

Iceland: NATO Charts Out Battle For The Arctic

Arctic's thawing seas bring new security risks

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NATO's Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and Iceland's outgoing Prime Minister Geir Haarde - who tendered his resignation Monday amid the country's economic crisis - will both address a one-day conference in Reykjavik on the issue. NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, U.S. Gen. John Craddock, is also due to attend, alongside representatives of Britain and other NATO countries. -At least four people were arrested outside the Reykjavik conference venue Wednesday before the meeting - two of them for burning a NATO flag. Many Icelanders oppose the volcanic island's membership in the military bloc, fearing it compromises the nation's independence.

There's a race against time in the Arctic Circle, where a melting ice cap is opening up once-frozen shipping lanes and countries including the United States, Russia and Canada rush to lay claim to lucrative energy reserves - a scramble that poses serious new security threats.

NATO commanders and lawmakers were gathering in Iceland's capital Thursday to examine the risks posed by the Arctic's thaw and the prospect of new standoffs in the region's icy waters.

The prospect of new shipping routes threatens to complicate already delicate relations between countries with competing claims to Arctic territory - particularly as previously inaccessible areas open to exploration for their abundant reserves of oil and natural gas.

Lee Willett, head of the maritime studies program at London-based military think tank the Royal United Services Institute, said that as shipping routes from the Pacific to Europe open up, warships from a host of nations are likely to follow.

Britain, China and several other northern nations are attempting to claim jurisdiction over Arctic territory alongside the U.S., Russia and China.

"Having lots of warships, from lots of nations who have lots of competing claims on territory - that may lend itself to a rather tense situation," Willett said.

"We may see that flashpoints come to pass there more readily than elsewhere in the world," he said.

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Military strategists expect territorial disputes to become more intense as a shrinking ice cap allows greater exploration, just as energy demands increase.

Some scientists predict that Arctic waters could even be ice-free in summers by 2013, decades earlier than previously thought.

Russia and Canada have already traded verbal shots over each other's intentions.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said last year he will firm up control of disputed Arctic waters with stricter registration requirements for ships sailing in the Northwest Passage - though Canada's control of the passage is widely disputed, including by the U.S.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said his government will also act to mark out its Arctic territory, though many dispute Moscow's assertion that it has the right to control an area equivalent to the size of France. At least four people were arrested outside the Reykjavik conference venue Wednesday before the meeting - two of them for burning a NATO flag. Many Icelanders oppose the volcanic island's membership in the military bloc, fearing it compromises the nation's independence.

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