CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MARITIME SECURITY IN THE POLAR REGIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Maritime security in the polar regions is not a topic that traditionally has been the focus of significant attention in traditional maritime security discourse. One reason for this is that the polar oceans have not been the scene of the same levels of maritime activity as other major oceans within which maritime security has been a priority issue. A major point of distinction here is that the polar oceans are not the subject of the same level of maritime traffic as that which occurs within the worlds other major oceans. In the Southern Ocean, for example, there is very little inter-ocean maritime traffic with the most significant commercial maritime traffic associated with fishing operations conducted under the CAMLR Convention. In the Arctic, while shipping is on the rise, it is overwhelmingly associated with coastal navigation along the Northeast Passage/Northern Sea Route and navigation within the Barents Sea. The polar oceans could be contrasted with other maritime areas where maritime security has been the subject of much

1 See e.g. N. Klein Maritime Security and the Law of the Sea (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2011) which gives no particular attention to the polar oceans.
3 Within the Russian Federation the term ‘Northern Sea Route’ is more commonly used, while the geographic descriptor ‘Northeast Passage’ has historically had greater usage; for the purposes of this chapter ‘Northern Sea Route’ will be used hereinafter.
greater recent attention such as the South China Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and more recently the Indian Ocean offshore the coast of Somalia. This is not to suggest that maritime security issues have been irrelevant in the polar oceans. During the so-called ‘heroic era’ of navigation and exploration in both the Arctic Ocean and Southern Ocean between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries there were numerous maritime disasters resulting in the loss of ships and their crew as a result of encounters with ice and polar weather. In the Arctic especially, this established something of a tradition of search and rescue (SAR) missions being mounted for expeditions that had been lost at sea of which the search for the missing Franklin expedition in 1848–1856 is perhaps the most famous. By the early twentieth century an appreciation did exist of maritime security in the polar oceans, but it was very much directed towards safety of life at sea and seeking to ensure that vessels undertaking polar voyages were properly equipped.

The period between the two World Wars had the gradual effect of placing the polar regions under an international security spotlight. In Antarctica this was the period during which territorial claims were formally asserted and rivalries began to emerge over the legitimacy of those claims, which eventually resulted in the emergence of overlapping continental claims by Argentina, Britain, and Chile to the Antarctic Peninsula. It was during this period that both Germany and the United States also began to display greater interest in Antarctic affairs, which when combined with ongoing historical Russian interests and emerging interests on the part of Japan, made Antarctica a continent of potential sovereignty discord which would have had inevitable implications for Southern Ocean maritime security. In the Arctic, while territorial claims were more firmly established, there remained ongoing issues with respect to the effective assertion of territorial sovereignty, which was especially an issue in the case of the many remote Arctic islands that lay to the north of the Arctic Circle at a considerable distance from

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9 These issues were further highlighted by the loss of the SS Titanic in April 1912 as a result of a collision with an iceberg off the coast of Newfoundland which precipitated the development of the first Safety of Life at Sea Convention: see International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea of 20 January 1914 (219 Consolidated Treaty Series 177).