

Forum: General Assembly 4

Issue: Ownership of the Arctic

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Introduction

The physical landmass of the Arctic is the second largest desert in the world, after Antarctica, and is home to a variety of wildlife both on land and aquatic. Vast, significant and unique as it is to the Earth's climate operations, the Arctic has only been a serious region of interest to humans in very recent history and has remained relatively untouched and uninhabited by humans despite rapid globalisation and industrialisation across the world. With new developments in technology since the first recorded landing on the Arctic ice sheet 209 years ago in 1909, research on the Arctic and its mysteries have been accelerated.

Surveys and studies on the Arctic have only lead to an increase of interest in the area and its resources. The Arctic's uniqueness and unexplored territory lends itself to being an attractive potential tourist hotspot, while the seas surrounding its ice sheets and the ground underneath it provide wells of natural resources and serves as a road in the world's map of trade routes. According to research from the USA's Geological Survey, 22% of the world's undiscovered oil and natural resource mines lie underneath the Arctic seabeds. It is largely because of the area's wealth of resources that interest in it has surged in recent times, as well as competition for its land and waters.

But the Arctic isn't home to just oil and wildlife, it's also home to 4 million people living in northern parts of Russia, Norway, Greenland, Iceland, Canada, and Sweden and all of these people rely on the Arctic for their livelihoods and home. Although the region has much to offer in return for human interest, research, exploration and development in it, the Arctic also has much at risk for those exact same reasons; any major commercial extraction of resources such as oil will most likely disturb the aquatic and terrestrial wildlife and increased economic activity will heavily burden the ice sheets. Still, Denmark, Greenland, Norway, Canada, the USA, Iceland, and Russia have continued to contest each others' claims over parts of the region.

Definition of Key Terms

Arctic circle

The region comprising of Arctic ice sheets, the seas and islands surrounding them, as well as the northernmost parts of Greenland (and by extension, Denmark), Iceland, Norway, the USA (via Alaska), Finland, Sweden, and Russia. The North Pole is in the Arctic circle, but the two terms are not interchangeable in this context.

Continental shelf

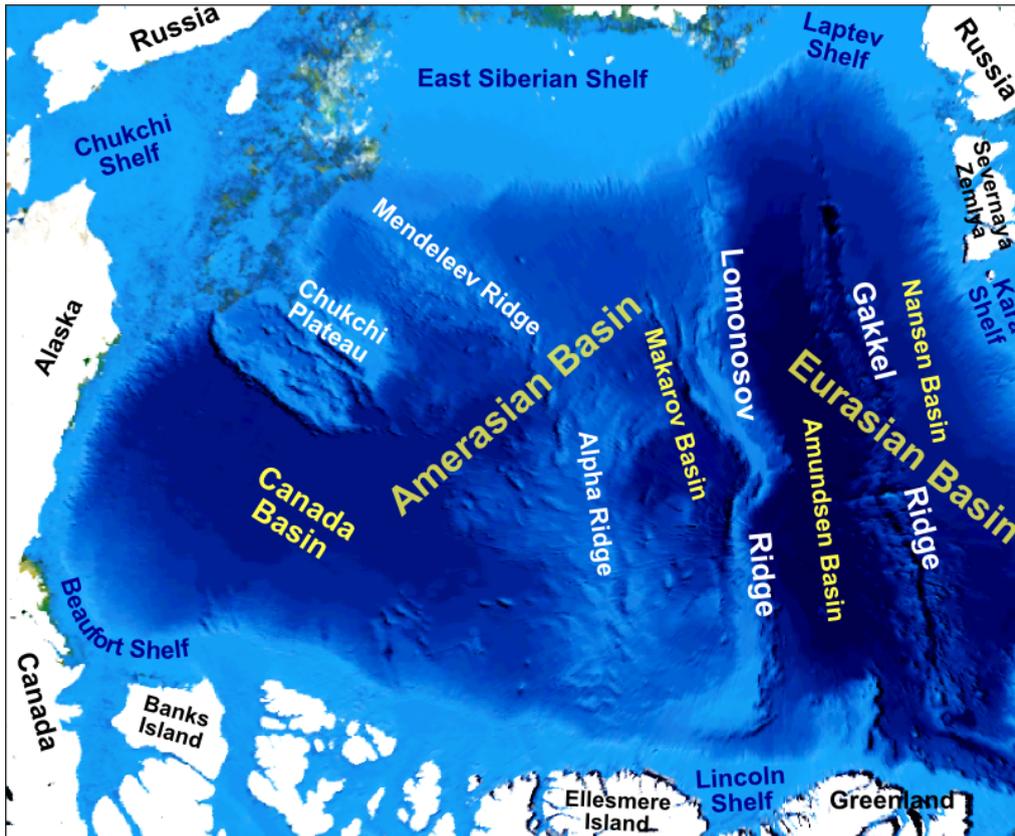
The land under a continent, which is not visible from above, but extends underneath the sea. This is why coastlines have shallow waters.

Global warming

Change in average temperature and weather patterns around the world. Global warming and climate change can be due to natural causes, but recent concern surrounding the topic is about accelerated global warming due to human effects on the environment.

Lomonosov ridge

Essentially a mountain range on the Arctic sea floor. It is contested by Canada, as it could be argued for as an extension of Ellesmere Island, which belongs to Canada, but both Russia and Denmark (via Greenland) have made claims over it too.



Caption #1: Map of the Arctic seabed (Mikenorton)

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

As defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an exclusive economic zone is an area of water reaching up to 200 nautical miles (roughly 370 km) beyond a country's territorial waters, where said country has the sole right to manage the resources contained in that area. However, the coast country does not have the right to dictate who is allowed to travel through the area, as well as who is allowed to fish in the area, thus the EEZ is considered part of international waters.

Territorial waters

Territorial waters As stated by UNCLOS, territorial waters cannot extend beyond 12 miles from a country's coastline. The coast country the territorial waters belong to can exercise sovereignty over them, unlike with the EEZ.

Background Information

Ratification of UNCLOS

Traditionally, countries were allowed to claim up to three nautical miles from their coastlines as theirs. However, the ratification of UNCLOS beginning in 1994 redefined the law of the sea. The ratification of UNCLOS changed the way in which countries could make claims to bodies of water. It's significant to the question of the Arctic's ownership due to the majority of the Arctic circle being comprised of seas. Therefore, to make a recognised and legitimate claim on any water in the Arctic which extends beyond a country's EEZ, nations must submit a claim to the UNCLOS' Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), providing evidence that their continental shelf extends beyond the 200 nautical miles of their EEZ, which Russia, Denmark and Norway have done.

Interest in the Arctic

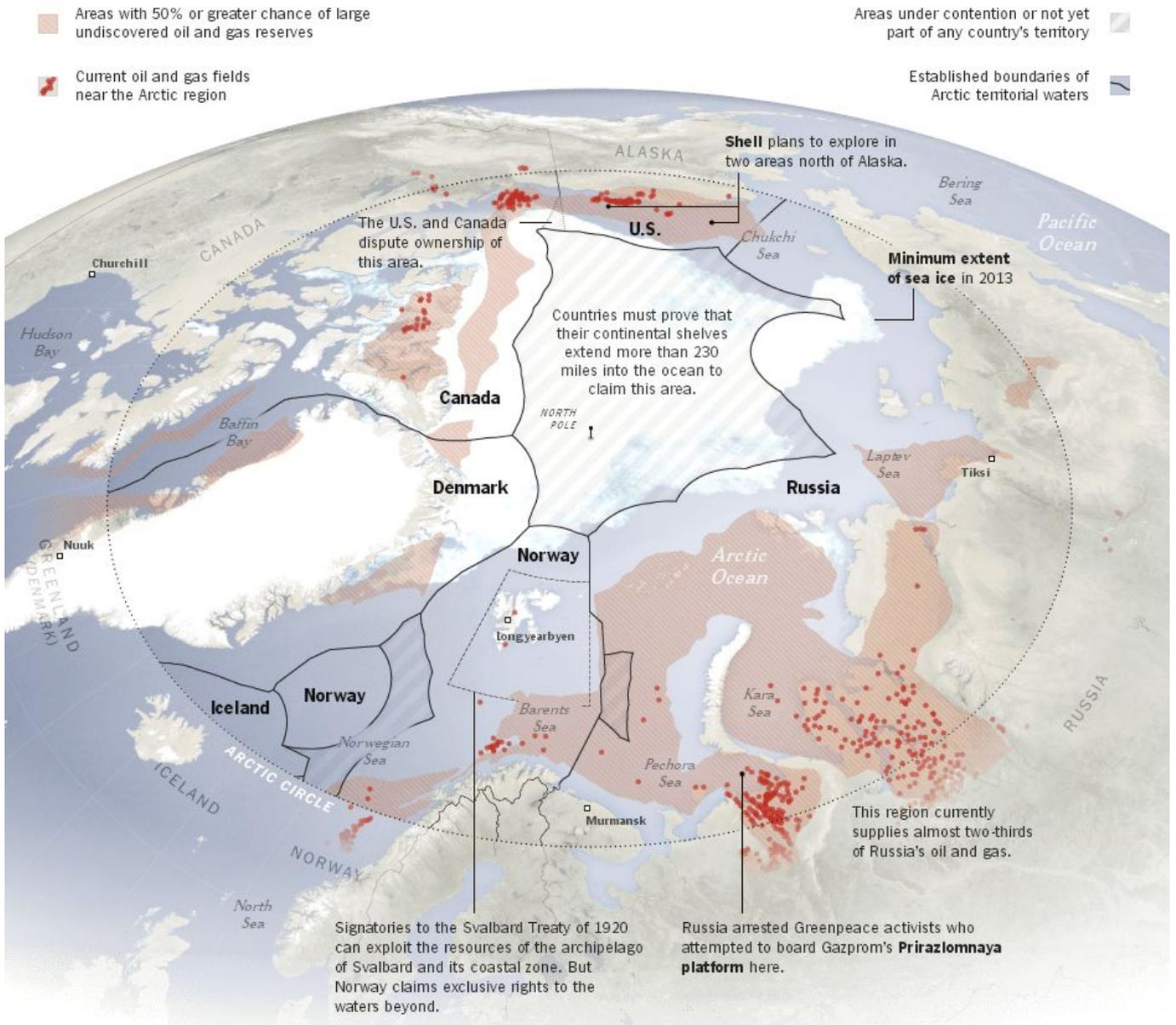
Unexplored as it is, the Arctic has gained massive interest from countries and corporations alike due to the scientific community's findings pointing towards rich natural resources being located in the region. Russia, the country with a claim over the biggest area of the Arctic, draws most of its natural resources such as gas from the region bordering Arctic waters and is keen on expanding its mining zones into the sea as well. The frigid terrain of the Arctic has previously left the region untouched in terms of resource exploitation but with the rise of global warming, the opportunity to mine and extract resources is slowly become a likely reality with the melting of Arctic ice caps. In addition to that, the disappearance of the ice caps also frees the Arctic up as a viable maritime trading route.

Environmental concerns vs. economic benefits

The reason behind the interest in Arctic ownership is essentially, the competition for the unearthed resources lying below the seabed and the trade routes through its seas. Therefore, the ability to fully use the Arctic in the most economically efficient way depends on the melting of ice mass. Removal of the ice in the Arctic will allow for easier maritime travelling and further access to the seabed. However, the ice sheets of the Arctic are an important part of the Earth's ecosystem, their disappearance can lead to rising sea levels which will affect many coastal communities. The processes of extracting resources themselves can also disturb the fragile ecosystem of the arctic, for example, offshore drilling can lead to a risk of oil spills and can contaminate the water surrounding the oil rigs.

Regardless of whatever disputes there are over territory in the Arctic circle, any parties wishing to benefit economically from the Arctic should also be ready and willing to take the responsibility of protecting its ecosystems.

Claims of Ownership



Caption #2: Map of the claims of ownership of the Arctic (Copeland, Watkins)

Currently, six different countries have made claims on the Arctic circle's territory and a number of those claims overlap with each other.

Most significant of these claims may be Russia's, filed to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). Russia has claimed ownership over both the Lomonosov ridge and Mendeleev ridge, both of which are more than 200 nautical miles beyond its territorial waters. This is significant because a successful claim to both of these ridges will make Russia eligible to claim the surrounding waters as an extension of its own EEZ. Russia is a country that relies on its natural resources as a tool in both politics and economics. The Arctic circle is an important strategic region to

Russia and the country is not subtle in showing it, Russia carries out naval patrols in the Arctic ocean beyond its EEZ, as well as fly military bombers over it. However, it has also shown its willingness to cooperate with other nations to resolve the disputes by joining the Arctic Council.

Canada and the USA also have claims over waters in the Arctic circle, Canada's territories and islands in the Arctic circle especially supports its claims and potentially conflicts with Russia's. Like Russia, both Canada and the USA have performed military exercises in the Arctic circle and invested into research and exploration in the Arctic, using ice breaking ships to carry out expeditions. Although the USA only has contact with the Arctic through Alaska, in addition to the economic reasons it is interested in the Arctic in relation to Russia's expansion.

Denmark bases its claim to the Arctic on Greenland, which is part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Its claims conflict with Russia's, as it wants the Lomonosov ridge as part of its territory too. As mentioned, it is currently in a dispute with Canada over the Arctic archipelagos, as Denmark believes that the islands are part of Greenland.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1994	The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea begins ratification. The treaty defines international laws on nations' actions and responsibilities in their own waters as well as international waters. It also states that nations are entitled to resources 200 miles off its coast, but are eligible to extend beyond that area should they be able to prove that their continental shelf does.
1996	The Arctic Council is formed to jointly resolve issues and monitor the Arctic across economic, political and environmental facets.
2001	Russia files a case for its ownership of the Lomonosov ridge to the CLCS alongside evidence of the extension of its continental shelf into the Arctic.
2009	A team of German sailors cross the Arctic successfully, thanks to record lows in ice mass, heightening tension and hurrying countries into resolving the overlapping claims.
2010	Russia announces its plans for a permanent Arctic military base.
2010	Russia and Norway sign a treaty settling their dispute over the Barents sea.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The UN has not openly condemned or support any certain nation in its extended claims over the Arctic region, merely acting as a neutral party to facilitate agreements and treaties, as well as providing the basis on which these claims have to be made valid against. Most important out of all the UN documents related to the issue is the UNCLOS, because it defines the laws on which a nation's claim to the Arctic can be recognised internationally. However, in general, the UN has not felt a strong need to intervene with the situation in the Arctic, as countries have shown a willingness to cooperate with each other.

- United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1994
- Declaration Concerning the Prevention of Unregulated High Seas Fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean, 16th July 2015

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