

White House Authorizes Shell to Resume Drilling in the Arctic

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The Obama White House and the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) announced Monday that Royal Dutch Shell has received US government authorization to resume its drilling operations in the Arctic waters of the Chukchi Sea, near Alaska.

Drilling in the area was halted three years ago, after Shell's activities produced near-disasters, including the running aground of a drilling rig and malfunctions of important safety-related machinery.

Renewed drilling could begin as early as June. The oil transnational is planning to drill half a dozen new "exploratory" sites while spending more than \$1 billion on its Arctic venture this year.

Shell has already dispatched a vessel, the "Polar Pioneer," to begin initial preparations. Reports Tuesday indicated that environmentalist groups planned to confront the vessel as it entered port in Seattle, Washington.

Environmental activist groups are being presented in the corporate media as the main voices of opposition to the latest move to open the Arctic to unrestrained economic and military development.

Shell's proposals themselves are "risky and ill-conceived," an executive at environmental group Oceana told the *Wall Street Journal*. US government approval for resumed drilling was "based on a rushed and incomplete environmental and safety review," according to research conducted by Earthjustice.

As was made painfully clear during the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, the entire corporate and political establishment is prepared to tolerate the destruction of vast ecosystems in pursuit of profits. In 2010, as British Petroleum's damaged Deepwater Horizon rig spewed crude oil into the Gulf for months on end, the Obama administration and its corporate-financial backers did everything in their power to protect BP's leadership from any form of accountability.

A repeat of 2010 in the Arctic could continue to flood huge volumes of ocean water with toxic chemicals for an even longer period of time.

According to environmental experts, the extreme conditions of Arctic drilling sites and their distance from North America's main concentrations of civilization and infrastructure mean that a spill in the Chukchi Sea along the lines of the 2010 catastrophe could not be "directly" cleaned up, due to the impracticality of large-scale cleanup in Arctic conditions.

Such a spill would be dispersed throughout the Pacific and beyond, riding the massive swirling currents that connect the waters of the Arctic to the broader global water conveyor belt, experts warn.

An official statement from the Bureau of Ocean Management, which formally approved the new drilling, acknowledged that some type of disaster is likely, stating that resumption of drilling operations implies a “75 percent chance of one or more large spills happening” in the coming decades.

The efforts to reopen the Chukchi Sea for corporate exploitation are bound up with sweeping measures to militarize and economically plunder the entire Arctic.

Over the past decade, the Arctic has emerged as a major arena of global geopolitical antagonisms. The Obama administration’s 2013 “National Strategy for the Arctic Region” calls for the U.S. to “seize the greater part of the economic opportunities in the region.” The U.S. Defense Department must deploy forces “under, on and throughout the airspace and waters of the Arctic,” the strategy document stated.

Resource deposits beneath the Arctic ice are estimated to contain at least 90 billion barrels of oil (estimates from as recently as 2005 predicted only 40 billion barrels), for a total of some 20 percent of the world’s total supply, as well as some 90 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves. Significant deposits of gold, copper, lead, diamonds and zinc are also believed to be present inside the Arctic Circle.

The disintegration of the northern ice shelf is transforming the northernmost reaches of Earth into “a maelstrom of competing commercial, national security and environmental concerns, with profound implications for the international legal and political system,” a 2009 Brookings Institution study noted.

In the coming struggle for the Arctic, Washington must play the “leading role in creating an effective regime for the region,” the elite think tank argued,” and it cited the need for “ice-capable military training” and the creation of a “sizable ice-capable naval fleet.”

Geopolitical tensions in the north are heightened by the fact that the region lacks clearly defined boundaries demarcating national ownership. As recently as 2013, the Canadian government commissioned a report aimed at clarifying Canada’s territorial claims in the Arctic, many of which conflict with those of the U.S. and European powers.

Conflicts over crucial Arctic territories have already been brewing between Russia and U.S.-aligned Norway for at least a decade. Even as Russia has sought to develop new infrastructure for the transportation and export of oil resources based out of its port of Murmansk and centered on the Barents Sea, Norway’s ruling elite, including the royal family, have demanded support from Washington on behalf of their own claims to this area.

The struggle for the Arctic is simultaneously amplifying tensions between the Western imperialist powers themselves. Canadian and Danish establishments exchanged heated rhetoric earlier this year over Copenhagen’s assertion of sovereignty over large sections of the Arctic. The U.S. also maintains standing territorial disputes with Canada, refusing to recognize Ottawa’s claim to the Northwest Passage, contesting Canada’s claim to the resource-rich Beaufort Sea, and maintaining a joint US-Danish military base at Thule, Greenland.

As one of the largest official landowners in the Arctic, Ottawa is not likely to passively accept US intervention in wealthy territories long recognized as Canada's by "historical right." Signaling the determination of the Canadian bourgeoisie to resist US and European moves in Ottawa's historical sphere of influence, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has used recent annual tours of the Far North to promote Ottawa's plans for the militarization of the Arctic.

Harper has openly demanded that Ottawa must prepare to impose its sovereignty in the Arctic through comprehensive militarization of its northern territories, a perspective that enjoys broad support within Canada's elite. Responding to Canada's formal assertion of ownership over large areas of the north, the *Ottawa Citizen* proclaimed, "Persuasion is good, but military hardware— battleships, icebreakers, aerial patrols by fighter jets, and satellite surveillance—will garner more respect."

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