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# COMMAND **LIVE** NEWS NETWORK



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The Headlines of Today. The Battles of Tomorrow.

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## Frozen wealth sparks military build-up



Russian Oscar II submarine *Belgorod*, converted for special missions.

In the 21st century a new battleground is emerging, as major powers race to exploit new resource discoveries in the Polar region of the high Arctic. Could economic rivalry and territorial claims over perhaps the last great untouched natural mineral wealth one day spill over into open conflict?

In 2007 a Russian deep-diving minisub planted the Russian flag on the seabed directly underneath the North Pole – a piece of propaganda that loudly telegraphed Moscow’s intentions towards the Arctic – rapidly growing into an area of economic and strategic importance. Since then there has been a creeping

militarisation of the Polar region as nations seek to boost and reinforce their capabilities in this frozen sphere of rivalry.

### Old setting, new motivations

The setting of the Arctic north is perhaps not as new as some

headlines might claim. Even in the 1950s, the Arctic was the expected route over which Soviet bombers would attack the US (and vice versa) – necessitating (in NORAD’s case) construction of a chain of airbases, long-range radar and early warning

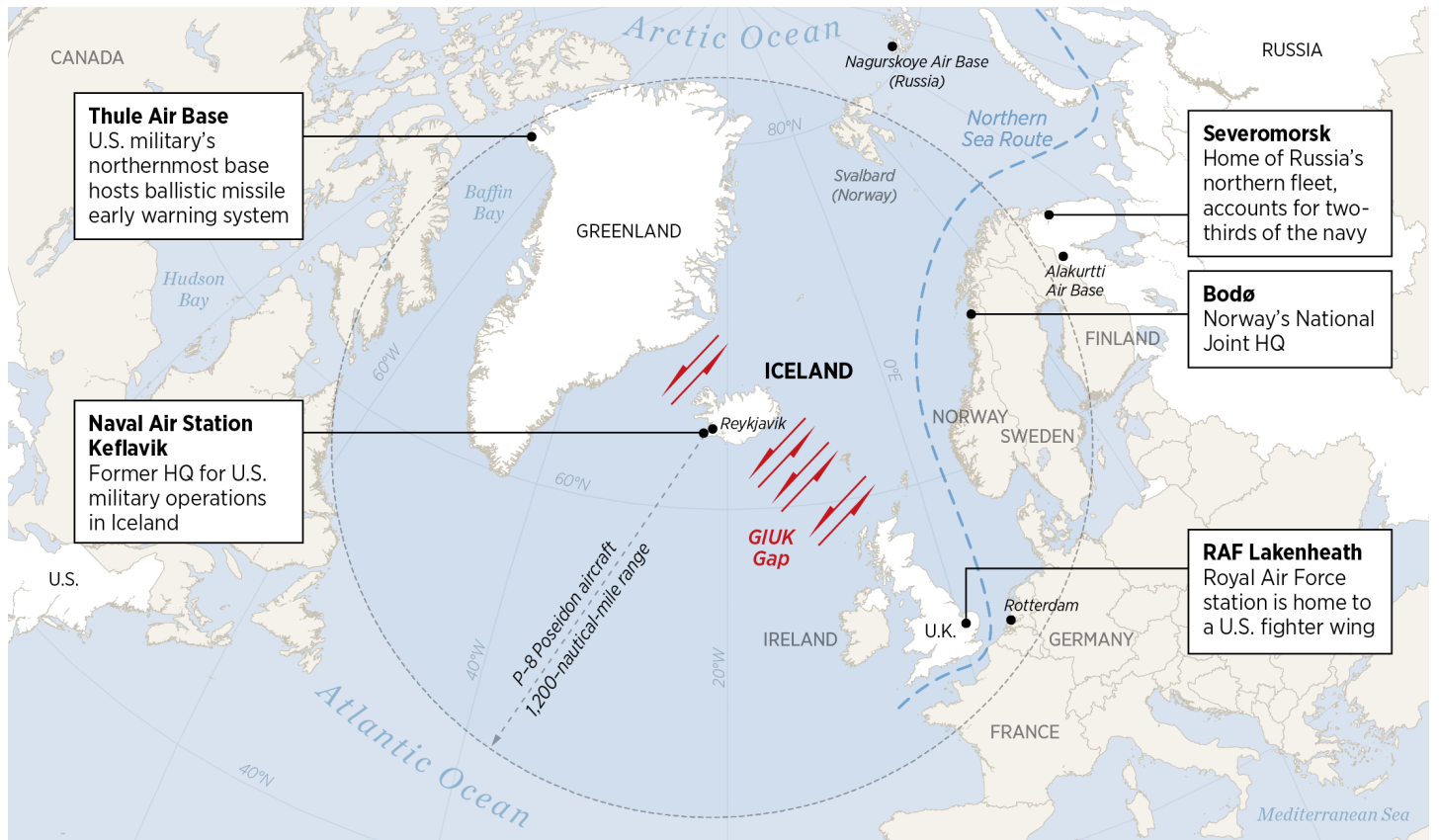
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### Iceland's Strategic Location in the North Atlantic.

stations in Canada, Alaska and in Greenland.

Additionally, the North Pole and the study of its ice packs became vital knowledge for submarine warfare in the Cold War, allowing nuclear submarines to hide from air and surface warships. In the event of WW3, a key task for NATO submarines would have been to have hunted Soviet missile boats underneath the ice, before they could find clear water (or thin ice to surface) to fire nuclear ballistic missiles at their targets.

An expected Soviet invasion of Norway and the critical GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-UK) gap which Russian submarines would have to pass to get to US convoys reinforcing Western Europe meant that Arctic winter warfare on NATO's Northern Flank was an expected part of any large scale conflict between the Warsaw Pact and NATO.

However, today, the importance of the Arctic (and the militarisation of it) has shifted from a WW3 sideshow to potentially, a *raison d'être* of conflict itself. This has been driven by several factors.

First is the knowledge that the Arctic seabed and nearby

continental shelves hold vast and diverse untapped mineral resources. Estimates from scientific bodies and government agencies predict that the Arctic may have 22% of the world's oil and 25% of its gas deposits. In addition, raw minerals such as copper, iron, nickel, cobalt, titanium, rare metals are also present in large quantities.

Second, is that mining and oilfield technology has now advanced to the point where extraction of these resources, while still expensive, is economically feasible. For instance, seabed drilling, remote UUVs (unmanned underwater vehicles) and longer-ranged helicopters to service remote platforms mean that oil, gas or other minerals

that were previously judged to be too difficult or too costly to extract, can now be harvested, changing the economic viability.

Third, is that shrinkage of Arctic pack ice due to climate change, now means that previously hard-to-reach areas are becoming uncovered, making resource extraction easier and less expensive. The shrinkage of



**Russian TOR-M2DT Arctic short-range air defense missile system.**



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Arctic ice is also opening up new trade and shipping routes across the top of the world, saving time and hundreds of miles. For example, the fabled ice-bound Northwest Passage, which links the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans was successfully transited by a bulk carrier in 2013 and a luxury cruise liner in 2016. These new shipping lanes, then have the potential to become valuable trade routes, or conversely geopolitical choke points.

Fourth, territorial boundaries underneath the Polar Ice Cap have never been contested or ratified before, adding a new and novel dynamic to the international discussion. This has seen the Arctic coastal states Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Norway, and Russia all submitting (or planning to

submit) claims based on their polar continental shelf. The vast untapped wealth (estimated at £23 trillion) of the Arctic is also attracting other nations such as China, keen to grab a share of the action in this new 'great game'.

### Power plays

Leading the militarisation of the Arctic has been Russia, which has perceived that military force backing up its claims to mineral-rich resources sitting on its doorstep is no bad thing. To that end it has revitalised its far northern defences, including opening a new permanent military air base, Trefoil, in Franz Josef Land, north of the Barents Sea – where MiG-31 interceptors and Su-34 strike aircraft can be based. It is also building other military bases in



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the high Arctic, including 13 airfields, ten radar stations and new deep-water ports.

In 2014, Moscow also announced the formation of a new joint Arctic Command, with four dedicated combat brigades. This build up of personnel and equipment has also been accompanied by increased training exercises and a focus on deployment in the far north.

Russia is also spending money adapting or developing specialist

military equipment for use in Arctic warfare. The traditional May Day parade in 2017 saw Arctic versions of the Tor-M2DT and Pantsir-SA SAM systems displayed on new amphibious tracked chassis. Meanwhile, the Oscar II class submarine, the *Belgorod* is being converted from a cruise missile sub to a research and special operations vessel designed to operate in the Arctic. With provision for midget submarines and divers, speculation



Navy SEALs being trained in Arctic Warfare.





**Canadian new *Harry DeWolf*-class offshore patrol vessel.**

is that the *Belgorod* may be involved in setting up a 'Russian SOSUS', or a chain of sea-bottom hydrophones in the Arctic. In addition, a new class of Russian icebreakers is set to be armed with containerised cruise missiles.

This increased military focus by Moscow on the Arctic has not gone unnoticed. The US Coast Guard, while an armed service tasked with securing the

US coastline, is now thinking about potentially adding cruise missiles packages to its future icebreakers – to avoid being out-gunned by Russian ships. The US, while still committed to military operations in the Middle East, is also making an effort to boost its Arctic readiness with exercises and training. In late 2015 it deployed Stryker armoured vehicles to the Arctic Circle for the

first time in Alaska. Meanwhile, a training exercise in 2015, saw US paratroopers jump over Alaska as part of a scenario tasked with recovering a lost satellite.

Canada too, is enhancing its military capabilities for the Arctic. A new class of armed patrol ship optimised for the Arctic, the *Harry DeWolf* class set to enter service in 2018 will have limited ice-breaking

capabilities. These are based on an armed Norwegian patrol ship/icebreaker.

## Summary

Some 30 years before the start of 'the War to End All Wars' in 1914 a race among the great powers to conquer, occupy and divide the spoils of a continent saw the 'Scramble for Africa' take place. Could a new scramble for riches unravel in the same way? Certainly the vast wealth, new shipping routes, along with the strained East-West relations means that it has the potential for wider geostrategic implications even for countries without an Arctic coastline. One caveat, of course, is the stubbornly low price of oil – even with conflict raging across the Middle East. This, and the US's shift to fracking to reduce its reliance on foreign energy reserves perhaps means that one point of key friction has been removed. Yet the Arctic, plausibly, provides the potential, if not for a full-on ground war, then limited skirmishes, naval or air clashes, or the kind of high-stakes espionage that characterised the Cold War.



**US Stryker armoured vehicles have been deployed for the first time in Alaska.**