



RACE TO SECURE ARCTIC RICHES HEATS UP

September 10, 2007

Northern countries are racing to claim areas of the potentially oil-rich Arctic seabed, which could become more accessible as global warming melts the polar ice caps.

Russia claims that nearly 500,000 square miles of the seabed, including the north pole, are connected to the country through underwater mountain ridges.

It is pushing to become the first of the five countries bordering the Arctic to have a claim approved by the United Nations, but the United States, Canada and Denmark are hot on its trail.

The international scramble

In a well-publicized stunt, a Russian submarine dropped a tricolor flag cast in titanium onto the seabed below the north pole last month to reinforce its claim, a move that was not well-received by other countries.

"This isn't the 15th century," Canadian Foreign Minister Peter MacKay told Canadian TV. "You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say, 'We're claiming this territory.'"

Canada responded by announcing plans to build two military facilities in its territory in the Arctic circle, and budgeted new money for ice breaker vessels to help with Arctic research.

Denmark launched its own research expedition, hoping to prove one of the underwater mountain ridges Russia claimed is actually linked to the Danish territory of Greenland.

The United States also deployed a Coast Guard mapping mission to see how far Alaska's underwater connections reach.

The region's potential

The Arctic is believed to have 25 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and gas, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

Melting ice could open areas up for drilling, though some scientists say that won't be a possibility for many years.

"It's unrealistic to think that we can drill for potential oil in our lifetime. The problem is the drifting ice which is very difficult to handle," Christian Marcussen, a leading scientist in Denmark's expedition, told the BBC.

The areas could prove profitable in other ways, though, as the melting ice opens up shipping passages.

"The idea that the Arctic Ocean may be as important to global commerce as the Panama and the Suez canals is now a near potential idea," Mead Treadwell, a member of the U.S. Arctic Commission, told National Public Radio.

Law of the sea

All the countries trying to claim pieces of the Arctic aren't just competing with each other, they are racing the clock as well.

The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea allows nations to make claims of seabed sovereignty within 10 years of ratifying, or signing, the convention.

Based on when they signed the convention, Russia's deadline is 2009, Canada's is 2013 and Denmark's is 2014. The United States has not yet ratified the convention but may decide to do so to start making Arctic claims.

The Law of the Sea allows governments an economic zone of up to 200 nautical miles from their shores, in which the country has exclusive rights to resources.

Countries must prove with scientific evidence and mapping any other claims to land connected to the continental shelf, the underwater land that slopes down from the countries' coasts.

The other pole

Many scientists are hoping countries battling for Arctic rights will eventually come to an agreement like the international pact on Antarctica, on the other end of the Earth.

A flood of land-grabbing and claims were made for Antarctic territory in the 1930s and again after World War II. Countries continued to argue over sovereignty until 1961, when the Antarctic Treaty went into effect.

Twelve nations, including the United States, Russia, Australia and Argentina, signed an agreement to devote the continent to international science.

The treaty formed a legal framework for nations' actions there. It set out that the land would be used for peaceful purposes only, and did not recognize the territorial claims.

While seven nations still have claims on Antarctica, most nations do not recognize them.

But the willingness of nations to cooperate in the Arctic could boil down to the money.

"If there's a high probability of finding a lot of oil, that would weaken the position of the ecologists and conservationists," Joel Darmstadter, an economist at the think tank Resources for the Future, told National Geographic.

-- *Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra*

© 2007 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions