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ANALYSIS

RUSSIAN STRATEGY IN ARCTIC: THE CASE OF LOMONOSOV RIDGE

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Arctic is emerging a new geopolitical struggle ground in international politics. All regional and global big powers including Europe, Russia, US are directly engaged because of their territorial interests. China is also entering directly in the game through policies and strategic initiatives. While the location is strategically significant, the permanent snow makes navigation difficult and economically costly. Many leading experts claim that the Arctic is becoming the future political battleground, not only for sharing strategic space among major powers but also for its natural resources and the Northern Sea Route.

The Arctic Circle begins at 66.5oN (north of the equator) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). Eight countries have territory in the Arctic Circle: Canada, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States (Arctic States. n.d.).

Generally, the Law of the Sea applies to the Arctic as well. However, due to the lack of historical application of this law in the Arctic and the refusal of the US and other countries to rectify this situation, many disputes have arisen. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) creates the international legal regime for oceans, including the Arctic Ocean (U.N,n,d). Each Arctic country, including the U.S., follows U.N rule of 200-mile exclusive economic zone. In the claiming beyond the decided rule U.S. is at a disadvantage because it is not a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides mechanisms for countries to claim more rights (UNCLOSdebate.org. n.d.). Canada, Russia, and Denmark (on behalf of Greenland) turned to one of those mechanisms. Though disputes regarding sea were always existed but were settled by war and diplomacy. There was no any official concept of demarcation for territorial sea. The idea and issue of sovereign territorial sea emerged in post-World War 2 or in post-colonial scenario as many independent and sovereign nation established.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

With the emergence of numerous new states, a complex web of territorial claims has unfurled, leading to the proliferation of pollution, intensifying competition for valuable fish stocks within coastal waters and adjacent seas. This surge in rival demands has sparked heightened tensions between the rights of coastal nations and those of distant-water fishermen. Additionally, the promising potential for abundant resources on the ocean floor has drawn increasing attention, further exacerbating the situation. The expanding presence of maritime powers and the challenges of long-distance navigation only compound these issues. Amidst these developments, the traditional notion of freedom of the seas appears outdated and fraught with inherent conflicts. The cumulative effect of these factors threatens to transform the oceans into, yet another arena characterized by conflict and instability. To mitigate emerging conflicts and issues in 1949, the International Law Commission made a significant decision to focus on codifying both the regime governing territorial waters and that governing the high seas. Following extensive discussions and consultations with various stakeholders and experts, the Commission finalized its report on the territorial sea in 1956(International Law Commission, n.d).

Subsequently, a second conference convened in Geneva from March 17 to April 26, 1960, drawing participation from eighty countries (U.N, 1960). The primary objective of this conference was to address crucial matters such as determining the limits of the territorial sea, establishing baselines, and defining fishery limits within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as previously decided. Amidst numerous arrangements and legal frameworks, conflicts and counterclaims continued to escalate, exacerbated by the rivalry between superpowers, which fueled conflicting legal assertions. The rapid pace of development only intensified the onslaught of pollution, particularly in oceans, posing a grave threat to the entire oceanic ecology.

To comprehensively address these pressing issues, a new conference was convened in New York in 1973, culminating in the adoption of a groundbreaking document in 1982: the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (U.N, 2012). This pivotal convention provided a comprehensive framework to regulate various aspects of ocean governance.

During the 1982 convention, significant deliberations centered on critical issues such as sovereignty and the delineation of continental shelves (U.N, 2000). The decisions reached during this conference laid down fundamental principles and guidelines for the management and utilization of ocean resources, marking a significant milestone in international maritime law.

1-Coastal States exercise sovereignty over their territorial sea which they have the right to establish its breadth up to a limit not to exceed 12 nautical miles; foreign vessels are allowed “innocent passage” through those waters;

2- Coastal States have sovereign rights in a 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) with respect to natural resources and certain economic activities, and exercise jurisdiction over marine science research and environmental protection (UN,n,d).

This convention also discusses about continental shelf (the national area of the seabed) and decided;

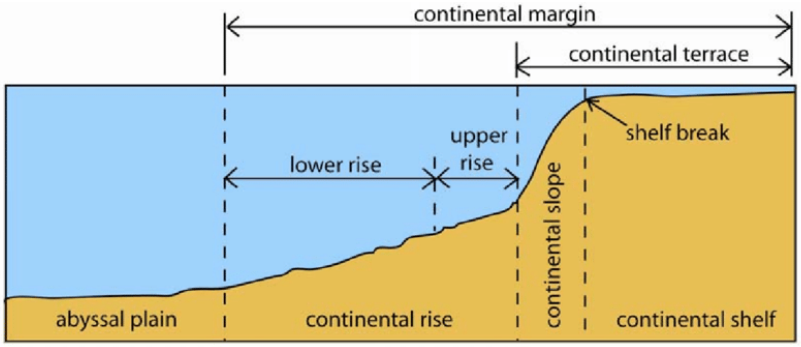
1- Coastal States have sovereign rights over the continental shelf (the national area of the seabed) for exploring and exploiting it; the shelf can extend at least 200 nautical miles from the shore, and more under specified circumstances;
2- Coastal States share with the international community part of the revenue derived from exploiting resources from any part of their shelf beyond 200 miles
3- The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf shall make recommendations to States on the shelf’s outer boundaries when it extends beyond 200 miles (UN,n,d)

A total of 169 parties, including the United Nations and the European Union, have both signed and ratified the convention and associated agreements, demonstrating a broad global consensus on the importance of regulating ocean governance (UNTC. n.d.). However, there remain notable exceptions to this widespread acceptance.

Sixteen parties, including Turkey, have neither signed nor ratified the agreement, indicating hesitancy or reservations about committing to its provisions (Cutrtis, n,d).

Additionally, fourteen parties, including the United States, have signed the convention or related agreements but have yet to ratify them, suggesting a degree of deliberation or internal debate within these nations regarding their adherence to the established principles and regulations outlined in the convention (Cutrtis, n,d). These varying levels of engagement underscore the complex dynamics at play in the realm of international maritime law and the diverse perspectives held by nations regarding their rights and responsibilities in ocean governance.

Figure 1: Continental Margin and Continental Shelf



Source:https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Generalised-profile-across-the-continental-margin-showing-the-relationships-between-the_fig2_265107513/actions#caption13

Idea of Continental Self and Case of Lomonosov Ridge

Typically, the ocean floor is categorized into seven primary regions or segments (Woo.M (2008):

1-Continental Shelf
2-Continental Slope
3-Abyssal Plain
4-Abyssal Hills
5-Mid-Ocean Ridge
6-Seamounts
7-Deep Ocean Trenches

Additionally, there are volcanic islands. It's noteworthy that the abyssal plain, spanning approximately 70% of the ocean floor, is a particularly extensive and significant region (NOAA, n.a).

The term "continental shelf" holds different meanings depending on context. Geologists generally define it as the segment of the continental margin lying between the shoreline and the shelf break. Alternatively, in cases where there's no discernible slope, it extends from the shoreline to where the depth of the water above it ranges roughly between 100 and 200 meters. However, within the legal realm, particularly in Article 76 of certain conventions, "continental shelf" assumes a juridical significance (Persand, S.2005).

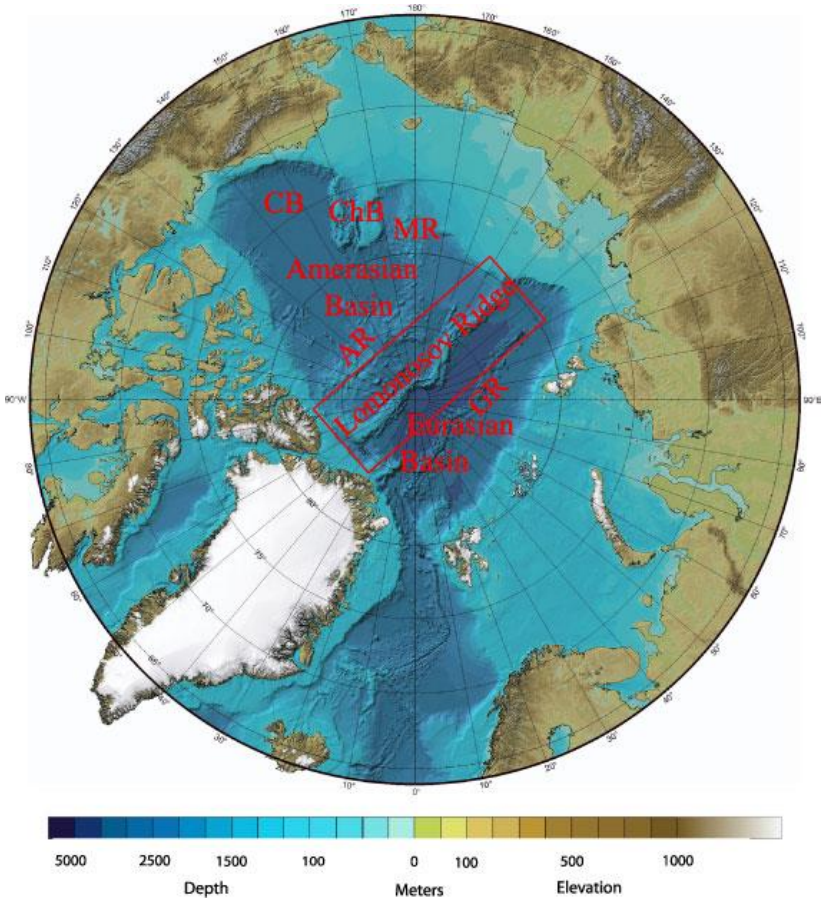
According to these legal provisions, the continental shelf of a coastal State encompasses the submerged extension of the state's land territory beneath the ocean surface. This includes the seabed and subsoil of underwater regions extending beyond the state's territorial sea. This extension reaches either to the outer edge of the continental margin or to a distance of 200 nautical miles, should the continental margin not extend as far.

Moreover, the continental margin itself constitutes the seabed, subsoil, slope, and rise of the shelf. However, it's important to

note that it excludes the deep ocean floor with its oceanic ridges, as well as their respective subsoils. This nuanced understanding serves to delineate the maritime jurisdiction and resource rights of coastal states, emphasizing the legal intricacies involved in defining oceanic boundaries and territories.

There are four ridges like structures on the Arctic Ocean seafloor. These are: the Gakkel, Lomonosov, Alpha, and Mendeleev Ridges (Basaran,I 2005).

Map 1: Physiographic image of Lomonosov Ridge, Canada Basin (CB), Chukchi Borderlands (ChB), Mendeleev Ridge (MR), Alpha Ridge (AR), and Gakkel Ridge (GR)



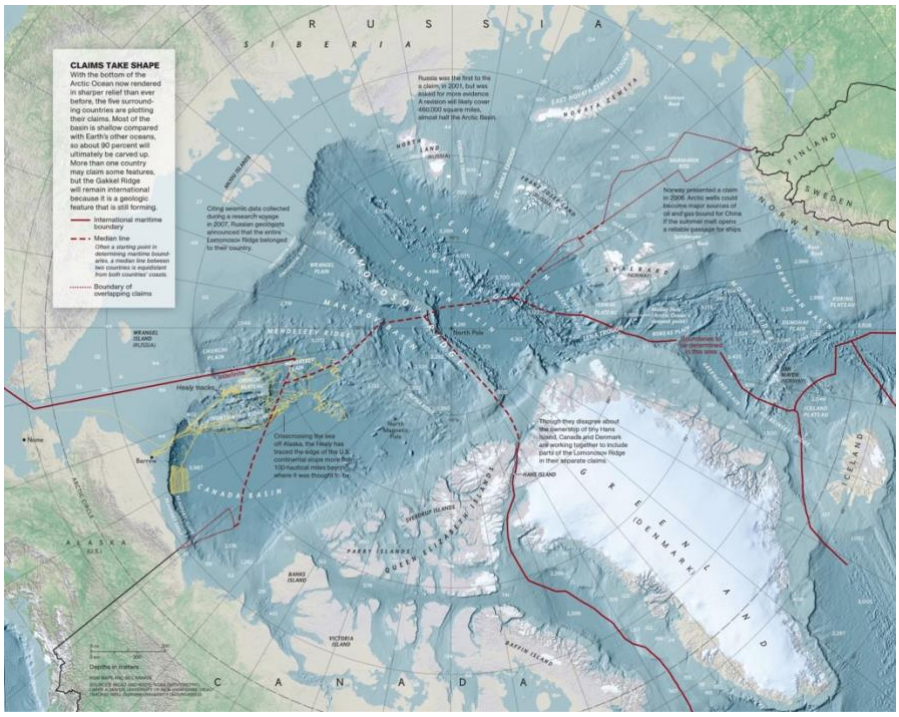
Source:https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1029/2005GC001114

In the 1982 convention, it is explicitly stated that the continental shelf of any coastal state encompasses not only the seabed but also mineral deposits beyond its territorial waters (U.N, n.d). This definition emphasizes the natural extension of a state's land territory to the outer edge of the underwater continental margin.

Accordingly, under clauses 4-7 of the convention, if a state can demonstrate that the shelf is part of its respective continental plate, it is entitled to expand the boundaries of its maritime territories. Article 76 of the convention further elaborates on this principle, granting states sovereign rights to exploit the seabed beyond the standard 200 nautical miles limit. However, this expansion is contingent upon the presentation of detailed geological evidence supporting the claim that the state's continental shelf—characterized by its gently sloping seafloor—extends beyond the 200-nautical-mile line (U.N, n.d).

Furthermore, Article 76 allows a country to assert its claim over a wide band of seabed along an underwater ridge that extends from its continental shelf, regardless of how far the ridge stretches. This provision underscores the importance of geological evidence in determining the extent of a state's maritime territories and resource rights, facilitating the fair and equitable allocation of oceanic resources among coastal states.

Map 2: Arctic's International Maritime Boundaries and Boundary of Overlapping Claims



Source:https://blog.education.nationalgeographic.org/2014/12/16/polarizing-region/

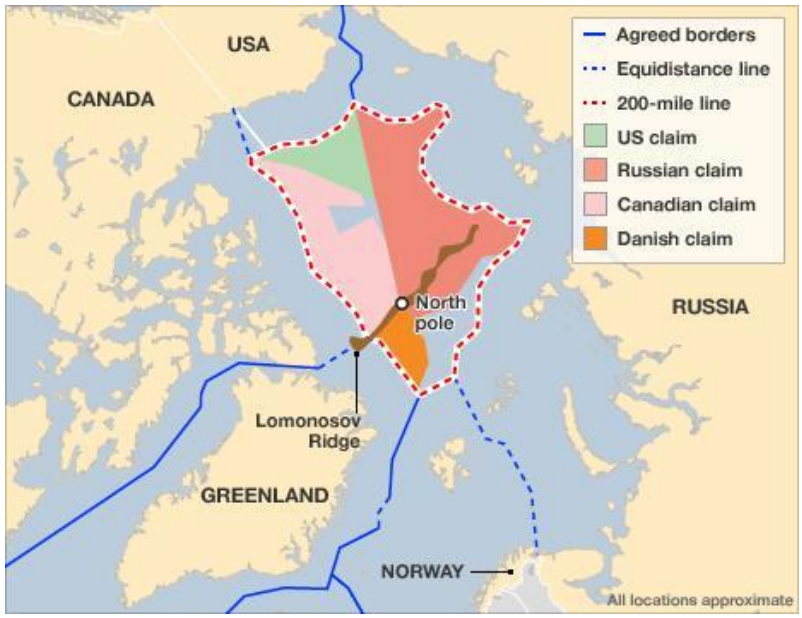
The Lomonosov Ridge stands as a colossal mountain range extending from the continental shelf of Siberia towards Greenland and Canada, spanning an impressive length of over 1,700 kilometers (1,060 miles). Towering above the ocean floor, its highest peak reaches a remarkable altitude of 3.4 kilometers (BBC, 23 July 2020).

However, despite its awe-inspiring stature, the ridge is subject to a contentious territorial dispute among Denmark, Russia, and Canada. Each nation asserts its own claim to this significant geological feature, imbuing it with different geopolitical implications.

Denmark argues that the Lomonosov Ridge is a natural extension of its autonomous territory of Greenland, thereby falling under its jurisdiction. Conversely (BBC,15 December 2014), Russia contends that the ridge is an extension of the Siberian archipelago Franz Josef Land, aligning it with Russian territorial interests. Meanwhile, Canada maintains that the ridge is an extension of Ellesmere Island in the Canadian territory of Nunavut, reinforcing its sovereignty over the area (BBC, 23 July 2020).

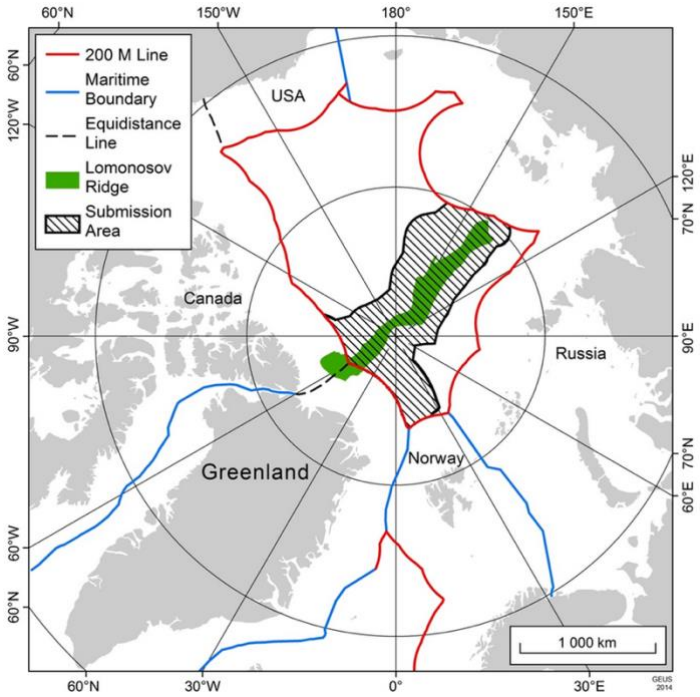
This territorial disagreement underscores the complexities inherent in defining maritime boundaries and resource claims in remote and often inhospitable regions of the Arctic. The resolution of such disputes requires careful examination of geological evidence, historical claims, and international law, as well as diplomatic negotiations aimed at achieving a mutually acceptable outcome.

Map 3: Claims by Different Parties



Source: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-28718806

Map 4: Area Denmark is Claimed



Source: https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/12/15/370980109/denmark-claims-part-of-the-arctic-including-the-north-pole

Denmark's primary contention revolves around the assertion that Greenland's continental shelf shares a direct connection with the Lomonosov Ridge. According to Denmark, this linkage substantiates its claim to the ridge (Calamur, K. 2014).

On the other hand, Canada presents a distinct argument, positing that the Lomonosov Ridge, stretching over 1,400 kilometers, is a natural extension of Canada's bedrock (CBC News, Dec 09, 2017). This assertion forms the basis of Canada's territorial claim over the ridge.

In response, the United States has contributed a meticulously detailed rebuttal, supported by scientific data. Their position challenges both Denmark and Canada's claims, arguing that neither the Alpha-Mendeleev nor the Lomonosov Ridges can be considered as part of any state's continental shelf (UNCLOSdebate.org. n.d.). Instead, the United States contends that these ridges are independent geological features, comprising either magma or freestanding formations.

This multifaceted debate highlights the intricate nature of territorial disputes in the Arctic region, where scientific evidence, geological understanding, and international law intersect. Resolving such disputes necessitates a comprehensive examination of diverse perspectives and empirical data, alongside diplomatic negotiations aimed at achieving a fair and equitable resolution.

The Russian Response and Strategy

In the face of the contradictory position of seven Arctic states (out of eight), which blocked the work of the Arctic Council after the start of a special Russian military operation in Ukraine, in February 2023, the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) approved the majority of Russian claims to the seabed in the Arctic Ocean.

This story began more than twenty years ago, when back in December 2001, Russia submitted its first application to expand its borders in the Arctic (Kubny, H. 2023,). Then, just a year later, members of the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf stated that additional research was needed to make a decision on the controversial issue and legalize Russia's rights to these territories.

The next five years in Russia were spent preparing the relevant materials, so in 2007 Moscow resumed studying the seabed and the boundaries of the Siberian continental plate, doing everything

possible to find additional grounds to justify the submitted application (The Arctic, 15 November 2018). The Arctic 2007 expedition caused an unprecedented resonance in the world media, since on August 2, 2007, the deep-sea vehicles Mir-1 and Mir-2, under the leadership of the famous Russian polar explorer Artur Chilingarov, descended to the bottom of the Arctic Ocean for the first time in the history of polar research (Tass, August 4,2017). This event caused not only a resonance in the media, but also outrage in a number of polar countries that also lay claim to these territories.

The next eight years were spent processing the results and preparing the second application to the UN, which Russia submitted in 2015. Moscow's claims were expanded to 103,000 square kilometers (Pratt, M. 2015).

In this context of growing scientific and legal confrontation, since 2008-2009, the United States and Canada have conducted joint research on the shelf, doing everything possible to prove that the Lomonosov Ridge is part of the North American continental plate, and not the Siberian one. The expedition members worked in areas north of Alaska and towards the Mendeleev Ridge, as well as east of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago.

In 2021, Russia, having conducted additional research in polar waters, made adjustments to the submitted application, designating another 704,000 square kilometers as its possessions (Hager, J.2023). In the final document, the total area of the Arctic claimed by Russia today is 2.1 million square kilometers. According to the filing, Russian claims now extend along the Lomonosov Ridge beyond the North Pole to Greenland and the 200-mile border of Canada. Even the Washington NGO "Woodrow Wilson Center" noted the high-quality elaboration of the Russian application to the CGCS for the expansion of external borders, its compliance with the rules and procedures enshrined in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982) (Korger.N 2017).

Ottawa also used the data collected to petition the United Nations to expand its borders. According to the Canadian government, observations by the country's researchers have proven that the Lomonosov Ridge is a natural continuation of the American continent. However, the claims of Denmark and Canada overlap in many ways, including the Lomonosov Ridge area, which is claimed by all three countries.

However, applications from Denmark and Canada have not yet been processed by the UN Commission. And this may happen, as some experts familiar with the mechanisms of the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf believe, no earlier than 2032 in relation to the Danish application (Hager, J. 2023). Canada will have to wait even longer. Thus, the current recommendation of the UN Commission is not yet a final decision, but it is recognition of Moscow's claims as the highest authority in this matter. Thus, American naval research expert Elizabeth Buchanan admitted in an article in War on the Rocks that "the Russian Federation is making progress in the great Arctic race. In February 2023, Moscow quietly achieved a major victory in the legal battle over the Arctic seabed."

Map 5: Russian Claim of Area of the Arctic Ocean Floor is an Extension of the Continent

Source:https://ocean.ru/index.php/deyatelnost/io-ran-v-gosudarstvennykh-programmakh

Map 6: Russian Claims in Arctic

Source:https://www.nature.com/articles/448520b

The history of the issue goes back decades. In 1948, the Sever-2 expedition was organized in the Soviet Union, whose participants received initial data indicating the likelihood of the discovery of the Lomonosov Ridge. In the spring of 1949, the Soviet Union sent a new air expedition to this region of the Arctic called Sever-4. On April 30, 1949, expedition members discovered one of the peaks of an underwater ridge 280 kilometers south of the North Pole (The Arctic, 15 November 2018). The measurements made it possible to prove the existence of an underwater ridge rising 2500-3000 meters above the seabed and stretching from the New Siberian Islands to the North Pole and further to Ellesmere Island (The Arctic, 15 November 2018).

Since its discovery, the legal status of the ridge has been determined by a number of international conventions, including the UN Convention on the High Seas, the Convention on the Continental Shelf and the Convention on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone. However, the existing legal framework has not been able to unambiguously resolve all issues relating to the disputed territories. In this regard, in 1982, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea was signed, which explicitly states that "the continental shelf of any coastal state includes the seabed and mineral deposits beyond the territorial waters and is defined as the natural extension of the land territory to the outer limit of the submarine continental outskirts."

Thus, if a state proves that the shelf is part of its continental plate, then, in accordance with paragraphs 4-7 of the Convention, it can expand the boundaries of its maritime territories (U.N. n,d). Of course, this

inevitably provoked a struggle between the polar states for the much-desired piece of the Arctic. However, the situation was complicated by the lack of generally accepted methods for studying the origin and essence of underwater ridges and hills.

The Russian Federation, one of the main competitors in this race, has spent significant material and human resources on exploring the Arctic. It took the participants of at least seven polar expeditions a long time to collect the necessary data on the geological structure of the seabed of the Arctic Ocean. Their main goal was to prove that the underwater Lomonosov Ridge is part of the Siberian continental plate. From a legal point of view, this would mean that the corresponding territories belong to the Russian continental shelf.

Thus, the recommendation of the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, given in February 2023, is not yet a final decision, but it is recognition of Russia's claims as the highest authority in this matter (Hager, J. 2023). Along with the right to the seabed of the continental shelf, the country receives the right to exploit all minerals and other inorganic materials. This does not include fishing or other activities in the water column or on sea ice.

Russia won an unimpressive, but quite significant victory. And the weight of this victory is significantly increased by the position of other Arctic powers, which in every possible way hinder and block the development of international cooperation in the Arctic.

Conclusion

As the ice in the Arctic region continues to melt, a surge in competition and territorial claims among the Arctic nations is becoming increasingly evident. The central international framework governing maritime disputes, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), plays a pivotal role in establishing legal norms for maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones.

UNCLOS serves not only as a legislative body but also as an arbitrator for resolving disagreements among nations concerning maritime issues. It empowers coastal nations with the authority to delineate their continental shelves, thereby extending their economic zones. However, the Lomonosov Ridge dispute presents a distinctive challenge, illustrating the complexity of maritime claims based on geographical features.

This case is particularly significant for Russia's scientific community and UNCLOS's credibility as a neutral entity. While Canada, Norway, and Denmark also engaged in extensive scientific research to substantiate their claims over the Arctic territory, they could not provide conclusive evidence to support their positions. In contrast, the United States, not being a signatory to UNCLOS, posited a unique perspective. The U.S. argued that the Alpha-Mendeleev and Lomonosov Ridges are independent geological formations, not extensions of any nation's continental shelf, advocating for a prohibition on national sovereignty over these ridges. However, UNCLOS dismissed the U.S. stance, aligning with Russia's well-substantiated scientific claims.

Russia's triumph in this case not only cements its strategic dominance in the Arctic but also provides significant economic advantages. This victory signifies a long-term strategic and economic foothold for Russia in the Arctic, shaping the geopolitical landscape of the region for years to come. It underscores the intricate interplay between science, law, and geopolitics in determining sovereignty and control over Earth's final frontiers.

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