officials in Washington view Greenland as a valuable piece of real estate in the emerging geopolitical struggle Pompeo laid out, an assessment that clearly wormed its way into President Trump’s consciousness as well.

Iceland and Norway also play key roles in Pompeo’s and the Pentagon’s new strategic calculus. Another former Cold War facility, a base at Keflavik in Iceland has been reoccupied by the Navy and is now being used in antisubmarine warfare missions. Meanwhile, the Marine Corps has stationed several hundred combat troops at bases near Trondheim, Norway, the first permanent deployment of foreign soldiers on Norwegian soil since World War II. In 2018, the Pentagon even reactivated the Navy’s defunct Second Fleet, investing it with responsibility for protecting the North Atlantic as well as the Arctic’s maritime approaches, including those abutting Greenland, Iceland, and Norway. Consider these signs of heating-up times.

And all of this is clearly just the beginning of a major buildup in and regular testing of the ability of the U.S. military to operate in the Far North. As part of Exercise Trident Juncture, for example, the aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman and its flotilla of support ships were sent into the Norwegian Sea, the first time a U.S. carrier battle group had sailed

above the Arctic Circle since the Soviet Union imploded in 1991. Similarly, Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer recently announced plans to send surface warships on trans-Arctic missions, another new military move. (U.S. nuclear submarines make such journeys regularly, sailing beneath the sea ice.)

The Irony of Arctic Melting

Although Secretary Pompeo and his underlings never mention the term climate change, every aspect of his new doctrine is a product of that phenomenon. As humanity puts more and more greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and global temperatures continue to rise, the Arctic ice cap will continue to shrink. That, in turn, will make exploitation of the region's abundant oil and natural gas reserves ever more possible, leading to yet more burning of fossil fuels, further warming, and ever faster melting. In other words, the Pompeo Doctrine is a formula for catastrophe.

Add to this obvious abuse of the planet the likelihood that rising temperatures and increasing storm activity will render oil and gas extraction in parts of the world ever less viable. Many scientists now believe that daytime summer temperatures in oil-producing areas of the Middle East, for instance, are likely to average 120 degrees Fahrenheit by 2050, making outdoor human labor of most sorts deadly. At the same time, more violent hurricanes and other tropical storms passing over the ever-warming waters of the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico could imperil the continuing operation of offshore rigs there (and in other similarly storm-prone drilling areas). Unless humanity has converted to alternative fuels by then, the Arctic may be viewed as the world's primary source of fossil fuels, only intensifying the struggle to control its vital resources.

Perhaps no aspect of humanity's response to the climate crisis is more diabolical than this. The greater the number of fossil fuels we consume, the more rapidly we alter the Arctic, inviting the further extraction of just such fuels and their contribution to global warming. With other regions increasingly less able to sustain a fossil-fuel extraction economy, a continued addiction to oil will ensure the desolation of the once-pristine Far North as it is transformed into a Pompeo-style arena for burning conflict and civilizational disaster.

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