

Russia claims North Pole with Arctic flag stunt

By **Adrian Blomfield in Moscow**

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Russia will fire the starting gun on the world's last colonial scramble today when a submarine plants a flag under the North Pole to symbolize the Kremlin's claim to the Arctic and its vast energy resources.

In an unprecedented and potentially perilous mission, veteran Arctic explorer Artur Chilingarov will descend 14,000 feet in a deep sea submersible and drop a Russian tricolor cast in titanium onto the seabed.

With Russia's northern rivals, all eager to extend their own Arctic ambitions, looking on uneasily, two Russian ships reached the North Pole after ploughing their way through deep ice for over a week.

In a nation that, in Soviet times, pioneered Arctic exploration, Mr Chilingarov's expedition has fired the Russian public's imagination.



The two Russian submarines are lowered into the Arctic Ocean

But Mr Chilingarov also caused international concern after declaring that the Arctic and the North Pole were Russian.

advertisement Global warming has given renewed impetus to the race for control of the Arctic.

Melting ice sheets could open up the fabled North East passage, the quest for which claimed countless sailors' lives, for the first time.

The route, which could dramatically cut the length of a journey from Europe to Asia, could become navigable to commercial traffic within eight years.

The more clement conditions make for an equally tantalizing prospect.

According to some estimates, the Arctic is home to a quarter of the world's untapped energy reserves - now more accessible than they ever have been.

For all Mr Chilingarov's posturing, his expedition is little more than a public relations stunt designed by the Kremlin to attract public support for Russia's long held claim to a 463,000 mile chunk of the Arctic - about half the size of Western Europe.

The Kremlin has long believed the territory belonged to Russia - it was marked as such on Soviet maps from the 1920s.

But in 1997, Russia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea, which limits the five nations on the Arctic Ocean Russia, Norway, Canada, the United States (through Alaska) and Denmark (through Greenland) to 200 miles of territorial waters.

But under the treaty, the five nations are allowed to file claims to a UN commission for greater territory if they can prove that their continental shelves are geographically linked to the Arctic seabed.

In 2001, Russia became the first country to file a claim, arguing that the underwater Lomonosov ridge was not merely a chain of

mountains in international waters but was actually an extension of Siberia's continental shelf.

The commission, however, was not convinced and asked for seismology reports and sonar measurements to support Russia's submission.

After a six week expedition that ended in June, Russia's Institute of Ocean Geology maintained it had a vital breakthrough - a claim that prompted Mr Chilingarov to set off on his patriotic mission.

But the institute warned that Russia was still along way off presenting a credible claim, saying it would not be in a position to do so until 2010 at the earliest.



Map of disputed Arctic region : [Click to enlarge](#)

"It would be far fetched to claim at this point that the evidence we have gathered is conclusive," said Georgy Cherkashev, the institute's deputy director.

"There is progress in that direction but I would be cautious until the data has been properly processed and analysed."

Even so, the development has galvanized other Arctic nations into action. Denmark is to submit its own claim and Canada has announced it will build eight armed ships capable of cutting through the ice.

Both countries are also expected to study the Lomonosov Ridge, which runs through Greenland to Canada's Ellesmere Island.

The area is believed to have up to 10 billion barrels of oil.

With the United States and Norway also having filed claims, the prospect for bitter territorial disputes has been raised. Russia, however, remains quietly confident.

The territory it seeks is a triangle running from the country's western Kola Peninsula in the West to the Chukotka Peninsula in the East with the Apex running through the Pole itself.

Even if the sector is not awarded to Russia, it is unlikely any other country could seize it. If Russia is successful, however, its already mighty energy reserves would be given a massive boost - although there is still doubt about the technical feasibility of extracting oil and gas from the Arctic.

Despite growing concerns over the way Moscow uses its energy for political gain, Russian scientists have repeatedly pledged that there is no intention to grab any part of the Arctic.

"A unilateral annexation of the area by Russia is impossible," said Viktor Posyolov of the Russian Institute of Ocean Geology, which has led the Arctic exploration. "We will strictly abide by the UN convention."

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