

Abstract

In recent years several factors changed the importance of the Arctic in international relations. Firstly, the rapid melting of Arctic ice cover opened potential access to vast natural resources within the Arctic Ocean seabed. It is estimated that the Arctic may contain one quarter of world's undiscovered reserves of oil and gas. Secondly, the water ways along the Russian and Canadian northern coasts became ice-free, although so far just for few days every year. Should the Arctic Ocean continue to melt, then in several decades the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage could become navigable for greater part of the year. This would shorten the journey distance from Europe to Asia by as much as forty percent, thereby cutting travel times and shipping costs.

Finally, as the Arctic does not belong to any single country, there has been an increasing interest among the Arctic rim states, which have been working on delineating their maritime boundaries in order to ensure their territorial claims. This process has proceeded in accordance with the international legal framework as established by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Coastal states are entitled to a 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around their coastline. However, should they be able to prove that their continental shelf reaches beyond that zone, they can extend their rights up to 350 nautical miles. The Arctic states have been collecting data for their submissions to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, which consequently makes recommendations in respect to the demarcation of territorial borders. In 2001, Russia claimed an extensive territory beyond its EEZ; the Commission, however, had neither approved nor rejected the claim and asked the Russians to provide more evidence. So far, the only Arctic state to succeeded in its submission has been Norway in 2009.

The gathering and collection of data by the Arctic states has led to an increased activity in the Arctic Ocean. The world media have tended to substantially expand their coverage of these events and to liken this process to a „race for the Arctic“. This thesis has shown that thus far all the states involved have acted according to the international law. However, should a global energy crisis ensue, then conflicts for the disputed Arctic territory may emerge. The Arctic strategies issued by the Arctic states governments have clearly stated the importance of this region for the respective states and their willingness to secure their interests in any way, including by military means.