Scramble For World Resources: Battle For Antarctica

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The Arctic and Antarctica are the last vast untapped reservoirs of mineral resources on the planet. [1]

If the expansion of Australia's territory is formalized, this will disrupt the operation of international legal mechanisms, which have already been seriously affected by the proclamation of Kosovo's independence.

Worse still, this will open the door to a large-scale re-division of the world. The South Pole precedent could be applied in the North Pole, which will turn the struggle for the Arctic resources into a global war, inevitably involving Russia. [2]

May 13th of this year marked the deadline for "states to stake their claims in what some experts are describing as the last big carve-up of maritime territory in history," Reuters reported in October of 2007. [3]

At the time the British Foreign Office announced that it was submitting a claim to expand the nation's Antarctic territory by a million square kilometers and would also submit "four other claims...for Atlantic seabed territory around South Georgia and the Falkland Islands and also around Ascension Island in the South Atlantic, near the Bay of Biscay in the North Atlantic, and in the Hatton-Rockall basin off Scotland's coast." [4]

Prior to 1962, the British Antarctic Territory was a dependency of the Falkland Islands and also included South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

On March 31 of this year Britain made a partial submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf regarding the Hatton-Rockall area in the Northeast Atlantic (Rockall is a miniscule craggy isle, though one with strategic significance way out of proportion to its size), which gives the country its only claim to the Arctic shelf that is estimated to contain a fifth of the world's undiscovered oil and nearly a third of undiscovered natural gas.

London started talks with Iceland, Ireland and Denmark (in its capacity of owner of the Faroe Islands) to jointly use Rockall to penetrate the Arctic in the impending scramble for its resources, a subject that has been explored extensively in another study in this series.[5]

In a parallel but far grander move, on this May 11 Britain submitted its claim to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf for the one million square kilometers it covets in the South Atlantic reaching into the Antarctic Ocean.

This was the formalization of plans initially revealed in October of 2007 and described in a press report of the time as a plan to “extend British sovereignty in Antarctica,” a zone which “covers a vast area of the seabed around British Antarctica near the south pole.” [6]

Immediately nations far nearer Antarctica and as such with better claims to its territory, Argentina most notably, lodged complaints as “The British claim…conflicts with the spirit of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, to which Britain is a signatory, which prevents all exploitation of oil gas and minerals, other than for scientific research.” [7]

Alarms were sounded from other quarters too. Shortly after the British announcement the Chinese People’s Daily reported:

“The South Pole, a world of ice and snow, has become a hot spot in recent years. The Argentinean Foreign Ministry stated that vice-Foreign Ministers from Argentina and Chile would be meeting in early December to discuss the South Pole issue, and work out a joint strategy to boycott British sovereign demands on the South Pole’s continental shelf.” [8]

The same source provided this background information:

“The vastness of seemingly barren, ice-covered land is uncovered and exposed to the outside world, revealing a ‘treasure basin’ with incredibly abundant mineral deposits and energy reserves….A layer of Permian Period coal exists on the mainland, and holds 500 billion tons in known reserves.

“The thick ice dome over the land is home to the world’s largest reservoir for fresh water; holds approximately 29.3 million cubic kilometers of ice;
and makes up 75% of earth’s fresh water supply.

“It is possible to say that the South Pole could feed the entire world
with its abundant supplies of food [fish] and fresh water.”

And warned that the “the value of the South Pole is not confined to the economic sphere; it also lies in its strategic position.

“The US Coast Guard has long had garrisons in the region, and the US Air Force [is] the number one air power in the region.

“[T]he South Pole [Antarctic] Treaty points out that the South Pole can only be exploited and developed for the sake of peace; and can not be a battle ground. Otherwise, the ice-cold South Pole could prove a fiercely hot battlefield.” [9]

Within weeks of the British statement in 2007 Chilean Defense Minister Jose Goni and Air Force Chief of Staff General Ricardo Ortega visited the South Pole “declaring that the use of the Arturo Prat naval base would be formally resumed in March 2008.

“Goni said the resumption of the use of the naval base, along with another two military bases in the Antarctic region, is to demonstrate the presence and sovereignty of Chile….” [10]

A Canadian daily described another element of the intensified rush to and scramble for the Antarctic:

“[W]hy would anyone feel the need to claim territory off the shore of the Antarctic, a nearly uninhabited frozen island we only reached a hundred years ago? The motivation lies deep under the sea floor: minerals, oil and gas.” [11]

In October of 2007 the Russian foreign ministry responded to Britain’s Antarctic plans by stating, “Being one of the nations that made the biggest
contributions to the development of the 1959 [Antarctic] Treaty and studies of Antarctica this country has consistently worked against the idea of dividing Antarctica on the basis of unilateral territorial claims and has not recognized them.” [12]

One of the bluntest assessments of the project to carve up the largest unexploited area of the planet came from a Scottish newspaper:

“Not since the Golden Age of the Empire has Britain staked its claim to such a vast area of land on the world stage. And while the British Empire may be long gone, the Antarctic has emerged as the latest battleground for rival powers competing on several fronts to secure valuable oil-rich territory.” [13]

The author of the above-quoted piece, Tanya Thompson, went on to characterize what was at stake.

“Britain is preparing territorial claims on tens of thousands of square miles of the Atlantic Ocean floor around the Falklands and Rockall island in the hope of annexing potentially lucrative oil and gas fields.

“The Falklands claim has the most potential for political fall-out, given that Britain and Argentina fought over the islands 25 years ago, and the value of the oil under the sea in the region is understood to be immense. Seismic tests suggest there could be about 60 billion barrels of oil under the ocean floor.”

“[I]t’s inevitable that they’ll tap into this area for oil and gas. Look what happened in the Falklands in 1982. But this is an uninhabited continent and there would be heavy diplomacy and sanctions if a war was about to be fought over Antarctica.” [14]

With the May 13, 2009 deadline approaching for submitting Antarctic claims, Russia sent explorer amd member of parliament Arthur Chilingarov, the Russian president’s special representative for international cooperation in the Arctic and Antarctic, to Antarctica in January. Chilingarov led the Russian expedition which planted the national flag on the Arctic Ocean seabed under the North Pole in 2007.

Heading the Antarctica-2009 expedition and accompanied by fellow parliamentarians, he said at the time: “We are definitely showing the whole world that we have serious plans to continue polar research.” [15]

For Argentina, Britain formally attempting to arrogate to itself a million square kilometer swathe of the Antarctic was preceded by the United Kingdom granting a new constitution to the Falklands Islands (Las Malvinas to Argentina) last November, one which while granting a greater degree of nominal autonomy still invested London with power over “external affairs, defense, internal security and the administration of justice.” [16]

Argentina lodged a protest, with the country’s foreign ministry stating, “This British

unilateral act mainly constitutes a new and open violation of the 31/49 Resolution taken in 1976 by the UN General Assembly, which urges both parties in dispute (Argentine and United Kingdom) to abstain from taking decisions to introduce unilateral decisions." [17]

Buenos Aires condemned the British action as a "violation of Argentine sovereignty and international law." [18]

This January Argentina renewed its concerns over the "anachronistic colonial situation unsuitable with the course and evolution of the modern world." [19]

As May 13 grew more close, in late April Argentina filed a counter-claim based on twelve years of research to challenge "the illegitimate British occupation of the southern archipelagos" [20] and affirmed that "its continental shelf extends out from the South American and Antarctic continent and from an archipelago of islands Britain also lays claim to." [21]

Both claims are to be examined and adjudicated on by the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf based on Article 76 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, but indisputably more is at stake than legal fine points. What is being fought over is control of vast natural resources including hydrocarbons, untold mineral wealth, the world's largest fresh water supply and fishing rights as well as geostrategic positioning which includes military objectives.

And the intensified interest shown in the Antarctic by not only Britain but its former colonial appendage Australia, which will be examined later, is not an isolated instance of aggressive if not illegal pursuit of strategic energy and economic interests abroad at the expenses of others – all others – but part of an accelerating pattern by the major Western powers and their military outposts to gain control over the world's resources, and that at a breakneck pace.

The same campaign by the West, acting in various ad hoc or longstanding coalitions, but especially in the collective military condominium that is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), is being conducted in the Arctic Circle [22], the Persian Gulf [23], the Caspian Sea Basin [24] and the African continent, especially in the Gulf of Guinea [25].

In the Antarctic Ocean it isn't limited to Britain's audacious maneuvers, ones which would never have been attempted without the complicity of its allies, but by a little-noted and just as large-scale and unprecedented move by Australia.

In April of last year the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf – through who knows what combination of select compliance and international negligence – granted Australia 2.5 million more square
kilometers in the Antarctic Ocean so that the nation's territory, in the words of Resources Minister Martin Ferguson, "expanded by an area five times the size of France," which could "potentially provide a 'bonanza' in underwater oil and gas reserves."

"The decision gives Australia the rights to what exists on and under the seabed, including potentially lucrative oil and gas reserves and biological
resources." [26]

The expansion of Australia's seabed borders included the Kerguelen Plateau around the Heard and McDonald Islands, which extend southwards into Antarctica. As such Australia

became the first nation to be granted exclusive property rights in the ocean.

Referring to the Western-engineered secession of Kosovo from Serbia two months beforehand, Dmitry Yevstafyev of the Center for Policy Studies in Moscow sounded this grave warning:

"This precedent is much more dangerous than Kosovo's independence. I am surprised that Russian authorities have remained silent on the issue. They must declare that this is an illegal decision creating a dangerous
precedent, and demand that the UN Secretary General explain the reasoning behind the decision."

"If the expansion of Australia's territory is formalized, this will disrupt the operation of international legal mechanisms, which have already
been seriously affected by the proclamation of Kosovo's independence.

"Worse still, this will open the door to a large-scale re-division of the world. The South Pole precedent could be applied in the North Pole, which will turn the struggle for the Arctic resources into a global
war, inevitably involving Russia." [27]

The 1959 Antarctic Treaty stipulates that, "No acts or activities taking place while the present Treaty is in force shall constitute a basis for asserting, supporting or denying a claim to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica or create any rights of sovereignty in Antarctica."

The deputy head of the Russian Antarctic expedition, Vladimir Kuchin, said at the time that "The Antarctic Treaty does not recognize any claims, and the UN does not own any territory and therefore cannot approve territorial expansions." [28]

A year later Australia would unveil its largest military buildup since World War II, one that projects a $72 billion dollar increase in military spending and the acquisition of twelve advanced "hunter killer" submarines, three new interceptor missile destroyers, both to be equipped with Tomahawk cruise missiles having a range of 2,200 kilometers, and 100 US F-35 Lightning Joint Strike Fighters. [29]

This new war machine will now have 2.5 million more square kilometers to deploy to and maneuver in, deep into the Antarctic Ocean which the Antarctic Treaty stipulates is to be free of military hardware and weaponry.

Th Treaty states "it is in the interest of all mankind that Antarctica shall continue forever to be used exclusively for peaceful purposes and shall not become the scene or object of international discord" and "Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only. There shall be prohibited, inter alia, any measures of a military nature, such as the establishment of military bases and fortifications, the carrying out of military maneuvers, as well as the testing of any type of weapons." [30]

A massively militarized Australia will be free to roam the expanded and self-proclaimed Australian Antarctic Territory, recognized only by Australia and Britain, France, New Zealand and Norway among the world's 192 nations.

As a writer from the United Kingdom posited over a year and a half ago, "The days of British Imperialism may be behind us, but critics fear we are trying to carve out a new empire, with

serious political repercussions." [31]

And what pertains to Britain applies with comparable force to its allies in Europe, North America and the South Pacific.

With the end of the Cold War almost twenty years ago any spot on the earth that had escaped 500 years of European colonialism and its European and American neocolonialist successor is now fair game for the West's avarice and aggression. The bottom of the world is no exception.

Notes

1) Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 27, 2007
2) Russian Information Agency Novosti, April 24, 2008
3) Reuters, October 7, 2007
4) Ibid
6) People's Daily, December 4, 2007
5) Stop NATO, February 2, 2009
NATO's, Pentagon's New Strategic Battleground: The Arctic
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stopnato/message/37104
6) Reuters, October 7, 2007
7) Ibid
8) People's Daily, December 4, 2007
9) Ibid
10) Xinhua News Agency. November 3, 2007
11) Toronto Star, November 18, 2007
12) Interfax, October 31, 2007
13) The Scotsman, October 23, 2007
14) Ibid
15) Russian Information Agency Novosti, January 15, 2009
16) Associated Press, November 7, 2008
17) Xinhua News Agency, November 7, 2008
18) Associated Press, November 7, 2008
19) Xinhua News Agency, January 3, 2009
20) The Guardian, Friday 24 April 2009
21) The Telegraph, April 24, 2009
22) Stop NATO, February 2, 2009
NATO's, Pentagon's New Strategic Battleground: The Arctic
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stopnato/message/37104
23) Global Research, February 7, 2009
NATO In The Persian Gulf: From Third World War To Istanbul Cooperation Initiative
http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=12190
24) Global Research, March 4, 2009
NATO Bases From the Balkans To the Chinese Border
http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=12554
25) Stop NATO, January 22, 2009
Global Energy War: Washington's New Kissinger's African Plans
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stopnato/message/36874
26) Agence France-Presse, April 21, 2008
27) Russian Information Agency Novosti, April 24, 2008

28) Ibid
29) Global Research, May 6, 2009
Australian Military Buildup And The Rise Of Asian NATO
http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=13523
30) http://www.nsf.gov/od/opp/antarct/anttrty.jsp
31) The Scotsman, October 23, 2007

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