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# General Assembly 4 - Special Political and Decolonisation

The geopolitical situation within the Arctic Circle



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("Information About The Arctic...")

## Introduction

The Arctic Region, at the north-most part of the Earth, is comprised of the Arctic Ocean, adjacent seas, parts of Russia, Alaska (USA), Finland, Canada, Norway, Greenland, Iceland and Sweden. As the seasons change in this region the landscape alters significantly. In winters the whole area of land is covered with ice and temperatures can drop to below  $-60^{\circ}\text{C}$  whereas in summers the landscape is made up of tundra forest with few species and is under  $10^{\circ}\text{C}$ . There is a current population of 13.1 million people that inhabit the Arctic, a majority of these people are indigenous populations while others are immigrants who, for the most part, have come from Europe. Within the region, there are multiple oil, gas and coal

reserves. As the increase in summer polar ice melting continues, this region has a more probable possibility of being explored for petroleum industries. The largest natural resource within the Arctic is water (in ice and glaciers) which makes up 20% of all the water on earth. ("Information About The Arctic")

The Arctic Region is ever changing and in recent years the melting ice is making the region more accessible. Many countries are recognising the possibilities of economic



development, extraction of natural resources and the increasing possibilities of trading routes in this region.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Arctic Haze

A reddish-brown gas created from anthropogenic pollution at very high latitudes which causes low visibility in previously clear skies. This haze is often seen in eastern Siberia, Alaska, northern Greenland and the arctic coasts of Canada. (Inc., Lesia, and Lesia)

### Exclusive Economic Zone

An area of water off the coastline of a country over which the state has certain rights of exploring and exploiting the waters, conserving and managing natural resources and even the right to establish artificial islands, installations and structures. These zones were prescribed to each nation by the UNCLOS.

### UNCLOS

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is an international agreement which defines the laws of nations in respect to their use of the oceans. The UNCLOS came into force in 1984 and since has helped define the law of the oceans.

### Continental Shelf

The continental shelf is an area of underwater land mass where the sea is relatively shallow compared to the open ocean. In terms of law, most continental shelves at this point in time are up to a distance of 200 nautical miles (according to the UNCLOS), however, this has been adapted throughout history. There is now a United Nations commission which deals with these laws, called the CLCS.

### CLCS

The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf was put in place to establish the outer limits of the continental shelf stretching 200 miles and make recommendations to coastal states about matters dealing with extending the continental shelf further. If states wish to extend their boundary they must prove that the seabed is physically connected to their country. This commission meets twice a year at the UN headquarters in New York.



## Lomonosov Ridge

The Lomonosov Ridge is a submarine ridge of the Arctic Ocean which spans 1,100 miles long. The ridge stretches from Ellesmere Island on the continental shelf of north America to a place near the North Pole and then south towards the continental shelf of the New Siberian Islands. This significant ridge divides the Arctic into two basins, the Eurasia basin and the Amerasian basin. The ridge also impacts water circulation, ice movement and marine life. ("Lomonosov Ridge | Geographical Feature, Arctic Ocean")

## Hans Island

Hans Island is an example of a territorial dispute in the region which has played out for over 20 years with little success of reaching a solution. The island lies on the Canada-Denmark border. In 1984 Canada placed a flag on the island which soon after was replaced with a Danish one. The dispute still continues today with no resolution and little consequence.

## General Overview

In 1925, Canada was the first country to claim territory in the Arctic and the Soviet Union shortly followed in 1937. This claim to Arctic land was very valuable to many countries because of the control over Northern air transport routes. The first time this region became disputed over was during the Cold War, when the area became a strategic place to launch submarine nuclear weapons. The beginning of the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) also proved significant in building tensions regarding defining the territories within the Arctic Ocean. The provisions within the UNCLOS only affected the Arctic nations when climate change was recognised because before, most of the territory was inaccessible in terms of resources.

After the implementation of the treaty (UNCLOS), Russia decided to take a new approach by using submarines to place a flag at the bottom of the Arctic ocean. Additionally, the explorers collected samples in order to justify that the ridge is an extension of Russian land. Canada, who had made a claim to the same land, was angered by Russia's actions. In December 2014, Denmark took further action to claim 900,000 beyond the coast of Greenland. Denmark's decision was mainly due to the major shipping routes which would create cheaper passage for trading and shipping. ("As Arctic Ice Melts, Territorial Disputes Are Hotting Up".)



The major change came when the additional research was found that an estimated 22% of the world's natural gases and oil comes from the Arctic. That being said, in 2015 Russia made their second claim to a territory of 436,000 square miles which included the North Pole. (6) The EU alongside nine of the world's largest fishing nations signed an agreement to keep the arctic untouched for fishing for the next 16 years. Now, however, the major concern is the extraction of natural resources which may become economically feasible by 2040. This would commence along with the extraction of natural materials such as, petroleum, gas, nickel, copper, coal, gold, uranium, tungsten, diamonds, molybdenum, silver and zinc. The Arctic region may also incorporate new shipping routes and transport of high value materials such as fuel.



("Obama Administration Bars Oil Exploration In Arctic Waters")

Some major concerns with these new developments in the region would be an increase in ice break up, noise pollution and the risk of oil and gas spillage. With more recognition in the region it will also be much easier for large corporations and commercial companies to move in, further contributing to destroying the planet as we know it. ("Who Owns The Arctic? And Who Doesn'T? – Timeline".)

## Major Parties Involved

### Russia

Russia is at the forefront of the debates about the geopolitical situation within the Arctic Circle and continues to expand its activities in the region. Russia already has a record number of 46 icebreakers, more than any other country. By expanding Russia's territories North-ward, President Vladimir Putin is taken actions to set Russia up to take advantage of new shipping routes and oil deposits. Russia's decades long push for the land has resulted in the international governance we see today.

### United States of America

The US has portrayed their interests in the region since the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867. In those years, national security and international development were key concerns. In today's world, the US is additionally concerned with environmental, scientific



and technological development. The US Arctic policy must meet the needs of US national security, protect the Arctic environment by conserving its living resources, strengthen cooperation among the eight Arctic nations, involve the indigenous people in decisions and enhance scientific monitoring in the region. ("Arctic")

## Canada

Canada's Arctic is precious to the country and makes up the majority of the landmass. Canada's Arctic foreign policy is made up of four issues including, "protecting Canada's environmental heritage, promoting economic and social development, improving and devolving northern governance and exercising Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic." Canada has mostly focused its effort into ensuring the world is aware of the effects of climate change on the region and the people which inhabit the northern Canada. ("The Canadian Arctic")

## Iceland

Iceland has interests with regards to the effects of climate change and the environment, the possibility of natural resource extraction, navigation opportunities and strengthening cooperation with other nations and stakeholders on the issues facing the region.

## The Kingdom of Denmark

Denmark is very centrally located in the Arctic with Greenland at the forefront alongside the Faroe islands, and Denmark itself not being far away. The Arctic makes up an important part in cultural heritage and a large population of the Kingdom lives within the Arctic Circle. Denmark is interested in the economic opportunities the region provides, as well as ensuring the Arctic is developed sustainably.

## Finland

Finland gathered the eight Arctic nations together in 1991, with additional groups representing the indigenous people, to implement an environmental - protection strategy. This led to the creation of the Arctic Council which is vital for future life in the Arctic. Finland's policy describes the essentialness of sustainable development and environmental considerations as well as highlighting how crucial international cooperation is in the region.



## Sweden

The Swedish policy in the Arctic is very simple as its priorities consist of the climate and environment, economic development and the human dimension, ensuring indigenous populations and other populations are taken into consideration.

## Norway

Norway also has laid out its own policy regarding the importance of international cooperation, business development and infrastructure opportunities, knowledge development (additional research) and environmental protection and emergency preparedness.

Every nation is watching hoping to gain access to shorter marine routes and the untouched vast natural resources which the Arctic region has to offer. The UK and China have taken a particular interest as the UK hopes to continue to engage in research about climate change in the region and China hopes to use the future trading routes in the Arctic. ("Arctic Policies Database - Arctic Portal - The Arctic Gateway")

## Timeline of Key Events

Timeline of events in reverse chronological order leading up to present day.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Description of Event</b>
<b>1998</b>	It was reported that Chinese researchers had discovered heavy industrial pollution in the snow around the North Pole.
<b>2000</b>	Visitors to the North Pole reported that the ice had melted for the 1st time in recorded history and formed a free patch of ocean about a mile in diameter.
<b>2004</b>	A comprehensive scientific study of the Arctic climate was released and confirmed that the North is melting, and faster all the time.
<b>2005</b>	Indigenous leaders from Arctic regions around the world called on the European Union to do more to fight global warming and to consider giving aid to their peoples.



- 2007** The UN warned in a report that up to 12% of Arctic ice has turned to water in the past 30 years, an alarming fact that only accelerates global warming further.
- 2007** Canada announced plans to increase its Arctic military presence in an effort to assert sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, a potentially oil-rich region the United States claims is international territory.
- 2007** Two deep-diving Russian mini-submarines descended more than 2 1/2 miles under North Pole ice to stake a flag on the ocean floor, part of a quest to bolster Russian claims to much of the Arctic's oil-and-mineral wealth.
- 2007** Canada dismissed Russia's claim to a large chunk of the resource-rich Arctic, saying the tactic was more suited to the 15th century than the real world.
- 2007** The United States launched an expedition toward the Arctic to map the seafloor off Alaska.
- 2007** Denmark was reported to be planning a month long expedition, to begin Aug 12, to seek evidence that the Lomonosov Ridge, a 1,240-mile underwater mountain range, is attached to the Danish territory of Greenland, making it a geological extension of the Arctic island.
- 2009** Russian media reported that the presidential Security Council has released a document outlining government policy for the Arctic that includes creating a special group of military forces.
- 2013** 2 Canada signalled intentions to claim the North Pole and surrounding Arctic waters while announcing the filing of a UN application seeking to vastly expand its Atlantic sea boundary.
- 2013** Russia's President Vladimir Putin ordered the military to step up its presence in the Arctic after Canada signalled its intention to claim the North Pole and surrounding waters.
- 2014** Denmark claimed ownership of around 900,000 square km of the continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean north of Greenland by filing documents to United Nations.



- 2015** Russia pressed a claim at the UN for an additional 1.2 million square km (463,000 square miles) of Arctic shelf, an area of escalating international tension.
- 2017** The Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica set a new record for the earliest transit of the fabled Northwest Passage after 24 days at sea and a journey spanning more than 10,000 km (6,214 miles).

("Timeline Arctic")

## Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Many attempts have been made, by both the United Nations and member states, to resolve the ongoing tensions building within the Arctic Circle, however, no success has been made thus far when it comes to an agreement on the territory, potential transport and trading routes or the extraction of natural resources. Each of the eight Arctic nations have their own policies focused towards their countries in order to improve their aspect of the region and open up potential development opportunities.

An official UN resolution has not yet been written because of the constant arrival of new factual information and shifting power regarding the situation both geographically, politically, socially and economically. The UN has been very active in attempting to ensure the sustainability of the region. Greenpeace has placed a significant amount of pressure on the UN to pass a resolution which provides global legal protection for the Arctic.

The Ilulissat Declaration of 2008 announced the meeting of five political states (United States, Russia, Canada, Norway and Denmark) to comprehend the Arctic ocean territory, climate change and the marine environment, maritime safety and the division of emergency responsibilities when new shipping routes are opened. This meeting was successful except for the exclusion of three Arctic nations which do not border the Arctic Ocean (Iceland, Sweden, Finland). The indigenous people were also excluded which questions the reliability of this declaration as a whole. ("Ilulissat Declaration")

Furthermore, one major treaty that was signed was between Russia and Norway about the Maritime Boundary in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean. This was the first political deal which honored true diplomacy and negotiations. The two countries made an agreement which would have economic benefits for both sides. This treaty proves an example of the simplicity and ease that future negotiations might have as well, further



proving the un-necessity of conflict. ("Delimitation Agreement: A New Era In The Barents Sea And The Arctic? | Arctic Forum Foundation")

## Possible Solutions

When looking for possible solutions, one must comprehend the most disputed of territories in the regions: Lomonosov Ridge and Hans Island. Additional maps must be drawn illustrating the territorial ownership of each nation and the areas of land already claimed. Research must also be done further into understanding where each continental shelf lies and the claims of each nation must be reconsidered over the extension of their own continental shelf. Another possible solution could be considering the possibility of splitting land.

A solution to the conflicting claims to Arctic land would be for a full State ratification and adherence to UNCLOS, however, if designed properly, an Arctic Treaty would also prove a viable solution. It could provide the potential to resolving not only sovereignty claims but also the unique Arctic issues.

This implementation of an Arctic treaty would be similar of that implemented in Antarctica which at the time had seven nations attempting to claim territory. These nations managed to resolve their conflicting claims through the Antarctic treaty, establishing a legal framework of joint governance and land ownership over the continent. Although this proved successful in Antarctica, some people might worry whether it could prove successful in the Arctic because of Antarctica being a continent while the Arctic is an ocean surrounded by land, making its boundaries and borders more challenging to define. Furthermore, in the Arctic, there is an indigenous population which makes it more difficult to claim and shift land ownership, unlike in Antarctica. The eight Arctic nations overlapping claims and diversified legal positions further point to the need of a legal framework under an "Arctic Treaty". (Molly Watson)

## Appendices

### Appendix A

A PDF created by Molly Watson at University of Maine School of Law about An Arctic Treaty: A Solution To The International Dispute Over The Polar Region:



[https://web.kamihq.com/web/viewer.html?source=extension\\_pdfhandler&file=https%3A%2F%2Fdigitalcommons.maine.gov%2Fcgibin%2Fviewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D1100%26context%3Ddocj](https://web.kamihq.com/web/viewer.html?source=extension_pdfhandler&file=https%3A%2F%2Fdigitalcommons.maine.gov%2Fcgibin%2Fviewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D1100%26context%3Ddocj).

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