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'Ice Wars' heating up the Arctic

By [Kaj Larsen](#), CNN

July 15, 2011 -- Updated 2023 GMT (0423 HKT)



Scrambling for a piece of the Arctic pie

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Tension is building in the Arctic, where countries are vying for valuable natural resources

More oil, natural gas and mineral deposits can be accessed now because of climate change

There have been territorial disputes over the underwater land where these deposits rest

Editor's note: CNN correspondent Kaj Larsen recently visited the Arctic to observe the U.S. naval exercise known as ICEX. His experience is part of the CNN documentary "Ice Wars," which will air at 8 p.m. ET Sunday on CNN Presents.

(CNN) -- On a small, floating piece of ice in the Beaufort Sea, several hundred miles north of Alaska, a group of scientists are documenting what some dub an "Arctic meltdown."

According to climate scientists, the warming of the region is shrinking the polar ice cap at an alarming rate, reducing the permafrost layer

The Arctic is now seeing naval and military activities it hasn't seen since the Cold War

and wreaking havoc on polar bears, arctic foxes and other indigenous wildlife in the region.

What is bad for the animals, though, has been good for commerce.

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The recession of the sea ice and the reduction in permafrost -- combined with advances in technology -- have allowed access to oil, mineral and natural gas deposits that were previously trapped in the ice.

The abundance of these valuable resources and the opportunity to exploit them has created a gold rush-like scramble in the high north, with fierce competition to determine which countries have the right to access the riches of the Arctic.

This competition has brought in its wake a host of naval and military activities that the Arctic hasn't seen since the end of the Cold War.

Now, one of the coldest places on Earth is heating up as nuclear submarines, Aegis-class frigates, strategic bombers and a new generation of icebreakers are resuming operations there.

Just how much oil and natural gas is under the Arctic ice?

The Arctic is home to approximately 90 billion barrels of undiscovered but recoverable oil, according to a 2008 study by the U.S. Geological Survey. And preliminary estimates are that one-third of the world's natural gas may be harbored in the Arctic ice.

But that's not all that's up for grabs. The Arctic also contains rich mineral deposits. Canada, which was not historically a diamond-producing nation, is now the third-largest diamond producer in the world.

If the global warming trend continues as many scientists project it to, it is likely that more and more resources will be discovered as the ice melts further.

Who are the countries competing for resources?

The United States, Canada, Russia, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Finland all stake a claim to a portion of the Arctic. These countries make up the Arctic Council, a diplomatic forum designed to mediate disputes on Arctic issues

Lawson Brigham, a professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and an Arctic expert, says "cooperation in the Arctic has never been higher."



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But like the oil trapped on the Arctic sea floor, much of the activity of the Arctic Council is happening below the surface.

In secret diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks, Danish Foreign Minister Per Stieg Moeller was quoted as saying to the United States, "If you stay out, the rest of us will have more to carve up the Arctic."

At the root of Moeller's statement is a dispute over control of territories that is pitting friend against foe and against friend. Canada and the U.S., strategic allies in NATO and Afghanistan, are in a diplomatic dispute over the Northwest Passage. Canada and Russia have recently signed development agreements together.

In the same way a compass goes awry approaching the North Pole, traditional strategic alliances are impacted at the top of the world.

Who owns the rights to the resources?

Right now, the most far-reaching legal document is the U.N. Convention on Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS. All of the Arctic states are using its language to assert their claims.

The Law of the Sea was initially designed to govern issues like fishing rights, granting nations an exclusive economic zone 200 miles off their coasts. But in the undefined, changing and overlapping territory of the Arctic, the Law of the Sea becomes an imperfect guide, and there are disputes over who owns what.

One example is the Lomonosov Ridge, which Canada, Denmark and Russia all claim is within their territory, based on their cartographic interpretations.

Also complicating matters is the fact that the U.S. has never ratified the Law of the Sea. That has given other Arctic Council nations more muscle to assert territorial rights.

So what's next?

With murky international agreements and an absence of clear legal authority, countries are preaching cooperation but preparing for conflict.

There has been a flurry of new military activity reminiscent of days past.

Two U.S. nuclear-powered attack submarines, the SSN Connecticut and the SSN New Hampshire, recently finished conducting ice exercises in the Arctic. Secretary of the Navy Richard Mabus said the purpose of the recent naval exercises was "to do operational and war-fighting capabilities. Places are becoming open that have been ice-

bound for literally millennia. You're going to see more and more of the world's attention pointed towards the Arctic."

Other Arctic nations are ramping up their military capabilities as well. Just this month, Russia announced that it is deploying two brigades to the Arctic, including a special forces unit. The Russian air force has recently resumed strategic bomber flights over the Pole. Canada, Denmark and Norway are also rapidly rebuilding their military presence.

But despite the buildup, almost all of the activity in the Arctic has been within the scope of normal military operations or research.

Have we seen this before?

There is a long precedent for countries using the Arctic to demonstrate military primacy.

On April 25, 1958, the world's first nuclear-powered submarine -- the USS Nautilus (SSN 571) -- began Operation Sunshine, the first undersea transpolar crossing.

Done on the heels of the Sputnik satellite launch, it was a demonstration that the U.S. could go places that its Cold War nemesis could not. For the next three decades, U.S. and Soviet submarines would continue to use the Arctic as a proving ground for military prowess.

With the end of the Cold War, that activity waned. But in 2007, a Russian expedition planted a flag on the bottom of the polar sea floor, almost 14,000 feet below the surface. This "neo-Sputnik" has brought renewed interest to the Arctic and launched a flurry of activity -- scientific, economic and military -- that is eerily parallel to the decades of tension between the superpowers.

The Cold War may be over, but the dethawing of military activity means that the frigid Arctic is once again becoming a hot spot.

For more updates on the story and the "Ice Wars" documentary, follow [@kajlarsen](#) on Twitter.

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Humans suck.

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philwoodman

The US may not be a signer of the treaty, but if there's money, oil, gold, diamonds there, we'll be there.

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opus512

Awesome, thanks to global warming we can mine and extract even more resources that probably contribute to global warming.

It's a win/win!

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Arlaquinn

the scientists who have been sat up there for the last 50 years have not been there to watch polar bear activity or see how we can help them!

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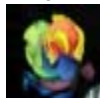


Arlaquinn

no one has rights!!! it shjould be left alone,

is this a product of global warming or is global warming a product of these greedy men in suits!?! with advances of solar power is this really needed?

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IsNot

Both. And, no--we really don't need to keep fostering a reliance on fossil fuels with the alternatives. However, it's hard to get a patent on sunlight, so there is no profit in it. And, as we know, it's all about the Benjamins.

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Todca

Antarctica and the Arctic need to have a safe zone where no humans can go because all we do is pollute and wreak havoc

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DRussell

Perhaps Canada should acquire nuclear weapons. It has lots of reactors, vast amounts of uranium, helped with the US Manhattan project in the 40's and has had the technical ability to make and deliver them since the 1960's. Clearly it is the only way to guarantee sovereignty in this day and age. Although... [more](#)

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Zooper

Gun ownership is not higher in Canada than the U.S. This is a myth. The small arms survey of 2007 divides the number of guns to the population. The U.S. is at 88.8 per 100 and Canada 30.8. You must also factor in the type of control over small arms in Canada. Handguns are strictly controlled. I can ... [more](#)

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MountieSmith

We seriously looked at nuclear subs in the mid 80s, to use in the Arctic. That project ended with Cold War I. Now with Cold War II, who knows!

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Guest

Canada did have nuclear weapons years ago. But gave them up to be non-nuclear with regards to weapons.

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DRussell

And I believe it was the first nation after Russia and America to have a satellite in orbit.

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MPWRR

To all you oil experts out there, little do you realize that we only get about 10% of our oil from the Mideast. We get about 75% of it domestically and the remaining 15% from other nations. So who do you think is controlling the oil prices and causing them to hit the hundred dollar a barrel level?... [more](#)

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• *IsNot*

p1n>> Mexico and Canada are part of the North American continent and can claim the title of "American", which confuses a lot of people. In addition, there are several treaties that consider imports from Mexico and Canada as "domestic" for certain trade and taxation purposes. And, yeah--they are... [more](#)

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• *p1n*

Mr Expert....you must count Canada and Mexico as part of the US.

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• *tambor2*

Amazing that people can still deny climate change as purely profit-driven companies are taking tangible actions to capitalize on its tangible impacts. It's also sad to see us children trying to burn more of the substance that's causing all these problems in the first place. We can't continue to ope... [more](#)

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• *Arlaquinn*

i think these companies with help from certain powers are even speeding up the process.....

did you know that in the 70s the US and USSR "signed" a pact not to develop their weather changing machine project any further!?!

do you really think they just stopped?

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• *Rpokeytruck*

I hope obama and his crowd are long gone when its crunch time. He's allready ruined the pipeline deal from Canada, China will get it.

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• *haditone*

They have thousands of oil leases on property in this country and have not drilled. Why? Is there some reason we need to control the Middle East?

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• *haditone*

Wait - the science community told us last month we were headed for another "little ice age"...quite the 'global warming' crap.

If they are after oil, why are all of the stations down there equipped with big telescopes pointed at the sky? The ones they turned off to scientists two years ago.

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tambor2

You should educate yourself better on the science of climate change so you understand better that its results are more extreme patterns in both warm and cold directions, not just a constant warming.

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wildlifeman

Nibiru

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p1n

Please have your head checked.

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Nalobrex

Russia apparently has the strongest case geologically to the disputed Arctic areas. The question is whether the US and Canada will abide by any international rulings.

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berrettaa

I say let all of the greedy, disgusting oil companies drill themselves a big hole in the arctic and fall in it. Then we can be serious about energy independence.

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