

Arctic

To Whom Does The North Pole Belong?

Russia is pursuing a military buildup; America is reacting defiantly. The Arctic could become a new conflict zone.

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Nato antisubmarine maneuvers in the North Sea © Marit Hommedal/NTB Scanpix/Reuters

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Is this icy wasteland the most dangerous armory in the world? This seems quite possible to the traveler, the longer he crosses the chill landscape around the Russian city of Murmansk. An overland road from the Norwegian border passes by miles of double-row fences with frosty crowns of barbed wire, warning signs and modern surveillance cameras. Soldiers march with bushy fur caps along the streets of the rare towns that have been wrested from the desolate landscape of crippled birches and frozen lakes.

The Kola Peninsula, which extends from here eastward into the Barents Sea, is a sort of gigantic pier. Bathed in the Gulf Stream, its fjords scarcely ever freeze over. That makes the Murmansk region Russia's gateway to the Atlantic and the

most important staging post for its largest naval unit, the Northern Fleet. Submarines carrying atomic weapons are stationed here along with long-distance bombers and army units.

The Kremlin recently began bringing in at least 6,000 additional soldiers to the area. They are only part of an Arctic army that is growing along the Arctic coastline of White Russia, also because of the treasures of raw materials that are hidden here. Six new military bases are being built; old runways from the Cold War are being renovated; new icebreakers are being built; modern submarines loaded with even more atomic warheads are being put into service. Both Russia and NATO have recently conducted increasingly elaborate military maneuvers in the far North.

What's going on here?

Something is occurring that the world hasn't seen for a long time: a massive new border exploration. For decades, it was thought that the Earth's surface had for the most part been divided up between nations; but then climate change came along and began to thaw the Arctic. If the North Pole is viewed from outer space, the Arctic Ocean looks like a cake that has just been taken out of the freezer. Five powerful and less powerful countries are reaching for their pieces: Russia, the USA (via Alaska), Canada, Denmark (via Greenland) and Iceland. Because slumbering beneath the ice are huge quantities of oil, cobalt, gold and nickel. On account of its abundance of raw materials, geologists are already calling the Arctic "Ali Baba's cave."

What is more, nothing less than a new ocean is opening up in the far North. The receding ice is freeing up what may very well be the quickest maritime route between the richest countries of the world. Hovering above all these tangible interests is the prestige-linked question about who the North Pole actually belongs to: NATO or Russia?

After the Ukraine crisis, must the world ready itself for a de-freezing conflict – this time, a purely meteorological one?

Things don't have to turn out that way. Because there are rules on how the Arctic should be divided up, formulated according to scientific criteria by the United Nations. But what if ultimately no one adheres to these peaceful rules? Or if the competitors assume that their counterparts aren't doing so? The danger of the

Nordic gold rush lies not so much in what actually happens along the Arctic Ocean, but in dangerous interpretations. Who is taking what steps? And for what possibly hidden purpose?

Above all, the two superpowers, Russia and the United States, are providing each other with many grounds for suspicion, with uncertainties that can be turned into unbending conviction.

For example, there's the behavior of the Alaskan senator, Republican Dan Sullivan. In his opinion, the somnolent government in Washington isn't taking note of what is happening in the far North. He believes that Russia is planning its next "land grab" in the Arctic, and that the correct response is to increase the U.S. military presence in the area, in order to counteract Russian preponderance if necessary. What is Barack Obama doing instead? The senator believes the president is constantly speaking about climate change: "The Russians are playing chess in the Arctic and our Administration still seems to think it's tic-tac-toe."

Is this paranoia or realism?

Two years ago, scarcely any European could have guessed what symbolic and strategic value a peninsula by the name of Crimea could have for Russia. Is the value that Russia attaches to the Arctic Ocean being similarly underestimated?

As recently as 2007, Moscow made it clear that it considers the North Pole to be just as Russian as the Crimea. At that time, Arctic explorers used a submarine to place a metallic Russian flag on the seabed at a depth of more than 4,000 meters, supposedly right at the North Pole. The action was purely symbolic; the North Pole doesn't belong to the Russians any more than the Moon belongs to the Americans. But the claim was laid out for all to see.

"The North Pole has a symbolic importance for Russia," believes the Russia expert Kararzyna Zysk from the Norwegian Defence University College. "Claiming it as Russian fits in with the patriotic agenda of the Kremlin."

One could call Vladimir Putin's ideology itself Arctic: The world is a rough place where the strong have the best chances and where military power is a virtue. Fitted out with these convictions, Russia is currently attempting to assert its place in an alternative world order. From a coolly calculating, geopolitical perspective, what the largest country on earth has painfully lacked up to now is

sufficient access for its fleet to the world's oceans. This access would be important in order to be able to counter the many military bases that the United States possesses across the globe with at least a few floating staging posts.