

An Emerging Challenge: Combating Illicit Activities in the Arctic

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I. Introduction

The Arctic Council, which includes the United States, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden (also referred to as the A8), was formed as a result of the Ottawa Declaration in 1996.¹ In April 2015, the United States became the next chair of the Arctic Council and will do so for the next two years. As the Arctic region becomes more accessible to the A8 and other nations, which includes ice-free summers by 2050 according to scientists, it is an important time to ensure that the Arctic sea lanes are being used legally and respectfully.²

Because of the increase accessibility of the Arctic as a result of the melting ice, there will be greater human access to the region with the potential for increased maritime transport, greater exploitation of natural resources such as oil and gas, minerals, and fisheries, and increased tourism from around the world. With the rise in maritime activity, it is likely that criminals and other actors will seek to take advantage of a more accessible Arctic by finding new trade routes to ship illicit goods such as drugs, weapons, and humans. As referenced in Canada's report on its Arctic foreign policy, increased access to the Arctic while positive, "may also contribute to...potential illegal activities."³ The Arctic is of strategic importance for all of the eight nations that make up the region, therefore, unified efforts should be made to combat illicit activities in the High North.

Bolstering Arctic cooperation on preventing and deterring illicit activities will require a cohesive maritime strategy. An element of such an approach involves information-sharing among the Arctic nations, which can provide a greater opportunity to locate, respond to, and police illicit activity. Additionally, many Arctic nations, especially the United States, will

¹ "About the Arctic Council." Arctic Council, 2015, <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/arctic-council/about-arctic-council>.

² "Arctic Nearly Free of Summer Sea Ice during First Half of 21st Century." *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*. 12 Apr. 2013, http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2013/20130412_arcticseaice.html.

³ "Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy: Exercising Sovereignty and Promoting Canada's Northern Strategy Abroad." Page 3. Government of Canada, http://www.international.gc.ca/arctic-arctique/assets/pdfs/canada_arctic_foreign_policy-eng.pdf.

need to persuade their governments to fund these efforts through the development of Arctic infrastructure and technology. Without proper funding, it will be challenging for a regional strategy to be effective and thus, will leave open the chance for criminals to threaten maritime activity and indigenous populations in the Arctic.

The High North provides significant strategic and economic opportunities for the Arctic nations and many others in the international community. Because maritime activity is projected to increase significantly within the next few decades, the Arctic nations need to collaborate with one another to ensure that the region remains safe and protected from illicit activities and crime. As stated in an assessment prepared by Canada's Integrated Threat Assessment Centre, "vessels with links to human smuggling, drug trafficking, and organized crime have attempted to access the Canadian Arctic."⁴ Therefore, efforts need to be pursued in the near-term by the Arctic states to develop a holistic, comprehensive approach to combat potential illegal trafficking in the Arctic.

II. The Problem: Trafficking of Humans, Drugs, and Arms

Organized crime in the Arctic has been an existing problem and continues to be a growing concern for Arctic nations. For instance, Canada has been dealing with human trafficking in several remote areas located within the Arctic Circle.⁵ Human trafficking continues to be a global challenge and it is likely that newly accessible maritime routes in the Arctic may worsen the situation. Human traffickers are currently exploiting the maritime domain by using vessels to transport the victims of human trafficking. Also, smugglers and traffickers are using passenger ferries as a way to transport people across bodies of water by hiding their victims in crates to avoid detection from officials.⁶

Additionally, narcotics and drug smuggling are concerning issues for Arctic nations. The United States, which is an Arctic nation because of Alaska, has been dealing with illegal drug manufacturing sites, which increases the importance for the U.S. Coast and other law enforcement agencies to secure cargo passing through maritime routes near Alaska.⁷ Russia

⁴ "Arctic Terror Threats Real: Security Agencies." *CBCnews*. CBC/Radio Canada, 10 Nov. 2010, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/arctic-terror-threats-real-security-agencies-1.868895>.

⁵ Roy, Heather. "Canada's Inuit face human trafficking fears," *Al Jazeera*, March 15, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/canada-inuit-facehuman-trafficking-fears-2014313112152462536.html>.

⁶ McGill, C. *Human Traffic*. London, UK: Vision Paperbacks. (2003).

⁷ "Illegal Drug Manufacturing Sites." *State of Alaska*. 2011, http://dec.alaska.gov/spar/ppr/methlab/methlab_listing.htm.

has also become aware of the potential dangers of a more accessible Arctic. According to the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, a “surge in navigation and resource exploitation raises the probability of environmental and human security hazards, and it increases as well the vulnerability of Russia’s northern border, which previously had the benefit of the Arctic ice’s natural protection, to...illicit trafficking.”⁸

Another illicit activity that is also troubling is the shipping of weapons. The world has seen arms smuggling in nearly every region, whether it be Iran shipping weapons to its proxies throughout the Middle East and to North Korea or other state actors using commercial shipping to transport light weapons to non-state actors in South America and Africa. To the extent that any of these weapons flows are originating from, or being delivered to, countries that could benefit from reduced shipping times through the Arctic trade routes, the Arctic nations would have to expect that they would do so. Therefore, arms smuggling probably will be an increasing issue of concern in the High North in the decades to come.

The challenges surrounding illicit activities in the Arctic region have been given limited attention, but greater demand on researching and documenting these acts is needed as the Arctic become more accessible. If illegal trafficking of humans, drugs, and arms is not dealt with in the present before Arctic ice-free summers, then it will be difficult to address this challenge and the impact it will have on global trading and security. Not only will regional cooperation be necessary to combat these issues, but the coast guards and law enforcement agencies of the Arctic nations must address their lack of capabilities to combat illicit activities meaningfully with existing resources and equipment in the Arctic.⁹

III. Recommendations: Regional Cooperation and Arctic Infrastructure

It is unlikely that significant momentum will be made on combatting illicit trafficking in the Arctic during the United States’ current Arctic Council Chairmanship. However, the Arctic nations can still contribute to meaningful steps in the near-term through bilateral and

⁸ Perry, Charles M., and Bobby Andersen. “Strategic Issues in the Arctic Region: Implications for National Security and International Collaboration.” Page 61. The Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Feb. 2012, <http://www.ifpa.org/pdf/StrategicDynamicsArcticRegion.pdf>.

⁹ Sturgis, Linda, Joel Smith, and Isaiah Reed. “The Arctic’s Changing Landscape: Addressing New Maritime Challenges.” Page 2. Center for a New American Security, Mar. 2014, http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_Arctic%E2%80%99sChangingLandscape_policybrief.pdf.



multilateral initiatives to ensure that the High North and its maritime routes are being used peacefully and legally by all state and non-state actors. A past example of such cooperation is the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) and its Task Force on combating human trafficking in the Barents Sea. The Task Force, which began in 2003, aims to identify and implement measures required to fulfil the goal of making a “concerted effort to stop trafficking in human beings in the Barents Region.”¹⁰ Currently, a similar regional task force does not exist in the western Arctic. Thus, it may be beneficial for the U.S., Canada, and Russia to emulate the BEAC and develop an initiative that provides regional cooperation through information-sharing and multilateral exercises to detect and prepare for interdictions of ships carrying illicit goods. Potential areas of concentration for a western Arctic task force could be the Beaufort Sea, and possibly the Chukchi Sea. Also, Arctic nations could use current anti-trafficking mechanisms to help combat such activities in the High North. One recommendation may be to cooperate with international governmental organizations, like the United Nations, World Customs Organization, and EUROPOL, to share information and best practices that can be applied to combating illicit activities in the Arctic.¹¹

Another potential opportunity for the A8 in combatting current and future illicit trafficking is through the newly developed Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF). The ACGF, comprised of all Arctic states and possibly observer states in the future, is a cooperative initiative with shared maritime interests in the Arctic such as strong search and rescue and oil spill response capabilities.¹² While focusing on these issues is important, using the ACGF as a platform to also address illicit activities in the Arctic may be beneficial as well. Plus, the ACGF could be used to introduce a database, similar to the Vessel & Maritime Incident Database produced by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), to share intelligence and document incidents regarding illegal smuggling. Such data could be helpful in locating future illicit shipping activities by understanding if there are patterns from where these incidents are occurring and identifying the “beneficial owner“ of a vessel is, or the

¹⁰ “Trafficking in Human Beings.” *Barents Euro-Arctic Council*. 2015, <http://www.beac.st/en/Documents/Documents/Trafficking-in-human-beings>.

¹¹ “A Comprehensive Strategy to Combating Illicit Trafficking.” Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, June 2010, <http://www.sipri.org/research/security/transport/files/existing-good-practice/united-states-4>.

¹² “Historic Arctic Coast Guard Forum Gathers Nations to Progressively to Foster Safe, Secure, and Environmentally Responsible Maritime Activity in the Arctic.” *U.S. Coast Guard Newsroom*. 26 Mar. 2015, <http://www.uscgnews.com/go/doc/4007/2484382/HISTORIC-ARCTIC-COAST-GUARD-FORUM-GATHERS-NATIONS-TO-PROGRESSIVELY-FOSTER-SAFE-SECURE-AND-ENVIRONMENTALLY-RESPONSIBLE-MARITIME-ACTIVITY-IN-THE-ARCTIC>.

ultimate owner of a ship and not necessarily the flag that is being flown.¹³

In addition to regional cooperation to address illicit activities in the Arctic, the need for certain infrastructure and equipment is required for any long-term capability to combat illegal smuggling in the region. One example of an Arctic state's lack of infrastructure that is needed to have an impactful role in maritime security in the region is the United States. For a state that looks to be a leader in the Arctic region, they continue to have little capacity to effectively operate in the region. Currently, the "United States lacks a persistent maritime surface and air presence in the region that would help to normalize interaction and cooperation with other Arctic states, including Russia."¹⁴ While some Arctic states have put forth more resources to developing Arctic infrastructure, more is needed from many of the Arctic states to provide enforcement against illicit smuggling.

IV. Conclusion

While efforts have been made to enhance regional cooperation in maritime security to combat illicit activities in the Arctic region, more initiative can be focused on these activities to secure the High North. It is significantly likely that shipping activity will increase in the coming decades as the Arctic ice melts. This change in the Arctic's accessibility, along with the global proliferation of illegal smuggling of humans, drugs, and arms, should warrant serious focus on deterring criminals from using the Arctic's trade routes to smuggle illegal goods and humans across the world.

As the United States chairs the Arctic Council for the next two years, cooperation among ministers, coast guards, and law enforcement agencies can provide opportunities for the A8 to develop a holistic framework to address these challenges. The Arctic region provides significant economic and strategic opportunities for the Arctic states and the world, therefore, efforts should be made to pursue a comprehensive regional strategy that focuses on combating illicit activities in the region. Because of the geopolitical importance of the Arctic region, developing the capabilities to prevent and deter illicit activities in the Arctic is

¹³ "Vessel and Maritime Incident Database." *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2015, <http://www.sipri.org/research/security/transport/vmid>.

¹⁴ Kraska, James. "Understanding Emerging Security Challenges." (2012): page 4. Center for a New American Security, Mar. 2014, http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_EmergingArcticSecurityChallenges_policybrief.pdf.



necessary to preserve the safety and security of the region for the future.

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