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Perspective: Managing new Central Arctic Ocean fisheries in an era of global warming

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By Alf Håkon Hoel

Global warming has reduced ice cover in the Arctic and facilitated the northward extension of fish stocks such as capelin and cod. This has brought speculation that commercial fisheries might be possible in the Central Arctic Ocean. Globally significant fisheries already exist in the seas surrounding the Arctic Ocean with the Barents Sea cod fishery being one of the largest fisheries in the world.

For a fish stock to extend its range into new areas, it needs the right water temperatures, food, suitable bottom topography, and spawning grounds that are not too far away. These conditions are not in place in the deep Central Arctic Ocean for groundfish like cod or haddock. Pelagic species like polar cod, which live in the water column, might be able to spread into these deep water areas, however. This has brought concerns that vessels from distant water fishing nations might initiate an unregulated fishery in the high seas beyond the 200-mile zones of the five coastal states (the Russian Federation, the US, Canada, Denmark/Greenland, and Norway).

In the middle of the Arctic Ocean, there is an area beyond the jurisdiction of the five coastal states of 2.8 million km² about four times the size of the state of Texas. It is expected that summer ice in this area will continue to decrease, and a potentially fishable area in the Arctic high seas can thereby emerge in the years ahead.

Management discussions to date

These concerns have brought discussions of how to manage potential future fisheries in the area beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ). The existing international legal framework for the oceans, the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention, and the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Convention oblige states to cooperate on resource management in the high seas beyond the 200-mile zones.

A meeting of government officials from the five coastal states was held in Oslo in 2010. The outcome of this meeting was a request to marine research institutes to assess the situation regarding fish stocks in the Arctic Ocean and relevant research. A meeting of scientists in Anchorage in 2011 concluded that commercial fisheries are not likely to emerge in the Central Arctic Ocean in the short term. It also pointed to a continued need for research in this area.

Another meeting among government officials took place in Washington D.C. in spring 2013, requesting additional information from scientists, in particular regarding the probability of commercial fisheries in the areas beyond national jurisdiction in the Central Arctic Ocean. It also discussed measures to prevent potential unregulated fisheries. A second meeting of scientists was held in Tromsø in October 2013, assessing existing arrangements for surveying the marine ecosystems in the Arctic Ocean and providing recommendations in this regard.

Government officials met again in Nuuk in February this year (2014) where they agreed that more scientific research to better understand the living marine resources of the Arctic Ocean is needed, that interim measures to prevent the development of illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing in the area beyond the 200-mile zones in the Central Arctic Ocean should be introduced, and that a broader process involving more countries will be initiated. This process could have a binding international agreement as its outcome. To date, Norway is the only country that prohibits vessels flying its flag to fish in unregulated waters, including those of the Central Arctic Ocean.

Fisheries in ABNJ in Central Arctic Ocean still not likely

Even with a continued reduction in ice in the Central Arctic Ocean, potential future fisheries are likely to be mainly within the 200-mile zones of the five coastal states. These states are all major fishing nations and have extensive management regimes for their fisheries. Where fish stocks are shared between two countries, bilateral arrangements for cooperation on their management, such as the Norway-Russia fisheries commission, are in place. What the process described above adds to this established system is a commitment on the part of the five coastal states to prevent vessels flying their flag to engage in unregulated fisheries on the high seas in the Central Arctic Ocean, should such a situation emerge in the future. Also, an intention is stated to initiate a broader process to involve more states, as are continued efforts in scientific research.

In a larger perspective, the more important aspect of this process is that the five coastal states take scientifically based, precautionary measures to reinforce and further develop the existing legal-political order in the region.

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