

Tensions rise over Arctic after Denmark lodges territorial claim

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7 January 2015

Denmark has made claim to a vast and potentially resource rich-area of the Arctic Ocean sea-floor in a long-anticipated submission to the UN. The claim concerns the region to the north of Greenland, a Danish dependency, and encompasses a total area of 895,000 square kilometers.

The claim, which Danish Foreign Minister Martin Lidegaard hailed as an “historic milestone for the Kingdom of Denmark,” is part of procedures under the United Nations’ Convention on the Law of the Sea to determine the exclusive maritime economic zones of the five countries with Arctic territories—Denmark, Norway, Russia, the US, and Canada.

Like other UN member states, Denmark had ten years following its ratification of the Convention in 2004 to submit its claims, giving it an end-of-2014 deadline. It had previously lodged claims for territorial waters to the south and northeast of Greenland, and around the Faroe Islands. The claims go beyond the standard 200 nautical miles from the coast of national territory provided for in the UN treaty, on the grounds that the sea-floor in the areas claimed is in fact an extension of the continental shelf.

The Danish announcement produced a flaring up of the simmering tensions between the powers with a direct interest in the region.

In Canada, the Danish move was greeted with undisguised hostility.

The right-wing *National Post* entitled its story on the Danish claim, “A new Cold War: Denmark gets aggressive.” Denouncing the “tiny nation of Denmark” for approaching the UN “with a staggering claim,” the article cited comments of Michael Byers, a former NDP candidate and expert on the Arctic based at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. “It is ironic that the only country that right now could be said to be acting provocatively in the Arctic is Denmark,” he told the *Post*.

Rob Huebert of the University of Calgary’s Centre for Military and Strategic Studies also denounced the Danish claim, saying that it showed evidence that Canada’s competitors are not basing their claims on valid geological data. “I think we got sold a bill of goods,” said Huebert. “I don’t think the Russians or the Danes, once it came up to the political leadership, ever really intended to do that.”

In reality, Canada, like all the other powers, is ruthlessly pursuing its national interests and doing so in an area of the globe where geopolitical conflicts are growing rapidly.

Canada’s Conservative government has made the assertion of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic a key component of its geo-political and military-defence policy since coming to power in 2006. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has toured Canada’s far north annually ever since, unveiling a Northern Strategy in 2010 which includes the building of new icebreaker ships. During his last visit in August 2014, he took part in an opening ceremony for the construction of the Canadian High Arctic Research Station, a facility which according to the Prime Minister’s website is aimed at conducting environmental research and “exercising sovereignty over Canadian territory.”

Ottawa is in the final stages of submitting its own claim, anticipated to be somewhere in the region of 1.7 million square kilometers. In late 2013, Harper rejected the initial draft of Canada’s claim developed by a team of marine geographers and other scientists, instructing them to submit a more ambitious claim, including asserting Canadian sovereignty over the North Pole.

Copenhagen’s territorial claim aims to secure access to a large chunk of the vast energy reserves and rare materials that are believed to be in the Arctic region. In recent years, the Danish army has intensified its focus on the Arctic, setting up an Arctic Command to conduct military operations and sending additional armed forces to the joint US-Danish air base at Thule in northern

Greenland.

At an Arctic oil conference in Norway early last year, estimates were presented that a total of 45 billion barrels of oil could be located north of the Arctic Circle. In addition, approximately 30 percent of undiscovered gas supplies are said to be located there.

The real target of Denmark's territorial claim is Russia. Given Denmark's close alliance with US imperialism and its role within NATO, it is hard to imagine that Washington was unaware of the Danish submission, which makes a claim to territory that Russia also covets. An *Economist* article published in its 20 December edition gave away more than it intended by declaring, "Denmark's claim will test whether Russia is willing to stick to the rules in the Arctic. It is based on a provision of the Law of the Sea which says countries may control an area of seabed if they can show it is an extension of their continental shelf."

The United States is the only one of the five countries with an Arctic border that has refused to ratify the Law of the Sea Convention and consequently is not participating in the UN process to determine maritime borders in the Arctic.

To Canada's chagrin, the US, which is an Arctic power by virtue of Alaska, lays claim to a large swathe of the oil-rich floor of the Beaufort Sea that Ottawa contends belongs to it. Washington also contests Canadian sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, which as a result of climate change, is likely to become a major shipping lane.

The US's overriding priority, however, is thwarting its current main global geo-political rivals, Russia and China. Although China does not possess any Arctic territory, it has invested heavily in oil drilling projects in the Arctic. The prospect of an ice-free Arctic Ocean in little more than a decade has also encouraged Beijing and other Asian countries to increase engagement with the region so as to benefit from the much shorter shipping routes that will result. In 2013, China was awarded observer status at the Arctic Council. The council's full members are the countries with borders or territory in the Arctic.

Responding to the western powers' aggressive drive over Ukraine and accompanying war threats, Russia is strengthening its military presence in the north. A number of military bases that Moscow abandoned after the collapse of the Soviet Union have been revived. Moscow is also expected to present its own Arctic Ocean claims to the UN in March.

A new military group is being formed by Moscow

responsible for the far north, consisting of two brigades with a total of 6,000 soldiers. New radar facilities are also being installed.

The US is preparing to take military steps in the region to block any attempt to challenge its predominance. In February 2014, the US navy released a new Arctic roadmap in what was an update to a 2009 plan. It stated that a shipping route through the Barents Sea could be ice free for at least 160 days per year by 2020 and that this would necessitate an increased military presence in the region. The report's recommendations called for an evaluation of satellite and other surveillance capacities, as well as a focus on identifying airfields, ports and hangers available to the US.

The navy's update followed the release in May 2013 by the Obama administration of a new US Arctic strategy, which included an increased military presence as one of its key goals.

In an article published in *Foreign Affairs* last month, Milosz Reterski urged a program to construct a fleet of nuclear-powered icebreaker ships for use in the Arctic. "The country has a growing national interest in the Arctic, and its relations with Russia, a dominant force in the region, are increasingly chilly," he wrote.

Another aspect of US policy towards the Arctic region is the encouragement of Canada to join its highly provocative missile defense program, something the Harper government has indicated is now under consideration.

Brigadier General Matt Milloy, who heads the US missile defense program based at Colorado Springs, told CBC in September 2014 that Washington needs missile detection systems in the Canadian Arctic "That Polar approach is of supreme importance to North American defense," said Milloy. "And ... a great area to look at what we can do with sensor capacity up there."



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