



Ask Dr. de Blij

Dr. Harm de Blij

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Q Some countries have stranger shapes than others, but one of the weirdest must be Namibia, with what looks like an arm sticking out of it, signaling a right turn! How could something like this happen?

*Tomas Bolger
Campile, Ireland*

A It certainly looks like the panhandle to end all panhandles, but this one is actually referred to as a "finger" rather than an arm. And the finger has a name: the Caprivi Finger, although the correct translation of its original German name is *Caprivi Strip*. It's a ribbon of land about 450 km (280 miles) long averaging about 65 km (40 miles) wide, and as the map shows it connects the northeast corner of Namibia to the south bank of the Zambezi River.

All this started around the time of the Berlin Conference of 1884/85 where Africa's colonial borders were drawn. The British and the Germans made a deal, and it's not certain exactly what role Count Caprivi played. By some accounts, he had the money to persuade the British to award the Germans a corridor linking their holdings in southwest Africa to the river, thus giving the Germans, as it were, the Finger. That scenario would explain why the Count's name became attached to the strip, but other evidence suggests that his name was simply assigned to it in recognition of his growing power in Germany itself (Caprivi was to become Bismarck's successor as Chancellor of the German Empire).

Either way, the Caprivi Strip did not exactly meet German expectations. The notion was to link the German colony, with its vast deserts and difficult coasts, to the Zambezi and its eastward outlet, giving the Germans riparian rights on the great river. There was just one small problem: downstream from the place where the Strip meets the Zambezi, the river plunges over the Victoria Falls, more than 100 m (350 feet), into its raging gorge. No boat-building industry ever developed...

Q I recently read where the Russians sent a ship into the Arctic Ocean to plant a metal flag on the seafloor at the North Pole. Soon I saw maps in the newspapers and stories on television about the USA and Canada saying that they might lay claim to waters and even underwater territory there. Why is the Arctic suddenly in the news like this?

*Rachel Auld
Saegertown, Pennsylvania*

A And not just Russia, Canada and the USA, but also Norway and Denmark, and even Finland, Sweden and Iceland are in on the action. That makes eight "states with interests" in the Arctic.

What's happening can be attributed to three main factors. First, climate change is causing more Arctic ice to melt during the northern summers, creating open water where there was none before and opening sea routes previously clogged with ice year-round. Second, the price of oil is rising, and below those waters lies ocean floor beneath which there are yet-uncharted oil reserves. Third, the technology of oil and gas exploration is advancing rapidly, making it possible to extract energy resources that were previously beyond reach.

So all the interested parties – the "abutters" to the Arctic Ocean – are getting in on the act and even some without Arctic Ocean coastlines. Take a look at a globe, and it would seem that the Russians have the best shot, because Russia's landmass alone borders about half the Arctic Ocean. And according to international rules of boundary-making at sea, or UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea), the Russian claim would be by far the largest. The overwhelming majority of the world's states have signed on to UNCLOS, but not the United States (does this sound familiar?), creating a situation that could lead to serious disagreement. Look again at the globe, and you will see why the Canadians also have a reason to stake a large claim. If the current warming phase persists, a seasonal maritime shipping route would open up, so that you could sail from eastern Asia to western Europe without going through the Panama Canal.

Various versions of a partitioned Arctic are appearing. Dramatic gestures like that Russian flag-planting and Canadian patrols in widening waters suggest that this is just the beginning of a long and complicated story.