

## Peace at the Pole

Nations seek common ground to avoid conflict over Arctic oil and gas

by *per* Concordiam Staff

**Trying to avert an international struggle for control of undersea oil and gas near the North Pole, NATO and Russia are inching toward a diplomatic solution to apportion the mineral riches that scientists believe rest within the Arctic. The region's harsh climate and technological limitations of oil and gas drilling have left much of the Arctic off limits to successful exploitation. But recent warming has shrunk the size of the polar ice pack, and nations have begun staking claims to territory that was once considered economically inaccessible.**

The stakes are high: The 6 percent of the globe above the Arctic Circle contains an estimated 90 billion barrels of oil and 1.7 quadrillion cubic feet of natural gas, according to a 2008 appraisal by the U.S. Geological Survey. The vast majority of those minerals lies offshore and would be easier to recover if sea ice were thin or nonexistent. "For now, the disputes in the north have been dealt with peacefully, but climate change could alter the equilibrium over the coming years in the race of temptation for exploitation of more readily accessible natural resources," U.S. Adm. James Stavridis, NATO's supreme allied commander, said in an article in the *Guardian* in October 2010.

Several events in late 2010 suggest that the five countries that make up the Arctic region – the United States, Russia, Norway, Denmark and Canada – aim to keep tensions in check. In September 2010, Russia convened an international arctic forum in Moscow at which Prime Minister Vladimir Putin insisted the territory north of the Arctic Circle would be "an area for cooperation and dialog." That same month, Russia and Norway signed a treaty, 40 years in the making, that delineated the maritime border between the two neighbors in the Barents Sea and Arctic Ocean. It wasn't just petroleum prospects. Fishing and navigation rights also prompted the settlement. "It sends an important signal to the rest of the world – the Arctic is a peaceful region where any issues that arise are resolved in accordance with international law. It reflects the parties' active role and responsibility as coastal states for securing stability and strengthening cooperation in the Arctic Ocean," Norway's Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg announced at the time.

A NATO conference in the United Kingdom in October 2010 edged the world even closer to ensuring that competition in the Arctic remains peaceful. The Environmental Security in the Arctic Ocean conference drew participants from 17 nations. One of the chairmen of the conference was Alexander Vylegzhanin of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The rise of China, Japan and Korea as Arctic maritime nations suggests more countries will have a hand in Arctic governance in the future, a democratic expansion of responsibilities that conference attendees discussed. "The balance is one of achieving national interests and common interests ... for the world as a whole," said professor Peter



U.S. and Canadian Coast Guard ships survey the Arctic continental shelf in August 2009. Northern countries are trying to define territorial waters in the Arctic, a region expected to contain 90 billion barrels of oil.



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Berkman, a NATO advisor who runs the Arctic Ocean geopolitics program at the University of Cambridge.

Climate scientists have raised the possibility that the Arctic Ocean could shed its ice starting as early as September 2030. Such forecasts have encouraged nations to stake claims to waters far from their coastlines. Some of those territorial claims conflict. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea provides for a 200-mile economic exclusive zone in which countries can harvest resources. But the law provides for expansion beyond 200 miles if a nation can prove its continental shelf is more extensive.

Russia tested that provision in 2007 when it sent two mini submarines to plant a titanium flag on the seabed, 4.3 kilometers beneath the ice at the North Pole. Russian scientists focused on the 2,000-kilometer Lomonosov Ridge, an underwater mountain range that Russia insists is part of its continental shelf. Canada, which asserts rights to some of the same waters, dubbed the mission a publicity stunt without legal standing. In fact, the U.N. had previously rejected Russian claims to the ridge, citing a lack of geological evidence.

“This isn’t the 15th century. You can’t go around the world and just plant flags and say, ‘We’re claiming this territory,’” Canadian foreign minister Peter MacKay told CTV television.

Though arguments over fishing and shipping lanes have created friction in the past, the region’s potential mineral wealth draws the most attention these days. Scientists say the Arctic harbors the largest trove of undiscovered oil and natural gas in the world. The U.S. Geological Survey might even have underestimated the future mineral potential of the Arctic, since it counted only resources recoverable using existing technology and ignored unconventional oil and gas fields. Greenland, an autonomous country within Denmark, has begun granting licenses to petroleum companies to drill for oil and gas. In late 2010, Scotland’s Cairn Energy, one of those license holders, announced it had struck oil. Norway and Russia are looking north to tracts in the Barents Sea harboring an estimated 318 trillion cubic feet of gas, an amount many times higher than those countries’ known reserves.

If global warming continues, extraction could become easier. Not only would drilling be simpler in the absence of sheet ice, but shipping the oil and gas to market would be less hazardous in ice-free seas. Nations have talked

Russian boats tow an oil platform into the Arctic port of Murmansk in November 2010. The platform was built to drill on the Arctic shelf, a source of what could be 20 percent of the world’s oil.

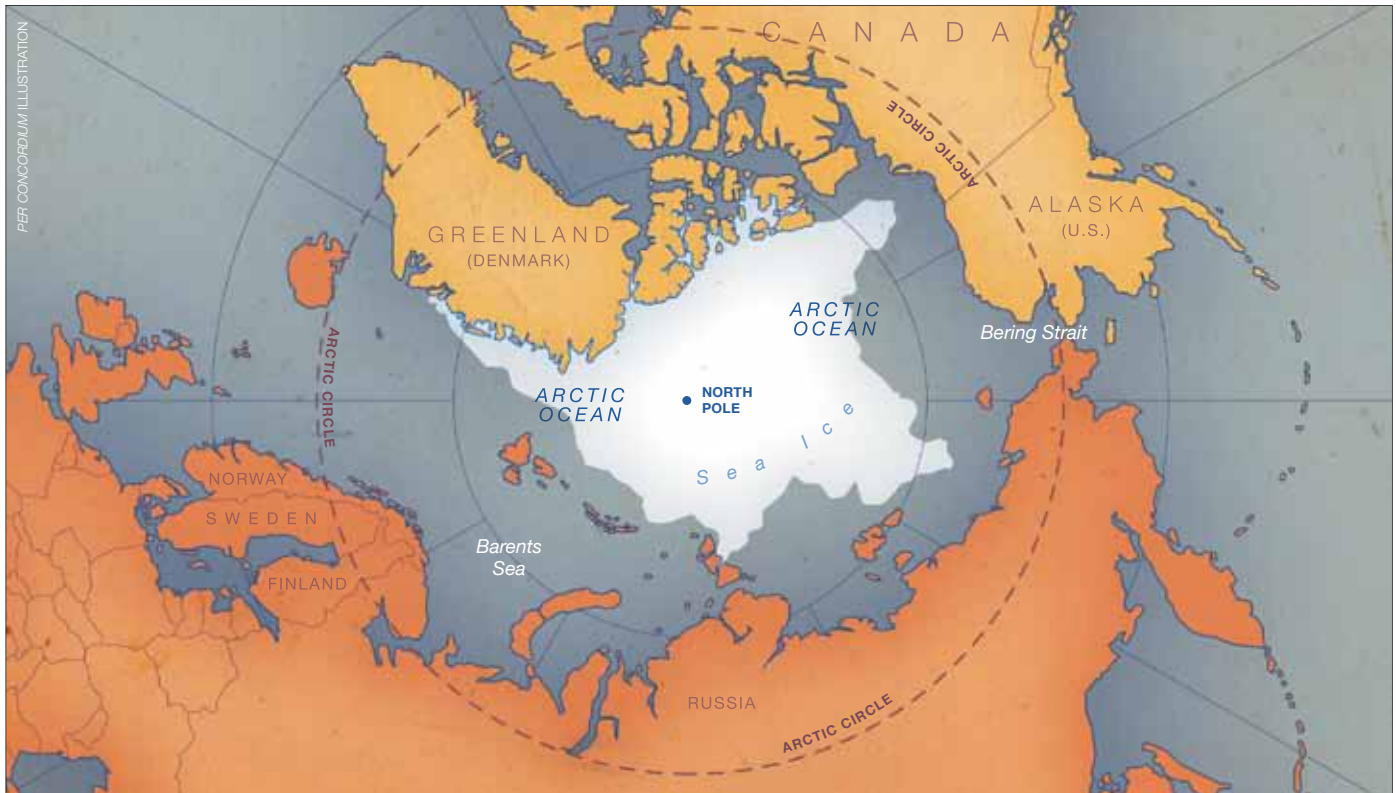
Oil barrels lie in rows in Kulusuk, Greenland. Danish scientists aboard powerful icebreakers have been exploring the Arctic ice pack north of Greenland for signs that oil may be plentiful.



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**"CLIMATE CHANGE COULD ALTER THE EQUILIBRIUM OVER THE COMING YEARS IN THE RACE OF TEMPTATION FOR EXPLOITATION OF MORE READILY ACCESSIBLE NATURAL RESOURCES."**

—U.S. ADM. JAMES STAVRIDIS, COMMANDER OF U.S. EUROPEAN COMMAND

about establishing routine shipping lanes astride Canada and Siberia to connect Europe, Asia and North America, versions of the old Northwest and Northeast passages sought by European explorers in the 1500s and 1600s. Nevertheless, in its 2009 Arctic Maritime Shipping Assessment, the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental agency founded in 1996, cautioned against minimizing the perils of the polar climate. Even if ice routinely vanishes every September, the Arctic Ocean will remain ice-locked in winter and prey to icebergs year-round.

Russia's polar submarine expedition raised worries that a new "cold war" might be materializing in the Arctic, which Russian leaders dubbed a "strategic economic resource" in 2005. But in 2010, Russia went out of its way to sound conciliatory, particularly at the Moscow conference in September. Not only did Russia place the Lomonosov Ridge question in the hands of the U.N., but it stressed the need to repair environmental

damage in the Arctic inflicted by the former Soviet Union. Alexander Pelyasov, director of Russia's Centre of the North and Arctic Economy, suggested to the *Guardian* that his nation's policy hasn't always been consistent since the days of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989. "I think you have to get a balance between co-operative behaviour and national interest. It's a very difficult balance," Pelyasov said in a *Guardian* article in September 2010. "Unfortunately, over the past 20 years we have sometimes gone in this and that direction."

NATO has stressed its preference for creating a zone of cooperation rather than a zone of competition at the top of the world. The military's role would be to support peaceful civilian uses above the Arctic Circle. Said Adm. Stavridis: "Some may argue the Arctic should be completely free of military forces in order to preserve the goal of peace and universal utility to humankind, but I personally believe that the military has a rightful and necessary role in the high north." □