

# Growing international tension over the Arctic

Niall Green

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Strained relations between Norway and Russia in the Arctic region have in recent months produced a series of territorial and environmental disputes. Though this has mainly expressed itself in conflicting claims over fishing rights, both countries are vying to control oil and gas extraction and transportation rights in the still largely pristine Arctic Ocean.

The Arctic region is estimated to contain 40 billion barrels of oil and as much as a quarter of the world's natural gas reserves. Due to the extreme environmental conditions, polar drilling has been considered largely uneconomical until recently. However, Arctic reserves are now being considered more seriously as other oil and gas fields become exhausted.

Russia and Norway are amongst the world's largest net oil exporters and both recognise the vital importance of expanding their industries into largely untapped northern reserves. New drilling operations have already begun, and output from the region is expected to rise significantly over the next decade. The two countries have competing claims over sovereignty in the Barents Sea, which lies between their Arctic coasts and is the most likely area for new large-scale production.

The disputed claims produced an international incident in October when a Russian trawler was boarded by two Norwegian fisheries inspectors near the Svalbard Islands in the Barents Sea. Another Russian vessel in the same area was put out of action after a net thrown from a Norwegian coast guard helicopter disabled its propeller. The Russian vessel still in operation made its way back to its home port of Murmansk, with the two inspectors on board, chased into Russian waters by Norwegian coast guard ships.

Days of diplomatic exchanges and rival claims from Moscow and Oslo followed. A week later, the Norwegian coast guard again intercepted two Russian fishing vessels off the Svalbard Islands, claiming that

the Russians were "illegally transferring fish."

Russia has long disputed Norway's right to inspect foreign vessels in the seas around the Svalbard Islands, with confrontations between the countries becoming common. Norway's claim to the Svalbard Islands was internationally accepted in the 1920 Spitsbergen Treaty. What is at issue is Oslo's claim, first made in 1925, to a 200-nautical-mile ocean territory around the islands, a claim rejected by the Soviet Union and now Russia. Though ostensibly about fishing rights, the territorial dispute was all but ignored until the 1970s and the development of the North Sea oil industry in Norwegian waters.

Sverre Lodgaard, the director of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, has stated that "The Barents region is about to become a geopolitical hub," with a considerable proportion of the world's oil and gas to be extracted there and transported through it in the near future.

Not only do Russia and Norway want to expand drilling in the Arctic, but Russia also has plans to build a major energy pipeline to the Barents Sea port of Murmansk, creating another outlet for its vast energy reserves onto the world market and making the port one of the world's most important energy distribution centres. Norway has objected to Russian plans to expand drilling and transportation in the region, superficially on the basis that Moscow has a poor record of enforcing environmental protection measures compared to its own.

Complaining that "Norway has no clear policy in the north," Lodgaard has pointed out that the country's refusal to join the European Union (EU) has left it without enough clout to push its energy interests in the Arctic. "[T]he European Union may favour Russian claims over Norway's because Moscow is more important to the EU than Oslo," he stated.

Germany's reliance on Russian oil and gas and

current close cooperation with Moscow has placed further pressure on Norway to find a means of securing its Arctic interests. Norway's status outside the EU has lent its relations with the United States added weight.

The Norwegian bourgeoisie has looked to Washington as its main Great Power ally since it gained independence from Sweden in 1905. The administration of Theodore Roosevelt was the first government in the world to recognise Norway's independence and, in part thanks to America's large Norwegian immigrant population, has remained a key ally. The country was a founder member of NATO and during the Cold War was a useful base for Washington's military manoeuvres against the USSR's Arctic Fleet.

The relationship continues to the present, with soldiers from Norway serving in Afghanistan. A small military detachment also participated in the occupation of Iraq.

The king and queen of Norway and an entourage of government and business figures recently toured America, including a visit to Houston, to promote investment in Arctic oil and fields to US executives. The response of the American companies to Norway's solicitations was reported to be less than enthusiastic given the costs involved in oil and gas extraction in the Barents. Nonetheless, the Arctic reserves are too great to be ignored by US imperialism for long.

Lodgaard has suggested that Oslo is looking to the Bush administration to "broker" a deal between Norway and Russia. In effect, this would be used as a mechanism for Washington to advance the interests of its energy companies, with Norway as junior partner, against their Russian rivals.

This would turn the Arctic into another front in the ongoing conflict between Moscow and Washington. American imperialism has repeatedly acted to limit or roll back the sphere of Russian influence, including orchestrating pro-US coups d'état in Georgia and the Ukraine, with the aim of advancing US domination of the natural resources of the former Soviet Union.

However, the growing debacle facing the Bush administration in Iraq has compelled Norway's recently elected Labour-led government to distance itself from Washington by withdrawing its small military contingent. Given the historic reliance of Norway on the US, this withdrawal will doubtless be

compensated for. Norway could send more troops to aid the US occupation of Afghanistan or use its diplomatic links, such as brokering the Sri Lankan "peace" agreement, to Washington's advantage.

There are also calls for Norway to advance its own military weight in the Arctic, with Aslaug Marie Haga of the Centre Party, a partner in Oslo's coalition government, demanding a militarisation of the Barents Sea, "to secure Norwegian interests."

No move by Norway could effectively occur independently of the US, or the EU, should Germany's relationship with Russia sour. Therefore, weak Norwegian imperialism must throw its lot in with a major power.



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