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Russia Claims the North Pole

By Yuri Zarakhovich/Moscow

President Vladimir Putin has long promised to restore Russian greatness and build an "energy empire." But until now, his empire-building had been confined to taking control of corporations operating on his turf, buying into businesses abroad, and blackmailing former Soviet Republics who dared vote against Moscow-backed candidates, moved to join NATO or acted in otherwise uppity ways. But Putin's imperial ambitions have recently added an element of classic 19th century-style territorial expansion: Late last month, Moscow signaled its intentions to annex the entire North Pole, an area twice the size of France with Belgium and Switzerland thrown in — except all of it under water.

The ice-frozen North Pole is currently a no man's land supervised by a U.N. Commission. The five Polar countries — Russia, the U.S., Canada, Norway and Denmark each control only a 200-mile economic zone along their coasts. And none of these economic zones reach the North Pole. Under the current U.N. Maritime convention, one country's zone can be extended only if it can prove that the continental shelf into which it wishes to expand is a natural extension of its own territory, by showing that it shares a similar geological structure.

So, the Russians claimed a great scientific discovery late last month. An expedition of 50 scientists that spent 45 days aboard the *Rossia* nuclear ice-breaker found that an underwater ridge (the Lomonosov ridge) directly links Russia's Arctic coast to the North Pole. This, they insist, surely guarantees Russia's rights over a vast Polar territory that also happens to contain some 10 billion tons of oil and natural gas deposits.

Russia's first attempt to expand beyond its Arctic zone was rebuffed by the U.N. Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, but Moscow hopes that its "latest scientific findings" will produce a different outcome when the Commission next meets, in 2009.

Besides risking the defacing of the pristine beauty of the North Polar cap by oil rigs and pipelines, some believe Russia's planned expansion will threaten their own interests. In May, U.S. Senator Richard Lugar told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Russia claiming the hydrocarbon-rich area would be to the detriment of U.S. interests. Unless Washington ratifies the U.N. Maritime Convention, pending since 1982, the Senator explained, the U.S. will have no say whatsoever in the dispute — it won't even have a seat on the International Seabed Authority that monitors nations' compliance with the U.N. Maritime convention, controls activities beyond the national jurisdiction limits and currently administers the area around the pole.

The North Pole isn't the only prize in the eyes of the resurgent Russian empire — Moscow is also looking to restore control over a 47,000 sq. km (18,000 sq. mile) piece of the Bering Sea separating Alaska from Russian Chukotka. The territory was ceded to the U.S. in 1990 under the U.S.-Soviet Maritime Boundary Agreement signed by Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. While the deal may have helped ease Cold War tensions, anti-reform Soviet hardliners always opposed giving up a piece of territory rich in sea life and hydrocarbon deposits, and they and their nationalist successors prevented the agreement's ratification. Today, the Agreement still operates on a provisional basis, pending its ratification by the Russian parliament.

But what had once been a battle cry of the nationalist opposition has now become the official line. In recent weeks, Kremlin-controlled media have berated the Agreement as a treasonous act by Shervardnadze (who later became the pro-NATO president of Georgia). Now, leading pro-Kremlin members of the Russian legislature are publicly demanding that the Agreement be reviewed, with the aim of recovering the country's riches.

Meanwhile, on the morning of January 7 this year, the rotor blades of a Russian Mi-8 helicopter shattered the divine silence at the opposite end of the Earth, disgorging a group of top Russian dignitaries led by none other than FSB (the former KGB) Director Nikolai Patrushev, to proudly raised the Russian flag over the South Pole. At the time, it might have looked like a stunt. But back in 2004, Patrushev landed at the North Pole in much the same fashion. Stay tuned.

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