

Canada, Russia locked in dispute over Arctic border

CTV.CA NEWS STAFF (featuring WHITNEY LACKENBAUER & ROB HUEBERT)

CTV News Channel
September 16, 2010

Canada and Russia are locked in a decades-old dispute over which country owns vast stretches of the Arctic, and the potentially rich resources beneath the otherwise deserted ice and snow.

The United Nations will decide the border dispute between the two Arctic nations, and both the Russian and Canadian governments appeared convinced Thursday that their claim is the strongest.

Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon and Russian minister Sergey Lavrov are meeting in Moscow to discuss the dispute, which focuses on a long ridge running along the floor of the Arctic Ocean from Siberia to Ellesmere Island.

Canada and Russia are both claiming the Lomonosov Ridge is an underwater extension of their territory, and claiming that their northernmost border should be adjusted accordingly.

"We are confident that our case will prevail backed by scientific evidence," Cannon said at a news conference after the talks.

Lavrov was equally insistent that Russia's data would "provide a scientific proof that it's an extension of our continental shelf."

Russia has already staked its claim to the underwater ridge – and the entire region – by dramatically planting a Russian flag on the ocean floor from a small submarine at the North Pole in 2007.

The border dispute is just one of several international squabbles over who controls which parts of the vast, sparsely populated Arctic, which may contain as much as a quarter of the Earth's undiscovered oil and natural gas.

Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States are all expected to file ambitious, competing and overlapping claims stretching right up to the North Pole as the scramble for Arctic riches picks up its pace.

With all these nations jostling for position at the top of the world, at least one expert says Canada is falling behind the rest in pressing its claim.

"Everyone else is sorting out their differences, we really are the laggards," said Michael Byers, who holds the Global Politics and International Law chair at the University of British Columbia.

On Wednesday, Norway and Russia signed an agreement to divide an oil-rich zone off their northern coasts, essentially splitting the disputed 175,000 square kilometres section of the Barents Sea between them.

The Barents Sea pact was signed Wednesday by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, and Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg.

Ottawa has been stalling two similar disputes for years – in addition to its argument with Russia – one with the United States over its border with Alaska in the western Arctic's Beaufort Sea and another clash with Denmark over the maritime boundary between Baffin Island and Greenland.

The federal government has said it is making its Arctic claims a priority, but even if the border disputes are settled, it must still deal with the looming issue of control over the Northwest Passage – which is increasingly seen as a shipping shortcut between Asia to Europe.

Ottawa says the Northwest Passage is Canadian sovereign waters, but Washington and several other nations regard it as an international passage.

Russia's Lavrov, meanwhile, said that Wednesday's agreement with Norway was the example to follow in settling conflicting claims and warned against a stronger NATO presence in the Arctic.

"I don't think it would be right for NATO to assume a decision-making role about who and how should make decisions in the Arctic," he said.

Cannon said that while Canada is not seeking to militarize the Arctic, it intends to "assert sovereignty" over the area and ensure the security of its borders.

NDP defence critic Paul Dewar said that the Tories have used the Arctic as a "wedge of sorts ... to have everyone concerned about our sovereignty."

He said the proposed \$9-billion purchase of 65 new fighter jets falls into that Conservative strategy.

However, Dewar said that the Conservatives have not worked hard enough to negotiate with other countries to ensure Canada's interests are best served.

In particular, Dewar told CTV's Power Play that the Conservatives have not appointed a director for the Canadian Polar Commission two years running.

"We've had this organization there, leaderless. And we have a government that is missing in action on the real issues."

However, Laurie Hawn, the parliamentary secretary to the defence minister, said the government has been working hard to make the Arctic a priority.

He pointed to recent announcements about a new research station and the creation of a deep sea port as proof.

"To say that we're not engaged is absolute nonsense."

International disputes

Despite the fear that Canada is losing ground in the North, University of Waterloo expert Whitney Lackenbauer said Ottawa is actually in a good global position.

He noted that the resolution between Russian and Denmark proves that international law and diplomacy will carry the day in the Arctic, even though that conflict had simmered for decades.

Likewise, he said Canada and Russia will eventually come to a peaceful resolution on any territorial disputes.

"We just need for the science to come in (and) wait for our diplomats to do their business," Lackenbauer told Power Play.

Still, there are large military buildups occurring in the Arctic, which could point to future conflict, said University of Calgary professor Rob Huebert.

For instance, Hueber said that conflict will almost certainly flare up over the region's vast oil and gas resources.

"That's really what most people are looking at into the future."