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Arctic Ocean states to stick to existing rules; Denmark, Canada, Norway, Russia, US say 'no race for North Pole'

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The five states surrounding the **Arctic Ocean** agreed late May 28 to stick to the existing legal framework on the development of the region following a meeting in Ilulissat, Greenland, of the countries' foreign ministers.

In a declaration, foreign ministers from Denmark, Canada, Norway, Russia and the US said they remained committed to the UN convention on the law of the sea and to the "orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims."

The Arctic is thought to hold billions of barrels of oil and billions of cubic meters of gas reserves, and claims on the region have prompted much controversy. The melting ice cap has opened up shipping lanes, but it is on the potential reserves of oil and gas at the North Pole that most of the attention has been focused.

Russia staked a claim to the mineral wealth directly beneath the North Pole last summer by sending a submarine crew 4,200 meters down to plant a titanium flag on the seabed. Russia's expedition drew criticism from its northern neighbors, with Canada particularly dismissive of the Russian claims. Canada also is looking to boost its sovereignty claims, while Norway and the US have expressed concern over the Russian expedition.

Extensive work from several countries is being carried out to determine how far the continental shelf of the different states stretch beyond the **Arctic Ocean**.

Denmark's Foreign Minister Per Stig Moller said all future **disputes** would be settled through talks. "With the Ilulissat Declaration we have created a solid political framework for a peaceful development in the **Arctic Ocean** in the years ahead," he said.

"We have sent a clear political signal to the local inhabitants and the rest of the world that we will act responsibly when addressing the development in the **Arctic Ocean**. We have committed ourselves politically to solve any disagreements through negotiation. Thus, hopefully, we have eradicated all the myths about a 'race for the North Pole.' The legal framework is in place and the five states have now declared that they will abide by it," Moller said.

Martin Pratt, expert in maritime **boundaries** at the UK's Durham University, told Platts May 29 the declaration to

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stick to the existing legal framework was a logical step. "There is a legal framework, so there was no need to panic and come up with an additional complicated agreement," he said.

The declaration stated that the law of the sea provides for "important rights and obligations concerning the delineation of the outer limits of the continental shelf, the protection of the marine environment, including ice-covered areas, freedom of navigation, marine scientific research, and other uses of the sea. We remain committed to this legal framework and to the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims," Pratt added.

However he said the five states could face difficulties in the future if there is a **dispute** over the **boundaries** of the Arctic. "It could be problematic if more than one state claims an area," he said. States submit their scientific evidence on the Arctic to the commission on the limits of the continental shelf, set up under the UN convention to examine data on claims.

But the commission has no power to act on **disputes** over **boundaries**. "So it is not impossible that countries may **dispute** areas in the Arctic," Pratt said, adding that similar **disputes** exist already, for example between the US and Canada over the north coast of Alaska.

"Canada and Denmark could have disagreements [over the Arctic]," he said, and states may object to Russia's claims that the Lomonosov Ridge and Mendeleev Rise are part of Russia's East Siberian continental shelf.

"The issue of ridges is the most complex," Pratt said. He added he would be surprised if the UN commission would agree that Russia owns these areas as they are closer to Canada and Greenland. "There could be overlap here," he said.

However, the five states would do well to cooperate on drawing up the **boundaries**, Pratt said. "It is in the interests of the states to cooperate as much as possible and to agree on defining the **boundaries**," he said. "They should pool scientific data to define them."

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