Most Americans give little thought to our far north. We think of the Arctic as a single region, a cold place divorced from our everyday lives, a setting for documentaries from which we learn that polar bears are in danger as their icy habitat shrinks. But the U.S. also faces huge, new geopolitical consequences from the melt. A whole new area of Earth is suddenly open for international conflict, environmental destruction, and an economic bonanza.

On March 1, Alaska's senators sat down at the Council for Foreign Relations with other experts on the region to figure out how to get the rest of America to stop ignoring what the Council's Fellow on Ocean Governance considers "one of the biggest stories of the 21st century."
Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski told a roundtable discussion at the gathering that the U.S. is "an Arctic nation," but the top of the world is changing fast as it melts. Summer sea ice shrank 40 percent between 1970 and 2007, and even agnostics on global warming such as Coast Guard Commandant Thad Allen say the U.S. better prepare for a new Arctic. "There's open water where there used to be ice. We better deal with it," he said.

The issues to consider in a defrosting Arctic include possible skirmishes over territory, a race among major powers for undersea resources, and environmental disasters from ship collisions and oil spills. "We are at a critically important time," Murkowski told the council. "There are two ways we could go. The path of competition and conflict. Or cooperation."

As huge swaths of once inaccessible polar region open, few Americans realize how woefully behind the U.S. government has lagged in addressing security and commerce issues. For instance, tourist ships have already started sailing through the once legendary Northwest Passage, graveyard for explorers in times past. This formerly iced-over link between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans is melting so fast it could very well be completely ice-free in summers as soon as 2020, according to Mead Treadwell, head of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. That would make commercial shipping viable, meaning that a single Chinese container ship using the Northwest Passage instead of the Panama Canal could save $2 million each way between Shanghai and New York. "The Bering Strait may become the new Panama Canal," Treadwell said. Up to 25 percent of the Earth's shipping may, in our lifetime, be sailing the polar route.

The Council for Foreign Relations' Scott Borgerson said the north coast of Alaska may soon "resemble the coast of Louisiana, lit by the lights of ships and oil rigs." He predicted that some Alaskan port could become a new Singapore. But more traffic means more danger from collisions and fuel spills, and the Coast Guard lacks the icebreakers and communication equipment necessary for a year-round Arctic presence.

Resource extraction presents another challenge, as there are enormous untapped reserves of oil and gas in the region. The 5.5 million-square-mile area north of the Arctic Circle -- part of the U.S., Russia, Canada, Denmark (which owns Greenland), Finland, Norway, Iceland and Sweden -- contains up to 25 percent of the Earth's undiscovered oil and gas reserves, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. In 2007, Norway opened its Snow White gas field, projected to supply more than $1.5 billion of liquefied natural gas annually for the next quarter-century. And Russia's resurgence as a world power has been aided by Arctic resources.

But to remove those resources you have to own them, and nations are now scrambling to claim vast new areas of sea bottom. They can do so by proving them to be extensions of their continental shelves. In summer, U.S., Russian, Canadian, and Danish scientists aboard icebreakers conduct studies to support claims submitted to a U.N. commission. In theory, the U.S. could gain an undersea region as big as California.
That's the good news, but the bad news is that the United States is last in the claims race. The U.N. Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf has begun examining claims from Russia and Norway, which could be granted before the U.S. formally joins the process. Although the U.S. is gathering information for a claim, it cannot be submitted -- nor can the U.S. have a say in the claims of other nations -- until the government signs an international treaty. The agreement under which the apportionment of riches will go forward -- the **1982 Law of the Sea Convention** -- lays out a comprehensive set of rules governing ocean issues, including protection of marine environments. All Arctic nations except the U.S. have signed. "If this were a ball game," one Coast Guard admiral told me, "the U.S. wouldn't be on the field or even in the stadium."

What's the holdup? Ironically, in this era marked by fierce partisan politics, the treaty has had the backing of both the Obama White House and the Bush administration before it, along with oil and shipping industries, the Pentagon and even environmental groups such as the Sierra Club (which applauds the environmental protection provisions).

The treaty's passage has been delayed by a few Republican Senators such as Louisiana's David Vitter, Jim DeMint of South Carolina and Mississippi's Trent Lott, who worry that the treaty would provide a backdoor way for the U.N. to regulate U.S. military activity on the high seas, as well as U.S. environmental law. Lott also posits the treaty would impact American commercial authority: "When American businesses . . . invest time and money and effort for a . . . seabed discovery and want to make use of it, they then have to turn it over to a U.N. bureaucracy to decide who gets it and how it's shared with the rest of the world."

In the meantime, while America dithers, Russia is emerging as top dog in the far north. The stakes go beyond trillions of dollars in potential oil and gas rights, fishing privileges, and shipping authority; they also include establishing a military hegemony that would give nightmares to Cold War strategists. In 2007, Russian explorer and legislator Artur Chilingarov -- with great symbolic, if not diplomatic or legal, authority -- dropped a titanium flag by mini sub at the North Pole. "The Arctic is ours," he said. Russia has claimed an area the size of France and Spain combined, but it is uncertain whether the claim will be granted.

Russia operates 19 icebreakers while the U.S. Coast Guard has only two. Russia has beefed up its Arctic troops and begun military over-flights in the region for the first time since the Cold War, according to a recent Coast Guard report. "We are looking at how far the region will be militarized. Depending on that, we'll decide what to do," Gen. Nikolai Makarov, head of Russia's General Staff, said in 2009.

Last summer, the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island hosted a conference on Arctic security concerns that was attended by military representatives from around the world. Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, said that Russia defines the Arctic as a "national heritage" and identifies the region as "strong for military conflict over resources." The Norwegian delegation described Russian bomber sorties along Norway's coast, although the two countries are quite friendly at the moment.
That's not all the lumbering bear is up to. Russia is building floating nuclear power plants for its Arctic ports, and last year opened its northern route between Asia and Europe to two German commercial ships. Their trip from Korea to Holland made history, cutting the usual distance by 30 percent. A Russian icebreaker escorted the vessels.

Russia is so protective of the region that it routinely denies U.S. science missions access to Russian waters, complained Treadwell, head of the Arctic research commission. Meanwhile, the Russians plan to have 340 ice-strengthened vessels in the water by 2014.

A State Department expert told me on background that Russia's aggressive moves are cosmetic, designed to make the country look strong for its domestic audience, and that Americans shouldn't take the bellicose language seriously. But Ariel Cohen, a Russia expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation, called the Russian claims "a time bomb."

And never mind old enemies; let's talk about old friends. Canada and the United States disagree on their offshore boundary in the Arctic and also over whether the Northwest Passage is owned by Canada, as Ottawa insists, or is an international passage, as the U.S. believes. So far the disagreement is friendly, but billions could be at stake as well as unencumbered passage of military ships. "Use the Arctic or lose it," Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said.

Regardless of which countries emerge as Arctic powers, oil companies are anxious to know where boundaries are. "This will be the biggest land distribution in history," Paul Kelly, spokesman for the American Petroleum Institute, told me last year.

As the clock ticks, Alaska Sen. Mark Begich, a Democrat, worries that "every day that goes by, we lose our sovereignty as other countries recognize our inability to act." Perhaps Begich is remembering his Kipling. At the dawn of the 20th century, writing about Central Asia, Rudyard Kipling described the way international issues play out in remote regions as "The Great Game." In the 21st century the northernmost regions will be the board on which the game is played.

Think Saudi Arabia in 1880. Or the Isthmus of Panama before the canal was built. Those who got control of those places prospered while the losers gnashed their teeth.

At the War College gathering last year, American and Canadian speakers showed slides depicting the different Arctic countries as animals reflecting their national character. Russia showed up as an aggressive bear. The U.S. appeared as a sleeping elephant.