

General Assembly

Topic Brief 2

*Addressing the legal and environmental
implications of Arctic resource exploitation*

Overview

The Arctic is the northernmost region of the Earth, centered on the North Pole. Most scientists define the Arctic as the area within the Arctic Circle. As the permafrost of the Arctic region softens and the ice that normally covers the Arctic sea melts, it has become more feasible to access the resources of the Arctic. Currently, oil, natural gas, and coal are being extracted in the Arctic.

Historically there have been three main regions in the Arctic linked to oil exploitation: the Beaufort Sea coast (North Slope of Alaska and the Mackenzie Delta of Canada), the Canadian north-eastern Arctic (Nunavut), and northwest Russia (Barents Sea and West-Siberia).

Canada, Russia, Denmark, Norway, and the United States all claim the right to extract natural resources out to the edge of the continental shelf and arctic boundaries, beyond their exclusive economic zones.

The issue with mining resources in the arctic is these projects pollute rivers, marine coastal environments, landscapes and the air. An oil spill in the Arctic would also devastate ecosystems and Indigenous ways of life. The impacts could be irreversible, wiping out wildlife populations and destroying traditional food systems and livelihoods.

Timeline:

1982 - UNCLOS adopted

Creates global rules for seas, seabeds, EEZs and continental shelf claims.

1996 - Arctic Council established

Eight arctic states + Indigenous groups form an intergovernmental forum on environmental and sustainable development issues.

2007 - Russia North Pole claim

Russian expedition plants flag under the North Pole seabed, sparking debate over Arctic sovereignty.

2011 - Arctic Council Nuuk Declaration.

First binding agreement under the Arctic Council on search-and-rescue cooperation among Arctic states.

2014 onwards - Increased competition

Russia expands arctic military and drilling; U.S., Canada and others strengthen their claims and presence.

Key Terms

1. UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) : Global agreement on how nations have access to seas, seabeds and Exclusive Economic Zones.
2. Arctic Council : Intergovernmental forum of Arctic countries and representatives of indigenous individuals on sustainable development and environmental matters.
3. EEZ : Exclusive Economic Zone The rights of the coastal state as to the natural resources of the zone in 200 nautical miles.
4. Continental Shelf Claims : UNCLOS Legal claims in extending the sovereign rights or entitlements pass the 200 nautical mile limit .
5. Arctic Sovereignty : Political and legal conflicts over the ownership and control of Arctic territory and resources.
6. Resource exploitation : Exploitation of the Arctic to extract oil, gas as well as minerals.
7. Arctic Shipping Routes (Northwest Passage & Northern Sea Route) : New shipping lanes to open up with shipping due to declining ice and the routes are legally disputed.
8. Environmental Degradation: Pollution and destruction and disturbance of the natural habitat and ecology by drilling and shipping.
9. Climate Change and Melting Ice: Warming as a rise to resource access against significant ecological threats.
10. Indigenous Rights : The protection of the cultural, land and subsistence rights of Arctic Indigenous people.
11. Sustainable Development : Equilibrium resources utilized and long term environmental and social safeguarding.
12. Geopolitical Rivalry: strategic rivalry amongst the non Arctic and Arctic powers to influence route and resources.

Relevant Parties

1. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS): Lays legal frameworks on territorial claims as well as the seabed resources.

2. Arctic Council : 8 Arctic states & Indigenous groups as permanent participants working on overall issues of sustainable development including topics of environmental protection.

the Arctic States (the Arctic 5)

Russia : The longest coastline in the Arctic this country is aggressively expanding its claims and drilling development.

United States : Arctic territory through Alaska interested in energy security and military presence.

Canada : Having strong Arctic sovereignty claims trying not to overuse the resources, but respect the rights of Indigenous people.

Norway : Norway is a major Arctic energy producer (oil & gas) .

Denmark : Resourceful lands into Polar resources and shipping.

Useful Resources

"Addressing Climate Change in the Arctic." US EPA, 27 Nov. 2024,
www.epa.gov/climateimpacts/addressing-climate-change-arctic.

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"The World Is Gearing Up to Mine the Arctic." Geographical, n.d.,
geographical.co.uk/geopolitics/the-world-is-gearing-up-to-mine-the-arctic.
Accessed 26 Aug. 2025.

"Extractivism Is Damaging Arctic Ecosystems and Warming the Global Climate."
WWF Arctic, n.d., www.arcticwwf.org/the-circle/stories/extractivism-is-damaging-arctic-ecosystems-and-warming-the-global-climate/. Accessed 26 Aug. 2025.

"Securing the Arctic: The Dilemma of Resources, Climate, and Stability." GLOBSEC,
26 Sept. 2024, www.globsec.org/what-we-do/commentaries/securing-arctic-dilemma-resources-climate-and-stability.