

Ocean explorers plant Russian flag on Arctic sea floor

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Published: Thursday, August 02, 2007

OTTAWA -- Two Russian mini-submersibles successfully descended more than four kilometres to the North Pole seabed early Thursday, a flag-planting feat hailed by expedition leaders as a historic achievement akin to the first moon landing, but mocked in Canada by Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay as "just a show" of Russian bravado and "no threat to Canadian sovereignty." Yet the dive is widely seen as a symbol of Russia's determination to claim ownership, under the UN Law of the Sea, to an Ontario-sized swath of the Arctic Ocean seafloor -- and control potentially vast reserves of oil and gas on Canada's northern doorstep.

Expert observers in this country also say the apparent ease with which the Russians reached the North Pole and carried out such a descent is a clear indication of just how far behind Canada is -- without even an icebreaker capable of year-round travel across the polar cap -- in being able to assert its own territorial claims in the Arctic.



Canada's leading expert on Arctic sovereignty told CanWest News Service that MacKay's immediate response to Russian dive hints at a "disturbingly complacent" attitude toward the Arctic by the Canadian government.

"The Mir-1 successfully descended to the ocean floor at 12:08, Moscow time, to a depth of 4,261 metres," mission chief Artur Chilingarov, a Russian legislator and polar explorer, said after the submersible landed at ocean bottom, according to Russia's ITAR-Tass news agency.

"The touchdown was soft, yellowish soil is seen around; no deepwater creatures are in sight," Chilingarov added.

A second mini-sub, Mir-2, also reached the seafloor at a depth of 4,302 metres. A robotic arm from one of the submersibles scooped samples from the seabed and deposited a titanium case containing a Russian flag.

MacKay, in a televised interview just hours after the Russian announcement, said: "This isn't the 15th century. You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say, 'We're claiming this territory.'"

"There is no threat to Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic ... we're not at all concerned about this mission -- basically it's just a show by Russia," he told CTV.

Canada's leading expert on Arctic sovereignty issues, UBC law professor Michael Byers, essentially backed MacKay's interpretation of the Russian dive but told CanWest News Service it should serve as a wake-up call to Canada.

"Legally speaking, it's just a show," said Byers, Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law. "But it's also an awfully impressive display of Russia's capability to operate in the Arctic. And that capability means that Russia will be able to file a scientifically complete claim to the Arctic seabed with the United Nations on time, while Canada's ability to do so is highly questionable. Mr. MacKay is right about the Russian flag, but seems disturbingly complacent about the larger issue."

Byers said Canada "should send a formal letter -- a 'diplomatic note' -- to the Russian government reminding it that the planting of a flag is of no legal consequence" and asking that "Russia make public all the data it obtains, in the interests of transparency, fairness and diplomatic and legal certainty."

He added "such a diplomatic note would remind the Russians that the situation is governed by pre-established legal and technical procedures, while expressing Canada's continued engagement with the issues and its own determination to mount a well-supported legal claim."

Russia's flag-planting mission follows a claim made by its scientists last month that the Lomonosov Ridge -- an underwater mountain chain that runs across the Arctic Ocean between Russia and Canada -- is geologically linked to Russia, giving it ownership of a sprawling, resource-rich area of the polar seafloor under a UN convention governing undersea territorial claims.

Billions of dollars in oil and gas deposits are believed to lie beneath the Arctic seabed, and all five nations with Arctic coastlines -- Canada, Russia, the U.S., Norway and Denmark, which governs Greenland -- are angling to secure subsurface rights in the region.

Russia's geological claims have yet to be verified, but it made a similar argument in 2001 and was told by the UN to conduct further research, due to be submitted in 2009.

Canada has been working with scientists from Denmark to determine whether the ridge is also linked to North America's continental shelf.

Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, a country can secure rights to seabed territory reaching far beyond the 200-mile limit if it can prove that a portion of the ocean floor is geologically linked to its continental shelf.

Canada's evidence is due to be submitted in 2013.

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