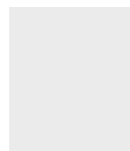


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ISSUE DESCRIPTION



COMMITTEE Special Political and Decolonization Committee

ISSUE Tackling Territorial Disputes in the Arctic Circle

(WRITTEN BY Tamás Lengyel, Deputy Secretary-General)

ACTUALIZED BY Kata Gombos, Chair of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee

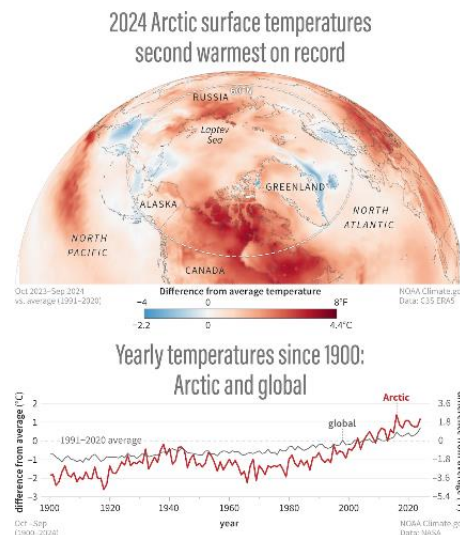
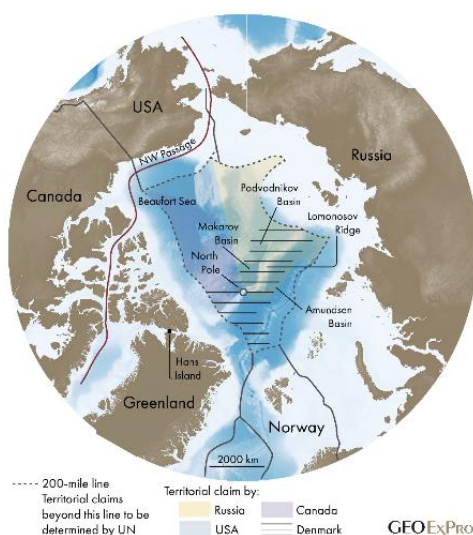
APPROVED BY Vilmos Eiben, President of the General Assembly

Introduction

The Arctic Circle is a part of Earth's northerly latitude and includes the Arctic, which encompasses the Scandinavian Peninsula, North Asia, North America and Greenland. The Arctic is rich in natural resources, it comprises 20% of the world's freshwater property, 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of its natural gas reserves. For this reason, many countries began to contend over the ownership of these areas.

Global warming is also vital to foresee in this matter, since it may cause greater conflict in the near future. The dark ocean surface which is being more and more revealed as the ice caps are melting, absorb 90% of the sun's heat, leading to increased heat absorption. As ice caps melt, more and more resource extraction opportunities open in the region. This leads back to the concern of the inevitable controversy over the regional tenancy. The warming of the Arctic Ocean has also opened vast trading opportunities via the Northern Passage, potentially reducing sea travel from Asia and the West by 20 days.

The territorial claims in the Arctic are divided between eight countries, including America, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Canada, Russia, Iceland, and Finland. The UNCLOS treaty, which was ratified at the end of the Cold War, has failed to clarify territorial disputes, increasing tensions between Arctic states.



Definition of Key Terms

Arctic States - Eight countries which all have territory within the Arctic Circle. The Arctic States consist of the United States, Canada, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Russia, Iceland and Finland.

EEZ / Exclusive Economic Zone - The EEZ is a maritime zone which extends up to 370 kilometres from a coastal state's baseline. In this area the US and other coastal nations have jurisdiction over natural resources.

Ice caps - An ice cap is a thick layer of ice and snow that covers a vast area of land, typically found in the polar regions.

NATO - The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, established in 1949, originally to provide collective security against the Soviet Union, now has the purpose to guarantee the freedom and security of its members through political and military means.

Polar Silk Road - As the ice caps are melting, China aims to establish new sea routes through the Arctic Ocean, tapping into the region's potential for global trade connectivity and promoting Arctic exploration. This initiative is known as the Polar Silk Road.

Ridge - An oceanic ridge is an underwater mountain range formed by the movement of tectonic plates.

Territorial Disputes - Territorial disputes are disagreements between countries over the control or ownership of a piece of land or a maritime area and their resources. They are mainly caused by resource competition, historical claims and the importance of geopolitics.

The Arctic - The Arctic is a polar region located at the northernmost part of Earth. The Arctic region consists of the Arctic Ocean, adjacent seas, and parts of Canada, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. (It is sometimes also referred to as "Circumpolar North" or "Subarctic").

The Arctic Council - Formally established in 1996, The Arctic Council is a key intergovernmental forum advocating cooperation and coordination among the Arctic States, in particular issues of sustainable development and environmental protection.

UNCLOS Treaty - The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is an international agreement that establishes a legal framework for the use and protection of the world's marine areas. As of July 2024, 169 countries and the European Union are parties.

United Nations Commission - The purpose of the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (the Commission or CLCS) is to facilitate the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (the Convention) in respect of the establishment of the outer limits of the continental shelf.

General Overview

The Arctic Circle is a unique and astonishing geographical site, which has been a central point for territorial disputes for years. In 1924, Canada is said to have been the first country to claim its borders that extended into the Arctic. In 1926, the then Soviet Union followed, and subsequently, eight nations made claims including the USA through the state of Alaska, Canada, Denmark through Greenland, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Russia. Roughly half the Arctic Circle is bordered by Russia, while the other seven claim the remaining. Due to climate change the area becomes more accessible every year, resource exploitation, shipping routes, and undeniably, territorial claims have risen, which has led to disagreements and conflict between the Arctic States.

Rules on ownership in the Arctic are laid out by the UNCLOS, which is a legal framework that regulates marine and maritime activities worldwide. Once a country ratifies the UNCLOS, it has ten years to claim territories beyond their continental shelves in an extended region. This has already been done by Canada, Denmark, Norway and Russia.

INDIGENOUS GROUPS

The people of the Arctic have been present in the region for a millennia, and indigenous peoples make up an estimated 10% of the area's inhabitants. Indigenous groups include the Saami in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia, Nenets, Khanty, Yupik and Inuit in Alaska, Inuit in Canada and Inuit in Greenland. Under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) many of these groups have gained recognition of their rights, which requires consultation and consent for activities on indigenous territories. Some groups such as the Inuit in Canada and Greenland have become autonomous since 1999. Although discussion often happens, indigenous groups may not have the legal standing to meaningfully influence decisions, or their traditional knowledge is overlooked. Some cases also show challenges for these groups such

as ecological damage deriving from exploitation. They are greatly exposed to the unfortunate effects of climate change and significantly rely on the environment and ecosystem for their basic needs. For instance, the Saami reindeer herders in Norway are protesting wind farms, since these projects disrupt reindeer patterns, highlighting that human rights should go hand in hand with climate protection, not rule one another out.

All things considered, international frameworks do exist for the rights of these groups, these processes are often inconsistent or superficial as a result of a lesser legal status. Environmental degradation, climate change and economic pressures further threaten their traditional ways of life.

DISPUTED TERRITORIES

Even so, there are three ongoing territorial disputes in the Arctic: The Northwest Passage (disputed since 1969), Beaufort Sea (disputed since 2004), Lomonosov Ridge (disputed since 2014).

THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE AND THE BEAUFORT SEA

The ones currently involved in a territorial dispute over the Northwest Passage are the United States, the European Union and Canada, where the route passes through. Canada claims that the passage is a part of their internal waters based on the principle that the waters of the Arctic Archipelago fall within its borders and are enclosed by straight baselines. This indicates that Canada declares the right to regulate and control any activity in this region. However, the U.S. and the European Union believe that the passage belongs to the international community, therefore under UNCLOS, free passage is allowed regardless of national sovereignty and thus rejects this approach. Canada and the U.S. reached an agreement called the Arctic Cooperation Agreement in 1988, that allows the U.S. to transit their icebreakers with Canada's permission. Despite providing practical mechanisms for the countries to cooperate, this did not resolve the fundamental legal dispute.

Since 2004, Canada and the U.S. have also been involved in a dispute over a resource-rich maritime boundary called the Beaufort Sea. Canada asserts that both a land and a maritime border should be established at the meridian line of the 141st degree. The US, however, holds that only a land border should be established and that the boundary in the Beaufort Sea should follow an equidistance line. This case remains unresolved, and the nations have been unable to reach an agreement, ever since the two parties began negotiations in 2011. Despite this, they maintain cooperative relations in the Arctic.



LOMONOSOV RIDGE

Russia, Canada and Denmark all fiercely dispute the 1,800-kilometer, resource-rich Lomonosov Ridge, claiming it as an extension of their own continental ridges. Whichever country succeeds with its claim to the Lomonosov Ridge would obtain a vast area around the North Pole. As the ice caps are melting, more and more of the seabed is revealed to us, but it is certain that the Lomonosov Ridge has one of the largest supplies of natural resources in the Arctic Circle. Russia submitted a claim in 2001 to the United Nations Commission, and this submission has since been modified with new evidence to cover a larger area. However, applications from Canada and Denmark have not yet been processed by the Commission.

CONCERNS REGARDING RUSSIA, THE US AND CHINA

People who live in or study the Circumpolar North have started to worry about the relationship between Russia and the US, in general, including the Arctic. Russia has been the most aggressive contender to claim territories in the Arctic, having already planted its flag on the seabed in 2007. The Russian Federation has made some of the most extensive territorial claims in the region and, according to NATO, reopened hundreds of Soviet-era military sites there. While they have claimed that their increased military posture is purely defensive, prompted by increased ship traffic to the country's north, this all may be reevaluated in the light of the war in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the Russo-Ukrainian War prompted Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership, and they are expected to be admitted to the alliance. This would leave Russia to

be the only non-NATO member of the Arctic States, changing the security dynamic. The chance of a conflict between the US and an adversary is quite 'low', but it would have profound consequences, such as increased military presence in the Arctic hence the risk of a global conflict. The increased tension between the parties could act as a trigger for not just Arctic states, but also their allies. Thus, the already vulnerable Arctic environment would be further harmed.

MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE REGION

The Arctic is warming nearly four times faster than the global average, leading to diminishing sea ice and rising sea levels. These changes disrupt ecosystems and impact Indigenous communities' traditional ways of life as a result of local food sources being altered. Additionally, the region has seen unprecedented wildfires, since 2018 the number of blazes has tripled in most of the Arctic. The rising temperatures create an ideal condition for larger and more intense fires, due to the drought of forests. What is more, the degraded air quality caused by the smoke can profoundly damage human health.

The Arctic's strategic importance has led to increased geopolitical interest. Notably, U.S. President Donald Trump expressed intentions to bring Greenland and the Panama Canal under U.S. control, for the sake of economic and national security. Greenland lies on the shortest route from North America to Europe, and increased influence over the region would aid the United States' ability to counter Russia and China's growing interest in the Arctic. Asked earlier in January whether he could rule out using military or economic force, Donald Trump said he could not. Despite the President's apparent confidence, the prime ministers of Denmark and Greenland have both claimed that the island was not for sale, and its future lies in the hands of Greenlanders themselves. Nevertheless, prime minister Múte B. Egede has stated his government was looking for ways to work more closely with the U.S. on defence and exploring mining resources.

Disputes in the Arctic region are expected to intensify due to climate change, and indigenous rights are likely to become more prominent, in light of upcoming recognition. Global political conflicts are prone to escalate in tension, as in the case of Greenland, where the outcome is highly controversial, and could escalate in a multitude of different possibilities including amplifying economical pressure or even invasions. The future of the Arctic Circle is bound to be shaped by geopolitical rivalries and the willingness of nations to cooperate.

Major Parties Involved

The Arctic States: The eight Arctic countries consist of the United States, Canada, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden. All eight states have territory within the Arctic Circle, including continental shelves that cross into the region. Each state has the right to claim territorial privileges over parts of the Arctic.

Russia: 53% of the Arctic Ocean's coastline lies in Russia making them the largest portion holders of the territory. Russia's claims of region and activities led to many disputes between the Arctic States, such as the dispute concerning the Lomonosov Ridge, or objections regarding the claims of the U.S. over the areas of Alaska.

United States of America: In 1867 the U.S. became an Arctic nation upon the purchase of Alaska, therefore playing a critical role in the territorial disputes. Although the United States of America supports international law, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it has not ratified the treaty which complicates its ability to fully assert claims.

Norway: About half of Norway's land lies above the Arctic Circle and hosts about one-tenth of its population, and its priorities include making the country's north a safe and inviting place to live. Russia actively challenges Norway on its sovereignty over Svalbard, the disputes centre around how Norway enforces rules on maritime source extraction. Following international law and maintaining open communication are key factors in managing this issue.

Finland: About one-third of Finland's territory is located above the Arctic Circle making it possess about 10 percent of the Arctic region. Sharing a land border with Russia in the east has caused occasional tension around the management of natural resources between the two countries, Finland's focus is primarily on peaceful collaboration. Its Arctic policy defines many strategic objectives such as mitigating climate change, promoting the wellbeing and safety of indigenous inhabitants, and cutting-edge research.

Canada: Although the Canadian Arctic is home to less than 1 percent of Canada's population, it constitutes nearly 40 percent of Canada's land, and more than half of the inhabitants of the Canadian Arctic are Indigenous people. Tensions arise over how to involve indigenous groups in decision-making processes. The most significant issue of Canada, however, is the status of the Northwest Passage, which it considers a part of its own

territory. In contrast, other countries including the United States believe the waters should be open to all.

Arctic Council: The Arctic Council is the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic Indigenous Peoples and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues, in particular on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic. It was formally established in 1996, and ever since all Arctic Council decisions and statements require consensus of the eight Arctic States.

China: China, a country which does not have any land or territorial claims in the Arctic but instead is an active observer of the Arctic Council, who seeks to expand its influence in the region. It considers itself a “near-Arctic state” and is building out a network of trade routes to help expedite global shipping. China’s increasing presence in the region raises concerns about its long-term strategic goals in other nations, who fear China might seek to establish military or political influence in the region.

Timeline of Events

1925 - Canadian amendment to the northwest territories act

1926 - The USSR (Soviet Union) declares territorial rights to all lands and islands between its territory and the North Pole.

1946 - Canada attempts to claim territorial rights over the islands and the Arctic Ocean north of its mainland extending up to the North Pole.

1984 - The Danish raise flag on the disputed Hans Island

1994 - The UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) enters.

2001 - Russia claims the Lomonosov Ridge as an extension of its continental shelf.

2007 - Russia claims the North Pole by planting the Russian flag on the Arctic seabed.

2008 - The Ilulissat Declaration

2013 - Canada announces her territorial claim over the Lomonosov Ridge.

2014 - Denmark submits a territorial claim over the Lomonosov Ridge too.

2022 - Canada and Denmark sign the Hans Island Agreement dividing Hans Island in half between them.

2024 - 2025 - President Trump expresses interests in purchasing Greenland.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

THE UNCLOS AND ARTICLE 234

The UNCLOS resulted from the third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III), taking place between 1973 and 1982. Initially the UNCLOS did not include any particular framework for the legal disputes surrounding the Arctic, and it was largely added as an afterthought on the behest of Canada, the Soviet Union and the United States. The aforementioned three parties privately negotiated an “Arctic Deal”, resulting in the inclusion of Article 234, wherein ice-covered waters around the globe are subject to special legal framework that permits coastal states to enforce laws for vessels traversing any ice-covered areas within their EEZ-s in order to prevent marine pollution.

HANS ISLAND

The sea between the Danish territory of Greenland and Canada’s Ellesmere Island is equally divided by the 1.3-kilometer-wide Hans Island. Started in 1973, this territorial dispute between the two countries is also known as the Whisky Wars, or Liquor Wars. It was a bloodless conflict which led to no violence. This small border dispute was often considered rather humorous by the two nations, “taking turns” planting their flags on the Island since 1984. It all came to an end after a process started in 2005 to resolve the issue. The countries agreed to reopen negotiations regarding the future of Hans Island, and among others, began geographical surveys of the area. In April 2012, both parties declared their willingness to divide the island in half, and in 2022 they signed an agreement settling this debate. This treaty was finally approved to be ratified in 2023 by the Danish parliament, creating an island split roughly in half.

BARENTS SEA

Multilateral negotiations are vital and inevitable in solving certain disputes. In 2010, Norway and Russia managed to settle a long-standing conflict over the maritime boundaries of the Barents Sea by signing a treaty called the Barents Sea Delimitation Agreement and dividing it between

the two competitors. The two countries agreed on a clear border of their respective Exclusive Economic Zones, allowing both to utilize the resources of the region while avoiding conflict. The treaty also promoted environmental protection and sustainable maritime practices. This agreement is an ideal demonstration, showing how even the most complex territorial disputes could be resolved through peaceful negotiation.

Possible Solutions and Approaches

The UNCLOS established a legal baseline for debating further claims and disputes, however, the Arctic States should revisit how useful UNCLOS is as a framework for future Arctic governance. In its current form, the Convention is not entirely suitable for this purpose as it does not sufficiently consider the constantly changing circumstances of the Arctic environment due to climate change.

A solution would be to put forward a resolution which would divide the disputed territories equally between the countries claiming them, or to reach a compromise between the Member States, with all the parties giving up a part of their claims in exchange for their respective territories. In other words, instead of gaining full control over a region, each country would receive the same amount of portion. This, however, raises the question of whether the Arctic States are the ones who should be considered, or whether any other UN member state has the right to claim territory in the Arctic. Nevertheless, when dividing the region, it is crucial to take into consideration the will of the people who currently occupy the areas in question.

Another solution could involve countries gaining the entire region they wanted to take possession of, in exchange for their own resources. This, in return, would be given to all parties who wished to get a hold of that region before it was distributed.

Environmental protection could be the cause leading to a resolution as well, declaring large parts of the Arctic as protected zones would ban resource extraction and focus on sustainable use of resources and ecosystem preservation. This arrangement would put an end to many ongoing disputes and prioritize the prosperity of our environment.

The territorial disputes in the Arctic Circle have become an increasingly urgent matter that undoubtedly demands cooperation from all nations involved. All current research and scientific evidence will need to be taken into consideration, and addressing these disputes through diplomacy and multilateral collaboration is crucial for all parties to recognize in order to arrange an equitable resolution and maintain environmental stability in the region.

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