While the Polar Vortex and Sochi Olympics may have dominated world headlines this winter, both are relatively minor in size and scope when compared to an evolving geo-political crisis also featuring freezing temps and international competition.

The high stakes “Great Game” over Arctic riches will affect billions of people in the coming years, yet appears near completely “out of sight, out of mind.”

Though polar sea ice has increased this past winter, satellite photos clearly show a decades-long melting trend, which, according to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, is now an average of 45 percent smaller than during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus the race is on for the Arctic’s vast petroleum, fishing and mineral resources. And I do mean vast.

Polar bears on floating ice blocks may soon be the least of our worries.

A 2008 study by the U.S. Geological Survey estimates the Arctic Circle, north of 66 degrees latitude, contains “90 billion barrels of undiscovered, technically recoverable oil, 1,670 trillion cubic feet of technically recoverable natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of technically recoverable natural gas liquids.” That’s approximately 22 percent of the world’s untapped petroleum product resources, including 13 percent of oil, 30 percent of natural gas and 20 percent of natural-gas liquids.

So what are folks doing about it?

The strong are going for the gold.

It’s like the Latin motto of the Hawaii-based 3rd Marine Regiment: fortes fortuna juvat, or “fortune favors the bold.” Too bad those Marines are not setting national policy.

While the White House retreats from assertive foreign policy, Russia and China have stepped in to fill that power vacuum. Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang are tough, pragmatic leaders. They don’t mind stepping on toes for their national interests.

Russia, a member of the eight-nation Arctic Council, along with the U.S., Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Denmark, which represents Greenland, has claimed that its 200-mile Economic Exclusion Zone ought to extend hundreds more to the North Pole. Insisting the undersea Lomonosov Ridge is really just part of Russia’s continental shelf, Putin launched a scientific expedition to plant a rust-proof titanium Russian flag on the

North Pole's sea floor.

Putin's claim to nearly half the Arctic Ocean's international waters and seabed outraged the Canadians, as then-Foreign Minister Peter Mackay exclaimed, "This isn't the 15th century. You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say 'We're claiming this territory.' "

Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper is pushing back, ordering his government in December 2013 to draft up a robust international claim to the Arctic seabed including up to the North Pole. Both the Russians and Canadians have boosted their military presence northwards.

China is taking a different approach, acquiring two ice-breaker ships, building a research facility dubbed the "Arctic Yellow River Station" in Norway's Ny-Ålesund Spitsbergen archipelago, starting Arctic expeditions and pushing a comprehensive plan that would make ancient military strategist Sun Tzu proud.

Though China is nearly 1,000 miles south of the Arctic Circle, it insists on "near-Arctic" status. To gain legitimacy for such a claim, Beijing is not shy about throwing around money. It helped Iceland survive a banking crisis by launching a currency swap worth $500 million and signing a free-trade agreement with Reykjavík. It is negotiating another agreement with Oslo and partnering with several Arctic nations on a variety of other projects.

Those investments have paid off, as China was admitted last year to the Arctic Council as a "permanent observer," along with India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Italy. All of a sudden, everyone wants in. But China wants even more.

With China easing its way northward as it grows in economic, diplomatic and military might, it will undoubtedly nudge aside Arctic nations for resources and challenge Canada on its claim of the Northwest Passage as an internal waterway. It's not a theoretical exercise. In 2010, just four ships transited the northern shipping route, but two years later 46 ships carrying 1.26 million tons of cargo made the voyage.

In a report titled "Global Arctic" by Finland's Institute for International Affairs, authors Juha Käpylä and Harri Mikkola get it exactly right: "the Arctic today is a global Arctic: it can no longer be perceived as a spatially or administratively confined region, but is instead taking on a new form and dynamics in the midst of contemporary global politics."

Let's hope the White House, Congress and elected leaders in Ottawa and Scandinavian capitals start paying close attention. And perhaps more importantly, that they stand

together for our collective national interests.

Read the original article at TheHill.com.