NOT ON RUSSIA’S PLATE:

Political theater is usually easy to see through. But last week it was so dark at the bottom of the abyss at the top of the world that no one could see the stage.

I refer to the absurdity of planting a titanium Russian flag beneath the North Pole on Aug. 2. If this wasn’t a publicity stunt, then why descend 14,000 feet in a mini-sub to drop a metal flag when it could have more easily been dropped overboard from the mother ship?

With great courage and bravado, a mini-sub captained by the politician Artur Chilingarov descended more than two miles below the pack ice to the sea bed. Then it returned safely back to a hole chopped into the pack ice by an ice-breaker. On board to capture the return were enough media equipment and choreographers to broadcast this remarkably successful non-event around the world.

The purpose of the expedition was symbolic. Russia wants to draw attention to its 2001 claim that its continental shelf extends all the way from the Siberian mainland to the North Pole via the undersea mountain range called the Lomonosov Ridge. They made this claim despite their 1997 ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea, which limits their rights to 200 miles of continental shelf unless they can prove otherwise. If their claim extension is approved by the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, Russia could develop whatever resources lie beneath the sea in their direction. Mostly, we’re talking about fossil fuels.

The Russian argument is absurd. Lomonosov Ridge is not part of the continental shelf at all. It's a linear submarine ridge dividing the Arctic Ocean into two adjacent abyssal basins. Inconveniently for the Russians, the ridge extends well beyond the North Pole to the continental shelf shared by northwest Greenland and Ellesmere Island in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. Denmark, which controls Greenland, and Canada, which controls Ellsemere, have equally valid claims to the ridge.

In fact, all of the continental shelves are seamlessly connected in a clockwise direction (looking down from the pole), from East Greenland to Canada, Alaska, Siberia and Norway. These northern lands are, of course, seamlessly connected to southern lands as well, all the way to Patagonia, South Africa and Malaysia.

Perhaps you’ve heard of the Bering land bridge, the ice-age, dry-land connection between Asia and Alaska. This wasn’t a bridge at all, but a broad continental lowland hundreds of miles wide. Before 12,000 years ago, remote ancestors of the flag-planting politicians could have followed mammoths into the future United States without even realizing it. At the time, this land mass, now known as Beringia, was simply the middle part of a single "continent" extending from Tierra del Fuego to Ireland.

I think the United States should lay claim to the Lomonosov Ridge. Forget the arbitrariness of political history. Forget the thin film of oceanic water that rises and falls against the land, changing the geography each time. The only rock-solid and meaningful geographic boundaries on Earth are those bounding the tectonic plates. The most dominant plate in the Northern Hemisphere is the North American Plate, which extends east to west from Iceland to Siberia, and from Mexico to beyond the pole in a north-south direction. The North American Plate also includes everything in northern Russia east of the Chersky Mountains, as well as the new Siberian Islands. Regrettably for Russia, the only superpower on this plate is the United States. Happily for us, Russia lies on the Eurasian Plate. Hence, the Russian continental shelf is logically attached to the triumvirate of Canada, the United States and Mexico.
The downside of adding Siberia to the North American Plate is that anything not on that plate must be jettisoned to adjacent ones. Getting Siberia would require that we give up San Francisco, Los Angeles and much of Southern California to the Pacific Plate. This would be an easy trade for me.

Geologists just don't get the respect they deserve. If they -- instead of the politicians -- were in charge, the world would make a lot more sense. Political theater could then be seen for what it is -- entertainment.