

EU-Norway crab row could fuel oil tensions in Arctic

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An Arctic battle between the European Union and Norway about snow crabs around Svalbard is really about claiming access to oil, experts say

On the face of it, a relentless battle between the European Union and Norway in a remote part of the Arctic is about snow crabs.

But the real fight may go beyond who gets to catch the modest crustaceans around Svalbard, a unique Norwegian archipelago in the Barents Sea.

What is really at stake is oil, some experts say, and a coming race for the commodity of which there is a lot in the polar region.

"No country wants to give up resources without receiving anything in return. That is the principle here too," Norwegian Fisheries Minister Per Sandberg tells AFP.

Norway, which is not a member of the EU, has slammed Brussels for authorising European vessels from mainly Baltic nations to fish for crabs in the Svalbard area, saying it violates its national sovereignty.

A Latvian ship has already paid the price. In January, a ship called "The Senator" was intercepted by Norwegian coast guards while crab fishing around Svalbard, and recently received a hefty fine.

"What happened is totally new," says Sandberg. "The EU is unabashed to make this kind of a decision without consulting us."

The EU and Norway's conflicting interpretations of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty signed in Paris are at the heart of the problem.

The treaty recognises Norway's "full and absolute sovereignty," but gives the signatory nations an equal right to economic activities on Svalbard and its [territorial waters](#).

The core issue is to agree on the geographical scope of the treaty and how far all signatory states benefit from an equal access to resources.

With a strict interpretation of the treaty, Oslo says the agreement applies only to the 12-mile limits of the territorial waters surrounding Svalbard and not any further.

But Brussels has a more loose interpretation of the treaty and says it

covers 200 miles around Svalbard, in line with the concept of an economic zone that did not exist when the treaty was signed.



The Norwegian Petroleum Directorate in April doubled its estimates of hydrocarbon reserves in the Norwegian part of the Barents Sea, with much of it believed to lie in southeast Svalbard

Oil in the line of sight

The snow crab, first recorded in the Barents Sea in 1996, is an invasive, and more importantly, a sedentary species as it lives in permanent contact with the seabed.

This means that the rules that apply to snow crabs are more similar to oil than to fishing.

The crab dispute could create a "precedent" that "would have implications for oil and gas," warns Harald Sakarias Brovig Hansen, a researcher at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute.

"We fear a domino effect. If an actor is recognised as having the right to fish for snow [crabs](#) in accordance with the treaty, then numerous others, will probably come and claim a share of the cake," he says, referring to oil.

The cake could prove to be very appetising as the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate in April doubled its estimates of hydrocarbon reserves in the Norwegian part of the Barents Sea.

A large amount of the 17.7 billion barrels in the region could be in southeastern Svalbard, according to the directorate.

Oil companies are lurking. Norway has already granted exploration licences that extend in the contentious area and the national energy giant Statoil, always pushing further north, plans to drill in the area this summer.

This drilling in the Korp fjell prospect, considered highly promising, could irritate the other signatories of the Svalbard Treaty and lead them to claim an equal access to oil.

"I think snow crab is a trial balloon," says Per Arne Totland, an author and expert on Svalbard issues.

"In this case, Russia, the United States, the EU and China share a common interest in obtaining the widest access to the resources that the treaty could give them."

In a gesture of conciliation to the EU, Oslo has proposed reserving some

of its snow crab quota—500 tonnes out of a total of 4,000 tonnes— to other European countries in return for fish quotas. But the EU has refused the proposal because accepting the deal would strengthen the Norwegian take on the treaty.

Brussels wants "a practical arrangement with Norway that would allow the continuation of fishing activities for snow crab, without giving up the EU's interpretation of the 1920 (treaty)," European Commission spokesman Enrico Brivio told AFP.

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