

THE POLAR BASIN — GEOPOLITICS AND DEFENSE

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Far back in Man's remotepast, the New World of the western hemisphere was a goal for Asiatic immigrants, many movements going through the Alaska gateway down into the interior of the North American continent or along its western coastal fringes. Early man also walked and paddled or sailed along the top of the Eurasian and North American continents, establishing the seed of today's indigenous populations around the Polar Basin. Long before Columbus discovered the New World the hard way by sailing almost due west across the wide part of the Atlantic, early man in northern Europe had explored at least the northeastern extremities of the new continent by way of the northern Great Circle, and migrated to and colonized Iceland and parts of Greenland.

These prehistoric movements around the Polar Basin or between continents by routes which touched it, extended over vast periods of time and were in response to population pressures and climate changes which such a time-scale permitted. Beyond this we can make only the wildest guesses as to why early man entered into these regions. Whatever the reasons, the spherical shape of the earth and the location and form of its main land masses resulted in these northern routes being a reasonably sure means for primitive man, moving by foot on land or in small open craft on the sea, to accomplish his purposes of continent hopping. We can discover more certainly the reasons for modern man's interest and activities in the Polar Basin, but the physical means to serving these ends do not differ materially from those available to primitive man.

The Polar Basin has exerted a continuing attraction in the northern hemisphere, and the nature of the several responses to it suggest the area's geopolitical significance. There has been a northward pull, but only in the sense of the irresistible pull of the magnetic north pole which turns the compass needle in that direction without physically transporting it northward. The arctic and sub-arctic remain among the least densely inhabited regions of the earth and with good reason. There is very little to recommend them as a desirable place to live for the majority of mankind congregated in the temperate zones. Any

northward direction of modern man's attentions must be sought in the economic, political, and social conditions of particular times and places.

One such period was the era of the Renaissance in western Europe, that age of discovery and adventure when medieval man was transformed and became a transformer, seeking to break out of an enclosed universe which had held him in body and mind within well-defined limits. Possessed of the concept of the world as a globe and adding the strong economic desire to expand and improve commerce with "fabled Cathay" on the other side of the world, the search for the shortest way to the Far East was logically directed to the north. Certainly such a route must exist around the shores of the Polar Basin or directly across it.

John Cabot in 1496 received a commission from Henry VII to search out the Northwest Passage to Cathay and India across the top of the North American continent, setting in motion a quest which has continued into our own period. At the suggestion of Sebastian Cabot, the search for the Northeast Passage to the same goal was launched in 1553 by Sir Hugh Willoughby, Captain Richard Chancellor, and Cornelius Durfourth. This initial attempt did not achieve its aim, but it did discover a feasible route to Archangel and laid foundations for the long and flourishing trade between England and Great Muscovite Empire. Two years later the Muscovy Company was chartered "for the discovery of regions, dominions, islands, and places unknown" but, more importantly, for trade with Russia. Similarly, the first period of search for the Northwest Passage culminated in 1670 with the chartering of the "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay" and the granting of extraordinarily sweeping privileges and powers.

The centuries to follow were scattered with a long list of names and heroic and tragic events related to the continuing search for both passages, but the original dream of feasible northern routes for a broad and thriving commerce between the worlds of western Europe and the Far East soon dropped from the popular mind. The practical men of commerce, who had initially sparked the search, turned to the more round-about east-west routes for the conduct of their trade, having to be content with the half-loaf of the Great Circle routes of the north

Pacific and Atlantic. The logic of the total dream was thwarted by the hard facts of land-form, sea ice and climate and the limitations of a transport technology based upon wooden ships and sail.

Although these feats of sailing from east to west and west to east around the brim of the Polar Basin were to be accomplished in our own day, surface trade via these routes is still not commercially feasible. When Roald Amudsen became the first to "conquer" the Northwest Passage by sailing and drifting with the ice pack from Baffin Island to Nome, Alaska, his voyage took almost three years (August 13, 1903 to July 11, 1906). The subsequent and repeated accomplishment of the Northwest Passage within the space of a season by the RCMP and U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, and the establishment by the U.S.S.R. of the Great Northern Sea route as a seasonal channel for surface movement required the use of fleets of powerful (and uneconomic) ice-breakers, air support to scout open water, and elaborate radio communication systems. These accomplishments, therefore, have required relatively large investments of public funds and the purposes served have had to take on more than mere commercial aims.

As the formation of the great trading companies testifies, however, these early explorations did have their practical commercial side even in falling short of their initial goals. Hard on the heels of Hudson's explorations came the whalers and the northern seas for generations served as a major source of whale oil and by-products until the resource was exhausted by ruthless and unregulated exploitation, aided in its final stages by improved technology. Hunters and trappers moved across the lands of the arctic and sub-arctic and private fortunes were built upon the rich harvests of fur. From the beginning and continuing to this day, the northern waters are a major source of the world's fisheries production. Of the nonrenewable resources of the land, gold was an early attraction and ~~then~~ until recently served as one of the main props in the northern economies of Siberia, Canada, and Alaska. Iron long has been mined on a large-scale in sub-arctic Eurasia, more recently in Canada and possibly in the immediate future in Alaska. Copper, lead, zinc, nickel, tungsten, platinum, tin, and other metals have been or are being mined. Sub-arctic Canada has some of the world's largest known

deposits of fissionable ores and southeast Alaska has recently been the source of some modest production. There is coal in abundance and petroleum and natural gas. The boreal forests bordering the tundra zones put the Soviet Union and Canada at the top of the list in world forest resources, and the many great river systems present potentials for hydroelectric power.

Natural resources attracted modern man to the North, profitable enterprises were established, new settlements came into being and old ones grew in size. But populations moved out as well as in, and settlements withered away and died as well as being born and growing. Natural resource development was a very sporadic, narrowly specialized absentee, often ruthlessly exploitative process which was never to comprise more than a small part of the Polar Basin's broad importance to the rest of the world.

Although purely commercial, public, and private support for the continued probings for passages around or across the Polar Basin was to decline, the process of exploration did go on, often in a more systematic and thorough way. The men who engaged in leading and supporting these expeditions were the products of other stages in the development of western civilization, as were the expressed aims or implied motivation of their efforts. The initial outburst of discovery had only revealed the faint outlines of scattered fragments of the earth's surface, and men of the epochs arbitrarily labeled as the ages of reason and the enlightenment wished for more than interesting and quaint renderings of mermaids and sea and land monsters to fill in the blank spaces of their maps. There was much to know, not only of the configuration of land and sea masses, but of their nature. This urge to know however, was not limited to a desire for knowledge for its own sake. These were times of intensified national rivalries for new territories and trade, and the race to lay claim to new empire or to clearly establish the boundaries and "prove up" on existing claims provided strong military and economic strategic motivation. There appeared on the scene of polar exploration the pioneer naturalists, botanists, oceanographers, cartographers, and other scientific investigators, generally as members of or supported by naval units.

The Great Northern Expedition to Arctic Russia (1725-42), planned by Peter the Great in the last years of his life, combined all the elements to be found in past and modern arctic exploration. Through a series of land and sea journeys, broadly coordinated under the Admiralty College, the extent and general nature of Russia's Siberian empire was determined, the general outline of its Arctic Sea coastline traced, the Aleutian Islands and the Alaska mainland discovered and claim laid to this northwest corner of the North American continent. Although it failed to conclusively accomplish one of its main aims, to determine "where Asia joins America," this extraordinary effort did provide a sound groundwork for future explorations on the eastern hemisphere side of the Polar Basin. In 1778, Captain James Cook charted the coast of Alaska from Icy Cape (just south of Point Barrow) southward and positively concluded that Bering Strait separates North America and Asia. Thus, it was finally determined that there were two "sides" to the Basin. On the North American side there was no contemporary effort comparable to that of the Great Northern Expedition, but the continued journeys and investigations of individuals such as Samuel Hearne (1770-72) and Alexander MacKenzie (1789) filled in blank spaces on the map and added to knowledge. It was not until the British Navy during the nineteenth century resumed in earnest the quest for the Northwest Passage and seige was laid to the North Pole, until Sir John Franklin's search for the Northwest Passage (1819-48) became the search for Sir John Franklin (1848-78), that large-scale exploration was undertaken. Geographically in between were the relatively steady, frequently more fruitful efforts of smaller Danish, Norwegian, and other European and American expeditions.

The strategic defense importance of the arctic and sub-arctic lands around the Polar Basin had been recognized by individuals for a long time. This exploration ^{in part} renewed naval interest in the exploration. This also prompted President Lincoln's Secretary of State, Seward to engineer the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867. (It was a negative defense consideration — recognition of inability to hold its North American possessions — which caused Russia to initiate the sale.) His broad plans for national security, which were to be

frustrated by lack of popular understanding and acceptance, included the purchase of Iceland and Greenland from Denmark. Although the twin keystones of Seward's defense plan were backed up against the Polar Basin, his concept of geography and strategy were still essentially oceanic rather than purely polar, aiming to give this country dominance over the two oceans by which the continent could be approached. The physical aspects of the Basin in relation to the technology of warfare in Seward's day limited the strategic importance of such a view in the same manner as had the technology of commerce in relation to the shortest route to Cathay.

The several major causes of past interest in the Polar Basin — the quests for shorter trade routes, exploitable natural resources, knowledge of the earth and national security — are still part of our present day lives. The earth is, after all, as spherical as it was in the day of Cabot and, to our knowledge, the land forms have not significantly shifted their locations, sizes, or shapes, although climate has. Over the intervening centuries, however, there have been tremendous changes in man himself, his civilization and his use and occupancy of the earth's surface. Probably nine-tenths of the earth's population today is to be found in the northern hemisphere, and with the exception of China and India, the capitals of all major military and industrially developed nations are closer to the Arctic Circle than they are to the Equator. Man's present patterns of population concentration and his tremendous economic progress alone would require, therefore, a re-evaluation of the geopolitical importance of the Polar Basin. But it has been the results of the recent past age of technology and its present speeded-up phase that have made feasible all the unfulfilled dreams and plans of the past, in fact, have made it imperative that they once more become the dreams and plans of our nation today.

Man now hurdles the physical barriers of the earth's surface by moving through the air, and the airplane very early in its career (immediately following World War I) was pressed into service in arctic exploration. The first successful non-stop flights from eastern Europe to the United States by Soviet fliers in 1937 foretold what is now almost a common-place, the regular trans-polar commercial flights

of giant jet passenger craft between Europe and the Orient and North America. As regards passenger travel and the transport of high value freight, the shortest route between east and west via the north is an economic as well as a physical possibility. The successful long-range voyages of nuclear powered submarines under the polar ice may be the forerunner of the transport technology making economically feasible the underwater movement of freight in bulk across the Basin.

Natural resource potentials take on new significance in the light of technological advance. The passage of time alone has been a factor causing the richer or more accessible resources of the world to be worked out, increasing the pressure for the development of more and more of these northern resources, but if the resources themselves become more accessible through new modes of transportation and new trade routes, the rate of increase in their real economic value is correspondingly speeded up and our men of commerce had better take another look.

The air age has both added to our store of scientific knowledge concerning the Basin and required that it be greatly expanded. We must learn all there is to learn concerning the maintenance of life ~~in~~ and the operation of equipment in this environment, if we are to efficiently exploit the advantages it offers for travel and natural resource development. Modern civilization is highly complex and on a world-wide scale, the need to know more and more about the nature of the earth, its ocean currents, atmosphere and weather adds further importance to the top of the world as a strategically important area for further scientific investigation.

But far overshadowing commercial or scientific motivations have been the importance of strategic military considerations in giving the Polar Basin its present significance. With the long-range jet bomber, the land-based ICBM's or submarine launched Polaris missiles as the chief weapons of modern warfare and the geographic array of the principal military powers of the world around the Basin, it is not difficult to explain the main reason for the frantic activities going on throughout the arctic and sub-arctic. The placement and manning of detection, communication, interception, and offensive facilities have created new military settlements around the Basin, brought in thousands of people

and required the stepping up of all manner of scientific investigation and research.

It should no longer be necessary to belabor the message of Vilhjalmur Stefanson and other pioneer prophets of the air age in the Arctic, those who for decades have been urging us to prepare for the time when the Polar Basin would become the Mediterranean of the future world. Their future is our present.

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