



View Point

Research Vessels set Sail for the Arctic

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Research vessels from four countries are currently deployed in Arctic waters for undertaking surveys, mapping of the seabed for delineating the continental shelf, seismic data collection and marine scientific research. Among these, Canada, Russia and the US are Arctic littorals while China is a non-Arctic state. These vessels are expected to be in the area for about three months before the Arctic ice begins to refreeze making further surveys difficult.

Canada has deployed the Coast Guard Ship Louis S. St-Laurent to measure sediment thickness and the US its Coast Guard Cutter Healy to map the sea floor of the Beaufort Shelf. Interestingly, both Canada and U.S. have deployed these vessels in an area (nearly 21,000 square kilometers) where they are yet to establish respective maritime boundaries. The two countries have also agreed to allow experts from both sides to exchange data clearly signifying the synergy in their respective politico-diplomatic approaches to the Arctic boundary issues. The two vessels are expected to stay on task for about three months.

Likewise, Russia has dispatched its polar research vessel Akademik Fedorov to the Arctic. The expedition aims to determine the extent of Russia's continental shelf and establish that the Lomonosov Ridge is an extension of the Siberian continental plate. If the claim is proved and accepted by the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), it could generate for Russia an additional 1.2 million square kilometers of continental shelf in the Arctic and help develop and exploit the enormous quantities of oil and gas in the area. Earlier in 2001, Russia had submitted to the UN its claim and had argued that the Lomonosov ridge was an

extension of the Russian continental shelf; but the claim was rejected on grounds of insufficient scientific data. During the current voyage, Russia also plans to establish a new drifting station called Severny Polyus-38. This expedition is expected to last about 70 to 90 days.

China, a non-Arctic state, sailed Xue Long (Snow Dragon), a scientific research vessel, to the Arctic on July 1, 2010. It is a non-nuclear polar class vessel acquired by China from Ukraine in 1993 and has been regularly deployed to support Chinese stations in Ny-Alesund in the Arctic Ocean and three Chinese scientific research stations in Antarctica. The stated mission for the vessel during this deployment is to collect data to study the 'atmosphere, sea ice, and melting in the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas, the Canada Basin, and the Mendeleev Sea Ridge'. There are 122 people embarked onboard the vessel and comprise of scientists, researchers and reporters and the crew, who are from China, Estonia, South Korea, and the US. Perhaps what is significant is that this is the second time that a scientist from Taiwan has been invited to join the expedition for polar research. The vessel will be on deployment in the Arctic for about 85 days including transit time. China has also established a temporary scientific research station and the scientists are expected to stay at the site for about fifteen days during the period of the deployment.

According to US Geological Survey report, 90 billion barrels of oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids can be exploited in the Arctic, and of these nearly 84 percent can be found in offshore areas. It is evident that there is a surge of interest in the Arctic resources and the claimants are keen to file their continental shelf claims to the CLCS before 2013 and legally exploit the resources for themselves. However, there is only a short period in the summers that provides the opportunity to dispatch vessels for survey to the generally harsh and tough sea conditions that prevail in the Arctic round the year.

Besides there are bright prospects for exploiting marine living resources during summer months. As the Arctic sea ice melts the region can be expected to be a busy place and fishing fleets from far and wide can be expected to be sailing in the region.

China does not claim any territory in the Arctic but recent articulations by Chinese experts suggest that the Arctic is a common heritage of mankind and 'belongs to all the people of

the world’ and as and when the region is ice free, China would like to engage in ‘peaceful exploration and protection of natural resources there’. This prompted the US Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Roughhead to argue that if the US has to become an ‘indispensible’ player in the evolving politics of the Arctic, it will have to start thinking seriously about ratifying the 1982 UNCLOS III.

As far as India is concerned, the state owned OVL, is reported to be in talks with Rosneft, a Russian energy company to jointly bid for the Trebs and Titov fields in the Arctic. Rosneft and OVL are also partners in Russia’s Sakhalin I project, with a 20 per cent stake each in the operating company.

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