

# Canada's Arctic race with Russia

## Securing Canada's rights in the Arctic will require a serious investment of money and personnel

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Four decades ago, the Americans beat the Soviets to the moon. Now it's Canada's turn to race against Russia, this time to the North Pole.

Last week, a nuclear-powered icebreaker set sail from Murmansk, cutting a path for a research vessel. When they reach the North Pole, scientists will plant the Russian flag on the ocean floor.

Fortunately, acquiring sovereignty over the seabed is more difficult than that.

Coastal states have sovereign rights over their adjoining continental shelves, and any oil or gas located there. But historically, these rights did not extend more than 200 miles from shore.

In recent decades, international law has changed. Under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, countries may – depending on the depth and shape of the seabed and the thickness of underlying sediments – claim a shelf that extends much farther.

Any such claim must be submitted, with supporting scientific data, to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, a body of scientists elected by parties to the UN Convention.

For Canada, the possibility of sovereign rights beyond 200 miles is especially important in the Arctic Ocean, where the relative shallowness of the water suggests that continental shelves may extend many hundreds of miles offshore.

What's more, the U.S. Geological Survey estimates that 25 per cent of the world's undiscovered oil and gas reserves lie under the Arctic Ocean.

Once a country ratifies the UN Convention, it has 10 years in which to file its submission with the commission. Russia ratified in 1997, and submitted a claim just four years later. The claim encroached on areas that Canada, Denmark and the United States hope to claim for themselves, and all three countries filed protests.

The commission responded by recommending that Russia submit a revised claim, as well as more scientific data. Now, with an eye on its deadline later this year, Russia is conducting far-reaching seismic surveys of the sedimentary layers underlying the Arctic Ocean.

Canada ratified the UN Convention in 2003, which means our submission must be complete by 2013.

In 2004, the Canadian government allocated \$70 million for seabed mapping. Scientists are using the money to conduct seismic surveys along part of the Lomonosov Ridge, an undersea mountain range that runs northward from Ellesmere Island and Greenland.

Extensive seismic work is also required along the northwest flank of the Canada's Arctic archipelago, that vast, frozen expanse of ocean stretching from west of Ellesmere Island to the Beaufort Sea.

Logistically, mapping this area is as challenging as mounting an expedition to the moon. Two Arctic icebreakers working together could take four or more summers to complete the job. Canada has only one vessel that is powerful enough to be of use, the aging Louis S. St-Laurent. One or more icebreakers will need to be chartered or bought –probably from Russia or Finland.

Getting the work done on time will be expensive, but filing a scientifically complete claim could result in Canada acquiring sovereign rights over an expanse of seabed larger than Alberta, with comparable oil and gas reserves.

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that Canada would acquire up to eight ice-strengthened patrol vessels. However, the new ships will only be able to break one metre of ice, making them of little use near the North Pole, or in parts of the Northwest Passage.

More problematically, the new vessels are designated for the navy, which has little experience in Arctic waters. Instead of new military frigates disguised as icebreakers, we need new, proper Arctic icebreakers for use by experts: the men and women of the Canadian Coast Guard. Ships that can go anywhere, anytime, like the ones the Russians and Americans already have.

Coast Guard icebreakers are multi-purpose platforms. They break ice for commercial shipping, maintain navigation aids and support Arctic research. When necessary, they can carry RCMP or even military personnel on board. Coast Guard icebreakers are useful for asserting sovereignty without provoking other states.

In addition to more money for seabed mapping and new icebreakers, it's time for some serious diplomacy. Harper should immediately call a summit meeting of the leaders of all the Arctic countries, as well as the Inuit, to discuss climate change, access to the continental shelf, the regulation of new shipping routes, and the security threats posed by terrorists and other non-state actors.

A summit meeting would send a signal to politicians, civil servants and the general public – in Russia, Canada and elsewhere – that the way forward on Arctic issues involves negotiation, co-operation and the legal processes already established in international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

In terms of Arctic diplomacy, Canada should pay particularly close attention to the United States. The U.S. has not yet ratified the UN Convention, although President George Bush has asked the Senate for its "advice and consent." At the same time, it would not be in the United States' interest to have a Canadian claim to the extended continental shelf endorsed by the UN Commission before the U.S. makes its own position – and the scientific basis for that position – clear.

Ideally, the two countries would file mutually supportive claims. But before they could do so, Ottawa and Washington would have to resolve a lingering maritime boundary dispute in the Beaufort Sea, offshore from the border between the Yukon and Alaska, since the line established within 200 miles provides the starting point for the line farther out.

The Americans could also be a useful source of scientific information. During the Cold War, the U.S. navy mapped much of the sea-floor topography of the Arctic Ocean, using nuclear submarines under the ice. Recently, it declassified the data obtained from areas more than 200 miles offshore. Yet it will not, officially at least, even admit to having data from within 200 miles of other countries, since collecting that data would have been illegal without the coastal state's consent. Canada should now consent, retroactively, to any clandestine mapping that occurred, in expectation of gaining access to that data.

Securing Canada's rights in the Arctic Ocean will require serious investment of money and personnel as well as imaginative and proactive diplomacy. Is Canada a serious Arctic country? Are we in this race to win?

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