US imperialism and the new race to the Arctic

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The Arctic has in recent weeks become a focal point of geopolitical tensions between Russia and the United States. Given the present rate of global warming, scientists anticipate that the region will be ice-free by the summer of 2030. It is believed to contain a large portion of the world's undiscovered oil and gas reserves. It is also an important maritime route, one that is increasingly accessible due to the thawing of its ice cover.

The Arctic is one of the most resource-rich regions of the world. According to a study commissioned by the US government, some 30 percent of unexplored natural gas reserves and 13 percent of undiscovered oil and gas condensate are located there. Only Russia has a greater supply of raw materials.

The Northeast Passage, which extends beyond the Arctic, is regarded as an alternate sea route from Europe to Asia to the southern route, which runs via the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal and on to India. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, traffic using the Northeast Passage collapsed, but in recent years it has significantly increased again with the progressive melting of the region's ice.

What is a disaster from an environmental standpoint could allow for the exploitation of raw material reserves and the region's increased use as a maritime route. Conditions for the extraction of raw materials, however, will be extremely difficult.

According to one estimate, the cost of oil production in the part of the Arctic apportioned to Alaska would be between 50 and 100 percent higher than in Texas.

Environmentalists and scientists criticize attempts to extract Arctic oil and gas. In January, in a letter to the scientific journal *Nature*, Christophe McGlade and Paul Ekins warned that the extraction of oil and gas in the Arctic was "incompatible" with attempts to limit global warming to 2 degrees Celsius.

Nevertheless, the bordering states—Russia, Norway, Canada, the US and Denmark (which owns Greenland)—are aggressively penetrating the Arctic and establishing military presences there.

The US, in particular, is increasingly vehement in its efforts to secure its claims in the region. Earlier this week, Barack Obama became the first sitting American president to make an official visit to the Arctic. After a long debate, the Obama administration this year issued permits for the energy group Royal Dutch Shell to undertake oil production in parts of the Arctic apportioned to the United States.

In the course of his visit, Obama announced the deployment of more icebreakers and marine vessels to the region, ostensibly to ensure "safety at sea" and to document the effects of climate change.

For weeks, the US military, assorted think tanks and numerous media outlets have been agitating for the US to act more aggressively in the Arctic.

In mid-August, the *Harvard International Review* called the "opening of a new sea route in the Arctic" the most significant change on the planet "since the last Ice Age." The publication urged the US government to raise territorial claims in the Arctic and increase its military presence. It argued that energy extraction in the region was worthwhile financially because the global demand for energy resources would rise and the existing supply decline. It also noted that production sites in the Arctic would be closer to Asian markets than the gas and oil extracted in the Gulf region.

The front page lead item in Sunday's *New York Times* was a long article lamenting the lack of US involvement in the Arctic and warning that Russia and China might benefit as a result of American inaction. Both China and Singapore have in recent years invested heavily in energy projects in the region. The *Times* spoke of a renewed Cold War with Russia in connection with a "new race to the Arctic."

It cited a certain Admiral Zukunft, who said at a conference in Washington this year: "The United States is actually not even in this game there … When Russia sent the Sputnik into space, we sat there with our hands in our pockets, marveled, and said, 'Good for Mother Russia.'"

In May-June, NATO held one of its largest military

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exercises of the year in the Arctic. It lasted for 14 days and was clearly directed against Russia. (See: NATO begins anti-Russian air drill in Arctic). More than 4,000 soldiers and over 100 planes participated in the "Arctic Challenge" exercise. In response, the Kremlin mobilized its forces in the region for unannounced military exercises.

In July, Moscow published a revised military doctrine for the navy. The most important change was a higher weighting of the Arctic in Russia's naval strategy.

In August, Russia held military exercises on the Arctic's Taimyr Peninsula, in the far north of Siberia. More than 1,000 soldiers and 50 special vehicles participated in the manoeuvres. A representative of the navy insisted that the exercises had a purely defensive character.

In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*, the Russian military expert Viktor Litovkin explained Russia's increased focus on the Arctic as follows: "The shortest route for ICBMs is via the North Pole. Russia is concentrating its naval forces here in order to take out American sea-based anti-missile systems in case of conflict. Also to protect natural resources on its northern coast, and the sea route from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, which is opened up by the warming of the seas."

In early August, the Russian government submitted a petition to the United Nations that Russia be granted sovereign rights over an area of 1.2 million square kilometres around the North Pole. A similar petition had already been rejected by a UN commission in 2002. In February or March 2016, the UN will begin the examination of the current application.

Russia hopes to gain control over the energy resources of the region. The Russian economy has been highly dependent on income from the sale of energy on the world market since the restoration of capitalism in 1991. Nearly 50 percent of revenues in the Russian state budget are derived from energy exports. But the easily extracted oil and gas reserves in Russia are being depleted. According to the Kremlin, the parts of the Arctic to which Russia has made territorial claims would provide access to approximately 4.9 billion tons of fossil fuels.

But it is widely questioned whether Russia, whose energy businesses utilize poorly developed technology, can extract the reserves in the Arctic. The sea in the region is 500 to 2,000 metres deep. At such depths, Russian companies cannot even undertake test drilling.

In addition, US and European Union sanctions mean that Russian corporations are largely cut off from foreign companies and their technology. Recently, the American energy giant ExxonMobil had to withdraw from a joint venture with the Russian state company Rosneft to develop oil production in the Russian Arctic.

Even companies such as Shell and ENI are having technical problems with exploratory drilling in the Arctic and are not yet able to go deeper than 60 meters.

An important calculation on the part of Russia, as well as its rivals, is not only increasing its own energy holdings, but also depriving others from exploiting the Arctic's reserves. The extraction of shale oil and natural gas in the US has already changed the structure of the world energy market to Russia's detriment.

According to the *Berliner Zeitung*, the Kremlin wants to expand the Russian fleet in the Arctic. The Russian navy has been a presence in the region since Soviet times, but Moscow wants to deploy it commercially to accompany foreign freighters in the Northeast Passage.

Besides these economic and geo-strategic considerations, Russia is preparing for a possible military conflict with the US. NATO has advanced further into Eastern Europe since the Ukraine crisis and it is provoking Russia once again with its latest military exercises in the Arctic.

While the American media agitates against Russian military exercises in order to justify Washington's own military buildup, most of the Russian Navy vessels are in a miserable condition. The *Berliner Zeitung* writes that most military experts believe a large part of the Russian navy operating on the oceans of the world, is "ripe for the scrap heap." Taken together, the rival countries bordering the Arctic, all of which belong to NATO, possess a much more powerful and technically superior military presence in the region.

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