

Securing Canada's Sovereignty In The Arctic

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As demonstrated by this summer's OP Nanook, the Arctic continues to be of strategic importance to Canada due to its wealth of natural resources and the importance of its position to the defence of the country. This policy brief contends that Canada should strengthen its patrol capacity in the Arctic and its exclusive economic zones by using Arctic/offshore patrol ships that belong to an armed Canadian Coast Guard. If Canada is serious about defending its North, the Canadian Forces will need to enhance its search and rescue capabilities in the region. Furthermore to counter illegal activity in the North, the Canadian Forces should share responsibility with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and an armed Canadian Coast Guard. Lastly, unmanned aerial vehicles may be of strategic importance to Canada, as they can monitor remote areas while Canadian Rangers provide support on the ground to better protect the region. A Canadian policy that places importance on the Arctic will need to contain elements that develop the capabilities of the Canadian Forces and the Canadian Coast Guard.

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INTRODUCTION

For decades, the Arctic has been of strategic importance to Canada due to its wealth of natural resources and the importance of its position to the defence of the country. In recent years, rapid climate change has brought the Far North to the public's attention. With this past summer's OP Nanook, which brought the Canadian Forces to the high Arctic, it is clear that Canada intends to demonstrate its Northern sovereignty and Arctic capabilities for the world to see. Prime Minister Harper has recently stated that, "Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty over the Arctic. We either use it or lose it. And make no mistake, this Government intends to use it" (Office of the Prime Minister, 2007: web). As a result Canada requires a comprehensive strategy for the region that both promotes Canadian sovereignty and enhances Canada's capabilities in the Arctic. Canada's national interests should be pursued in a meaningful way while allowing Ottawa to maintain good relations with the international community.

CANADIAN ARCTIC SOVEREIGNTY

For Canada, national sovereignty has become increasingly tied to the territorial integrity and protection of our Far North. In view of this, Canada's interests lie in protecting its legitimate claims to the Arctic islands and the surrounding waters, together with the North West Passage (Lagassé and Robinson, 2008: 64-65). Though security is certainly an issue for Canada, Ottawa's principal interest is having substantiated territorial claims to the region's potential resource benefits. Today's threats therefore, are states not considered long-established Canadian allies including China, India, and Russia¹. This noted it is important to keep in mind that Canada is geographically isolated and shares only one border with another country: the United States. It is therefore unlikely that Canada will face a dispute over territory with any foreign powers (Lagassé and Robinson, 2008: 73).

The current world is better interconnected than during the Cold War years. In pursuing war today, great powers are faced with higher economic costs and potential exclusion from the international community. It would take the development of an entirely new international security environment for North America to be militarily threatened by foreign powers. Furthermore the fact that Ottawa's allies are bound

¹ China is acquiring Arctic capabilities such as new ships with ice-strengthened hulls and Russia recently launched another Arctic expedition to support its shelf claims.

to protect Canada under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty² ensures that military conflicts with other powers are improbable (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2010: web). It would be more far more useful for Canada to focus on enhancing its relations with its most important ally to ensure that Canadian interests in the region remain protected in the future.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CANADA-U.S. RELATIONS

If the Northwest Passage is to become a commercial sea route, both Ottawa and Washington have a stake in ensuring that the region is both navigable and secure. In order to mitigate the costs of disrupting trade routes while ensuring the rule of law in the region, Canada should augment bilateral maritime security cooperation with the United States (U.S.) (Lagassé and Robinson, 2008: 98). An effective Arctic strategy that allows for greater cooperation with the U.S. may not be politically popular, yet pooling resources would be the most effective way of ensuring that both governments are capable of responding rapidly to emergencies throughout the region (Lagassé and Robinson, 2008: 98). Canada does not have the capacity to secure the region on its own and this suggests that complete political sovereignty, in regards to the Arctic, may not always be feasible. If Canadian security interests in the Far North require Ottawa to work collectively with Washington, Ottawa may have to relinquish some level of autonomy in the Arctic in order to maintain strong alliances that promote mutual security (Dittman, 2009: 8). International institutions that promote cooperation such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have existed for decades and have proven beneficial to their members' security. As we live in an increasingly interdependent world, cooperation is more likely to increase amongst traditional allies on international security matters.

THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Canada has to meet two important objectives in order to solidify its claims over the vast territories that make up the Canadian Arctic. First, Canada needs to improve its ability to exercise jurisdiction over the region. More precisely, Ottawa must enact Canadian law as well as environmental regulations and simultaneously carry out the expected duties of a sovereign state in the region while working to improve Canada's legal claims (Lajeunesse, 2008: 1038). This would ensure that developments do not unfold in the Arctic that could set precedents damaging to Canadian interests.

² Article 5 states that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members must consider coming to the aid of an ally under attack

Second, rather than attempting to force foreign governments to accept Canadian sovereignty over the region, it would be beneficial to encourage them to do so out of self-interest (Lajeunesse, 2008: 1038). Since the 1970s, Canada has claimed that the Northwest Passage falls under Canadian jurisdiction, whereas the EU, Japan and the U.S. have maintained that it is an international strait through which they have the right of free access (Lajeunesse, 2008: 1039-40). As a result Canada needs policies that allow our interests in the Arctic to merge with our other interests—namely strong Canada-U.S. relations. This is not to say that Ottawa's relations with Washington are more important than protecting Canadian interests in the Arctic, nor does it suggest that these two strategies are mutually exclusive. Rather Canada will need to clearly express its strategy for the Far North to the international community including the U.S., in order to make it easier for other states to align their Arctic policies with our own.

USING ECONOMICS TO PROMOTE CANADA'S INTERESTS IN THE ARCTIC

Ottawa should strive to ensure that shipping through the passage is convenient, safe, and affordable as this would provide foreign states with a strong incentive to use the region for commercial purposes. If such an approach proves successful, it could compel foreign companies to lobby their governments against challenging Canada in the region (Lajeunesse, 2008: 1051). Transit fees are another means by which Canada could establish its sovereignty over the passage. If the government decides to introduce transit fees it would be vital that those fees not be so onerous that Canada's image abroad be negatively affected (Lajeunesse, 2008: 1051). Finally the money collected from tariffs could be transferred to projects that work to further enhance Canada's capabilities in the Arctic.

THE CANADIAN NAVY

Although the Canadian Coast Guard has been playing the lead role in the region, as the opening of the Northwest Passage continues the Canadian Navy will soon be called upon to play a greater role in defending Canada's Arctic waters. An increased emphasis on maritime trade routes requires the Navy's presence to ensure that trade continues uninterrupted and that basic order can be kept across the vast Far North. It is important to note that defence procurements and acquiring new capabilities, such as new ice-strengthened vessels and icebreakers, are costly and time-consuming ventures. The need to start work on these projects within a proper time frame is especially urgent as it remains likely that the Arctic will begin to be increasingly

accessible to transportation over the next ten to twenty years (Huebert, 2007: 9-16). With recent government procurements, it is clear that the Government of Canada would like the Canadian Navy to play a greater role in the Arctic.

BROADER STRATEGIC OPTIONS

As the U.S. is also concerned with Arctic security it is imperative that Ottawa demonstrate proof of Canada's ability to patrol the region (Charron, 2005: 847). The Government of Canada will need to demonstrate that it is able to properly resource itself and protect against any threats to continental security. If Ottawa then requires financial or tactical assistance from the U.S., it will be in a better position to ask Washington for support. If Canada displays the ability to independently secure the Arctic, there may be less merit to the demands that the Northwest Passage become an international strait, particularly if Canada chooses to extend preferential treatment to its trading partners and other Arctic bordering states. For both Canada and the U.S., working alongside one another towards continental security has proven successful in the past and there therefore exists a promising precedent for joint cooperation in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING CANADA'S CAPABILITIES

Canada might enhance its capabilities in the region by strengthening its patrol capacity in the Arctic over its exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Although the Canadian Forces' (CF) frigates could patrol the EEZs, these vessels are better suited for expeditionary operations and are only able to access the region in the summer as they are not ice-capable vessels. However, as Canada faces no major military threat in the region, using CF frigates would seem an unnecessarily expensive option. To this end, using Arctic/offshore patrol ships (A/OPS) would be more cost-effective. The A/OPS should, however, belong to a refurbished and armed Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) rather than the CF due to the lack of military threat discussed above (Lagassé and Robinson, 2008: 46). Financing of this project would most appropriately be found through the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, as CCG ships, not the CF would form Canada's Arctic maritime presence.

Another way to improve Canada's authority in the region would be to further develop the CF's ability to protect Canadians through its search and rescue capabilities. It is for this reason that Canadian academics Phillippe Lagassé and Paul Robinson argue that the purchase of new fixed-wing search and rescue aircraft needs to be prioritized over

other procurements (Lagassé and Robinson, 2008: 97). This is especially important considering the expected economic growth in the region, as well as Canada's efforts to step up its presence in the Arctic. In terms of countering concerns such as illegal smuggling or terrorist attacks, for example eco-terrorism against critical energy infrastructure, it has been suggested that the CF share responsibility over maritime security with civilian agencies such as the RCMP and an armed and expanded CCG. The CF can then focus on maintaining frigates outside of the Arctic on the coasts to perform the aforementioned tasks while special operations forces in Halifax and Esquimalt prepare for counter-narcotic or counter-terrorism missions (Lagassé and Robinson, 2008: 97).

Canada's interests in the region can also be fulfilled through North American Aerospace Defense Command's continued military protection of Canadian airspace, with unmanned aerial vehicles monitoring remote areas and the Canadian Rangers providing support on the ground (Lagassé and Robinson, 2008: 99). Lagassé and Robinson have also recommend that in order to have clandestine patrol and surveillance capabilities off the coastlines, Victoria-class submarines should be maintained and the CF's Aurora maritime patrol aircraft should eventually be replaced (Lagassé and Robinson, 2008: 100). This list of recommendations is obviously not exhaustive, however, the point is to demonstrate some of the more tangible policies that should be involved in enhancing Canada's ability to protect its interests in the region.

The Arctic is of vital importance to Canadian national security, Canadian and international commercial interests, and to the people inhabiting the region who require improved access to economic and social opportunities. The current government's policies have ignited a national debate over how the Canadian government and the Canadian people view the Arctic. One hopes that this debate will continue and result in policies that include a thorough understanding of what role the CF along with other departments and agencies should play. This debate will allow for the development of a coherent Canadian Arctic strategy allowing those involved in security to have a clear understanding of responsibilities while still maintaining our ability to protect the 'true North strong and free.'

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