

Headline: Ice on fire

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It's something to ponder in this murderous summer heat as 6,000 Filipino and American soldiers engage in large-scale training exercises under the Balikatan: Climate change is causing rising temperatures, which in turn are melting the ice in the Arctic at an alarming rate. And unbeknownst to much of the world, that almost mystical polar region has become a hive of military activity by countries anticipating the opening of "a treasure trove of resources."

That's the stuff of action movies right there, except that it's not fiction. The Associated Press reported early this week that the world's military leaders were preparing for "a new kind of Cold War" in the Arctic where the fast-melting sea ice could mean the opening of shipping lanes in a region that holds an estimated 13 percent of the planet's undiscovered oil and 30 percent of its untapped natural gas. Think of the potential conflicts between and among the world's powers, which may serve to explain the now fairly regular conduct of military training exercises such as "Exercise Cold Response" in Norway last March, "with 16,300 troops from 14 countries training on the ice for everything from high-intensity warfare to terror threats."

Major exercises were also held two months ago by the United States, Canada and Denmark. And, the AP report said further, the military chiefs of the seven main Arctic powers—Canada, the United States, Russia, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Finland—were scheduled to meet in May to discuss regional security issues.

With climate change and global warming, the melting of the Arctic sea ice means not only the opening of lucrative shipping lanes but also the flooding of the world's coastal cities. The Guardian reported in September 2011 that the ice was melting at its fastest pace in almost 40 years. It quoted scientists as saying that the ice had melted "to a level not recorded since satellite observations started in 1972—and almost certainly not experienced for at least 8,000 years." It said that if the trend continued, "a largely ice-free Arctic in the summer months" was likely in 30 years, or up to 40 years earlier than was projected in the last assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The last time that condition occurred in the summertime Arctic was 125,000 years ago, at the height of the last major interglacial period, The Guardian said.

This puts into unsettling perspective the current military activity in the Arctic, where the prospect of ice-free sea lanes has galvanized the United States and other world powers to strengthen their capabilities in the region. Think of the buildup of troops and arsenals in that pristine place where dwell such magnificent creatures as polar bears and penguins, and where, thanks to Discovery and National Geographic, the wondrous terrain and the awesome power of the elements serve as constant illustrations of the beauty of creation. Imagine the ice bruised and besmirched by military hardware, and nuclear-powered submarines shattering the surreal underwater peace; imagine the pollution tainting the "El Greco sky" (John Updike's phrase, summing up how "the clouds overhead were breaking up, exposing exclamatory fragments of blue").

Here in our motherland, in parts stewing in record temperatures and in others swamped by unseasonal rain, the dangers posed by military exercises to ecological systems were raised last Monday by marine scientist Perry Aliño and conservation groups in connection with the Balikatan amphibious training activities in Palawan, which faces that potential flash point, the West Philippine

Sea. Aliño said the building of military structures in the area had affected sharks and other marine wildlife. Frances Quimpo of the party-list group Kalikasan observed that past Balikatan naval maneuvers and live firing exercises had led to the destruction of coral reefs. Also, Quimpo pointed out, these exercises involved the consumption of massive amounts of fossil fuels and the release of large volumes of toxic waste into the air, land and sea.

It's ironic that all these things are occurring as the world prepares to mark International Earth Day on April 22. It's as though the world's powers were cavalierly rolling the dice. Remember that the Kyoto Protocol, the first international agreement to fight global warming signed by 141 nations, expires this year. It should be to the continuing shame of the United States, which is among the biggest consumers of fossil fuels, that it refused to be a signatory.

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