

Law of the Sea treaty would aid the U.S.

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

It conjures up images of the great polar expeditions of the past. We can imagine Adm. Robert Peary and Frederic Cook in a race to reach the North Pole, or Capt. Robert Falcon Scott and Roald Amundsen racing to reach the South Pole.

But today, the prize is bigger. At stake are vast mineral and energy deposits. According to U.S. Geological Survey estimates, about one-quarter of the world's undiscovered oil and gas lies beneath the Arctic Ocean. Also, new shipping routes are being made possible as global warming melts more of the ice caps covering the poles.

The focus right now is on the Arctic region. Earlier this month in an event that seemed rooted more in theatrics than international law, Russian lawmakers in a minisub planted their country's flag on the seabed under the North Pole. Meanwhile, Canada has announced plans to build military bases to secure its claims to the Northwest Passage, which could replace the Panama and Suez canals for many ships during at least part of the year. Denmark has launched a mapping expedition. The United States has sent the icebreaker Healy to the region to map this nation's claims. It is estimated that the United States could lay claim to as much as 200,000 square miles of new undersea territories.

Ironically, in this race to claim Arctic riches, the United States might be the biggest loser. The body of law that will help resolve territorial disputes, and there will be many, is called the Law of the Sea Convention. Since the 1930s, the Law of the Sea Treaty has been highly contentious in the United States. After the treaty was completed in 1982, President Ronald Reagan had objections, based mostly on undersea mining rules. President Bill Clinton renegotiated those parts of the treaty to make these rules more favorable to the United States. In 1994, he signed the treaty, but some conservatives in the Senate still objected to it as impinging on U.S. sovereignty, and the treaty stalled in 2004.

Now, with the territorial race on, momentum is growing in the Senate for passage. Earlier this year, President George W. Bush, yielding to pressure from State Department officials and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, agreed to support the treaty. But the White House has done little to help move the treaty through the Senate, which must ratify it.

Given the pace at which events are occurring concerning the Arctic, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., should schedule a floor vote before the Christmas recess.

Considering backing from such diverse groups as the major oil companies and major environmental groups, and considering the strong backing of the U.S. Navy, it is time the United States joined the 152 nations that have ratified the treaty. No nation has more to lose by staying outside the Law of the Sea regime.

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