

Lavrov at Talks on Last Frontier

May 10, 2011



A polar bear walking along a ice floe in Baffin Bay above the Arctic circle. **Jonathan Hayward**

WASHINGTON — Leaders of Arctic nations gather in Greenland this week to chart future cooperation as global warming sets off a race for oil, mineral, fishing and shipping opportunities in the world's fragile final frontier.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will join his counterparts from seven other Arctic states in Greenland's tiny capital of Nuuk — population 15,000 — on Thursday for an Arctic Council meeting on the next steps for a region where warming temperatures are creating huge new challenges and unlocking untapped resources.

The council comprises Russia, the United States, Canada, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Denmark, which handles foreign affairs for Greenland, as well as groups representing indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic most directly affected as ice and snow retreat.

"It's an important gathering, but also a symbol of some of the big challenges that the Arctic faces," U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg told a Washington think tank audience on Monday, noting that U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar would accompany U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Nuuk.

"There are very core interests that are at stake in the Arctic, but it is an opportunity to find new patterns of cooperation," he said.

Evidence is mounting of climatic transformation in the Arctic, where temperatures are already at their highest levels than at any time in the past 2,000 years and are rising much faster than elsewhere in the world.

Oil companies are alert to the potential of the Arctic, which the U.S. Geological Survey estimates may hold 25 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and natural gas reserves.

Among oil majors eyeing the Arctic are Rosneft, Royal Dutch Shell, ConocoPhillips, Exxon and Norway's Statoil.

Global shipping, too, is adapting to the new conditions. Previously icebound routes such as the Northern Sea Route past Russia and the Northwest Passage along Canada have become increasingly navigable — cutting transportation time but raising questions about how the region will be managed.

The council will discuss a plan to divide search-and-rescue responsibility across the Arctic region, a step closely watched by shipping lines and oil firms seeking to expand operations.

It will also debate guidelines for admitting observer delegations to the council, which could see non-Arctic powers such as China get a seat at the table, and may discuss where the Arctic Council should base its secretariat.

U.S. officials say they are also pushing for a broader initiative on oil and gas activity in the region, including how to deal with potentially disastrous oil spills.

"I think that there will be explicit discussion in Nuuk with the Arctic Council nations about how to take the next step and cooperatively address some of the important offshore oil and gas issues," Deputy U.S. Interior Secretary David Hayes told a news briefing.

Heather Conley, an Arctic expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank, said the council was moving to strengthen its governance role that could allow it to take action on weighty issues.

"We all are realizing that human and commercial activity are really going to significantly increase as polar ice recedes. We don't have sufficient infrastructure to keep up with this increasing activity," she said.

Environmental activists say the Arctic challenges require much more aggressive action on everything from fishing quotas to international standards for oil and gas development in a pristine, delicate region.

"There's a short window of opportunity to get out in front of it and protect important and vulnerable ecosystems before industries get entrenched," said Lisa Speer, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's international oceans program in New York.

The Arctic Council is often criticized as being ineffective, partly because it can only act unanimously.

Speer said piecemeal decisions on observer states and the council secretariat threatened to obscure the broader threats — both natural and man-made — to the Arctic's environment that the Arctic Council needs to tackle quickly.

"These are bureaucratic questions. They are important, but it is sort of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic," she said. "We are looking at this huge crisis and the response is a lot of inside baseball."

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