Putin Pushes the Envelope

by Phyllis Schlafly

Release: Sept. 2, 2014

While the world's attention was distracted by his incursions into eastern Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin quietly made another provocative move that could lead to a direct confrontation with the United States. The Russian Navy sent a ship to remote Wrangel Island, planted a Russian naval flag on August 20, and announced plans to build a naval base there for Russia's Pacific Fleet.

Wrangel Island is a frozen, nearly uninhabited island in the Arctic Ocean, about 90 miles north of Siberia and 300 miles northwest of Point Hope, Alaska. It's about the size of our two smallest states, Delaware and Rhode Island, combined.

Wrangel Island has little economic value in itself, but it is hugely important because it is the closest land to a vast swath of the Arctic Ocean, which is estimated to hold 25 percent of the world's recoverable oil and gas. According to a European reporter, Putin has said he wants to expand Russia‘s presence in the Arctic, both militarily and economically.

It's not the first time that Russia has planted a flag to claim territory in the Arctic, hoping to extend its control over that resource-rich region. In August 2007, a Russian submarine planted a Russian flag on the ocean floor at the North Pole.

When the Canadian foreign minister expostulated that Russia could not expect to claim territory under rules of "the 15th century," the Russian Foreign Minister cited a more recent precedent: "Whenever explorers reach some sort of point that no one else has explored, they plant a flag," he said. "That's how it was on the moon, by the way."

Yes, the United States did plant a flag on the moon on July 21, 1969. Planting the American flag was Neil Armstrong's first task after taking that "one small step" which was a "giant leap for mankind." The sight of that flag, beamed back to earth, was rendered sweeter because many so-called experts had predicted that the Russians would get there first.

Americans beat the Russians to the North Pole, too. On April 6, 1909, Admiral Robert Peary, after an arduous expedition with dogs and sleds over hundreds of miles of ice, triumphantly wrote: "I have this day hoisted the national ensign of the United

States of America at this place, which my observations indicate to be the North Polar axis of the earth, and have formally taken possession of the entire region, and adjacent, for and in the name of the President of the United States of America." Peary's claim was reaffirmed when our first nuclear submarine, the USS Nautilus, reached the Pole on August 3, 1958.

Russia claims that its recent flag-planting on Wrangel Island was 90 years to the day from when Russians had planted a Soviet flag there on August 20, 1924, claiming the island for the U.S.S.R. But there again, American explorers had already claimed the island for the United States some 43 years earlier.

Wrangel had not yet been officially discovered when the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867. The $7.2 million purchase price agreed to by U.S. Secretary of State Seward was considered so large that Alaska was ridiculed as "Seward's Folly" until gold and oil were discovered years later.

The brave American explorers who reached Wrangel Island on August 12, 1881 were aboard the United States Revenue Cutter, the Thomas Corwin, which regularly cruised the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean off the coast of Alaska. The party included the famous environmentalist John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, whose account of the 1881 expedition to Wrangel Island was published after he returned to the mainland.

The Corwin's captain dispatched a landing party led by William Edward Reynolds to plant the American flag on the island, claiming it for the United States. Reynolds later became Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard and retired as a Rear Admiral.

Although Russia's claim to Wrangel Island dates only to 1924 while America's claim dates to 1881, the U. S. government shamefully failed to assert and defend our prior claim against Russia's more recent one. Indeed, our State Department on several occasions purported to surrender America's claim to this important outpost.

In the 1970s, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger tried to negotiate a boundary agreement giving away Wrangel Island to the Soviet Union, but the deal fell through because the Soviets kept demanding greater access to fishing near Alaska. Again in 1990, Secretary of State James Baker tried to make a deal with Gorbachev to give the island to the collapsing Soviet Union, but that was not completed before the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, and anyway has never been ratified by the Russian Duma.

In light of Russia's chronic misbehavior on the world stage, let's correct a historical blunder by reviving America's historic claim to Wrangel Island, thereby extending our jurisdiction over the riches of the Arctic.

Full disclosure: During World War II, I spent two years test-firing .30 and .50 caliber ammunition at the world's largest ammunition factory while my future husband served in the U.S. Navy helping to protect Alaska against a possible Japanese invasion.

Phyllis Schlafly is a lawyer, conservative political analyst and author of 20 books. She is the co-author, with George Neumayr, of the New York Times Best-Seller titled "No Higher Power: Obama's War on Religious Freedom." She can be contacted by e-mail at phyllis@eagleforum.org. To find out more about Phyllis Schlafly and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate Website at www.creators.com