

WebMemo



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Russia's Race for the Arctic

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By planting the Russian flag on the seabed under the North Pole and claiming a sector of the continental shelf the size of Western Europe (see Map 1), Moscow has created a new source of international tension, seemingly out of the blue. Geopolitics and geo-economics are driving Moscow's latest moves. Geologists believe that a quarter of the world's oil and gas—billions of barrels and trillions of cubic feet, respectively—may be located on the Arctic continental shelf and possibly under the polar cap. The Arctic frontier also harbors precious ferrous and non-ferrous metals, as well as diamonds. At today's prices, these riches may be worth hundreds of billions of dollars. And if the ice caps melt and shrink, not only will these resources will be more accessible than they are today, but a new sea route along the northern coast of Eurasia may be open to reach them. Russia's attempted grab is a cause for concern. The U.S. must engage its allies—especially Canada and the Nordic countries—to formulate a strong response.

A Return to Greatness? Russia's claim has a political dimension. The exploration and exploitation of polar petroleum and other resources may be the kind of opportunity that allows Russia to become what President Putin has termed “an energy superpower.”

In 2001, Russia filed a claim to expand the continental shelf with the U.N. Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf under the Law of the Sea Treaty (LOST), to which it is a party. In response, the commission refused to accept or reject the Russian claim and demanded more study. Russia is planning to resubmit the claim and expects an answer by 2010.

Russia's claims are literally on thin ice. Moscow is extending its claim to the Arctic Ocean seabed based on its control of the Lomonosov Ridge and the Mendeleev Ridge, two underwater geological structures that jut into the ocean from the Russian continental shelf. Those ridges, however, do not extend far enough to justify Moscow's claims beyond its 200-mile economic zone, and other countries also claim control of the same area in the Arctic.

Back to Jingoism. This latest move by Moscow is also a chilling throwback to the attempts during the 1930s to conquer the Arctic during the years when the Soviet Union was seized by fear and hatred. Stalin and his henchmen executed “enemies of the people” by the hundreds of thousands, after mock trials, in the basements of the Lubyanka secret police headquarters and in unnamed killing sites in the woods. Those not yet arrested were forced to applaud the “heroes of the Arctic”—pilots, sailors, and explorers—in a macabre celebration of Stalinist tyranny. To the regime's critics, today's expedition is a chilling reminder of the brutal era when millions of Gulag prisoners were sent to the frozen expanses to build senseless mega-projects for the power-mad dictator.

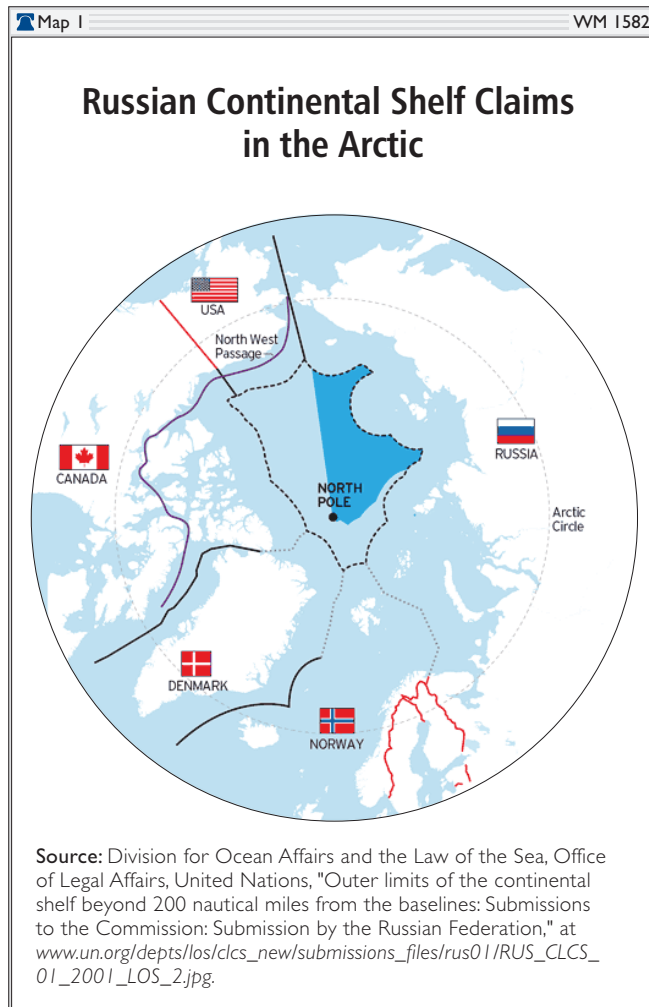
Today's Russian rhetoric is reminiscent of the triumphant totalitarianism of the 1930s and the mindset

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of the Cold War. The leader of the Arctic expedition, Artur Chilingarov, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Duma, proclaimed, "The Arctic is ours and we should manifest our presence." Russia's Arctic and Antarctic Institute declared, "This is like placing a flag on the moon"—conveniently forgetting that the U.S. never claimed the moon as its territory. Andrei Kokoshin, chair of a parliamentary committee on the ex-Soviet region, said that Russia "will have to actively defend its interests in the Arctic" and called for the reinforcement of Russia's Northern Fleet and border guard units, as well as building airfields to "ensure full control." Vladimir Putin weighed in during a speech on a Russian nuclear-powered icebreaker earlier this year, urging greater efforts to secure Russia's "strategic, economic, scientific and defense interests" in the Arctic.

Blocking Russia's Claim. The U.S. and its allies are not interested in the new Cold War in the Arctic. A crisis over Russian claims in the Arctic is avoidable if Russia is prepared to behave in a more civilized manner. If Moscow suggests exploring the Arctic's wealth in a cooperative fashion—in partnership with the U.S. and other countries—this could become a productive project that furthers international cooperation. However, Moscow's current rush to dominate the Arctic Ocean and everything under it indicates that greed and aggression motivate the new Russian polar bear.

Legal and diplomatic action is a necessary response. The U.S. State Department has expressed its skepticism regarding the planting of the Russian flag and stated that the act does not have any legal effect. Canada has voiced similar objections. To block Russia's grab, the U.S. should encourage its friends and allies—especially Canada, Denmark, and Norway—to pursue their own claims with the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. While the U.S. has not ratified LOST, other Arctic countries, including Norway and Denmark, have filed claims with the Commission in opposition to Russia's claims. The U.S. should also encourage Canada to coordinate a possible claim through the International Justice Court in The Hague against the Russian grab, which the U.S. may join.

Russia's decision to take an aggressive stand has left the U.S., Canada, and the Nordic countries little choice but to forge a cooperative High North strategy and invite other friendly countries, such as Great Britain, to help build a Western presence in the Arctic. This will probably have to include a fleet of modern icebreakers, submarines, geophysics/seismic vessels, and polar aircraft. There is too much at stake to leave the Arctic to the Russian bear.

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