
Is Russia fuelling a risky new 'Race to the Pole'?

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Moscow Diary: The icy frontier

The BBC's James Rodgers is back from a holiday and here he examines Russia's controversial Arctic ambitions.

His diary is published fortnightly.

Russia rattled its rivals. Moscow stole a march on its competitors in staking a claim to the mineral riches of the Arctic.

Russia rarely takes the easy way. They did not just say, "We think we might have a reasonable claim". Their expedition last August, led by explorer Artur Chilingarov, planted a Russian tricolour flag on the seabed at the North Pole.

The feat led other nations whose territory approaches the ice cap to remind Russia that it wasn't as simple as all that.

Ever since then, there have been rumblings that this could be the issue that will lead Russia and its former foes back into full-on confrontation. The fact that it is focused on the Arctic has led to endless speculative headlines punning on the phrase "Cold War".

Some of the members of the expedition that dived to the bottom of the Arctic Ocean were keener to talk about the technical and scientific achievement it represented.

Pretty much everyone else, in Russia and elsewhere, either celebrated or condemned what they saw as the acts of pioneers or pirates, depending on their point of view.

Russia's claim to the North Pole cannot be decided on the basis of the flag-planting alone, but the adventurous act was totally in keeping with the way the country has always been ready to challenge the Arctic.

According to Sergei Pryamikov, an expert at Russia's Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute, "Canada and Denmark are just as active as us in pursuing their Arctic claims - they just don't do it with as much fanfare".

Speaking to the BBC this week, he said all five countries bordering on the Arctic were seeking to stake out territory there - legally.

"They are all worried about securing energy resources - but there are no conflicting claims to specific seabed resources, so I doubt very much that a war could break out," he said.

Russia was one of the first to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, he noted, and as there is a 10-year time-limit for making a claim, "we have to present our case ahead of the others". Russia is preparing a fresh submission of Arctic data to the UN, in support of its claim.

ARCTIC HEROISM On a recent visit to St Petersburg, with my head full of headlines about a new space race/Cold War/land grab, I decided to go to the Russian State Museum of the Arctic and Antarctic.

The museum's facade was being restored - in itself perhaps a reflection of the fact that the oil wealth which has funded a new era of exploration is also helping to fill the coffers of cultural institutions.

The building itself, like so many in St Petersburg, tells the history of the city as well as any lecture. It was built in the 19th Century and used as a church until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Along with many of St Petersburg's artistic treasures, the museum was moved to Siberia as Hitler's forces prepared to besiege the city.

Perhaps because it was a Soviet-era creation, the museum celebrates that epoch most of all. The forging of a new way of life, combined with the constant improvement of 20th-Century technology, seemed to inspire explorers as never before.

There are exhibits celebrating bold trans-Arctic flights. There's the tale of the Chelyushkin, a ship crushed in the polar ice. Those on board survived for 60 days on drift ice, during the Arctic winter.

The pilots who finally rescued them were awarded communist Russia's greatest honour, "Hero of the Soviet Union".

Then there was the story of a certain L. Rogozov. Struck by appendicitis a hopeless distance from anything like a hospital, he operated on himself. There was a picture of him sitting up in bed, carrying out the surgery by looking in a mirror placed somewhere around the top of his thighs. The phrases "hard man" or "tough guy" simply seem inadequate.

I got chatting to one of the museum staff, who was keen to practise his English. He gave me a brochure that had been produced in the mid-1990s. It told a familiar story: an impoverished ex-Soviet institution offering its expertise to foreign partners in return for funds.

The man I was talking to apologised that the brochure was out of date. It certainly was. Russia today doesn't want, or need, any help to go exploring.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/7359410.stm>
