

## New political battle lines emerge in Arctic

Disputes over Arctic development are not ultimately a 'clash of civilizations' but a clash of world views.



Jim Paulin / AP

A oil drilling barge is loaded onto a transport ship in Unalaska, Alaska, to be sent to Singapore for repairs. (March 19, 2013)

By: [Stephen Bede Scharper](#) May 20 2013

In the summer of 2010, while I was visiting an ecological research station near Tobermory, Ont., the British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil rig was gushing out of control approximately 1,500 miles due south in the Gulf of Mexico.

Gazing across the turquoise waters of Georgian Bay, I wondered how I would feel if a collapsed oil rig were fouling this clear, remarkably beautiful expanse of the Great Lakes. I winced internally imagining the waters and arresting vistas that had become so meaningful to me becoming blackened by such a tragedy.

Perhaps such thoughts also crossed the minds of native groups in the Arctic last week as they called for a moratorium on oil extraction in their homelands, which are now rapidly opening up to mining and development owing to a warming North.

In a statement released in Kiruna, Sweden, May 13 shortly before a meeting of the eight-nation [Arctic Council](#), 42 aboriginal signatories from Scandinavia, Russia, Canada and the U.S. called for a halt to offshore oil drilling and a hold placed on northern energy projects until local native groups have consented to such interventions.

“It is time,” the statement intones, “that the oil companies and the Arctic states change their path and start to listen to the voices of the indigenous peoples residing in these lands.”

Claiming that effective methods to contain and clean up the inevitable oil spills have not yet been devised, the statement adds that drilling on traditional aboriginal lands should also cease until governments and industry demonstrate improved environmental sensitivities and standards.

Given the BP debacle in the Gulf of Mexico, this appeal has merit. Lots of it.

A little refresher on the BP saga might be helpful.

Last year British Petroleum (BP) pleaded guilty to 14 criminal charges, consenting to shell out \$4.5 billion (U.S.) for the loss of life and ecological devastation caused by its Deepwater Horizon disaster.

BP also admitted to withholding documents from and providing false information to a U.S. congressional investigation, claiming an estimated oil leak rate of 5,000 barrels a day when actually more than 60,000 barrels were spewing every 24 hours into the Gulf.

BP's malfeasance raises unsettling questions for the prospect of expanded Arctic drilling.

If it took nearly three months of trial and error remedies to cap the BP rig in the temperate waters of the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of the world's wealthiest nation, how much longer would it take to repair a similar accident in the remote, frigid Arctic waters, hundreds of miles away from rescue and repair infrastructure?

And if BP were able to deceive investigators and the media regarding a spill under the very nose of the U.S. public, how much easier would it be to obfuscate spill rates and ecological damage in a distant part of the Arctic Ocean, far beyond the range of commercial fisherman and media outlets?

Interestingly, for the next two years, Canada will chair the Arctic Council, and federal health minister and northern Conservative MP Leona Aglukkaq will head the Canadian delegation. An Inuk from Nunavut, Aglukkaq has embraced a pro-development agenda that is causing consternation among some northern aboriginal communities and environmental groups.

Her appointment underscores the fact that disputes over Arctic development are not ultimately a "clash of civilizations," pitting natives against non-natives. They represent, rather, a clash of world views.

Those who adopt a perspective of continued fossil fuel extraction and modern resource exploitation, with little regard to climate change or ecological consequences, represent one world view. Those who advocate decreased reliance on fossil fuels, more investment in renewable energy, and protection of the planet's vital but threatened ecosystems represent another world view.

Both world views claim native and non-native adherents.

The fact that only two of the six aboriginal participant groups on the Arctic Council — the [Arctic Athabaskan Council](#) and the [Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North](#) — have signed onto the appeal for a moratorium on drilling attest to this.

As cultural historian and "geologist" [Thomas Berry](#) (1914-2009) once predicted, in future, the main political lines will be drawn not between progressives and conservatives, but between those who respect the ecosystems of the Earth and those who don't.

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