The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Planning to Claim Arctic Territory With UN in 2015

October 30, 2014

The Yamal atomic ice breaker on the way to North Pole.

Russia intends to lay claim to more than a million square kilometers of Arctic shelf by filing a formal application with the United Nations next spring, a senior official said Wednesday.

Moscow expects the area to contain some 5 billion tons of oil and gas resources, Natural Resources and Environment Minister Sergei Donskoi said, Interfax reported.

The Arctic Ocean is neutral territory, but any country can claim portions as an exclusive economic zone if those portions are part of the country's continental shelf.

Russia's claim partially overlaps with Canada's. Donskoi said Moscow obtained new data to prove its claim, including from this year's expedition by the Akademik Fyodorov icebreaker.

The Akademik Fyodorov, which returned to St. Petersburg on Tuesday, conducted the world's first seismic study of the Arctic seabed, Donskoi said at a governmental meeting on the Arctic chaired by President Vladimir Putin.

Russia will also build 13 military airfields and 10 radar stations in the Arctic, a senior Defense Ministry official said Tuesday, RIA Novosti reported.

This includes a military base on Wrangell Island — a polar bear nursery that Russia has declared a wildlife reserve and is on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The plans for Wrangell Island were slammed by environmentalists, who say no construction is permitted in a nature reserve and warned that doing so may lead to the island's removal from the UNESCO roster.

Donskoi did not comment on these concerns at a meeting with Putin, but said his ministry endorsed the construction on the island.

The minister did not specify when the application might be reviewed, but said it would allow Russia to "expand [its] foothold" in the Arctic.

Russia has participated in the Arctic race in recent years with gusto, citing geopolitical prestige and potential profit from untapped oil reserves in the area.

The high cost of operating in the inhospitable Arctic keeps the pace of exploration slow, however, as well as a recent EU embargo on the sale oil and gas drilling equipment to Russia.

Original url:
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