

The Arctic

Drawing lines in melting ice

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Despite the ungainly scramble for a slice of the Arctic's tantalising riches, no nation can master the region alone

THE Arctic has been a fashionable destination this summer. A team of Danish researchers, heading northwards on a Swedish ice-breaker, has just set sail from Norway. Meanwhile an American Coast Guard cutter, with a crew of scientists, has embarked on another expedition to map a giant swathe of ocean floor.

That was only this week's polar news. It came hard on the heels of a storming visit to Resolute Bay on Canada's northern extreme by Stephen Harper, the prime minister. He announced a new deep-water port and military training base, declaring that "the first principle of Arctic sovereignty [is] use it or lose it." Still more eye-catching—even if some of the footage shown on Moscow television really came from the film "Titanic"—was a Kremlin-backed voyage, which led to the planting, by a minisub, of a titanium Russian tricolour on the seabed.

Like any celebrity who is caught following the crowd, all the Arctic travellers insisted that their plans had been made ages ago and that the coincidence of so many polar expeditions was purely haphazard. Don't believe a word of it. What looks like an unseemly dash to claim great chunks of the Arctic—the sea, the ice, and whatever lies underneath—is precisely that. But why is it happening now? Clearly, the boom in energy and commodity prices has changed the economics of difficult searches for oil, gas and minerals. The steady shrinkage of polar ice-caps, as a result of global warming, is making previously inaccessible deposits much easier to get at—and helping to open some formerly icebound shipping lanes.

For all the historic resonance of Russia's flag-planting foray, the current dash to the Arctic is not—or at any rate, not yet—a simple race to create "facts on the ground" which can then be consolidated, and if necessary defended, by military power. It has more to do with the establishment of legal arguments, which have to be shored up by scientific data.

All the parties with a claim to a slice of the Arctic are intensely conscious of the terms of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which is supposed to regulate almost all human uses of the high seas, from fishing to mining. Under the convention, governments can lay claim to an economic zone up to 200

nautical miles (370km) from their coast—or further, if they can prove that the area in question is an extension of their own continental shelf. Precisely such a claim is made by Russia with respect to the Lomonosov Ridge, which stretches from the Russian coast to Greenland. And this week's Scandinavian expedition may lend support to a claim by Denmark that the ridge is connected to Greenland, which is under Danish sovereignty. "There are things suggesting that Denmark could be given the North Pole," as the country's science minister, Helge Sander, eagerly puts it. The Canadians, for their part, say the ridge could be an extension of their own Ellesmere Island.

Such a cacophony of arguments could keep lawyers and geographers busy for decades. So why the hurry? Because any country that wants to make a claim under the Law of the Sea must do so within a decade of ratifying it. Russia's deadline is 2009. Canada must set out its case by 2013, and Denmark by 2014.



As for the United States, it respects the convention in practice but has not ratified it, because some senators fear a loss of American sovereignty. The bodies created by the convention—the International Seabed Authority, and International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea—worry conservative American groups like the Heritage Foundation which fear global bureaucracies.

These objections may soon be overcome: the Bush administration, along with moderate Republican senators like Richard Lugar now want to sign up to the convention and start making America's case.

But between setting out a claim under the Law of the Sea and enjoying the fruits of ownership there is a long route to be trodden. An agency called the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf decides on the merits of the case, but it has no powers of enforcement. A ruling may lead to counter-claims by other countries. In the end, bilateral talks may be needed; they can last for decades. There have been calls, over the years, for a more sensible way of dividing up the Arctic—but as the prizes look more tantalising, setting rules for the game will probably get even harder. For now, the only inter-governmental body with a say over the region is the Arctic Council: its mandate is narrowly environmental. "It has been purposely hobbled," says Rob Huebert, a polar specialist at Canada's Calgary University.

People who love the Arctic for its beauty, not its riches, look enviously at Antarctica, which was carefully parcelled out by a treaty regime designed to stop the cold war spreading south. "Countries shouldn't be allowed to fight over borders here," insists Jake Moreland, the recent British winner of a race to the North Pole.

If governments never got round to parcelling out the Arctic, that was partly because harsh conditions seemed to preclude most economic activity. Now, of course, the calculation has changed, though some of the present talk about an Arctic El Dorado may be exaggerated.

An oft-quoted figure—that the region contains 25% of the world's undiscovered oil and gas—is generally attributed to America's Geological Survey. Don Gautier, who works for that agency, retorts that it has never done a systematic study of the Arctic, or put a figure on its energy riches. But the United States and other Arctic nations are doing a survey now, and a clearer picture may soon emerge.

At least in the short term, Mr Gautier says, government activity in the Arctic has more to do with transport routes than with under-sea riches. But for shippers no less than for oilmen and miners, expectations of quick gains may be overdone.

Take the Northwest Passage, to which the newly proclaimed Canadian port of Nanisivik marks the eastern entrance. At the moment, this route through the Canadian archipelago is navigable at best for a brief summer spell. (Sovereignty over the passage is one of the Arctic's many unresolved issues: Canada claims it, but the United States says the waters are international.) In theory, a complete opening of the Northwest Passage can shave 2,500 miles off a journey from Europe to Asia. But Lawson Brigham of the United States Arctic Research Commission, based in Alaska, is not convinced the financial gains will be dramatic. "Has anybody done the economics?" the former coastguard captain asks. In fact, he and fellow researchers from the Arctic Council are doing some sums at the moment; they will complete their assessment of global warming's impact on shipping next year.

Despite the appearance of a free-for-all, governments and scientists still co-operate over the Arctic; often there is no choice. In the Danish expedition that set sail this week, the Swedish ice-breaker is being led northwards by a larger Russian one, the *50 Years of Victory*. And, despite a Canadian-Danish tiff over tiny Hans Island, the Canadians will help the Danes by providing some data on the ridge.

Having dropped (back in 1990) a plan to build the world's biggest ice-breaker, the Canadians may also have to seek Russian help next time they need to carve out a path to the North Pole: even the patrol boats ordered up by Mr Harper this month won't match Russia's leviathans.

And despite the general surge of Slavic pride, Moscow's recent Arctic foray was far from being an all-Russian affair. One member of the crew was a Swede, Fredrik Paulsen, who paid \$3m for his ticket; another an Australian businessman, Michael McDowell. "Russia's role in the expedition was to provide transport for rich foreign tourists," grumbles Lev Savatyugin of the Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute. He is also sceptical of the expedition's scientific value, saying that gathering gravel from the surface of the seabed proved little about long-term geological movements; you need to dig deeper, and other Russians have already been doing that.

For the time being, the fact that no nation can conquer the Arctic on its own is probably a source of relief. At a moment when nationalistic claims and counter-claims are resounding over the ice-floes, the region's intractability still forces its would-be conquerors to rub along.