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Twenty-Five Years and Counting

On one side of the issue lies a coalition of odd but powerful political bedfellows: President Bush, the environmental community, the military, the oil, shipping and fishing industries and the top Democratic and Republican members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. On the other side lies a handful of cranky right-wingers. Yet the issue — Senate ratification of the Law of the Sea — remains unsettled, just as it has been for a quarter of a century.

The United Nations approved the Law of the Sea in 1982. It governs uses of the world's oceans, establishing ground rules for everything from navigation to deep seabed mining. It is all fairly common-sensical stuff, but for years opponents have charged that the treaty threatens American sovereignty. And for years, Senate leaders have decided that it is not worth the fight.

Now it most certainly is. The steady retreat of the sea ice in the Arctic Ocean — caused largely by global warming — has opened up an inaccessible part of the world to shipping and potentially vast deposits of oil, natural gas and mineral resources. This, in turn, has touched off a scramble among nations to determine who owns what on the ocean floor. Unless the United States ratifies the treaty, it will not have a seat at the table when it comes time to sort out competing claims.

Today, the treaty will face yet another critical moment in its long and troubled life when the Foreign Relations Committee votes on whether to send it to the floor. The vote is expected to favor the treaty. But the task facing the Democratic chairman, Joseph Biden of Delaware, and the ranking Republican member, Richard Lugar of Indiana, is to produce not just a favorable vote but an overwhelming vote sufficient to persuade the Senate majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, to finally move on ratification.

There are many other reasons besides oil and gas to ratify this worthy document, not least the fact that it would allow the United States to play a leadership role on a whole range of global ocean issues, including overfishing and pollution. But the possibility of losing out on some major underseas discoveries at a time when oil is approaching \$100 a barrel should make even the most reluctant senators take notice.