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Denmark and the Issue of Sovereignty over the Arctic: about Diplomatic Leadership Based on “Geographic Neutrality”

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In recent years the Arctic Ocean has turned into a place of international contention. At the root of this struggle for interests lie attempts to obtain sovereignty rights over its underground mineral resources which are said to amount up to 22% of all undiscovered subterranean resources in the world, as well as the Northwest Passage and the Northwest Sea Route, which possess great commercial potential. The sovereignty problem is based on the following question: To which countries does the topographically complex continental shelf in this maritime area belong? The countries that are in geographical proximity to the Arctic Ocean are Russia, Canada, Norway, the U.S., and Denmark's self-governing territory of Greenland. The opinions of these countries differ in terms of what legal framework to apply and how to deal with the issue of jurisdiction over the continental shelf.

Especially noteworthy is the diplomatic leadership of Denmark, which is one of the interested parties in the Arctic dispute. As the issue of sovereignty over the Arctic began to capture the attention of not only the government but also the people, Denmark took a step towards solving this problem by exercising its leadership through organizing the Arctic Ocean Conference (Polarhavskonference) in May 2008, which was attended by the five coastal states and areas. Prior to this conference, Denmark also initiated the “Greenland Dialogue” (Grønlandsdialogen), which is a series of informal cabinet-level talks that have been held once a year since 2005 in different parts of the world, on the consequences of climate change. The goal of the talks is to protect the Arctic Ocean environment and the livelihood of the people in the region from the effects of climate change.

This dialogue is regarded as a cornerstone of Danish “climate diplomacy” (klimadiplomati).

Through the Arctic Ocean Conference and the Greenland Dialogue, Denmark formulated the Ilulissat Declaration (Ilulissat-erklæringen), which serves as a guideline for achieving a solution to the dispute over the Arctic. This series of actions has become known as the Ilulissat Initiative (Ilulissat Initiative). The diplomatic leadership displayed by Denmark is influencing, to a great extent, the establishment of order in the Arctic maritime area, where relations regarding sovereignty rights are unclear.

Why then was Denmark able to assume a leadership role? In other words, why has Denmark’s interest in the Arctic, exhibited in the realization of the Greenland Dialogue, the organization of the Arctic Ocean Conference, and the resulting Ilulissat Declaration, been displayed in the form of diplomatic leadership, and has even borne certain fruits? In order to answer this question, this paper uses the term “geographic neutrality” to describe the unique positionality of Denmark (Danmarks forhandlingsposition), in that it is the only actor that is not itself in geographic proximity to the Arctic Ocean.

The term “geographic neutrality” is, therefore, used here to mean that Denmark itself is the only country that is not a coastal state (grænsestat), i.e. the only actor that is not in close geographical proximity to the Arctic Ocean. Thanks to this, Denmark is able to be involved in the Arctic issue from a position that is slightly more detached in comparison with the nations that are in close geographical proximity to the Arctic Ocean and are literally coastal states. Needless to say, this is due to the fact that Denmark’s interest in the region springs from its possession of Greenland, and it is through this territory that Denmark is an interested party in the dispute and yet is able to exercise its influence from a slightly detached position.

Therefore, the word “neutrality” in the term “geographic neutrality” is not used here in the literal sense of “neutrality as a diplomatic stance based on maintaining neutral policies.” As Denmark obviously possesses the right of a party involved, it is not, strictly speaking, in a neutral position. The expression “neutrality” here refers to the neutrality that stems from the fact that Greenland, a coastal area of the Arctic Ocean, is Denmark’s self-governing territory and that Denmark is the only actor that is geographically distant from the Arctic Ocean, or in other words, does not itself possess geographical proximity to it. Denmark, while having a strong interest in the sovereignty issue surrounding the Arctic, is on the one hand exercising sovereignty over Greenland and, on the other, exhibiting diplomatic leadership by effectively using “geographic neutrality” derived from its geographically distant location/ non-proximity, and by decisively emphasising its position as an outsider.

As demonstrated by the organization of the Arctic Ocean Conference, the Ilulissat Declaration,

and the Greenland Dialogue, Denmark is today exercising effective leadership supported by its “geographic neutrality” and aimed at achieving a peaceful resolution to the problem of the authority who draws the borders in the Arctic Ocean, the main cause of the dispute in this maritime area. This paper poses the question: What strategies can Denmark use to address the sovereignty dispute over the Arctic? In answering this question, the paper sheds light on the huge impact Denmark’s commitment to the Arctic issue has had on the structure of the confrontation over borders in the Arctic maritime area, and by examining Denmark’s leadership in relation to the Arctic dispute, focuses attention on the role of the “leading actor behind the scenes” that a “small country” like Denmark plays in the sovereignty dispute over the Arctic, without resorting to power games such as those played by the U.S. and Russia.