

Diplomatic Offensive On Arctic Is a Success

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Russia is clearly the major regional player in the Arctic. The northern sea route plays an important role in Russian transportation strategy, reducing the route from Europe to Asia by at least one-third of its length. The Arctic is also important for Russia's security equation, serving as a base for the country's Northern Fleet.

Russia's political leadership has always paid close attention to the Arctic. As far back as 1910, the Navy was sent to explore the northern sea route.

In 1926, Moscow declared any landmass inside the triangle between the North Pole, the Bering Strait and the Kola Peninsula as Soviet territory.

In 1997, Russia ratified the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea and since then has always been committed to the existing legal and institutional framework and the "orderly settlement of possible overlapping claims."

With the longest Arctic border, Russia has significant claims to the continental shelf and, if accepted, would provide it with roughly 45 percent of the Arctic seabed. Understandably, the region plays an important part in the country's political discourse.

Last week, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin spoke at an international arctic forum in Moscow and underlined the importance of the Arctic for Russia, while making a case for improving cooperation with other Arctic nations. Putin's speech was an important sign of Russia's craving for multilateralism in the Arctic. Good relations with neighbors and settlement of disputes are necessary for the successful extension of Russia's continental shelf.

As part of its "diplomatic offensive," Russia reached an agreement with Norway and ended the dispute between the two countries over the demarcation line in the Barents Sea. The Kremlin is also forming closer ties with Ottawa on Arctic governance and maritime sovereignty. Despite some disagreements, the United States and Russia are successfully cooperating in the Arctic Council and already set their demarcation line in 1990.

Although there are visible differences among Arctic and non-Arctic players, the good cooperation record shows that speculations about a new Cold War in the Arctic are overblown. But these issues can be resolved in the context of the existing legal and institutional framework.

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