

A new race for the North Pole

Russia plants flag, Canada sends troops

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20 August 2007

The heroic age of polar exploration took shape at the turn of the twentieth century, as teams from several countries hoped to reach one of the planet's last unexplored frontiers. Expeditions from Norway, Italy and the United States made early attempts, with Norwegian Roald Amundsen being the first person generally acknowledged to have crossed the North Pole when he flew overhead in 1926. Twenty-two years later, Aleksandr Kuznetsov's Soviet exploration party became the first to set foot there.

In those days national prestige was the principal driving force of Arctic exploration, as well as a desire to push the limits of human endurance and technology. But what is one to make of the recent spate of activity at the North Pole?

While national jingoism continues to play a significant role, today there is also the more pressing matter of vast reserves of untapped oil and gas.

In August, three nations launched high-profile "missions" to the Arctic.

In a record-breaking dive, two small Russian submarines planted a one metre-high titanium Russian flag on the seabed of the North Pole, 4,300 metres below the surface. In addition to the August 2 flag-drop, the vessels collected water and sediment samples from the seabed to support Moscow's claim that a ridge under the Arctic Ocean is an integral part of the continental shelf extending from Siberia.

The leader of the expedition, Artur Chilingarov, a veteran polar explorer, told reporters his mission was to prove "the Arctic is Russian.... We must prove the North Pole is an extension of the Russian coastal shelf."

Sergei Balyasnikov, a spokesman for the Russian Arctic and Antarctic Institute, said of the mission, "It's a very important move for Russia to demonstrate its potential in the Arctic. It's like putting a flag on the moon."

On August 9, the Canadian government announced it would build two military facilities in the Arctic in a bid to assert its sovereignty over the contested Arctic region. Speaking of Russia's claim to the Arctic at a press conference in Yellowknife, 500 kilometres (311 miles) south of the Arctic Circle, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said, "I think the recent activities of the Russians are another indication that there's going to be growing international interest in this region."

A few days later, Danish scientists launched an attempt to prove that the underwater Lomonosov Ridge, which runs across the North Pole's seabed, is geologically connected to Greenland, a

Danish territory, rather than Russia.

Denmark's Science and Technology Minister Helge Sander commented, "You can plant as many flags or send as many ministers as you want.... In the end the important thing is to have the best data.... We've put 230 million Danish kroner [US\$42 million] into this North Pole project, for 2004 to 2010."

The North Pole and its seabed are not currently accepted as part of any country's territory. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, states have sole exploitation rights over all natural resources within a 200-nautical mile (370km) zone extending from their respective coastlines. Countries can then claim the right to exploit a further 150 nautical miles of seabed if they can prove the continental shelf extends that far from their coast.

On this basis Russia lodged a formal claim to the United Nations in 2001. This was not accepted by the international Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, which told Moscow to resubmit the claim based on further evidence. President Vladimir Putin has said there is an "urgent need" for Russia to secure its "strategic, economic, scientific and defence interests" in the Arctic.

Russia's flag-planting drew strong criticism from Canada, with Foreign Minister Peter MacKay saying, "You can't go around the world these days dropping flags somewhere. This isn't the 14th or 15th century. They're fooling themselves."

MacKay was quick to add, however, that there was "no question" that the waters actually belonged to Canada.

Stephen Harper is expected to assert Canadian claims in the Arctic during a summit planned this week in Canada between US President George Bush, Mexican President Felipe Calderon and the Canadian prime minister. According to a press briefing by Canadian officials on the summit, Harper will press the issue during a private meeting with Bush.

During his three-day visit to the Arctic in early August, Harper stated, "Canada has taken its sovereignty too lightly for too long. This government has put a big emphasis on reinforcing and strengthening our sovereignty in the Arctic."

During his visit to the Canadian north, Harper said a cold-weather army training base would be set up at Resolute Bay and an existing port at a former mine at Nanisivik would be refurbished to supply the eight new Polar Class 5 Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships ordered by the Conservative Canadian government at an estimated total cost of C\$21.5 billion.

“Canada’s new government understands that the first principle of Arctic sovereignty is use it or lose it,” Harper said from Resolute, a small Inuit community about 600 kilometres (372 miles) south of the Pole, which will be developed as a training base for 100 Canadian armed forces troops. “Today’s announcements tell the world that Canada has real, growing, long-term presence in the Arctic.”

Canada and Denmark are for the moment cooperating on a legal definition of Arctic territories, proposing the “median line method” that would divide the Arctic waters between countries according to their length of nearest coastline. This would give Denmark the Pole itself, due to its proximity to Greenland, while Canada would gain significant territorial waters. This alliance is very tentative, with both countries having been involved for many years in a sometimes acrimonious dispute over a small island between Greenland and Canada’s Ellesmere Island, which could develop into an important shipping channel should the Arctic ice retreat further.

An unnamed US State Department official, speaking after the Russian submarines landed beneath the Pole, said that Washington was not going to stand by in the face of Moscow’s assertion of its territorial claims. However, the US is hampered by the fact that it has not ratified the 1982 UN convention regarding the extent of maritime territory in order to avoid any international restrictions being placed on American military actions. This has limited the ability of Washington to affect the current negotiations over the region. President Bush and Republican Senator Richard Lugar spoke in May this year in favour of US ratification of the treaty.

The problem for Washington is that ratification of the Convention on the Law of the Sea could make it more difficult for the US to pursue its claim to sea routes off the Alaskan coast that it disputes with Canada. A US Coast Guard icebreaker is currently in the Arctic to map the seafloor north of Alaska.

Today’s expeditions to the North Pole still have a strong element of patriotic flag-waving. The Canadian government wishes to use its claim to the Arctic to encourage a more aggressive foreign policy and a more assertive Canadian nationalism, while the Russian expedition was greeted at home by enthusiastic media coverage of a resurgent Russian presence on the world stage. However, the overwhelming significance of the rival claims to the Arctic region is the vast reserves of oil and gas that are believed to lie beneath the ocean floor.

Canada, Russia, Denmark, Norway and the US all have competing claims to these resources, estimated to be a quarter of the world’s undiscovered hydrocarbons according to the US Geological Survey. If Russia can successfully establish its claim it could gain rights over supplies of around 10 billion tonnes of oil and gas.

Global warming is causing the Arctic ice cap to melt, making exploration and drilling for oil and gas easier, while high oil prices and growing instability in the main hydrocarbon exporting regions of the Middle East and Central Asia are making the Arctic reserves attractive, despite the high costs involved in extraction from such a harsh environment.

Huge reserves of oil and gas have been identified north of the Russian city of Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula, which is being

developed as a major energy export centre for Siberian and Arctic reserves. Several extraction projects are being developed off the north coast of Russia, including the Shtokman field, the world’s largest offshore gas field, and the Prirazlomnoye oilfield.

A team of international researchers has written an Arctic Climate Impact Assessment in 2004 suggesting that the summer extent of the Arctic ice cap could melt completely before the end of the twenty-first century because of global warming. As well as allowing exploitation of the hydrocarbon resources, the retreat of the ice could open up new shipping routes, perhaps including the Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific. This vital strategic route, which would provide a more direct passage for shipping between the major world manufacturing region of Northeast Asia and the main markets of Europe and America, is already being disputed by Canada and the US.

Michael Byers, professor of international law at the University of British Columbia, said the Russian submarine mission was a legitimate project to collect seismic data to aid their claim to the Lomonosov Ridge: “The Russians are fully committed, at a political and scientific level, to filing a comprehensive scientific claim, with the United Nations. They’re perfectly entitled to do so, in fact I think we should celebrate that they’re working within the framework of international law.”

“Politicians in Russia or Canada can never lose domestically by standing up for sovereignty in the Arctic. But underlying all of the rhetoric is the very important fact that all of the Arctic countries are working within a legal framework,” Byers added.

Despite such assertions, the rhetoric, claims and counterclaims of these northern powers are pointing towards an impending breakdown of multilateral frameworks for resolving disputes over the Arctic Ocean and its huge hydrocarbon reserves. With imperialist wars and diplomatic brinkmanship the orders of the day in the Middle East and Central Asia, new and dangerous conflicts directly between imperialist powers are opening up at the top of the world.



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