

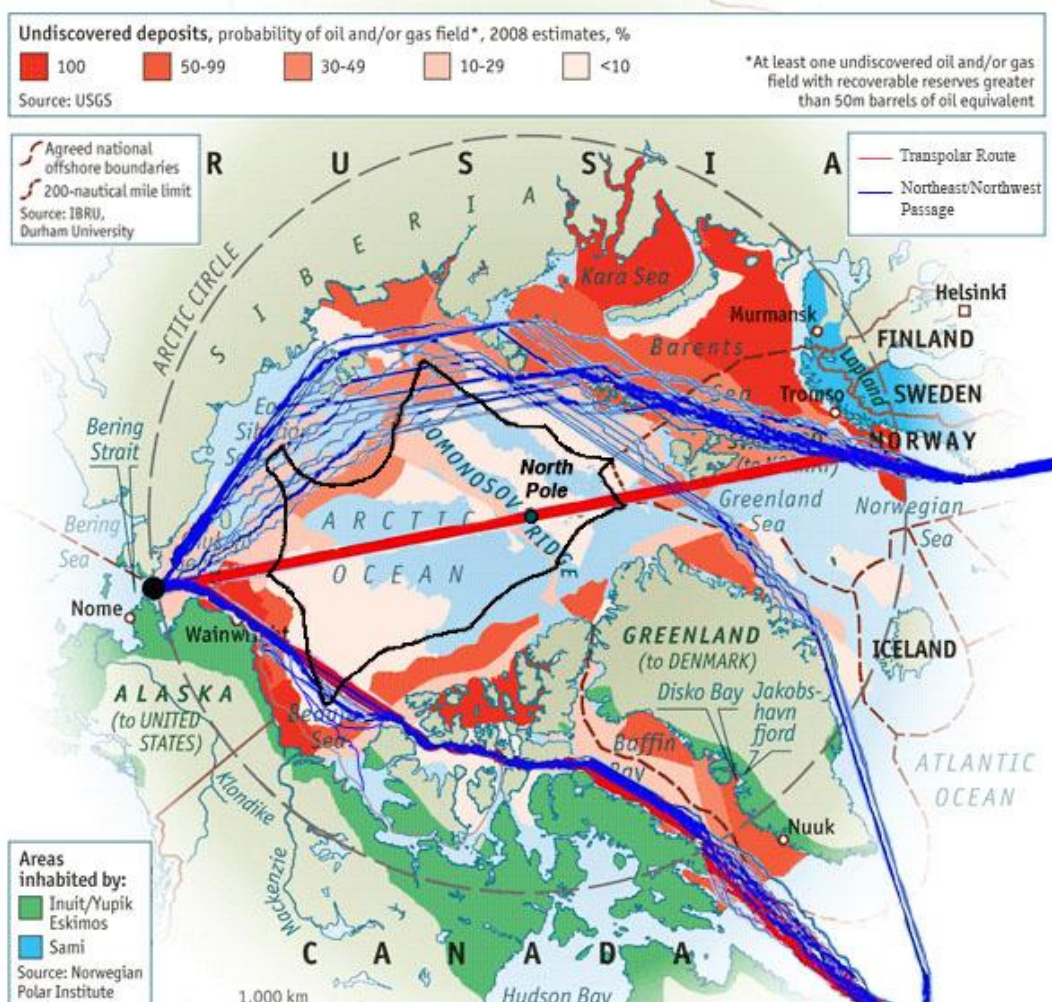
On Contested Waters of the Northernmost Ocean

by Irina Valko

In addition to a buffer position separating the former Cold War rivals and polar sea routes (including the Transpolar SeaRoute) as future global shipping lanes running from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, the Central Arctic Ocean disposes with other potential material and symbolic features that attract not only the coastal states, but the whole international community: renewable and non-renewable resources (mainly energy and fish) and fresh water.

Within the so-called 'Arctic Eight' group four states signal, implicitly and explicitly, the intention to extend own national rights over vast areas of the central part of the Arctic Ocean: Canada, Denmark, Russia and the United States. In terms of major commercial activity in the ocean, oil and gas extraction, fishing and transportation, the present situation, when the claimant states remain within the existing maritime borders (Exclusive Economic Zone of 200 nautical miles from the baseline), is very different from the one when their borders extend on the basis of their continental shelf claims. Figure 1 demonstrates this difference.

Figure 1: Oceanic resources of the Arctic states: present versus potential



Source: author, based on *Economist* (2012) and *PNAS* (2015)

The figure integrates the findings on undiscovered offshore oil and gas deposits in the Arctic ocean by U.S. Geological Survey (2008) and the possible modelled trans-Arctic shipping routes in 2040 – 2059 from reduced sea-ice appearing in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States in 2015. Black line separates Arctic states' EEZ (under national jurisdiction) from the High Seas (under international jurisdiction).

In Canada, the ongoing extraction of energy resources (oil and natural gas production) occurs mainly onshore. At the same time, while there is no significant fishing activity in the Western part of the Arctic Canadian seas, capelin, cod, sand lance, herring, halibut, plaice, snow crab, and northern shrimp is caught in Central and Eastern parts of the Canadian Arctic. As visible from Figure 1, the northern extension of the existing maritime borders would finally save Canada from disputing the status of a little part of the Northwest Passage that does not lie within its EEZ with international community. At the same time, potential new areas do not promise Canada a lot in terms of non-renewable natural resources: in contrast to area delimited by Axel Heiberg Island, Melville Island and the northern edge of Devon Island, where the probability of new energy deposit field is as high as 100 percent; and the Northwest part of the Canadian EEZ in the Beaufort Sea, where this probability is between 50 and 99 percent; the potential extension of maritime borders further into the Arctic Ocean promises the country some additional resources, but with a substantially lower probability of less than 10 percent.

On Greenland, no extraction of energy resources is present. Instead, fishing is of much greater importance: it generates 18 percent of its gross product.ⁱ The economic activity concentrates around the catch of the northern prawns, halibut, lumpfish, snow crab, and cod. Figure 1 demonstrates that a further extension of the existing maritime borders to the north would not change dramatically the existing maritime transport situation of Denmark – the only difference would be in the possession of a small portion of Transpolar Sea Route area holding the potential new northern limit of the country. And, similarly to Canada, potential new areas do not promise Denmark a lot in terms of non-renewable natural resources: in contrast to EEZ areas contingent to Greenland's coastline between Nord and Daneborg, and between Knud Rasmusen Land and location opposite to Canadian Alert (no name exists so far), where the probability of new energy deposits varies from 50 and 99 percent; the latter is not higher than 10 percent if Danish maritime borders are extended further into the Arctic Ocean.

In the North-west of the Arctic region, Russians catch cod, herring, saithe, capelin, northern shrimp and halibut; while the Far-Eastern part of the Russian North is specializing in the large-scale trawl fisheries and ground fish (approximately 90 percent walleye pollock), however, there is no significant fishing activity in the Siberian seas. In addition to the systematic onshore oil and gas production and exploration, drilling on the continental shelf is also present within the existing EEZ. As visible from Figure 1, the northern extension of the existing maritime borders would grant Russia not only the TPR laying on the potential new northern limit of the country, but also the sovereign right over the whole Northeast Passage, including the small portion of northernmost paths of the latter that are, so far, in the jurisdiction of the international community. Also, in contrast to other Arctic actors, the potential new areas promises Russia the most in terms of non-renewable natural resources: the latter are expected to be discovered in almost the whole deep ocean claimed by Russia, with probability of occurrence varying from less than 10 percent to almost 50 percent.

Finally, the fishing industry in Alaska is determined by the catch and processing of the ground fish (approximately 75 percent walleye pollock), salmon, halibut, and shellfish; while the ongoing extraction of energy resources occurs mainly onshore.ⁱⁱ Figure 1 demonstrates that a further extension of the existing maritime borders to the north would not change dramatically the existing maritime transport situation of the United States – the only difference would be in the possession of a small portion of Northwest Passage that is now under the jurisdiction of international community. Similarly to Canada and Denmark, potential new areas do not promise the United States a lot in terms of non-renewable natural resources: in contrast to EEZ areas contingent to the Arctic coastline of Alaska, where the probability of new energy deposits varies from less than 10 percent to almost 100 percent; the latter is not higher than 10 percent if the United States' maritime borders are extended further into the Arctic Ocean.

To sum up, by exploring the central part of the Arctic Ocean the coastal states may expand their resource base and those not yet started realizing the offshore drilling, to do so. However, it is obvious from the Figure 1 that the probability of discovering new deposits of crude oil and/or natural gas field within the existing borders of the Arctic states is higher than in the claimed areas in the central part of the ocean. In comparison to Russia, to which the potential northern expansion of the existing maritime borders promises additional energy resources (although with lower probability of occurrence); Denmark, Canada and the United States are expected to gain much less. As of the Arctic maritime routes, the existing semi-operating paths, the Northeast and the Northwest passages, are, for the most part, already within the EEZ of two Arctic states, Russia and Canada. Consequently, the expansion to the central part of the ocean may bring into consideration the jurisdiction over the Transpolar Route, which is not about to open even in the long-run. Unfortunately, it is too hard now to assess the actual volume of the fish stock in the central Arctic ocean – area never been fished due to a year-round ice coverage – that can potentially be divided among the claimant states, mainly because of the changing stock of marine animals that results from the variation in sea temperature.ⁱⁱⁱ

What seems to be more promising is the potential mass of fresh water – a truly strategic resource of the 21st century^{iv} – the Arctic Ocean contains. Although the central Arctic basin is a polar desert, i.e. an area where the annual precipitation does not exceed 130 mm annually, an estimated one-fifth of freshwater and several of the world's largest rivers are found in the Arctic. Fresh water exists in the Arctic in still, frozen, and running forms. When the massive glaciers of the ice age receded, a vast system of lakes and wetlands in depressions in the landscape emerged throughout the region^v. Greenland glacier^{vi} and smaller glaciers in Franz Josef Land, Novaya Zemlya, and Severnaya Zemlya store vast amounts of fresh water.^{vii} The annual mean freshwater input of almost 40 percent to the Arctic Ocean is dominated by four rivers – the Mackenzie, Lena, Yenisei, and Ob. The total freshwater export from the Arctic Ocean to the North Atlantic is dominated by ships through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and via the Fram Strait.^{viii} There is an interaction between the fresh water provided by the rivers, the existing seawater, and the melting ice within a large-scale freshwater cycle.

The rising global prices for oil, gas, fish and freshwater should imply the region's natural resource extraction and transportation becoming economically viable. At the same time, the reality of Arctic geopolitics turns out to be cooler. The economic and political climate is not heating at anything like the rate widely predicted in 2007; while the progress of Arctic oil and natural gas exploration is still very low (due to an extremely short drilling season, high economic, environmental and social costs); and a too slow sea ice melting allowing no

significant progress in the development of maritime transport and navigation.^{ix} In general, the operation and shipping costs of doing business in the Arctic Ocean are considerable, particularly in terms of labour, maintenance, repairs, and insurance. Shipping of perishable consumer goods is especially vulnerable to changes in the physical environment,^x so the Arctic sea routes, either the potential TPR or the existing routes, are not suitable. At the same time, while some fisheries (as cod) are now of minor economic value, due to decline of the resource base, national regulation of fishing rights would lead to massive overfishing in some areas of the ocean.

So, what is so special about the Central Arctic ocean that makes the four states compete with the international community for it, notwithstanding the questionability of potential economic gains? Until the beginning of the new millennium, few studies in political geography and geopolitics focused on the problematic of the world ocean. Prior to this, the latter appeared sporadically in analyses of cultural and political ecologists studying coastal communities, economists dealing with the maritime shipping routes, and even military strategists analyzing the surface of Earth in terms of fighting. However, the ocean itself "... was generally conceived as a space beyond the boundaries of society, a space *used by society*, not *of society*" [original emphasis].^{xi} Due to the development of human geography and social sciences in the late 1990s, the situation has started to change. The analytical interests in political geography turned seaward.^{xii} Geographers started to view the sea not just as a liquid medium separating societies but, primarily, as a distinct space with own developmental dynamics that always has an influence over coastal (and not only coastal) societies. Some authors claim that, in addition to an increase in the volume of resources extracted from the ocean, nations compete for the latter because of a rapid spread of sovereign states to cover virtually all the planet.^{xiii} According to Sanger, the current competition over the ocean areas is comparable to the competition over colonies in the eighteen and nineteen century.^{xiv} Other authors stress the symbolic importance of the ocean resources: within the ongoing process of globalization, "...states and their populations increasingly seek more, a high standard of living, increasing substantially the consumption of energy [and not only energy] resources from the continental shelves".^{xv} In other words, the coastal states tend to view the ocean as a source of power that allows them to strengthen own position within the system of international relations, given the fact that the international public law does not provide a unified response to their ocean claims.

ⁱGlomsrod, S. and I. Aslaksen, eds. *The Economy of the North 2008*. Oslo: Statistics Norway, 2009; pp. 53-54.

ⁱⁱGlomsrod, S. and I. Aslaksen, eds. *The Economy of the North 2008*. Oslo: Statistics Norway, 2009; p. 94.

ⁱⁱⁱStruzik, E. "As Arctic Ocean Ice Vanishes, Questions About Future Fishing." *Environment-360 Digest*, 11 February 2015; p. 1. Available at WWW:

<e360.yale.edu/digest/as_arctic_ocean_ice_vanishes_questions_emerge_about_future_fisheries/4358>

^{iv}Glassner and Fahrer, 2004; Tvedt and Chapman, 2010.

^vFor example, these lake and wetland systems cover 8.5% of Sweden and 10% of Finland.

^{vi}Greenland glacier, 1.7 million sq km, constitutes 12% of the total ice in the world (second in size after the Antarctic ice cap).

^{vii}Baldursson, 2011.

^{viii}Serreze et al., 2006.

^{ix}Hough, P. *International Politics of the Arctic: Coming in from the Cold*. New York: Routledge, 2013; pp. 40-45.

^xBoult, D. "Hunger in the Arctic: Food (In)Security in Inuit Communities." *Discussion Paper*. Ottawa: National Aboriginal Health Organization, Ajunnginiq Centre, Oct. 2004; p. 6.

^{xi}Steinberg, P. E. "Oceans." *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, 2015; p. 1. Available at WWW: <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199874002/obo-9780199874002-0052.xml>>

^{xii}Steinberg 1999; Wigen and Harland-Jacobs, 1999; Lambert et al., 2006.

^{xiii}Cohen, S. *Geography and Politics in a World Divided*. New York: Penguin Random House, 1963; p. 23.

^{xiv}Sanger, C. *Ordering the Oceans: The Making of the Law of the Sea*. London: Zed Books, 1987.

^{xv}Marroni, E. and M. Asmus. "Geopolitical Strategy for the Territorialism of Oceans and Seas." *International Journal of Geosciences*, no. 4, 2013; p. 1053.